Storytelling in Museums: Construing Language, Heritage and Places in the Aftermath of History

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Storytelling in the *Museo Diffuso della Resistenza, della deportazione, della guerra, dei diritti e della libertà* (Torino): construing language, heritage and places as the aftermath of World War II

Abstract

The article investigates aspects of museum communication with special reference to storytelling narratives as used in museum discourse. Museology and Media studies have addressed the topic, but storytelling is not a common practice in Italian culture compared with the Anglo-Saxon context, and the example provided by the installations at the *Museo Diffuso della Resistenza* in Turin represent a unique case of artification of oral history worth discussing. The article aims at using an interdisciplinary approach to address oral narrative as builders of identity. With the standpoint of narrativity, I address the function of museums as collectors of memories and focus on how the narratives that wrap an exhibition and what is displayed, enhance and shape the eventness of museum stories.

Key words: storytelling, museum communication, narrativity, aftermath, intertextuality.

1. Introduction

Developments in digital technology have transformed narrative practice and the way we need to see and feel a story by sharing our storyworlds, thus creating a collective vision of

authorship. Storytelling generates meaning by focusing on objects and by bringing visitors into the stories built around the objects displayed (Ryan 2014, 25-49).

Museology understands digital storytelling as a means to enhance communicative practice (Nielsen 2017). This article discusses storytelling narratives used in museum discourse and how they play a crucial role in construing national identity (Abbot 2019; Ryan 2004; Mulholland 2016; Morson 2003). As a case study, I will illustrate the *Museo Diffuso Della Resistenza, della deportazione, della guerra, dei diritti e della libertà* in Turin (Italy) that collects digital narratives of everyday life during the Second World War, and provides an immersive reading of the Italian Republican Constitutions. The stories exhibited using video installations represent a form of intangible heritage that preserves fragments of memory and turns them into a collective experience. This museum bears witness to the people who lived the War by staging the emotional and private aspects involved with the war experience and its aftremath, with historical rigor and as a from of reconciliation that overcomes ideology. The narration of what happened during and after the war sets the scene for an ideal dialogue between the public and the tellers of the stories. Narration represents a way of building a communal existence in which people establish a multifaceted relationship of mutual interdependence that overcomes the uncertainties of the *after−war* trauma. In the installations, this conception of social unity creates a cultural−semiotic space that realizes the "coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different socio−ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form" (Bakhtin, 1981, 291).

2.   How storytelling matters.

Stories are irresistible to the human mind because they activate the imagination (McCabe and Peterson, 1990). The binding force of stories creates a flow of images in the mind that turn into emotions. More generally, any visual element provides sensory details to a story and further stimulates creation (*poiein*). Instead of telling one has to show the events of the narrative to be effective, as stories matter when they mediate between the individual and the collective vision of an event. A successful story is personal, authentic, universal, and focused on people. It is effective if it foregrounds the role of an individual into a community. Stores are real as they spot on singularities within a social group by using symbols that visualise emotions, experiences, beliefs (Hyvärinen 2010; Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014, Hardy 2014).

In discussing storytelling we are dealing with technique rather than content and to a specific selection of narrative techniques that can fit into the museum environment. Digital storytelling, in particular, comprehends diverse storytelling forms that employ various digital media and devices. These devices provide a third dimension to narrative, i.e. the visual along with time and space. Successful storytelling consists in organizing content in a coherent system, held up by a narrative structure provided by the various media (video, audio, images, texts, maps). This highlights a high density of codes, events, characters, information, that interact through different relations that can easily be remembered and enhance cognition, notwithstanding the degree of involvement: a story produces other stories favouring collaborative knowledge i.e. creating a networked knowledge. Digital media in museums are crucial as they enhance interactivity, create the expectations of audience and develop audience ability to create meaning as generated by media convergence. In other words, storytelling provides a different mode of expression to frame the experience of History.

