Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe

Work Package 1 Work in Progress
Critical Analysis Tool (CAT) 2: how to analyze museum display: script, text, narrative

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CoHERE explores the ways in which identities in Europe are constructed through heritage *representations* and *performances* that connect to ideas of place, history, tradition and belonging. The research identifies existing heritage practices and discourses in Europe. It also identifies means to sustain and transmit European heritages that are likely to contribute to the evolution of inclusive, communitarian identities and counteract disaffection with, and division within, the EU. A number of modes of representation and performance are explored in the project, from cultural policy, museum display, heritage interpretation, school curricula and political discourse to music and dance performances, food and cuisine, rituals and protest.

Work Package 1, **Productions and Omissions of European heritage,** provides a critical foundation for CoHERE as a whole, interrogating different meanings of heritage, historical constructions and representations of Europe, formative histories for European identities that are neglected or hidden because of political circumstances, and non-official heritage.

This essay relates to a key objective of the research to 'investigate how Europe is represented in museums, heritage and commemorative practices' by analyzing the representation of Europe as a historical and geopolitical entity within key museums, heritage sites and in commemorative practices. The purpose of this is to examine the cultural, historical and political construction of Europe, to understand identity positions, areas of common ground and shared *lieux de mèmoire*, origin stories, constitution moments and 'European' attitudes, values, ethics and ways of being that are invoked in the displays. In addition to this, the research also examines representations in museums that do not take Europe as their primary frame, but link European history and questions to the geopolitical unit that they represent, as in the case of national history museums and city museums.

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How to analyze museum display: script, text, narrative

Introduction

This essay is one of a series of linked Work-in-Progress papers relating to different approaches and frameworks that aim to understand and analyze museum display as a form of representation. This paper, and those that will follow, builds on the motivations for analyzing display explored in the previous paper: 'Why Analyze Museum Display?' There, I made a case for rigorous attention to display as a form of representation and as a *political, public production of propositional knowledge intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects*. I argued that museums, and particularly museum displays, have key capacities and associations that enable them to claim authoritative truth status for their representations. I took a constructionist perspective to show that the techniques, appeals and structural organization of such representations are not 'reflective' of ante-social truths and produce inevitably political content. Even historical objects, which seem to be inherently 'true', cannot but take on meaning in the ensemble of display (as we will see in this essay as well). Tony Bennett, in an influential passage of *The Birth of the Museum*, explains this well:

> No matter how strong the illusion to the contrary, the museum visitor is never in relation of direct, unmediated contact with the "reality of the artefact" and, hence, with the "real stuff" of the past. Indeed this illusion, this fetishism of the past, is itself an effect of discourse. For the seeming concreteness of the museum artefact derives from its verisimilitude, that is, from the familiarity which results from being placed in an interpretive context in which it is conformed to a tradition and thus make to resonate with representations of the past which enjoy a broader social circulation (1995: 146)

It is precisely because the museum is able to create strong 'illusion to the contrary' that display warrants critical engagement. This becomes imperative when we add to this the cultural anxieties, scholarly dilemmas and social contests over truth – particularly about establishing 'what happened', but also in connection with 'what is happening,' and just 'what is'. Often these transpose easily into urgent and gravely critical questions about action and identity in the world. I concluded these thoughts by considering what it might mean for museum practitioners to work through the fallacies, possibilities and politics of truthful representation in the development and production of museum displays. In the essays that follow, we will engage not so much with the question 'why analyze display?' but with the 'how?', although inevitably these questions come to converge in places, because we must find techniques for understanding the very representational techniques that naturalize political constructions of knowledge.

Before describing my own approach to the analysis of display as representation, the next two essays offer reviews of a number of others (see also Kali Tzortzi's useful literature review of 2015). The most common approaches conceptualize displays variously, as scripts, texts, narratives, theories, systems, structures and maps. Some of these approaches claim a systematic status that leads to notional 'correct' analyses. Others rest on and value subjective experience, more or less explicitly. It isn't my aim to rubbish them all and champion my own. I believe that there can be benefit in combining approaches and insights from different frameworks, but only where coherence can be identified or fashioned from their different

assumptions. This isn't as arduous or forced an exercise as it might look, for the different frames used for thinking about display often overlap (for example, 'text' and 'narrative', or 'narrative' and 'structure'). Also these different frames have different capacities to subsume one another. This essay deals in particular with analytical approaches and potentials based on *script*, *ritual*, *text* and *narrative*, sometimes zooming in on the work of individual scholars to think in depth about how they make sense of given displays, and to examine the techniques that they model. In future essays in this series I will follow up on this by using or adapting some of these techniques myself, in close analysis of displays.

How can we understand museums, and particularly museum displays, as forms of representation? In part this is a question about the ontology of museum displays and how we might theorize them *as* representations, and thus in their political dimensions (for the moment let us leave to one side the possibility that museum displays might be more than *just* representations, although this will be a point of return). This connects inevitably to a matching (or mismatching) study of the visitor experiences. In other words, what is the relation between the museum display as a representation and visitors' experiences and understanding of that representation?

These issues around what, in the first essay in this series, I called the 'cultural nexus of museum knowledge production', are key for many museums. This is because they translate into a clear practical problem about how to ensure the greatest possible match between what curators intend visitors to experience and understand, and what it is that visitors actually do experience and understand. This problem still persists, notwithstanding the purchase of concepts such as the post-museum (Hooper-Greenhill 2000a) and the now orthodox insistence on that very basic tenet of constructivist learning theory – that people are individuals with lives, backgrounds and knowledges of their own, and not monads who bring nothing to the display except capacity for pure apprehension. But even in the context of working practices that claim to allow, value and encourage the making of personal meanings, there is necessarily always a coded span of appropriate response built into production processes, implicitly or explicitly. Such appropriate responses may be well known to visitors (even if 'subconsciously'), or not.

As we will see, Jay Rounds discusses familiarity with expected behaviours in his discussion of the choreographed attitudes of the art museum visitor, which conform to and reinforce social norms of deportment and attention (2006: 142-3). This can be related to reception frameworks, such as Stuart Hall's idea of the 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' reading. Here, people are so used to and 'in tune' with the forms of representation, the meanings encoded into them and the behaviours they require, as to accept them unquestioningly (Hall 1997). On the other end of the spectrum of familiarity is Bourdieu and Darbel's classic account of the discomfort experienced in museums by people from lower social classes (1991 [1969]: 53; 93-4). In my own work – co-producing displays with communities – I've collaborated with non-habitual visitors who were profoundly ill at ease upon coming to the museum. This is because the museum was for them a forbidding space, full of features and regulations that they didn't understand. This is one reason why it's important to bring studies of production and reception of displays into relation: to understand the connections between display and experience and how they can fragment, break down or fail. But before undertaking visitor studies, it is also necessary to ask how displays programme, determine, script or invite certain responses. This will lead us to draw on some of the concepts and theoretical tools associated

with reception theory, as well as approaches in museum studies that amount to something quite similar.

