

What does “Narrative” mean when used in the Museum Context?

By Steffen Backhaus, Mamdouh Froukh and Friederike Eden

A Conversation

When museum experts from different parts of the world meet, they are united in their profession but might face difficulties in exchanging ideas and expressing intellectual concepts, due to various forms of meaning associated with words which are not spoken in their native language. Even when this common language is shared, it may not necessarily be the first language of all the participants. Since the team's choice for this article was to hold a conversation in English, it quickly became clear that a field such as museum studies, and its related intellectual and linguistic constructs, have been shaped and molded by the English language.

Once these interpretations are accepted and invoked, participants can understand each other, but may fall into the habit of simply repeating definitions postulated by literature, and therefore they can become a closed group that is isolated from visitors. However, different views become apparent the further one deconstructs these 'common vocabularies'. A discipline such as museum studies and its related fields, therefore, has a hard time meeting the needs of museum staff from different societies, with diverse understandings of tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as knowledge worth preserving. This includes culture, education and leisure activities.

Especially in museum-theory some crucial vocabulary is used quite broadly. Therefore Steffen Backhaus (Institut für Museumsforschung Berlin, Germany), Mamdouh Froukh (Yasser Arafat Museum Ramallah, Palestine) and Friederike Eden (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany) decided to have a conversation about understanding, use and the difficulties the term NARRATIVE can bring in the field of

museums studies. Noting and sharing the first 100 Words that came to our minds about the term, served as a prelude to a joint conversation in which we reflected on the term NARRATIVE. The transcript of this shared reflection formed the backbone of our article.

The Conversation

Mamdouh Reviewing some literature about the meaning of narrative and reflecting on my experience I concluded that narrative simply is communication between the audiences and the museum. It creates an interaction between both sides on different levels. The notion of narrative in museums is supported by communicating not only through words or images but also through objects, artworks... and most importantly through storytelling which is considered a universal tool.

Understanding the cultural context during the narrative process is the key to involving different perspectives and reflecting other points of view in museums. This could lead to the notion of diversity in museum experience and engagement of the museum community on many levels. Furthermore, understanding the cultural context could provide a better interpretation and it will enrich the museum experience in terms of education and learning. Indeed, a master thesis could be written about “narrative in museums” since the more I searched about this term; the more questions appeared. I think we need to add a framework to the process.

Friederike Talking about narrative, I realized it's a term used in many ways. It's used for poetry and writing as well as for marketing and communication. So, there were different definitions I found during research that all somehow target the museum needs as well.¹ “Museum making in the twenty-first century is challenging, creative, complex and, ultimately, collaborative. Operating across different scales of activity from the level of the object to the level of the building, city or landscape, museum making also cuts across a range of professional practices from curation to design and from architecture to theatre and film. In the twenty-first century, the reality of museum design is multidisciplinary, multifaceted and as complex as the variety of

¹ Woodside, Arch G., *Introduction to Special Issue: Brand-Consumer Storytelling Theory and Research* in: *Psychology & Marketing Magazin*, Volume 27, Issue 6, June 2010, p. 531 - 540.

exhibitions and interpretive approaches we see across the contemporary museum landscape.”²

Focusing on the definition that relates to museums and museum work I tried to summarize what I think narrative is, how I understand the term. For me it is more of a theoretical concept for which I then tried to find examples relating to the museum field. While researching, even more questions appeared, as I realized how intertwined the term is with many other terms from the (SAWA)-glossary as Interpretation and Curation, just to mention two examples. It is not easy, perhaps even impossible, to define and separate them.³

While reading Steffen’s and Mamdouh’s 100 Words, it was interesting to see how related our understanding and definitions of the term is, regarding our professional work. Steffen asked, if narrative is the same as storytelling, which I found interesting because storytelling is one of the most intertwined terms that comes with narration in my opinion.

There is this useful diagram about storytelling for marketing and for creative writing. It explains how this fits very well for museum mediation, because storytelling is mainly about hooking up the reader/visitor to follow the story you want to tell.

How to make it emotional, make it reliable, make it participative. Therefore, storytelling is somehow a form we use in museums for mediation. But it is different to the term narrative because it is a story made up to express something, whereas narrative can vary between the biography of the object and the story told in the exhibition, or even combine them.⁴

² MacLeod, Suzanne; Hourston Hanks, Laura; Hale, Jonathan; *Introduction: Museum Making. The Place of narrative* in: Museum Making. Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions, Routledge, 2012, p. xviii.

³ Shelton, Anthony Alan: *Museums and Anthropologies: Practices and Narratives* in: A Companion to Museum Studies, Blackwell Publishing, Edited by Sharon McDonald, 2006, p. 64 - 80.