In fact, oral narrative as understood by historians and social scientists is an interview with questions that address certain topics and may voluntary or spontaneously direct and influence the response of the interviewee. As Abrams observes, oral history

> […] refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past. But an oral history is also the product of that interview, the narrative account of past events. It is then both a research methodology (a means of conducting an investigation) and the result of the research process; in other words, it is both the act of recording and the record that is produced […] (Abraham 2010, 2)

On the other hand, digital storytelling are 3–5 min visual narratives that synthesize images, video, audio recordings of voice and music, and text to create stories that represent individual, group or sociocultural views of health issues, community concerns, political and social issues. A digital story performs the identity of the teller as an artefact, pretending naiveté and providing a flipped point of view on history. The aim is to foreground 'people' − an example of "history from below".[1] In theory the teller is empowered and conscious of the potentials of narratives. The experiences of the Berkeley Storycenter and projects like the

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[1] The well known term in historiography refers to the work of E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Merlin Press, 1991. For a disussion of the approach and an interpretation of the meaning of "dal basso" Simona Cerutti provides an interesting discussion in "Who is below? E. P. Thompson, historien des sociétés modernes: une relecture", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2015/4: 931-954.

British BBC Capture Wales are a case in point[2] as they developed train-the-trainer approach in which a small group of participants is trained to use technologies to produce a video, and to write a script. These in turn, will train others, the participants, in small groups to construct their own digital stories. In this way, collective brainstorming, and sharing of experience build communities and spread the practice itself. At the beginning of the digital age this was a new and powerful tool to engage with the notion of community and identity that is now bypassed by the social media.

Narratives of personal experience that focus on the private life of families and individuals, offer insight into everyday conduct, affection, emotions and have a deep impact on the museum public. Yet, when stories address politics and ethics, or religion, narrators do not usually disclose their minds in full. Moving along a continuum, i.e. adapting themselves to the interviewer, to mainstream thinking or refusing altogether to manifest their beliefs, oral narratives. As Luisa Passerini understood forty years ago, memory, ideology and subconscious desires shape narration as the product of negotiation between the teller and the interviewer (Passerini, 1979). This results into layers of memories whose authenticity may be questionable but is valued as a process and a performative act of construction of historical understanding: an act of historiography itself.

If we look at examples of oral narrative and storytelling we can observe stories that are triggered by a key event. The event becomes a powerful initiator of plot. The aftermath of an event is circumscribes the time and space of the story.

Dictionary definitions of aftermath describe it as a specific segment of time after an adverse event, i.e. "the period following an event, such as an accident of war, and the effects caused by the event"[3]. The aftermath is *the result of* a turning point in history, a crucial, single event that shakes the lives of individuals bringing change into their being. The event splits the linear timeline of history into two units: the time before and the time after the event, i.e. an external, real, physical event pours into the subjective perception of time. The event intrudes into cognition and the awareness of existence, hence the role played by memory and the way it is defined and shaped as a story that collects and objectifies the aftermath (Tumblety 2013).

The aftermath is also a time of breakdown and digestion: it is a physical experience that describes our memories of the event as involving the body, a time when imagination is

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redefined and rebuilt into something new. This unique segment of time determines a profound change of state in the planning of our lives. It starts a process of recovery, a desire to act on new premises, a progression in a lifetime that may last for long, as the effects of the event stretch beyond individual experience to be projected on generations, families, groups of people by means of narratives (Bodei 2014).

Conceptually, the aftermath is a metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1981, 30). A metaphor understands the domain of experience using time, but this metaphorical encapsulation of experience extends into the spatial experience as well: what happened in the past is made present, and visualised by the act of narration, and this is what Koselleck described as "the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous" (Koselleck 1985, 279).