A central problem in theorizing and analyzing display – although often unacknowledged – pertains to ontology and translation. What is display? Can we grasp its essence and speak of it accurately? If not, to what can display be likened, as a representational form? Are there metaphors to help us to think about it? For example, in the first essay I discussed the fallacy of the 'museum-as-mirror', which operates as a metaphor suggesting that displays (at least good ones, produced through expert discipline) are a transparent reflection of reality.

Another popular way of thinking, as we will see, is to theorize the museum display as a text or 'speech act' (e.g. Bal 1996: 88; Ferguson 1996: 183), even one with its own grammatical and verbal structures. As is often the way with any compelling theory, this idea opens up some forms of understanding and forecloses others. It makes possible certain analytical methods and suggests techniques, but brings with this the disconcerting problem of 'capturing' and making visible only that which is amenable to the terms and possibilities of the theory itself. I've argued elsewhere that museum display isn't reducible to text in the strictly verbal sense used by some theorists, meaning that any such textual analysis will inevitably involve losses in translation (Whitehead 2009: 34-8). This doesn't mean that taking a textual approach is wrong or useless; it just means that it'll take you in a particular direction and will get you only so far. My view is that display is what it is (banal as that may sound), and there is no other language that renders it ideally, nor metalanguage that captures everything about it and perfectly expresses its ontology. It's more helpful to ask what analytical frame gets us closest, or gives us what seems to be the most complete view of the complex ontology of display as a representational form, not least because of the variety of objects, techniques and media involved in display, from architectural and spatial ones to light, furniture, graphics, AV and material exhibits and their deployment. And, if different theoretical frames give us different views, then can they be combined to good effect? Perhaps, as I will discuss, there is no one-size-fits all analytical method, and different methods (or combinations of methods) are good for different kinds of display.

Display analytics 1: museum as script
In an influential essay from 1980 Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach advanced an understanding of the museum as a physical script for its own reception on the part of visitors. The key premise is that the 'museum's primary function is ideological', as it is 'meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society's most revered beliefs and values' (449). The idea of the museum as script places attention on the way in which the organization of space and the visual, rhetorical and monumental characteristics of museum buildings and displays predispose responsive behaviour in visitors that is performed, much as a ritual is. As Duncan and Wallach suggest, 'by performing the ritual of walking through the museum, the visitor is prompted to enact and thereby to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script' (ibid: 450-451). In the case of their analysis, and that of Carol Duncan's later work *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums* (1995), this pertains to the art museum and to the internalization of the structures of art historical knowledge. In this way, geographical and chronological organizations (schools, periods, notions of stylistic development etc.), schemes of value and canons are reified and celebrated in the display and architecture of the building. This is at its clearest in those art museums that involve very literal scripts – for example in the many nineteenth-century western art museums that incorporate the names of the most highly consecrated artists within the interior decoration of

their galleries, literally inscribing the canon onto the walls and both reinforcing established knowledge and directing visitors' acquisition of it. This is not just a nineteenth-century phenomenon: at the time of writing one of the main foyer spaces in Tate Modern in London features an enormous timeline that teaches us how to apprehend modern art as a set of linear trajectories of, and relations between, artistic 'movements' over time. But scripting need not be so literal, and can be built from the physical organization of space insofar as it directs our movements, fields of vision and invites forms of attention (such as reverence for a great painting that is centrally placed to dominate our impressions).

There is more to be done with ritual in museums and, perhaps especially, in the expanded frame of heritage. Anthropological questions about the role of ritual in performing the truth – in making ideas seem real (from marriages to gods) – bear compelling relations with the museum functions discussed in the first essay in this series (e.g. Bell 1997; Kyriakidis 2007). Some rituals are literally scripted: such as weddings; others are *tacitly* scripted, and rely on the tacit knowledge and ability of participants to perform them. We might argue that museums are somewhere in between. They may have signs to tell us what we can't do (such as flash photography, running around or touching objects). They may have interpretive texts like labels that tell us what to notice about things, what to think and how to engage. But they also rely on visitors having some cultural knowledges and competences, as well as using non-verbal means to control visitors, as a grand interior will command reverent behavior, or sparsely hung white walls will command seriousness and close attention to things. For some, as we will see next, these tacit scripts still count as 'texts', informing particular approaches to analyzing displays.

What this gives us is a sense of the capacity for museums as architectural ensembles to predetermine visitor responses. Indeed, in this view, the visitor may not know that she is performing, or may not consciously reflect upon her behavior *as* performance. She may be already encultured into behaving 'appropriately' in the gallery environment, having internalized its 'doing codes' (an idea from Victor Turner's work on ritual, one of Duncan and Wallach's reference points). And/or, she may be *being encultured right then and there* by the museum itself. In this sense the 'script' is not thoroughly comparable to the one read by an actor who knows that she is 'playing a part', but relates more to longstanding theories about performativity as part of everyday life and behavior, including the unconscious behaviors that we don't think about or reflect upon unless prompted. To borrow from Anthony Giddens, we might say that this is part of the 'skilled performance' that produces and reproduces society itself (1993: 168).

In the art museum, performance is complex, with interconnecting epistemological and behavioural dimensions. It is notable that the idea of the script is most often applied to art museums, whose behavioral codes are both extreme and well-known (reverence, respect, rapt looking, silence, and so on; although some art museum practice is about changing this). The act of learning about art (according to certain determined structures proposed and legitimized by the museum) and our physical deportment in art museum space are entwined, for it is only by knowing the value structures of art that we can appropriately and conventionally respond to them, even at the level of the body (for 'museum bodies', see Leahy 2012). In a reflection informed by readings of Goffman, Giddens and Bourdieu, Jay Rounds points to the social dimension of this in his explanation of the 'invisible choreography' of the art museum. The visitor:

moves with careful formality, strikes a contemplative pose (stylized, a bit more rapt than strictly necessary to focus one's attention fully on the painting – but not so much as to appear to be posing). Other patrons respond in kind, moving as if to an invisible choreographer, avoiding intrusions between patron and painting, signaling respect for the aesthetic experience in progress. Their dance is not merely a courtesy; it is a mutual conspiracy, in which each validates the authenticity of the identities being enacted by the others (2006: 142-3).