⁴ Hodge, Christina J.: *A Guide to Object Biography*, Stanford University - Archaeology Collections, 2017.

The story written into the object can either be facts of the object or personal stories, which will mean different things to each visitor. For example, if you have a table, the table will be seen differently from each person’s perspective because they bring their own experience and their own story. The main difference between storytelling and narrative is that with storytelling you are literally telling one specific story out of many, while narratives are all the facets inclusive of the emotions that can occur with an object. Narratives can bring the spotlight for the story you choose to tell but can also be left in the dark.⁵

The most difficult part that I think we will have to keep in mind when trying to define narrative, will be the question, is it even possible and more important necessary?



Fig. 1. Storytelling Graph, “What really makes a great story?” by Tom Albrighton, 2013 (Source:<http://www.abccopywriting.com/>)

⁵ Whitehead, Christopher; Critical Analysis Tool (CAT) 2: *How to analyze museum display: script, text, narrative* in: Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe Work Package, 2016.

Maybe a wider definition is more useful because it can be applied to more situations? What can be the reasons for a closer definition and in which parts of the museum field would this definition help?⁶

Steffen You mean narrative is subject to individual perception and is not the same for all people?

Friederike Well, my interpretation is that I think narrative is the subjective story every person puts onto an object, based on their knowledge and their cultural background, as well as the object's information itself and how they are connected to a wider context.

Steffen So the information the curator gives through storytelling influences the image seen by the visitors?

Mamdouh There are many frames for narrative. The narrative could be the main theme in a museum or not, and some museums could be more subject-based than others. There are also different levels of narratives. Even interpretation could be a layer of narrative. Museums and curators are involved in forming narratives through different means like interpretation, but also museum audiences interact differently according to their own narrative which is formed by their perspective and experience.

Steffen Why I associate the word 'storytelling' so much with 'narrative' is because coming from the German term, 'Narrativ', I would define it as a story that generates a collective sense of meaning for a group. So when there is a story, then there is storytelling. But in contrast to 'storytelling', which, for my understanding, uses embellishment and the addition of emotional elements to artificially create suspense, narrative for me is much more reality-oriented. However, the conscious

⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen: *Studying visitors*. in: Macdonald, Sharon (Ed.): *A companion to museum studies*. Oxford 2006, p. 362–376.

Hein, George E.: *Museum Education* in: Macdonald, Sharon (Ed.): *A companion to museum studies*. Oxford 2006, p. 340 - 352.

Bennett, Tony; *Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision* in: Macdonald, Sharon (Ed.): *A companion to museum studies*. Oxford 2006, p. 263 - 281.

selection of content and the order in which it is given, plays an important role in both of them.

When it comes to museums and the term, “narrative”, I somehow strongly associate this with the museum visitor experience. If you consider the approach of visitor journeys, which assumes that the visitor's experience of the museum does not just start by entering the exhibition room, and has an effect far beyond that, new perspectives on the term 'narrative' emerge. The narrative of a place may affect visitors long before even entering the building.⁷ The idea to visit an exhibition might come after seeing an advertisement somewhere. The next step for many would probably be a web or social media search to get a feel for the mood of the place. The decision whether a visit is worth it or not is made on the basis of the content that awaits one here. And for me, this already represents a first reaction to a certain narrative articulated by the institution.

If we see pictures of bright austere rooms with marble statues lined up in a classical display we most certainly get a different idea of a place than when we see a colorful exhibition with objects of various genres and groups of people interacting with digital media stations or hands-on elements. By making such design decisions the museum influences the perception of the visitor and provokes the performance of "tacit scripts", as Christopher Whitehead calls it.⁸ Being self-aware of this as a museum and therefore making conscious decisions, for me, is already very close to creating a narrative. I would therefore describe narrative in the context of the museum as the orchestrated interplay of all possible elements that communicate with the visitor in the context of their visit, and give them a sense of its nature. That includes the selection of objects shown, their genres, their arrangement, the structure of the rooms, the intended circulation, the nature and tone of the labels, as well as the selection of media used both digital and physical, on- and offline.

⁷ Paqua, Megan. *Visitor Journey Mapping in Museums*. 15th May 2018. Last accessed 19. Feb. 2022 <https://museumsdigitalculture.prattsi.org/visitor-journey-mapping-in-museums-f18442ee1d99>.