In other words, the metaphorical notion of aftermath develops from the idea of proximity and distance from the event. In this metaphorical space, the experience can change over time, for various forms of experience and the memory of any such experience may overlay: with time the aftermath encapsulates reality, it binds together fulfilled or missed possibilities which change the way we relate to the event (Koselleck 1985, 274−275). Metaphors need to shape ideas into something real and objective to be grasped with more power: images and objects substantiate memory alike, and play a key role in symbolising and objectifying the aftermaths of an event. Be it cognitive objects, e.g. thoughts and images, or real ones such as photographs or works of art, they testify for the experience that construes this moment as unique in the lives of individuals. This exceptional segment of time becomes something meaningful when objects are mapped as traces of the event, as something that bears witness to it and keeps the memory alive (Stumpf 1982, 371).

The objects that signify the aftermath of an event can be private or public: they can be family memories, tokens of past lives, gathered, collected, treasured and preserved as meaningful by an institution or a group. Sometimes they are also exhibited. These objects fall out of the everyday experience, they used to be familiar and easily recognized, but after the event, they are repositioned as new. Being part of the aftermath metaphor, they are beyond our usual way of categorising, classifying and giving meaning to what goes on. They cross the horizon of recognition in everyday life into an existing space of new expectation and recognition (Merewether and Potts 2010).

Museums play a unique role in visualising metaphors and ideas through the objects collected. Exhibitions are meaningful as they turn concepts into an objective narration. Works of art, natural objects, and artefacts can be positioned in the museum space designing a path around which visitors move and learn about the theme, the ideas exhibited (Tzortzi 2015). An

exhibition portrays and exposes the aftermath of an event by foregrounding objects that act as signposts in a story. The narratives built around the objects define the space of history by absorbing and releasing emotions (Monti and Keen 2016).

3.   **Museums and their role in narrating cultural identity**.

Museums are complex institutions that engage in communication at different levels and generate forms of writing that address both professionals and the general public. They communicate with objects. They also bear the responsibility to shape the identity of a nation, and this is an issue that involves notions of power, politics, race and sexuality (Weiser 2017).

Museum ethics is engaged with memory and time. The objects preserved are soaked with experience and emotion, and for this reason, the play a key role in defining who we are and where we go, what we were, and how we could be. The people who created or used the objects that are exhibited and the public connect and communicate using the same objects. For this reason, museum narratives play a crucial role in defining portions of history as something permanent, and real, turning the aftermath metaphor into physical items that testify for what the event generated. They create history along with its myths (Kenell 2004).

In the 80s, New Museology advocated the idea of breaking with the traditional museums conceived as the authoritative gatherer of exquisite specimens of the past. The Museum, a self-contained institution and building, was seen as a misconstruction of time and human history: politics, power, control had shaped Museums as a place to 'fix' what was left of crucial events in human lives (McCall and Gray 2014; Walsh 2002; McLeod 2005; Ferguson, Greenberg and Nairne 2005). Not surprisingly, the movement based its critical view on Foucault: museums were places of dominance and sources of political and social hegemony. Foucault defined *heterotopias* as places in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 24). As such, Museums accumulated a general archive, enclosing in one place all epochs, all forms, and all tastes[4].

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[4] The idea of constituting a place that is itself outside of time, the project of perpetuating a fixed and immobile monument to power was seen as one of the key symbols of Western modernity and its idea of progress and scientific Positivism.

At the end of the decade, the word museum began to be used in its plural form, to signify the diverse ways in which history and heritage could be narrated, each having its its personality. The objects displayed appeared in need of a public response to be meaningful: meaningful: the public could add meaning to an exhibition, something now enhanced by the by the new media[5].

In contemporary museums, visitors are to be foregrounded: they are not the mere recipient of a message, but they can manipulate the message itself by providing comments, thus proving the success of an exhibition. The visitor belongs to a community of interpreters that creates art and culture by giving value to the object exhibited (Davis, 2007).