A number of interesting analytical questions emerge from the view of museum as script. What is scripted, and how? How do we distinguish a piece of script from a random or arbitrary feature? Can we translate the script, from its (mainly) physical form into a 'real' written document? What would that look like? Is there a benefit to extending as analytical concepts actual scripting conventions, for example those associated with drama or with some rituals? (For example, what might stage directions, cues or ceremony actually look like in the museum?) What happens when a visitor doesn't know or 'can't read' the script? What about the 'scripts' we might identify in history museums, or in heritage sites? To return to Rounds, what is *their* 'invisible choreography'? This might help us to think about why, for example, visitors who take whimsical selfies in difficult heritage sites and post them online receive censure.[1] Just as theorists of the visual have categorized different kinds of gaze, so might we categorize different kinds of script (Tzortzi 2015: 70-71; Noordegraaf 2004).

We must also consider what the idea of the museum as script does *not* tell us. In its focus on the ritual performance of the visitor and its pre-determination, the idea of the script can inadvertently distract our attention from the very knowledge structures and their articulation that are supposed to do the determining. It doesn't offer clear and ready analytical techniques for interrogating display, working instead as a suggestion that opens up a number of ideas to play with. At an ontological level, museum displays – especially in their spatial complexities and deployment of material objects, and the significations that these produce – can seem far removed from the idea of the script, making it hard to translate from one to the other. The script also doesn't tell us about real visitors, whom we must study in other ways (e.g. in person, or through direct observation), but only about the notional ones whose experience and behavior matches with hegemonic expectations. In my own work, influenced by reception theory, I have described this being as the *imagined visitor* – essentially a curatorial construct that is a necessary part of the creative production process, which is to say, the kind of *notional* audience member (or one of the kinds) who is necessarily in the curator's mind as she plans, designs and produces displays. This visitor-construct (maybe a member of a 'target audience' to use professional museum language) functions as the notional 'receiver' of prescribed information experience, or someone who makes a hoped-for coherence and sense of everything on show (Whitehead 2009). This imagined visitor may bear little relation to many real ones.

It remains possible for researchers to seek to identify a 'script' and then to discern the extent to which real visitors 'follow it', but this can be critiqued as an over-simplistic model of meaning-making. So, the museum as script idea allows only weak focus on the technical construction of representations, and none at all on real visitors. Nonetheless, it forms a powerful analytical frame, especially for understanding settings where invitations to respond in certain ways are structured overtly into the display – for example, where visitors are

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[1] See http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/should-auschwitz-be-a-site-for-selfies for an example.

obviously invited and intended to emote or to regulate their behavior *appropriately*. This is an idea that we'll return to later in the context of related theoretical approaches to reception.

Display analytics 2: museum as text

The idea of the museum as text is more or less orthodoxy now. But it covers a broad range of different positions. Not all of these cohere perfectly, partly because of the variety of ways in which the term 'text' is understood. The idea can be opened up to new challenges from theoretical fields pertaining to sensory experience, affect and the non-representational, that help to contemplate the possibility of complexities of experience that go beyond (or perhaps precede) basic 'x-means-y' models of signification. The idea of the signifying text in cultural theory is, as many have pointed out, phenomenally broad, such that nearly anything – a book, a dance, a plate of food, a city, a museum display – can be 'read' and thus analysed through linguistic means or terms. In this view, cultural forms have their own languages that we must learn in order to understand their signifying structures, before translating their expressions into English or some other tongue. In the practice of display analysis this has meant either the literal adoption and adaption of verbal-linguistic structures and grammatical metaphors, or the somewhat more rigorous applications of semiotic approaches. (There are some hybrids of these two, such as Davallon 1999.) The use of linguistic metaphors brings with it the dangers of their excessive ontological difference with the object of study. A gallery wall is manifestly not the same as a paragraph, and an empty space on that wall is not the same as a comma, nor are they likely to be experienced in the same way by 'readers' unless they talk themselves into it. The second – the application of semiotic approaches – has much more to recommend it.

A basic tenet of this is that the display is a linguistic structure and communication system in which objects (and, potentially, other things, like graphics) are units. Their signification is interdependent and relational, and is produced by and contingent upon their particular configuration. For Krzysztof Pomian, objects on display take on new utility as 'semaphores', replacing their former utility, as it were as objects in the world. The 'invisible' – something not there – is projected as signification onto them. Furthermore, their configuration in display is different from their real-world configuration prior to being collected and put on display, meaning that they must be rendered intelligible through the production of new semiotic coherence (1991). This is even if that coherence is achieved by copying those objects' presumed real-world ordering, as in reconstructions of the kinds of interiors or sites where such objects might once have been assembled.

Objects themselves – not in the sense of museum furniture or graphics, but in the sense of an object like Archduke Ferdinand's shirt, on display in the Museum of Military History in Vienna, which I discussed in the first essay – signify more than their material forms or indeed their original 'functions', becoming signs for other things (Pomian's 'invisible'). To use Susan Pearce's distinction (2006: 23), they may function as metonyms representing a 'totality' of which they are perceived to be a part, or metaphors with symbolic value, but the extent to which they function as one or the other can change over time and over different configurations. The shirt signifies the onset of a tragic war, but only because of its relational situation in a linguistic system. It isn't 'just' a tailored piece of cloth that happens to be blood-soaked, or a man's possession. In this particular system of signification, it has nothing to do with, say, the history of fashion, what elite men wore and when and why, or who made it and under what socio-economic and physical conditions. Indeed, the introduction of any such information into this paradigmatic display might seem quite jarring.

This can tell us a lot about the logics of displays and the production of meaning through museum objects, and we can put into the mix other units of signification, like lighting, that may dramatically affect our 'reading' of museum objects. Semiotic approaches are more or less consonant with the idea expressed by Sharon Macdonald that any exhibition is 'a theory', a suggested way of seeing the world and a statement of position (1996: 14). This recalls some of the ideas developed earlier in this essay and allows for a political reading of museum displays. Indeed, in a 1997 essay informed by the thinking of Stuart Hall, Henrietta Lidchi brought semantic and political readings into direct relation in her articulation of the 'poetics' and 'politics' of display. Poetics is 'the practice of producing meaning from the internal orderings and conjugations of the separate but related components of an exhibition', where politics is 'the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of social knowledge' (1997: 168, 185). Arguably, these two are mutually imbricated and neither one sits prior to or consecutively with the other.