⁸ Whitehead, Christopher: *Critical Analysis Tool (CAT) 2. How to analyze museum display: script, text, narrative*. 2016 in *Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe Work Package.*, p. 5. Last accessed 19. Feb. 2022 <https://digitalcultures.ncl.ac.uk/cohere/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/WP1-CAT-1.2.pdf>

Friederike I do think that narratives are shaped in our daily life, so they can change with time. But I don't know if I can agree with you, saying that the narratives about an object in an exhibition are already shaped before you go to the museum. I think it's an expectation that is shaped. The visitor may see advertising which evokes interest and leads to the decision to go to this exhibition. This can be influenced by the narration the institution, or the topic of the exhibition has.

Regarding Mamdouh's comment, to me this "layers" narrative has, I agree, are the connection for the term "interpretation", to me this is the foundation of what makes it possible to do interpretation planning. Only with many narratives one can change the interpretation plan, because there are more stories to tell than one. There are always more layers, more facets one can choose talking about.⁹

If objects have their own narrative, the curator must put all stories together and summarize them into forming a story that is chosen to be told in the exhibition. Narratives are the key to interpretation, because one can only choose on how to interpret something if it has different narrations.

Mamdouh We agree that narrative is subjective. I also think that narrative is a development of museum experience and notion, and when narrative enters, it gets away from the concept of object-oriented museum, which was more related to colonial understanding of the museums . Narrative is a new development of the museum experience and understanding because the purpose of museums nowadays shifts to engage and educate the community rather than show trophies or domination.¹⁰

Friederike I agree that there is an evolution regarding the concept of museums. In museums today it's not only about the story you tell in the exhibition, it's also important to enable access to several narratives of objects and topics. I think narratives are additive. And they will change with time, so they will maybe add or lose narratives.

⁹ Sirok, Kaja: *Remembering and Forgetting in Museum Narratives* in: *The Media of Memory*, Verlag Ferdinand Schöning, 2020, p. 43 - 62.

¹⁰ Roberts, L.C.: *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997.



Fig. 2. Display case showing a White Kuffiya (hattah) and Tarboush (fez) made in 1930's, Yasser Arafat Museum, Ramallah, Palestine.

Mamdouh I agree with you up to a point. The visitor could have his own interpretation or narrative, but the general narrative is decided by the curator or from the story itself. For example, when talking about the table, if it was in a context that is related to handicraft, there will always be different stories about the table itself as an object, but in the context of handicraft, the visitor has to stay with the main story and subject that is decided by the museum. The type and the theme of a museum can be considered as a frame or guidance for different narratives and interpretations that a museum might present. For me, a good curation approach gives the visitors the ability to create their own

narrative or to reflect their own experience, but this interaction should be under the main narrative that is decided by the museum.¹¹

Steffen In the context of an individual object, I would refer to this as 'meaning' rather than narrative. The making or individual creation of meaning is what museum visitors inevitably do when they come into contact with objects and it is influenced by all its surroundings.¹² But I agree that objects have multiple layers which can be used for interpretation.

¹¹ Hein, George E., *Learning in the Museum*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

¹² Hein, George E.: *Is Meaning Making Constructivism? Is Constructivism Meaning Making?* The Exhibitionist 1999, 18(2), p. 15 - 18.

Mamdouh I can give you an example from the museum where I work, as you know, the Yasser Arafat Museum is about the contemporary history of Palestinians in the last century and it is divided chronologically. In the 1930s Palestine was under British occupation (British mandate). In the permanent Exhibition, the Visitor could read texts with photos about this time, then there is a display case that contains a White Kuffiya (hattah) and Tarboush (fez) made in the 1930s, in general, these were costumes for Palestinians in the 1930s. But why did the museum display these objects? Palestinian revolutionaries wore the kuffiya or hattah to hide their identities during the 1936 Arab Revolt as British Mandate authorities assaulted anyone wearing it. To support the revolution and prevent revolutionaries from being apprehended, the commanders of the Revolt, called on Palestinians everywhere to wear the Kuffiya instead of the tarboosh.

So this is the main story is not about the costumes, it's not about what people were wearing: it is about the Palestinian revolution and revolutionaries.

Friederike So basically this shows us how narratives can shift, depending on the exhibition or the institution placed in only by changing the context.

The context in the example here is the Palestinian Revolution, the objects can be different but all of them have at least one narration connected to the topic. But if you would take the same object out of this context and put it into, for example the V&A Museum in London, for an exhibition about clothing of nationalities, it could tell a different story, even though it's the same object. That's why I think there is a narrative to each object, and therefore an object can tell many stories, depending on the context given.¹³

Mamdouh Back to the main question: who is telling the story? Who is the narrator? Is it the curator?