Museums' engagement with narrative is a way of enacting their role as social and socialised institutions, creating relations with their visitors. By communicating themselves 'among' the audience, museums actively construct meanings through the use of narrative resources. Comprehension is augmented and amplified (Ravelli, 2006, 5−16; Parry 2013). Storytelling is thus a common way of creating meaning around an exhibition. It facilitates the transition from objects to chains of objects, from works of linear structure to those of splitting structure, from static texts to dynamic and multimodal texts, engaging the whole body in the process of creation. Museum narratives involve the senses: empathy comes into play, by enriching a story, and constantly catching the audience's attention (Peterson and McCabe 1990; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Walsh 2002; Roppola 2013).

The stories that conceptualise the idea of aftermath testify for the habit of generations and groups of people to merge and communicate by using symbols. The aftermath becomes a 'positive' moment of expectation when people move toward some new possibility and try to achieve the communicative value of experience in its ability to create a community. New museums perfectly meet the function of symbolizing cultural identity.

4. Extending narration beyond the text: The *Museo Diffuso della Resistenza* in Turin (Italy). A case study.

The *Museo Diffuso della Resistenza, della Deportazione, della Guerra, dei Diritti e della Libertà* (Diffused Museum of Resistance, Deportation, War, Rights and Freedom) exhibits

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[5] In this context, a particular interest in museum architecture and design stimulated new research: the space dimension (the role of lighting, the use of installations) has been the object of investigation to redefine the place and role of memory and its specimens.

ideas and the memories of the Second World War. A robust ethical perspective on history substantiates the activity of the museum itself. As Thomassen and Forlenza highlight:

> […] After 1945, European countries built their national identities around highly selective narratives of the war. These narratives often created simplistic dichotomies of winners/losers and perpetrators/victims…An open or balanced memory must be sensitive toward the anthropological recognition of symbols and rituals as essentially polysemic and open to social interpretation […] (Thomassen and Forlenza 2013, 215)

Memory is at the heart of a project that aims at keeping alive a sense of community. Individual stories are treated as the foundations of History, and they serve as triggers to place local events and personal experience in the full scenario of European History. The Museum was opened in 2003 inside an 18th Century military building, and it hosts a permanent exhibition which illustrates everyday life during the war, the German occupation, the Italian Resistance and the return of democracy. The images, the sounds and the voices of the WWII witnesses are presented in multimedia installations, but the visit continues outside the building into the town, thus *diffusing* the museum, i.e. outspreading it to places that bore witness to WWII events. In this perspective, the museum represents a journey around places and their memories that are not fixed in a given historical moment but are alive, incessant and diverse, sometimes even divergent and conflicting, representing fragments of identity. History surrounds people, being written in the environment we live by, in the experience of everyday life. A palace, a square, a garden, down to the smallest signs that are preserved, incorporated, and transformed by urban growth can be the starting point of a story[6].

The relatively recent concept of *museo diffuso* (widespread or extended museum), was developed by architect Fredi Drugman (1927−2000) to illustrate the relationship between a territory and the heritage exhibited in its museums. According to Drugman, History is all around us and written in all the places we live by. A building, a square, a garden, may develop into a narrative. Locations enshrine different layers of time and preserve different levels of history: one point on a map encapsulates all the complexity, non-linearity and

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[6] https://www.museodiffusotorino.it/Home

multiplicity of time (Drugman 2003). Places enshrine different layers of history, questioning notions of memory and forgetfulness, acceptance and forgiveness (Freeman 2019)[7].

Drugman maintained that historical places and monuments could build a network of meaningful relations. In extending Drugman's concepts, Gravano suggests that "the dispersed museum implies a close link between alterity and familiarity, the usual and the extraordinary, every day and the unique. Thus the dispersed museum comes to be seen as an open form which proposes a deep relation between territory, a community of inhabitant, and visitors" (Gravano 2013, 115).

The concept of metaspace may be added to understand how meaning is built in this context. Metaspace refers to how a single location can host several social processes simultaneously. Such urban complexities can be understood as an urban gallery that generates different ways of participation. These places facilitate the merging of discourses produced by different layers of society (expert, semi or non-experts), while simultaneously memorialising conflicting cultural memories, histories, performances, and narratives (Bunschoten 2005).