What cautions might we heed here? Just now I mentioned that museum lighting can also be a unit of signification, and this can be used as a helpful starting point, because it brings into view a common interpretive problem with display analysis. It can be easy to mistake low lighting for drama, as part of the linguistic communication system that gives a given display its meaning by associating darkness, shadow and obscurity into the signification. But it might be about the conservation requirements of objects, or just inadequate lighting systems! Not every 'theory', to use Macdonald's term, can be constituted, because of the regulations to which displays are subject: conservation requirements, floor-loading limits, insurance costs, security, the unavailability of objects and display systems, a lack of money to pay for state-of-the-art display apparatus, and so on… These are all structural factors that can proscribe or compromise the knowledges that can be produced, and maybe even the thoughts that can be thought. The museum does not offer the same creative freedoms to producers as other cultural forms of communication, and we need to put a check on any analysis that tacitly assumes that meaning making in the museum is absolutely free play.

Along with taking structural influences for significations we need also to consider the possibility of accident and meaninglessness, and of how to take displays that are either poorly designed or barely designed at all. Once, when visiting a museum with a friend, who worked there as a curator, I was struck by a display of objects that together could be interpreted as an explicitly political and indeed controversial statement, in this case about national identity in the country where we were. When I asked her about this she told me that the objects had simply been displayed there provisionally as there was nowhere else to put them at the time. There was no *intended* semantic meaning to their ensemble. My initial interpretation of the display took her completely by surprise; she had never imagined that anyone could think that that was what the display meant, and this led her to worry that visitors might impute to the museum a position – on a divisive topic – that it did not hold.

This may be an extreme case of a haphazard display, but it points to a particular problem of interpretation – one that is in fact not limited to the scriptural and textual approaches described so far. We may ask whether perceived meanings are invalidated when producers do not recognise them as their own, and what then might be the status of our analyses and interpretations of 'their' displays. There may be many political reasons why, in some situations, producers might be cagey about the meanings of their productions. Otherwise, from psychoanalytic viewpoints, or approaches to the workings of ideology, we might admit

the possibility that not all meanings are made consciously, and that display analysis can uncover hidden assumptions and covert propositions. Many of our ideas and knowledges about the world seem natural to us because of our situation in time and place, and we may not readily question them. For the same reasons, curators may feel that the displays they produce are absolutely neutral and objective, even though, to a critical visitor, they may seem thoroughly ideological. We cannot say that meaning is not there because it was not intentionally and avowedly built into a display; such meaning can be produced without, even despite, explicit intentionality. But we also need to avoid the danger of 'reading too much' into ensembles that are just haphazard. There is a need to navigate between extremes here, between seeing order and meaning in every consequence, and uncritical acceptance of face values. These issues of intentionality, authorship and meaning-making are longstanding concerns in various fields and theoretical traditions, but not so much in museology; I will return to them repeatedly as we progress.

What we gain with the linguistic approach is one way of understanding the relational mechanisms through which display functions as a form of representation. For the specifics of display as an articulation of objects, this provides something more nuanced than the idea of script. But it leaves something to be desired in relation to the spatial and experiential characteristics of display, which tend to become reduced to a flat array of 'conjugations' of things, without a clear methical suggestion about how to understand *spatially* and parse the unequal intensity of things as they are made to appear to us, and the natures of the connections and relations between them. How do we actually render in text the meanings of the physical distances between things, the height of a plinth or the surface of a wall? We also need more spatial understandings to characterise the determination and nature of our encounter with displays – physically as we move around and sense, and affectively. It is in relation to this latter problem that I have argued that while textual-linguistic approaches are valuable, they do not capture anything because display is in some ways *beyond* text.

Display analytics 3: Museum as narrative
Once a museum display can be conceptualised as a text then it's tempting to try to discern stories that museums 'tell': the story of a nation, the story of Impressionism, of dinosaurs or space travel. There may be something very fitting about this, if we believe that as humans we tend to structure reality and experience in narrative forms, either because of nature, nurture or both (see for example Jameson 1981, and Austin 2012: 107 for an overview). Another reason that it seems to fit well with museum display is because our experiences of displays are often sequential and take place diachronically over time as we move our bodies and attention between one thing and another, and between one room and another, meaning that we encounter things in order. If encounters are ordered, and curators can control this order (for example by limiting the physical transit routes that visitors can take through a display space), then the capacity emerges for narrative as a built structure through which successive significations create the temporal arc of a story. The strict ordering of visitor encounters with representations is not always possible or desirable, but there is a sense in which it seems possible to tell stories either through the organisation of an entire museum, or in individual displays within it. Indeed, preoccupations with linear progress over time and teleology are common in some foundational thinking about museums, particularly in the nineteenth century (Bennett 1995).

An immediate question that emerges is whether we should – and how we can – differentiate between terms such as 'statement', 'story' and 'narrative' within the museum. Narratology

literature itself has a variable lexicon: there is no singular and agreed-upon definition of 'story', for example, nor of how it differs from narrative, and often theorists use the words differently from one another. In museums, such terms are often used synonymously. Display producers often also talk of 'key messages' that they hope to transmit, or 'big ideas' as in museum consultant Beverly Serrell's much-read practical manual *Exhibit Labels* (1996). These may or may not seem like stories or narratives, but in their relational sequencing of phenomena they can sometimes enfold the temporal elements of narrative pattern. The permanent exhibition 'Destination Tyneside' at Newcastle's Discovery Museum explores the history of migration into the Tyneside region in the North East of England, and teaches us that 'By 1911 one third of the population of Tyneside were migrants or children of migrants.' This is a statement, and yet contains a sort of story because it implies what happened before 1911 to make this so (people migrated to Tyneside). Is this a message, a big idea, a story, or all three? If narratological approaches are to be useful we need to think through the elisions between the terms of analysis – statement, story, narrative, even *plot* – not just in theoretical and scholarly usages but in practical ones too, attending to the terms that producers of displays use, and what they mean by them. In my experience of both working as a curator, and talking to curators about their practice, the idea of 'telling stories in space' or 'the story we wanted to tell' has recurred frequently. So in some ways it would be perverse to resist the idea that stories and narratives are not a feature of displays, but we must take care to recognize that these concepts are sometimes used loosely and changeably.