Friederike The person who creates a concept for the exhibition (the curator mainly), who decides which objects to put on display, which topics to represent. Later also

¹³ Lidchi, Henrietta, *The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*. in: S. Hall (ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Second Edition). London: Sage/Open University Press, 1997, p. 120 – 211.

the “wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter”¹⁴ who write the labels and texts for the catalog are the people who are creating the narrative of the exhibition. They work with the narrative of the object. Maybe they add one, maybe they will headline only a few of the “narrations” of the object and with that, create the story they want to tell.¹⁵

Mamdouh I agree with you that the curator could be the main narrator eventually, but the narrative should be part of a process that starts before and after developing the concept of the exhibition. This process could involve collecting information, dialogues, discussions, and research in cooperation with different specialists and parties. These steps finally lead the curator or the museum to form the narrative and to decide what to display, how to involve other perspectives, etc...

Friederike I think you can't focus on all aspects, on all layers that a topic can have, while curating an exhibition. At a certain point one must choose which narrative is good for the story you want to tell and which to leave untold. So that's where choosing narratives becomes storytelling. It is important to be aware of this critical point and the power that comes with decision making. What kind of power is given to the curators and institutions, due to such decisions? Because they are somehow responsible for who is represented and who is not. Therefore, I also find transparency very important when it comes to exhibitions and the choices curators must make.¹⁶

Steffen I agree that transparent communication to the visitor about the decisions made is key. But I also feel that we use narrative as an umbrella term for different

¹⁴ wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter (GER) = Scientific staff (EN)

¹⁵ Lindauer, Margaret: *The Critical Museum Visitor* in: *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, p. 203 - 225.
 Kirchberg, Volker: *Gesellschaftliche Funktion von Museen. Makro-, meso- und mikrosoziologische Perspektiven*. Wiesbaden 2005: VS Verlag.
 Scholze, Jana (2010): *Semiotik. Zeichenlesen in Ausstellungen*. In: baur, Joachim. (Hg.), *Museumsanalyse. Methoden und Konturen eines neuen Forschungsfeldes*, Transcript: Bielefeld, Pp. 121 - 148.

¹⁶ Bennett, Tony: *Thinking (with) Museums. From Exhibitionary Complex to Governmental Assemblage* in: *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, John Wiley & Sons, 2015, p. 03 - 20.
Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

processes. The creation of layers of meaning happens inside the visitor or a person looking at the object. Selecting from these different layers and fitting them into a larger story is something the curators do. In doing so, they select from the layers of meaning that are relevant to them as curators, formal educators and knowledge producers. Ideally, they also include the personal level of meaning that is relevant to the visitors. Curators could try to anticipate the meanings which will be created by viewers or can conduct preliminary visitor research to be best prepared. But I don't know if I can agree with you that an object has something independent and inherent that we can call narrative and that is independent of external processes. This sounds to me like the myth that 'objects speak for themselves', which I strongly disagree with.

Mamdouh Do you think that there could be a narrative in the museum without an object?

Friederike Absolutely! I think also things can have a narrative that are not museum objects but are rather intangible. If you don't show objects then you show for example a dance, music, or oral-stories, so they become kind of the "object" even though they are no objects. But they can have narratives too.

Steffen Which examples do you have in mind when you talk about „museums without objects“, Mamdouh?

Mamdouh I am thinking about exhibitions based on videos, texts, photos or performing arts in addition to modern exhibitions that is based on experience.

Friederike But then these things are the objects, the photo, a text or even the author/artist/photographer as a person can have a narrative, don't you think?

Steffen Your museum, Mamdouh, has a big focus on architecture as well, doesn't it? There's a concept behind the building, so this memorial site already tells a story through architecture and tries to provoke certain feelings or thoughts when you go along. One could either say that the whole building is the object that has a narrative, or that it is an arrangement of many different well-coordinated communication elements of different materialities that transport a narrative. This of

course includes not only materials of the building itself, but also open spaces, parks and garden areas.

Mamdouh Yes, the museum is part of the architectural and landscape complex that contains three main buildings. The buildings blend in harmony with the surrounding landscape. They are connected through stone paths located in spacious green areas. The Mausoleum (where Yasser Arafat was buried temporarily) defining a central stone cube, lightly floats upon a reflective pool. The Mosque gently appears as prominent from the landscape.

The Museum enriches the experience of the visitor by presenting to the people of Palestine and the world the narrative of the Palestinian National Movement through the life and work of Yasser Arafat, the historic leader of the Palestinian people.



Fig. 3. The Mausoleum of late president Yasser Arafat, Yasser Arafat museum appears in the background, Ramallah, Palestine.

The visual and physical experience of the visitor and the community are enriched through the interaction of the three main buildings with greenery, trees, water, stone routes, light and shadows.¹⁷ In this context, each of the three buildings can be considered as an object with its own narrative, where the narrative of each building integrated to support the main narrative.