In an urban environment, metaspaces have the potential to assist and foster several cultural processes and performances. In fact, in an expanded museum space whose limits and boundaries are blurred, audiences experience museums as a performance (Casey 2005).

As Drugman observed:

> […] The museum as a way of seeing, a staging, a Barnum's circus of modern life; as a means of transmitting political values and contents; as an officially sanctioned plundering with the aim of forming new bundles of ideas; museum-is places, like Venice; museums as 'monuments to the fragility of cultures, the decadence of major institutions, the dwindling of rituals, the disappearance of myths, the destructive effects of wars, to negligence and corrosive doubts'[…] (Drugman 1995, 9−10).

Museums formalise a manner of seeing and perceiving by organising the space in which the items are displayed and controlling the physical and emotional behaviour of the visitors passing through the exhibition space. Exhibitions have been interpreted in their

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[7]A case in point is the site of an anarchist, creative, utopian festival, the Fusion Festival, Larz, Meckenburgh. However, it used to be Rechlin−Larz military airfield (1933–45), then it became the main testing ground of the Third Reich's Luftwaffe (1945–93) and it was used by the 19th Fighter Bomber Regiment West, of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. https://www.fusion-festival.de/en/x/home/ (access: 4 December 2018).
Concentration camps, instead, are maintained to preserve them from decay and presented to the public as real, live experience. http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/preservation/ (access: 4 December 2018).

double act of *exhib−action* indicating the set of practices through which the identity of an exhibited object or subject is defined by the procedures of its display. An exhibition is at the same time an 'acting out,' i.e. an action performed in the very act of representation: it is an inherently performative act that reveals the articulation of processes of power that are dissimulated, naturalised and rendered transparent by the alleged objectivity of the implementation (Danto 1988; Miles, 1997; Guinard and Molina 2018).

In this perspective, museums are open to the city and connected to people; they aim to create perspectives and experiences rather than transmitting specific messages as part of the town. Visiting a museum conceived in this way is indeed a journey into the memory of each site. Each site preserves fragments of memory and memories. Virtual and real spaces can be blended to activate cognition and memory (Tzortzi, 2015a; 2016b). People are moved by what they see and hear, while the very fact of belonging to a community of visitors contributes to creating the experience (Styliani 2009).

Ancient techniques of *ars memories* are associated with emotionally salient mental images within visualised locations that bring together different fields and blend them to create a new one (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002). The museum in Turin blends digital and physical spaces. Places are associated with a specific meaning and become a destination, i.e. a place where individual or groups go and gather to re-create sense and feel active in reconstructing the aftermath of the war (Benyon 2012).

Visitors have personal knowledge and understanding of World War II, but most of all they have seen images of the war and concentration camps: the installations in the *Museo Diffuso* aim at triggering the memories and arousing opinions in the visitors' mind by stimulating an affective experience of history. Visitors watch short video clips and hear the stories using the audioguide at their choice and pace: some can be viewed on large panels, some on mirrors where the face of two interviewees is shown. A man and a woman take turns and tell their story, providing a detailed narrative of their feelings and opinions about a given topic. These clips are shown on a mirror, and the visitor sees him/herself between the two speakers: listening to the story compels the viewer to take part in a virtual conversation that makes the narrative highly dynamic, realising an authentic experience of storytelling (Carrozzino and Bergamasco 2010).

An interactive table allows visitors to touch 'documents' that turn into videos. Each one tells stories (both factual and personal) about the twelve places in town that had a significant function during the war. Documents are turned into communicative

acts that are activated by the same visitors. A cohesive pattern is thus created using the virtual narrative in the hands of every single visitor.

The museum experience starts with a story, extends over places that are inhabited, alive and real, involving personal memories and allowing the visitors to evoke their vision of World War II and their family memories. The aftermath is shaped like a living and immersive moment (Hackvoort 2012).