To establish a working principle, we might think of stories in museums as defined and finite sequences of related events, and narratives as their treatment or 'telling', including matters of emphasis, tone, omission, judgment and convention. The idea of narrative here would allow us to account for the kinds of political production of knowledge that I argued, in the first essay, is a defining feature of museum display. But even this is not straightforward, as it could be argued that there is no possible 'story' prior to treatment, and (again, returning to the first essay in this series) structuring concepts such as 'events' are themselves constructions. We should also question whether all museum displays are best understood as story or narrative, or whether some other form of understanding is more fitting. Nevertheless, we can find within the literature some narratological analyses of displays that attempt a precise grounding of terms and potentialize compelling techniques, productive of insights.

A heterogeneous body of museum history and theory has taken narrative as a core characteristic of museum epistemology, such that the 'ritual of walking' identified by Duncan and Wallach (1988) is also an act of walking through a story, that is itself often chronological in nature. Perhaps most influentially, Tony Bennett theorised a 'pedagogy of walking' in the museum (1995) and other writers have been more explicit. Mieke Bal, for example, bluntly asserts that 'walking through a museum is like reading a book' (1996: 4). We see this in quite overt form in this invitation to 'go on a journey through time' at the 'From the Beginning' exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London:

Explore the evolution of life on our planet in the From the Beginning gallery.

Discover early sea creatures, dinosaurs, mammals and ancient fossils. Go on a journey through time from the big bang to the present, and take a peek into the future. Find

out how our solar system was formed, learn about the variety of life that's lived on our planet, and discover just how late humans arrived on the scene.[2]

But how, in practical terms, do we identify, describe and analyse a narrative? In displays like this where chronological sequencing is used (or, the development of abstract art, Rome 400BC-AD300, the 'War Years', the evolution of the horse, etc.) we may feel we are dealing with straightforward narratives of successive stages and events, of things that happened or came about in temporal relations, such as cause and effect. In analyses, we might seek to understand how the techniques of display are used to posit relations and differences between such things – how temporal issues such as causal links, ruptures, transitions, cataclysms and so on are suggested through the blending of media in display, even to the point where progression to a different temporal moment is marked by our physical progression to a room with a different 'feel' or atmosphere, perhaps effected by modulations in interior architecture such as through colour and light. What, as a visitor, are the story elements that you encounter? In what order? Do they 'flow' or progress in linear fashion? Are there different 'stories' going on within the same timeframes? Do they proceed in parallel or differently, with greater or lesser importance or duration? Are they brought into connection? Are there agents of change (including non-human ones like the Big Bang)? How do the time and place of the story (or stories) correspond to the architectural spaces, graphic choices and object arrays in the museum?

These are some of the questions that we might ask within a display, but not the only ones. One thing to note about these questions to ask in display space is that that is what they are – questions. In the next essays I will think through the dominance of questions in analytical frameworks for display. Such questions are also informed by 'time-thinking' that brings us back to constructionist perspectives on knowledge, particularly from the theory of history. Here, the objectivity of time itself is problematized, and human organizations of it are acts of ordering and sense-making capable of great variability across cultures and across historical expressions. In the case of chronological narratives enacted in museums (and indeed in history books), this can mean the naming, and relative shortening or 'speeding up', of tracts of time, as well as the idea that things begin and end. Sometimes this has discursive effects, like the idea that nothing much happened in the 'Dark Ages', or in the 'Pre-Contact' period in the Americas.

As a case in point, the 'Art of the Americas' wing opened in 2009 at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston, USA. There, two of fifty-three galleries are dedicated to pre-contact cultures – one to Mayan culture, represented as finished, or 'over', and one to Native American culture – while the remaining fifty-one cover the period 1620-1970s. For theorist of history Reinhardt Koselleck (2002; 2004), history has a distinctive kind of temporality different from that found in nature. The temporality of history can speed up and slow down, and acts as a framework in which events 'happen'. At the same time, because of the purchase of this framework on our imaginations and orderings of the world, it also determines social reality in its own right. So historical time is not entirely an *a posteriori* imposition undertaken by the professional historian. It actually comes to structure the social world because we struggle to shake historical temporality as a way of thinking and making sense of experience and phenomena, or because it doesn't occur to us to try, so historical time as a means of

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[2] http://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/galleries-and-museum-map/from-the-beginning.html

accounting is inscribed as social structure. The political nature of historical time is manifest when different groups have conflicting interests in how and why it is organized as it is; dominant temporalities can perpetuate myths, or occlude the histories of groups, literally belittling them. You might see this as manifest in the MFA in the reduction to a blip, or speeding up, of some 12,000 years of indigenous presence in the Boston region is set before a slowed-down time span of just shy of four centuries, making it, and post-European contact culture, the main show.
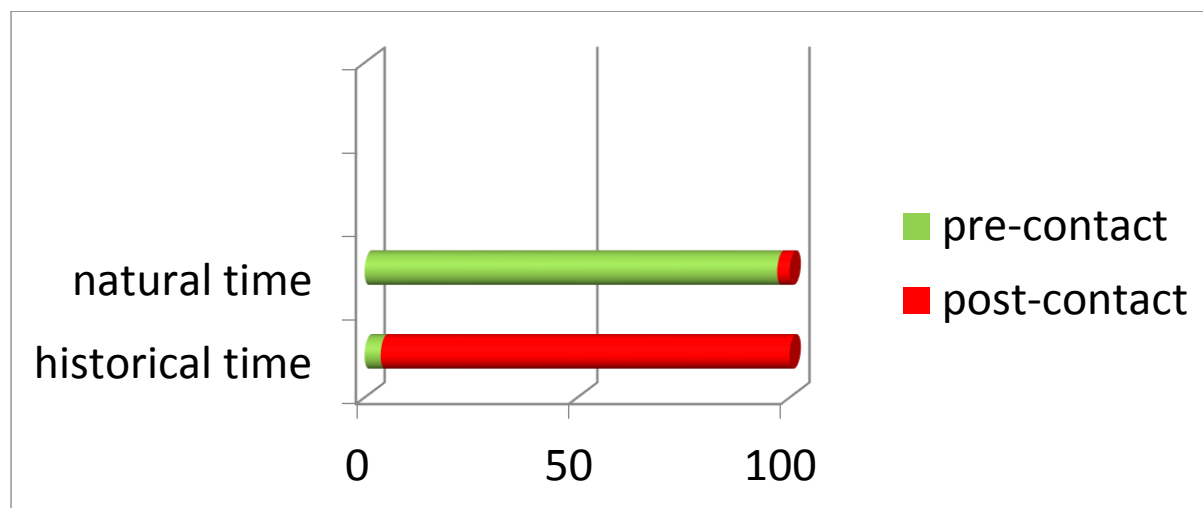
To be fair, this is a crude kind of analysis, as it considers the quantities of space dedicated to cultures and not the qualities of those displays, or the treatment of individual materials within them as more or less significant, special and valuable. Neither does it take into account the MFA's own history of collecting. In the 'Art of the Americas' wing one interactive explains why collecting Native American 'art' (itself an appellation that could be critiqued as unfitting and totalizing, as an occidental knowledge construct) has been so irregular and inadequate compared to the consistent, large-scale collecting of Western art. It is owned that this is partly due to issues around colonial power and knowledge structures – for example, the interactive teaches us that over much of the twentieth century Native American material was collected elsewhere as ethnographic, not artistic. From another perspective, the fact that Native American material has been conceded any discrete, decent gallery space at the MFA at all is an advance on previous practice. But it remains possible for a critical museum visitor to leave with a crude, occluding narrative of 'the art of the Americas' – of a prefatory minor culture with limited and unchanging output, superseded by European settlement and the rich, varied and complex cultural trajectories that follow – as a take-away impression. Whether the fact that a visitor leaves with such an impression makes it 'right' is moot. On one hand this returns us to issues of intentionality, for few if any staff at the MFA would want anyone to think this of the museum's story. On the other hand, it exposes a question about the significance and generalizable validity of subjective 'readings', versus attempts at systematic interpretations of displays. This is a critical concern in display analysis that I will exemplify below in relation to two authors who have taken seriously the challenge of thinking about the narrative quantities and qualities of museum display.