Steffen I think that was what I was trying to express at the beginning, when I connected the concept of visitor journeys to the term narrative. There are museum buildings that are entirely designed for the visitor to have a certain experience. In Berlin, for example, the redesign of the Neues Museum by David Chipperfield or the Jüdisches Museum by Daniel Libeskind are to be mentioned here. Another example is



Fig. 4. The booth in the entrance foyer of the MARKK with the word 'Garderobe' (cloakroom) in gold letters on a lamp above the counter adopts the architectural language of a theatre or cinema box office. Opposite, mirrored, is a booth with the word 'Kasse' (cashier's office), which is no longer in use as such.

¹⁷ Consolidated Consultants, Jafar Tukan Atelier, (personal communication, 2019).

perhaps the Museum am Rothenbaum / World Cultures and Arts (MARKK) in Hamburg, built after plans by Albert Erbe, whose entrance area, with its box office and cloakroom booths and the opulent foyer, not coincidentally evokes the emotions of a visit to the theatre.



Fig. 5. At the main rotunda in the entrance foyer of the MARKK, a quote from Goethe's Faust above the central portal sets the mood for what is about to be seen: 'Der Mensch ist ungleich, ungleich sind die Stunden!' (Unequal 's man, unequal are the hours). On the left and right: names of donors and patrons perpetuated on the pillars.

But I guess even museums that are not built with the whole experience in mind in the first place or those that have been remodelled over the years are perceived by the visitor in regard to a connected overall experience. An interplay of many small impressions - including architectural expressions. The question is whether visitors get exactly the impression and experience that the architect or the museum wants them to have? And what can we do to shape that experience to the best possible outcome?



Fig. 6. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain.



Fig. 7. The former entrance of the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany

Friederike To me it appears that there are three very common ways to decide about the housing of a museum. The first is to hire an architect who creates a building for the collection. For example, the Guggenheim in Bilbao Spain by Frank Gehry. Regarding the Bilbao-Guggenheim there's a huge debate on how they made an economical change for the region only by building this museum. Therefore, the museum becomes an artwork itself somehow. The second way collections are housed is, that often they are placed into historical, important buildings to narrate the story of the building as well as the story of the collection. A third option that often is used at historical sites, like the memorial of Arafat but also with excavation places like temples etc., is that a museum is built around it or near to the sight to maintain objects and exhibits and create a place for visitors.¹⁸

Mamdouh Narrative and architecture have a crucial link, starting with developing architectural concepts. It could be involved in architecture to achieve specific effects on user experience and perception of space. This effect could be noticed by perceiving the role of architecture in designing the experience of users linked with the sequential unfolding of information during space rather than just arranging meaningless space and forms. Narrative in architecture also could be affected and change beyond the architect's control, by time and by user's experience,¹⁹ for instance, viewing the architecture and history of the Pergamon Museum and noticing the narrative evolution based on many factors including history, war and visitors' experience through spaces.

Steffen Friederike, you mentioned this question before: who decides the narrative, respectively who is the narrator and that you have to pick information, because you cannot tell everything. And I agree that it's not possible to tell everything and that you have to decide where to make cuts for the benefit of a clear communication for the visitor. But if visitors bring the narrative to the museum, then for me that implies that if you want to have a well-defined exhibition message, you have to do profound

¹⁸ Giebelhausen, Michaela: *Museum Architecture: A Brief History* in: Sharon Macdonald (ed) *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2006, p. 223 - 244.

¹⁹ Sophia Psarra, 2009. *The formation of space and cultural meaning*, Routledge. p. 244 - 250.

visitor research in advance, to anticipate what people are interested in, or what kind of narratives they might bring with them.

Friederike I'm not sure if you can control the narration. You can control the narration, but the story is linked to the objects/topic. The important question to me though, does the museum want to control or should it control anything?²⁰

Mamdouh I think that there should be a control on a certain level from the museum, this control could be different depending on the theme or the type of the museum. On the other hand, the museum narrative should always provoke visitors to think or to imagine, maybe by giving them a teaser to search for something or to expand their knowledge if they want. But it should be taken into consideration that audiences will not interact with what is displayed in the same way. Their interaction will be affected by previous experiences and perspectives.

Friederike Museums have the possibility to tell a wider story. Either about the objects on display or the story told. To leave the conclusion open to the visitor, is an unusual or less often used tool, as most stories told in exhibitions have a certain narrative that is also made for the visitors to take home. That there are more aspects to most objects and/or topics is mostly less important. To make such a decision as a curator for example is a fundamental step but also necessary regarding the topic of an exhibition. There are some topics where a certain narration is necessary and others that can be communicated more freely.