Different narratives involve various aspects of real life: the difficulties faced by ordinary people in their day to day management of money and work, life under the bombings, hunger, cold and fear. Politics is presented as a way of living between opposition and conformity. Finally, the exhibition brings visitors to an air−raid shelter. Sound effects and testimonies are also provided to recreate the claustrophobia and fear of the situation. The sense of involvement and the active presence of the visitor transfer the past into the present. Then it is now.

Stories enable people to find similarities with other people, real, but also virtual or imagined. What is relevant is that stories can confirm a truth that enhances our sense of who we are as human beings. Stories can let people care about other people in emotional, intellectual, aesthetic terms. By stirring emotions with the installations, by expanding over the cityscape the memories of war, the exhibition testifies to the reality of the war. The visit creates a fertile ground for the understanding of the aftermath as a decisive, energetic moment of sharing, of the willingness and development of ideas that paved the way for the economic growth of the '60s.

The aftermath of World War II was a period of civil war (communists against the last strongholds of the regime), but it was followed by the Republic and its constitution: from tragedy to rebirth. For this reason, a special area of the museum is dedicated to the Constitutions. The Italian Constitution is presented through representative points which are explained by using four mirrors as a form of installation: *Yes to Freedom*, *Yes to Democracy*, *Yes to Equality*, *No to Violence*. By sitting in front of each mirror, visitors activate the replay of individual accounts, passages from literature and newspaper commentaries on the selected articles of the Constitution[8]. By scrolling the texts, their face is in the text: they face the constitution and its message as if they were responsible for the words they see. The result is a Dialogic multimodal text.

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[8] https://www.museodiffusotorino.it/GeneralInformation

In literature, the concept of dialogue and the Dialogic nature of novels is a well—known topic that has been investigated from many points of view (Bostad 2004).

Bakhtin argued that the novel is Dialogic because it is a form within which realised by the interaction between 'voices' that perform a dialogue, such as that speaker and listener. In the case of the novel, the voices are those of the characters and narrator, and of the reader/listener who makes sense of this dialogue by being actively involved with it. The voices of a Dialogic text may also be seen in its components that produce meaning and open it out to further forms of meaning-making (Klages 2006, 135−42).

For Bakhtin "any utterance is a link in a very complex organised chain of other utterances" (Bakhtin 1996, 69), as any utterance is always in a constant dialogue with all that has been said about a specific topic, as well as everything that follows. Any utterance is a response to an *already−said*, either in an immediate situation or a broader context. (Charaudeau and Maingueneau 2002, 288).

Bazerman (2004) stressed the importance of studying intertextuality to understand how an author, positions the self in a universe of multiple forms of narration. The intersection of narratives as displayed in the *Museo Diffuso* fully realises intertextuality. A dialogic exhibition is concerned with the 'to and fro' movement that is characteristic of the dialogic, and like the novel in Bakhtin's analysis, it comprises audiences in this interactive process of meaning-making and affects (Witcomb 2013). Moreover, polyphony is another aspect of narrativity that can be seen in this museum Polifony describes a form of multi-voiced text in which speakers, including narrators (or curators) and listeners, are on the same level. This idea can be extended to the relationships between the exhibition and the audience (Phillips, 2003).

The idea of dialogue in narratology identifies a form of social and cultural interaction with the text. The museum bear witness to the people who lived the war and worked to build democracy after the war: their narratives are used to establish a complex relationship of mutual interdependence with the audience. In the installation, this conception of social unity creates a cultural−semiotic space that respects the "coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different socio−ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form" (Bakhtin 1981, 291). The polyphonic interrelation of ideological differences, i.e. the intersection of points of view, becomes a source of new cultural identities and an enhancement of the linguistic and semiotic

resources. Storytelling penetrates the consciousness of every single visitor in unexpected and unique ways. By listening while watching people telling a story, listening while seeing popular images of the war, places and documents enable the visitor to focus on the story. The aftermath of the becomes real — a place to be and voice the national Constitutions.

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