Architectural historian and theorist Laura Hourston Hanks, a co-organiser of a 2011 conference on 'Narrative Space' and co-editor of the resulting volume *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Macleod, Hanks and Hale, Routledge, 2012), suggests

that 'transposing devices of literature onto display-space making has rich creative potential' (ibid: 30). This is not, however, just a way of thinking for museum designers, whose work is the main object of her analysis and critique, but a structural orientation for visitors:

> Just as for novelists, the creation of a coherent grand narrative is important for exhibition designers, as from within this legible frame, visitors can situate themselves within the context on display and gain understanding (ibid: 30-31).

In a study of the Imperial War Museum in London, UK, Hourston Hanks adapts a variety of concepts from narratology to understand this double organization of display space and visitor experience. In London, the 'Holocaust Exhibition', organized by designers Stephen Greenberg and Bob Baxter together with curators, focuses on the Nazi persecution of Jews and others before and during the Second World War. The first step in her analysis is to identify a 'meta-narrative', an 'overarching structure that allows for complexity – in the form of sub-themes, minor plotlines, and multiple characterization – to occur within or beneath it' (ibid: 26). This is manifest in the architectural organization of space through a gridded structure that is an organizing *metaphor*, but also 'equates to a recurring literary theme, or leitmotif, as well as a clear literary narrative structure':

> From within this imposed order, the designers started the process of dissolution by fracturing planes to create a metaphorical or symbolic disorder. This is most visible in the many inclining planes and diagonals of both floor and wall on the earlier, upper section, to represent the fragmentation of life in German, in the pre-war years. As the visitor descends to the lower level, where the true horrors of the Holocaust are revealed, the grid reasserts its authority. Here the structure is strictly geometric, in reference – akin to literary symbolism – to the rational and tightly structured order of the Nazi industrial killing machine (ibid: 26-27).

This attention to the organization of successive spaces reveals a kind of physical narrative that is quite clearly articulated in the analysis. In the nature of a non-verbal text, we might not expect all visitors to articulate it to themselves equally well, but it may nevertheless impress itself upon their understandings *as* narrative. Along with the meta-narrative idea, Hourston Hanks also considers the matter of time, identifying variations in 'exhibition time' as a physically malleable quantity – in effect a kind of spatialized version of Koselleck's 'historical time' (although this is not stated or explored). In the Holocaust Exhibition visitors walk through time, but tight control of visitors' progress through space (restricted spaces and a single route, making it hard to backtrack) is also control of their experience of time. This is given a literary cast:

> Just as clipped sentence and paragraph structure, and emphasis on action rather than description, quickens the pace of a novel as the reader approaches the denouement, so interior spatial design is employed here to channel visitors through the space more hastily, and inexorably, possibly in an attempt to mirror the irreversibility of the Jews' final journey to their deaths (ibid: 27).

Visitors also walk through the parts or acts of a drama, making up a kind of *plot*:

> The initial oval-shaped space, the opening 'act' of the historical documentary, is home to artefacts revealing the normal lives of Jews in Germany before the rise of

> National Socialism… The symbolic journey continues into its second 'act' with a physical and metaphorical descent to the horrors of the extermination camps, as visitors are taken downstairs to the 'depths of despair'. Meaning carries through to the third and final display space; a conscious echo of the oval form of the introductory space. The similarity between the opening and closing rooms of the exhibition provides a simple formal structure which signals completion to the visitor. The space, which is taken over by an audio-visual display, offers an important opportunity for contemplation and 'depressurization' (ibid: 27-28).

In this plot structure, there are multiple cast members, particularly through the personal stories that are told through archival representations and the deployment of objects as possessions, and thus as metonyms for lives. These become the threading narrative 'voices' that sit 'within or below' the meta-narrative, and they form targets of identification and empathy for visitors, perhaps as characters in a novel might. Other objects can be actors too, in a sense reminiscent of post-human understandings; they can be 'endowed with a specific contextual import' (ibid: 29), suggesting their position as pivots for the action and effective causes that (seem to) change everything – things of importance, in the literal sense of *things that bring*. At IWM one of these is an Adler typewriter, presented as symbol of the Nazi bureaucracy that was as dangerous as any conventional weapon. In the mirror-like surface of the backdrop to the typewriter we see ourselves reflected, breaking a kind of fourth wall and placing us simultaneously in 'perpetrator' and 'victim' spaces, according to designer Stephen Greenberg (ibid: 30). This puts us in the story. Who are we? Or who would we like to be?