Mamdouh, I would like to ask you about perspectives in the Arafat Museum, where you are working. I can imagine working in a cultural institution dealing with a versatile person as Arafat, it can be a challenge to represent so many narrations. As it is a Palestinian museum mostly serving the Palestinian People, I think the focus can be on a national narration. If possible, of course I think adding perspectives and narrations can enrich the discourse and reflections on a person or political persona. So now I wanted to ask how different perspectives are shown in your museum? And how do you deal with narration regarding your exhibitions.

²⁰ Hein, George E.: *Learning in the Museum*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 29.

Mamdouh The concept in forming narrative in Yasser Arafat Museum was to show facts, we are Palestinians, telling our story in a professional approach by showing facts and incidents without giving judgments. We are using references, sources and academic research, reviewed by many historians, politicians and curators.²¹ Most of the reviews we had were positive, but in this kind of narrative there will always be critics. For example we heard a critique from some Palestinians: they think the museum should be showing more about the occupation or other historic incidents or Palestinian figures, but for us it was understandable because people under occupation and oppression tend to be more emotional. On the other hand, some critics could say that narrative in the museum only represent the Palestinian narrative and is biased against Israel. Also this kind of critique is understandable, since the Israeli narrative in the western media is very strong and has strong support compared to the Palestinian story, so maybe they think they are telling the correct story and we are just trying to cover it up, even if this is not true.

Friederike But I think this is a very good example for narrative, because Arafat was a versatile person, seen from different views: like from the Palestinian view, from the Israeli view, from the European view. So he has different narratives. As a museum you must decide which narrative you want to represent, and then you can either represent only this story or you can try to offer information, so each visitor can make up their own mind, choose their story.

Steffen Mamdouh, do you have talks or discussions within the staff in your museum about how to show certain things? And who is making the last decisions on these kinds of questions? Is it always the historians or are other perspectives taken into account as well?

Mamdouh There are several sections in the museum, the permanent exhibition which has been done by many curators and revised by many experts. So any improvements or modification in this part are very limited. But there is also the temporary exhibition hall, which presents rotating special thematic exhibitions

²¹ Lahav, *The Seeing Eye: The Seeing "I"* in: J. Fritsch (ed.), *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*. 2011, New York: Routledge.

featuring Palestinian, Arab and international artists. The exhibitions remain on display for six months. The Idea and concept of the exhibition is developed by the curatorial team in the museum then discussed and approved by the museum committee, the curatorial team then starts working on the exhibition display and details through a process involving discussions and dialogue with the artists, curator, visitors and staff.



Fig. 8. A visitor looks at the work of “A hug” by Manal Mhamid, during the preview of exhibition “Guardians of Our Eternal Flame”, Yasser Arafat Museum, Ramallah, Palestine, 2019

Friederike In the part of the exhibition where you talk about Arafat’s life, do you have a certain way to represent him, Mamdouh? Maybe very positively or very negatively? If so, do you also show critical views on his persona, or does he have to be presented in a certain way, because this is the narrative the museum is telling?

Mamdouh I could say that the museum is trying to show things with facts, evidence based on sources, without judging negative or positive, and every visitor could adopt the point view or perspective he wants according to what is displayed in the museum and comparing to his own experience, perspective and sources. But in my opinion it is not about being neutral because neutrality is not applicable.

Steffen I think neutrality is an illusion that we as humans have convinced ourselves of through the creation of the scientific disciplines. Of course, the way you read the facts is strongly influenced by the world around you and by what you have experienced as a person before. But yes, it is possible for museums to try to work more empirical or evidence-based.

Mamdouh Constructing narrative in Yasser Arafat Museum is very challenging and complicated because it involves dealing with multi perspectives and diverse audiences with many controversial topics. The museum defines itself as the museum of the Palestinian Contemporary National memory and receives many tourists and diplomats with an audio guide in seven languages. In this context the terminology should be very precise and respectful for the community. While constructing the narrative, there were different perspectives sometimes about words: the word itself could form a new narrative. Using a specific word could be offensive for Palestinians or It could be not acceptable for the international community.

Steffen I agree with you that the choice of words affects the narrative and the use of certain words can offend certain people. Words definitely influence the image we see of the world and of people. It is very important to be sensitive to it.

Friederike I think it's a sensitive issue. As an example, the Eurocentric view: there is a centric view for every country, and especially with political stories or personas, the centric-view or narrative can be very dominant and hard to correlate on different narratives or point of views. Sometimes opposing narratives don't know the other's point of view.

Mamdouh Do you think there's a difference between narrative for Germans and Arabs? This leads us to the important question: Are museums universal? Should Museums be universal?

Friederike I don't think it can be universal, I think it doesn't have to be universal. It is impossible, because what defines the museum is where the institution is located, what the employees produce, what topics are represented. And that will always be driven towards a certain narration, based on the surroundings and cultural ideas of the institution and country.

Steffen I think museums should not try to be universal. On the contrary! You have to look at the specific place of the museum, the history of this place and its resources as well as the needs, values and interests of the people on site. The things which you would do in Paris may have to be adjusted for a museum in Berlin. Of course, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't talk to each other. We have to exchange ideas and learn from each other. But simply applying the one form of museum one is familiar with to a place in another country can, even if done so unintentionally, in the worst case have something neo-colonial about it.

But I had this question whether there is a specific type of storytelling used in museums and if this type of storytelling is the same in museums all over the world. I have this feeling that museum studies in Germany often have a lot of attention towards the UK and the US. But I ask myself whether museums in the Arab region tell stories in a different way. Can they perhaps draw on a wider range of narrative genres? And do they address other audiences or promote other types of visits?

Mamdouh Museums are more European or western oriented. If you look at an average person from the Arab region and from Europe, you will see a large difference between their interaction with the museums. For example, in Berlin you could notice the rows of visitors preparing to enter the museums, and in the Arab region they are less likely to visit the museums. There are many aspects behind these differences including culture, social, economic factors, etc.... I think these factors have a vital role in affecting the way how museums should present their

story or narrative, even though there is a significant development in the museums in terms of narrative in the last years in the Arab region. But there is still a long way to go to entice people to come to the museums.

Actually this is what we also notice in Sharjah. There are many programs and efforts to attract more visitors to the museums, the same case in Palestine. In my opinion, one of the most important aspects is to change the museum image in the community as a welcoming place for education and entertainment, and to let the communities feel they are represented in the museums. Fortunately, museums are now improving slowly through developing in museum narratives and programs, and most importantly through accumulative experience.

However, dealing with museums as a place for education and entertainment raises important questions about a very controversial subject: ethics. Are there any ethical limits in creating narratives? What are the ethics in creating narrative in general?

Friederike I think sometimes things have stories and narratives that are not true. But they are more popular than the truth sometimes. I think sometimes narratives are made up without control and therefore they can be ethically critical.

Mamdouh I agree, and we dealt with this issue partially in Yasser Arafat mausoleum. Especially before the opening of the museum and during the closure, since there were no guides during that time and the narrative starts with architecture, the guards outside the buildings were guiding the people who come to the area, and they were telling their own narrative about the complex. Sometimes it was not true, what is interesting is that they had many new stories about the architecture, trees, the tiles, the flags. etc. Sometimes it was problematic for the museum staff because we had to correct these stories for many visitors and some of these stories were shared on the Internet. So this is actually an example how people sometimes generate their own narrative even if it is not true.

Steffen I think when it comes to ethics, it is the responsibility of a good curator to anticipate stereotypical ideas in the minds of visitors. Museums should address and challenge these stereotypes. If a curator knows both the audience and the objects

very well, that might be an opportunity to give visitors something else to think about and to re-contextualise their thoughts.

Friederike I think what all museum professionals have to keep in mind, is to NOT talk about others without involving the community we want to talk about, if possible. The best scenario would be to let the community speak for themselves and provide only the stage/rooms/tools. Therefore, one will also be challenged to invite to community or reach out somehow. I think that a narrative can be shaped by the view of the curator and the staff of a museum, as well as by replicating already existing narratives. The main narrative sometimes can be drawn out of the personal narrative because it's more popular.

Mamdouh Maybe a good example for involving the community, was an exhibition displayed at Yasser Arafat Museum. It was about the Palestinian women in revolution. After discussions with artists, we agreed on giving the women artists the freedom to express their ideas and to speak, which turned out very successful.²²

However, narrative can be promoted as a tool to exclude people or ideas. For instance, in 2018 the Jewish Museum in Berlin did an exhibition about Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a very controversial topic. The exhibition curators tried to show the exhibition narrative as neutral and unbiased. However, it was not true. In the exhibition, they interviewed a Jewish and a Muslim to talk about the importance of Jerusalem in each religion. This is normal if they interviewed people on the same educational and cultural level. They interviewed a well-educated Rabbi with a huge knowledge about Jerusalem and its history and a modest Muslim with limited knowledge from Jerusalem. The Muslim gave a negative image about Muslims. Because I'm Palestinian, I know the reality and the stereotyping of the Muslims,. For the others they were manipulated with a biased and false narrative. This example shows how narrative could be a tool for exclusion.