This is a compelling way of thinking about and analyzing display, but it should be clear that an exhibition like the one considered above is particularly amenable to this approach, because of its highly designed, structured and programmatic approach to the creation of a visitor experience based on spatializing chronology in a linear way. With displays and exhibitions that don't fit this mould – thematic ones, for example, where succession and chronology might be less important, if not entirely absent – a narratological approach may not yield such compelling or neat results. It seems banal to say it, but a narratological approach works very well for highly designed spaces that are designed to have a narrative, and in particular for spaces where narratives are likely to be pre-known by visitors, at least in part, as in our example of the Holocaust. The issue of visitors' prior knowledge warrants further study, in relation to the psychological and social effects that may accrue from engaging with known stories, such as reinforcing and confirming beliefs and anticipating and indulging their own affective responses. This is also where we have to attend to real visitors, and ask whether they 'get' the effects that are encoded into the architecture: do restricted spaces really feel like 'clipped sentences' and produce that kind of narrative tension? Is the metaphorical 'descent' into horror experienced in a way that fits with producer intentions?

For me, another important reference point in thinking narratologically is the museological work of cultural and narrative theorist Mieke Bal. For Bal museums are inherently narratological, because of the 'necessarily sequential nature of the visit' and the experience of this as a 'walking tour', such that 'walking through a museum is like reading a book' (1996: 4). With her we return to the art museum as a site of signification, and she brings to this a preoccupation with small displays, or portions of them, and not so much with highly-designed spaces, as at the Imperial War Museum or indeed the magnificent, 'scripted' ritual spaces of nineteenth-century museums that interest scholars like Carol Duncan. In her work, the syntactic relations between just a few paintings can be mined for complex narratives that

express the cultural politics of their time, but also, in a second layer of signification, of the time in which they were displayed. In her analyses, Bal is attentive to multiple 'exposures', including display itself as both a tool of exposing something to view and a scopic 'exposition' (ibid: 7), something similar to what I called a 'production of propositional knowledge' in the previous essay. As she explains, 'in expositions a "first person," the exposer, tells a "second person," the visitor, about a "third person," the object on display, who does not participate in the conversation' (ibid: 3-4). The first-person, although invisible and unnamed (unless we call her or him 'the museum', as often happens in analyses!), 'opines' and is opinionated, and assumes authority shored up by invisibility. But exposing (display) and exposition (stating positions, theorizing, telling etc.) are bound together so that looking-at, and truth-finding become imbricated. As Bal explains about her motivation:

> I want to examine what is involved in gestures of exposing, in gestures that point to things and seem to say "Look!" while often implying "That's how it is." The "Look!" aspect involves the visual availability of the exposed object, which is thus potentially objectified. The 'That's how it is" aspect involves epistemic authority. The gesture of exposing connects these two aspects (2001: 165).

This connection of a scopic regime to an epistemic one is comparable to my discussion, in the first essay, of the museum as a kind of staging ground for the construction of opportunities for witnessing, through which a rhetorical appeal to singular truth is made. For Bal, this epistemic authority is 'anchored in a belief, almost tautologically referred to as positivist, that what you see must be real, true, present, or otherwise reliable'. As in my suggestions about witnessing, she proceeds, 'after all, it is visible, you see it there, before you' (1996: 5).

But for Bal there is yet another 'exposure'. This is made by the analyst whose identification of cultural-epistemological problems in museum exposures effectively (re)forms the discourse that is the object of her or his critique. Thus, 'by virtue of the speech act she or he is performing, that agent is semantically situated within that argument' (ibid: 7), a central aporia of cultural analysis. This issue of the role of critical subjectivities in the analysis of display is one that I have touched upon several times so far, and Bal herself acknowledges it variously, sometimes problematizing it, as above, sometimes admitting that she does not know what 'other viewers do' (2001: 173), sometimes sliding into the role of 'every-person' or suggesting a circular proof, that the narrative she has found is there because it has been found. In one sense this is reminiscent of understandings of 'meaning-making' in museums that seek to overcome a deterministic transmission model communication, and posit that meaning is made as a kind of negotiation between production and consumption (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 2000b; also recalling Stuart Hall's typology of 'readings'). But Bal's position is more complex as a form of subjectivism that seeks to evade both 'empiricist fallacies or falling back into relativist subjectivism' (ibid: 188). For her, the mere fact of a curatorial decision to hang three paintings next to one another 'because they somehow "work" together' (ibid: 187), is a proof of sorts that her narrative reading reflects some specific cultural forces at work in the producers' consciousness.

I'm not sure that the paradoxes that we see here are successfully negotiated. Two positions that Bal negates are i) that her own critical subjective analysis can be neutral, or ii) that it can be baseless, and hence spurious or untrue. It's difficult to wedge these denials together. We thus return again to the problem of the validity of readings that may not be acknowledged by producers. This was not one faced by Hourston Hanks, whose reading was 'with the grain'

and chimed with statements from producers. Bal's project is different: she does not avail herself of producers' 'real' voices, for they cannot be taken at face value, and the point of her subjectivist approach is that it requires no 'empirical' support. As she puts it, her analyses aim to provide 'an *integrated account* of the discursive strategies put into effect by the museum's expository agent (the curators), and, on the other hand, the effective process of meaning-making that these strategies suggest to the visitor' (1996: 7; my emphasis). The reading itself, then, 'becomes part of the meaning it yields'. Her justification for this approach ('And this seems an important insight, for what are museums for if not visitors?'), is a means of fashioning an apparently generalizable 'finding' from an individualistic analysis. It is a reversion to (pseudo-) empiricism that is reinforced when she calls for 'systematic' analysis of museums' narrative-rhetorical structures (2001: 187). What her analyses of displays of paintings reveal (or, precisely 'expose') are complex cultural phenomena, such as the links between homosocial competition among male artists and the subjugation of women in history (and, sometimes, how these homosocial dynamics reappear in the curatorial production). In such analyses the only proof of worth, if it is such at all, is the extent to which her own exposure/exposition persuades us, and whether we agree with her and share her position. But all of us who analyse display have to negotiate a position here, and at least Bal tackles the problem head-on.

The persuasiveness of Bal's analyses derive from an approach that combines narratology with semiotic understandings of displays. In displays, objects become signs, and a discursive significance overcomes the object (such as a painting) because of the signification that is imposed upon it (she says this signification is imposed by 'someone', but for now let us say 'by the producer' to keep it simple!). There then emerges a discrepancy between 'thing' and 'sign' ('precisely what makes signs necessary and useful'). In this case the 'thing' can recede 'into invisibility as its *sign* status takes precedence to make the statement', and it is this that makes up the 'constative speech acts' of the museum display. These acts employ 'rhetorical figures to build up a narrative discourse' (ibid: 166). These rhetorical figures are built from the 'productive tension between images, caption (words), and installation (sequence, height, light, combinations)' (ibid: 187).