²² Yasser Arafat Museum. *Guardian of our eternal flame*. 2019, October 10; Last accessed on 19 Feb. 2022, <https://yam.ps/page-11802-en.html>

SUMMARY

In conclusion to our dialog, we tried to summarize our outcome for the term NARRATIVE. We agreed that the term “narrative” is somehow undefined and vague, but also an umbrella term as it covers many different meanings. In the museum field it is used for different purposes, therefore it cannot be eliminated. It describes a significant part of what is inherent to the western idea of a museum as an institution that preserves, exhibits and communicates cultural heritage. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the term more precisely. Still, our group of three agreed about the meaning of narrative.

Narrative to us is the invisible idea: information or a story that can be told within any display, exhibition or museum. Narrative shapes stories and can be symbolized by objects that seem to have their own narration themselves. Narrative can be supported and even formed by many design elements in an exhibition, even the building itself. At the same time narrative has multiple layers in different scales that sometimes must react to each other. Institutions can have a narration themselves and therefore must coordinate this narrative with the story they tell in an exhibition. As narrative can influence the ideas of visitors as well as it can draw social attention to topics and communities, it colours the perception of who is seen and who isn't and therefore comes with a high ethical responsibility.

Our conversation does not lead to a conclusive definition and therefore is to be understood as a consideration of many different ways of working with or understanding narrative. It tries to demonstrate precisely the difficulties embedded in the term and the struggle we face when working with the term in one way or another.

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LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGE SOURCES

Fig. 1. Storytelling Graph, “What really makes a great story?” by Tom Albrighton, 2013. Original Source: <http://www.abccopywriting.com/>; Source: <https://www.bloggerabc.de/storytelling/>

Fig. 2. Display case showing a White Kuffiya (hattah) and Tarboush (fez) made in 1930's, Yasser Arafat Museum, Ramallah, Palestine. Source: <https://yam.ps/page-12255-en.html>

Fig. 3. The Mausoleum of late president Yasser Arafat, Yasser Arafat museum appears in the background, Ramallah, Palestine. Source: Yasser Arafat Museum.

Fig. 4. Cloakroom booth in the entrance foyer of MARKK Museum, Hamburg. Source: https://egyptianmuseumvisits.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/img_5178.jpg

Fig. 5. View of the central rotunda at MARKK Museum, Hamburg. Source: https://hhguide.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Markk-EingangandhalleDSC_8236-scaled.jpg

Fig. 6. Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, Source: <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/the-building>

Fig. 7. The former entrance of the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany. Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamonmuseum_Front.jpg

Fig. 8. A visitor looks at the work of “A hug” by Manal Mhamid, during the preview of exhibition “Guardians of Our Eternal Flame”, Yasser Arafat Museum, Ramallah, Palestine, 2019; Source: <https://yam.ps/page-11802-en.html#gallery-9>

APPENDIX

Writing down and sharing the first '100 words' that came to our minds about the term served as a prelude to a joint conversation in which we reflected together on the term. The transcript of this shared reflection formed the backbone of the above article.

100 Words

Steffen Backhaus Is narrative the same as storytelling? Is the use of narrative a form of knowledge- or science-communication? Are there different outside-museum narrative traditions in the West and the Arab world? What are common features? Are these regional narrative traditions reflected in the museum work or are there „universal“ narrative traditions in museums? Do narrative traditions in European and Arab museums have changed over time and with society? If discourses often enter the museum unnoticed and often cannot be kept out, then how have narrative traditions changed in the context of the use of global standardised media (e.g. social media)? Are they the same processes of change taking place in Europe and the Arab world?

Mamdouh Froukh Narrative in general creates a common language between the audiences and the museum through communicating and interacting on different levels. Communicating not only through words or photos but also through objects, art works and most important through storytelling which is considered a universal tool. Understanding culture context in forming narrative process is the key to

understand the different perspectives and reflecting other point of views in museums, this could lead to the notion of diversity in the museum experience and engagement of museum community on many levels, on the other hand, understanding the culture could provide a better interpretation and enriching museum experience in terms of education and studying.

Friederike Eden A narrative is a meaningful story that influences the way in which the environment is perceived. It transports values and emotions and is subject to change over time. Hence a narrative is inscribed in every object and event as soon as it is perceived by a person. If this perception is again reproduced, facets arise depending to the producer, that will appear different to every participant or visitor, but still can tell a chosen story. When we, as museum workers exhibit objects, we initially bring one or several narratives onto display. And while we use this narrative to tell the story we want to tell, the facets that come along with each narrative we choose - or leave in the dark - will stay in the room. As well as we can choose a certain narrative to be mediated, we have no control over each narrative that will appear with each visitor entering the room.