An example of this is Bal's classic analysis of the 'Caravaggio Corner' at the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, and the grouping of three paintings: from the left, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* of about 1602, his *Doubting Thomas* of about 1600-1601 and on the right Giovanni Baglione's *Heavenly Amor Defeats Unearthly Love* of about 1602-3.[3] This is not a particularly high-tech display and there is no flashy architecture or graphics. It's just three paintings in a row, ranged over the corner of the room: two paintings on one wall (by Caravaggio) and one on the other (by Baglione). Standing some feet away, the three paintings might just take up your field of vision. In other words, this is not the same kind of complexity as the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum discussed above, where narrative is built, at least in part, through complex and no-doubt expensive architectural design. So, the elements and vehicles of narrative are less visible, and a different kind of analysis is required.

Firstly, Bal analyses the paintings in themselves: what is 'eye-catching' or pointed at (linking to the notion of *focalizers* as used in visual narratology, and again to one of her ideas of

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[3] The paintings can be viewed online on numerous image banks, e.g. http://www.wga.hu/. Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* is usually to be found in the Picture Gallery at the Schloss Sanssouci

exposure – gestures that expose), and what is indexed? For example, in the *Doubting Thomas* the wound in Christ's side is a focal point that is both pointed to and indexed (literally) by Thomas who probes it with his finger. In Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia*, the personified Love is a pubescent boy, winged and naked, holding arrows that point to his genitals. In Baglione's *Heavenly Amor Defeats Unearthly Love*, another winged personification of Love, this time armoured and slightly older but still a youth, appears to descend from heaven on and between an earthly couple, comprising a young nude male in the foreground and an older male, in shadow to one side whose face is turned away. Their congress is interrupted; the prone young man 'with his bare buttocks lies ready for action', and 'instead of a penis on offer, toes stand erect in response to the angel' (ibid: 82). Bal then engages in an intertextual analysis of how the paintings 'point' to one another, or are made to do so.

Establishing that the framing paintings are erotic, the middle painting, the *Doubting Thomas*, is eroticized by association. In that painting, Christ's wound is transformed by syntactic connection (or 'conjugation', to use Lidchi's term) into a sexual/genital sign that references the anus of Caravaggio's *Amor*, the 'barely, yet clearly suggested access to the hole behind/underneath the penis' (ibid: 182). The juxtaposition of the paintings means 'the juxtaposition of the holes' (ibid) and the 'sign' value of the *Doubting Thomas* overcomes its 'thing' status. Meanwhile, Bal understands Baglione's painting, in which 'Heavenly Amor' and 'Earthly Love' are respectively personified by younger and older male figures, to represent rivalry between men (older men's domination of younger men and 'homoeroticism's revenge', which gives 'ruthless priority to youth' (ibid)). This rivalry is itself taken as an index of rivalry between Baglione and Caravaggio, a competition that the latter wins because of his more daring eroticism in eliding the sacred and the profane in the centrally-placed *Doubting Thomas*.

Far-fetched? Hard to follow? Or worse, unhistorical? In Bal's defence, the rivalry between the two artists is mentioned in the wall text, as Bal points out, and indeed this is not an uncommon theme in art history. In my experience it is not at all unusual that highly-educated, elite art curators intentionally put works of art into complex (and sometimes abstruse) spatial-visual 'dialogues' that are inherently intertextual. The paintings in the 'Caravaggio Corner' are out of chronological sequence, suggesting that some other discursive principle stands under their arrangement. But we do not know that Bal has identified that discursive principle. What if the art historical knowledge of the curators alone would discredit Bal's reading? Once again, the resolution comes from subjectivity, or rather, from her attempt to valorize an 'integrated account' of curatorial production and subjective reception:

> Whether Baglione had an opinion about Caravaggio's attractive young boy [the *Amor*] or not, whether his hatred for his rival had anything to do with it, whether he knew the Thomas and considered it; none of this is relevant for a reading of the collocation of these three images in this particular corner of this Berlin museum (ibid: 183).

Instead, what *is* relevant is what is 'there', 'in situ, on this wall and "read" in 1994 by someone interested in relations between men', someone who identifies a complex 'cultural-political story' that 'could not have been told by any of the three works individually' (ibid: 183-184).

There is acute visual and political analysis in Bal's account, and the extensiveness of narratives that can be turned out from a small cluster of things itself testifies eloquently to the richness of display as an expressive form of creative representation and as content for consumption. Bal's approach helps us to attend to narratives that are not 'writ large' in the museum architecture, or codified in big structures of 'exhibition time'. But this kind of close reading comes with caveats. The very complexity that Bal teases out turns into a practical-methodological issue. If a group of just three paintings can be mined for such a complex narrative that is so lengthy to describe and justify, then what would it be like to analyze an entire room, or an entire museum, and to render this in a form accessible to others? Bal says that 'walking through a museum is like reading a book,' but if this is so, then we will never get to the end unless we skip a lot! Then again, perhaps the narratives that small groupings reveal are so vast and fundamental – as with questions of patriarchy, rivalry and eros – that we need not walk so far… A related problem is where displays and their narratives can be said to begin and end. Bal cordons off one corner of a room for close analysis. We don't know what is in the other corners, which other paintings are in the room, and what other significations can be determined from larger selections. On what grounds can we choose and excise a single 'grouping' for exclusive analysis?

Meanwhile, it is clear that Bal's approach is particularly apposite for groups of figurative images that can themselves be subject to individualized visual (mainly compositional) analysis before moving onto their relational meaning in display. There is good reason to think that a narratology of this kind can produce special insights into displays of other kinds of objects, and especially non-figurative ones outside of the epistemic regime of art where particular cultural codes and forms of signification obtain; but these insights may be somewhat different, as will be the analytical techniques for achieving them. Lastly, we have explored at length issues to do with subjectivity and validity. If you are interested not so much in the 'relations between men' and more in, say, *light* (just to pick an obvious aspect of Caravaggiesque paintings), how different would your reading be, not just of the paintings but of the display as a whole? If you are interested in x or y, then will you not inevitably find what you seek? If nothing else, might you gravitate only towards those displays, or portions of them, that seem to speak to that interest? What will you miss? Does this matter for the validity of your critical 'exposure-exposition'?

These are questions concerning the initial orientations and groundings of investigation that beset all of the display analysis approaches to be reviewed and tried out in these essays. The next in the series focuses on approaches that do not proceed from overtly semiotic premises, but nevertheless have much in common intellectually with the ideas of script, text and narrative that have been reviewed here. As we will find, a common denominator for the approaches to be examined is the idea of the 'structure' of display and its determination of visitor experience.

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