

“Let the Silent History Be Told”: Museums Turn to Narratives

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Abstract

Narratives perform numerous tasks: they are a structure employed to offer contextualization or a stratagem to overcome museum's communication problems, for example, a way of linking sources, themes, and particularly, heterogeneous temporalities. The new museology concept, says a museum cannot be empirical, from which a universal vision is guaranteed. This crisis, caused by the hegemonic models of old, gave rise to narratives in museums. Secondly, the auto-referential modalities of communication went into crisis. "Place the periphery in the centre," to attract attention to those who would not have been recognised via the history itself, an occurrence which has only deteriorated since the modern storm, i.e. make them speak of individuals, territories and cultures whose own voices and identities had been denied. The RISARCIMENTI exposition [Storie di vita e di attesa], 2011, at the Etnomuseo Monti Lepini Museum, Brigantaggio di Itri Museum and the Brigantaggio di Cellere Museum refer to this perspective. So, we must endeavour to undertake a reflexive dimension, and not produce decisive and monolithic exhibitions but partial ones which can be dissected and criticised.

Keywords: Narrative Museums; new museology; polyphonic stories; Italian museums.

Many narrative museums have existed in the past. It seems appropriate to recall that, in the Renaissance period, the princes or the scholars who had their own collections would create their own narratives (and would invent their own cultural guides), narrating, and sometimes heroically reconstructing the location of certain exhibits; the objects stored in their room of wonders. Many of the narratives adopted in universal exhibitions in the mid-1800s were audacious and influential. In these cases, visitors were exposed to an evolutionary narrative path which digressed from the “primitive”, “living fossils”, and were exposed in *tableaux vivants* with wildly reconstructed concepts, which would reach the latest advances in techniques and civilization. (PADIGLIONE, 2013a, 2013b).

However, I think that it is also fair to specify that the narrative museums came into their element in the museology debate in the 1990s, or just before. Its avowal is linked to, a very relevant, social phenomenon, consisting of gaining a centrality of memories, such as the *memory* effect and the ever more widespread presence of various museums focusing on the identity of cultural groups and specific locations. The interesting thing is that, henceforth, narrations performs multiple tasks: they become a structure employed to offer contextualization (which is better when it's incorporated in specific subjects) or a stratagem to resolve communication problems, such as the linking of sources, themes and particularly heterogeneous temporalities. It seems very important to point out that the centrality of narrations also have the effect of untangling the imaginary, artistic and literary information in museum environments. If in the past, literature and art had found it difficult to get into scientific, historical and ethnographical museums, in the Nineties, they exceeded any limits and rightfully so, based on an instance of a logical interpretative connection between the heterogeneity of objects and of their horizons.

This change in paradigm has happened thanks to the speedy assumption and dissemination of an interpretative posture which was making it tough for museums to make

purely ostentatious or classificatory judgements and was weakening the connection between art and science whose spheres had rendered themselves and their specific languages reciprocally impermeable.

With the *new museology* (VERGO, 1989; PADIGLIONE, 2008) the idea that the museum cannot be placed into an empirical environment, ensures a universal vision and moreover, one that identifies a partial *framework*, which represents a common point of view, which yields political discussions, as well as distinct historical interpretations, from their direct relationship with reality.

The art of creating expositions, favouring window displays, dioramas, scenography or installations, always consists of placement in an expressive manner, a symbolic mediation with relation to the work or to the document. Nowadays we realise with more clarity that the choice of air-tight display, or non-tailored frames or to isolate the object in an empty space with white surroundings are far from neutral arrangements: they participate in precise historical, cultural choices. “Also, the lights and show-cases,” Pietro Clement (1996, p. 47) clearly specifies,

are metaphors for arrangements of knowledge: neutral lights as positivist knowledge, transparent window displays give the idea of a scientific-truths, geometries and the rational rhythm of light-panel- displays give the idea of an organizational, legitimized science, without the imaginary of emotion, constructors of similar closed concept spaces by this and other forms of fantastical, emotional and perceptual rationality.

The turnaround: interpretative and reflexive (recognized as bearers of non-neutral arguments, as a consequence of the ideals placed on display, the point of view of the curator, are put into debate) this potentializes the mission of social inclusion which was already present in museology of the sixties, but only caught on in the 1990s. Museology, suddenly found narratives smiting elitist barricades, the solemn and magniloquent posture that characterised museums in the turbulent seventies.

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So, I would like to emphasize that the narrative Museum was born from the crisis of the, until then, hegemonic models. Firstly, the illusion of the exclusivist matrix who cultivated the image of the museum as a temple of universal truths solely reserved for the few connoisseurs of that secular religion of art and beauty, has disappeared, that the museum is a noble house for artefacts which value themselves with such self-evident excellence and that they do not request narration or any other linguistic interventions. Secondly, the self-referential modalities of communication went into crisis. The rationalist illusion that had put expression above everything in naturalist museums and archaeological sites and made themselves eligible by use of mimetic language (during the composition of the descriptive apparatus and plaques) taken from various disciplinary traditions usually employed in the classifications and specialized scientific literature.

The *cultural studies* and the *museum studies* in particular within critically-reflexive sociology and anthropology which can be found in the Italian magazine *AM-Antropologia Museale* and within Palumbo's research (2001, 2006) show that the effectiveness of these language techniques and presumed analytical metacodes are to confirm their social distinction (BOURDIEU; DARBEL, 1969; BOURDIEU, 1979), instead of favouring being understood, refractory language was used to give an account of the complexity of the illusory and wholly alien experience (LYOTARD, 1979) to the new public who were being attracted by the mission of social inclusion.

The narrative model has spread with propensity, with experimentation and trivialisation in an unending number of contemporary museums. Very often the most disappointing results are when the narration is muddled with advertising, the communication mixed with museum didactics: a truly impoverishing quality, as if the narration was a lower, childlike level of communication, a patronising level which required a lowering of standards of documentation and interpretation. The potential that the story has to offer us a direct contact with a "another world" is forgotten. The scope for us to be immersed in realities the subject is composed of, offering various shades of meaning and a plurality of views. It is precisely thanks to narratives that this complexity can be presented. It's a method displaying the sequence of events, a way of developing the dynamics and the conflicts, creating a synthesis of heterogeneous elements, a path connecting diversities, adversities and protagonism.

Narration puts the constants and changes into context, constituting an unequivocal model to understand and represent human life, to set up an identity as a constructive process (cf. WHITE, 1983; BRUNER, 1987, 1991; RICŒUR, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1993, 2004). You can create a great narrative story without adding arguments and meanings as part of the disclosure to enrich them with stories that pure, precise research can offer. In addition, it is possible to communicate, thanks to the narrative, how parodies and irony have different levels of significance. It is theorised and practiced in architecture

and in post-modern literature and resending the notion of *double coding*, as the anticipated textual introduction with various legitimate interpretations (JENCKS, 2002).

The approach that I understand to abide most with my practice as an anthropologist and that interests me most is Bachtin's dialogical vision (1981; cf. also SOBRO, 2009), brings to our field of work, museums, inviting narrators to reflect on the way in which the narrative interrogates and in some ways stimulates, answers to be provided. This invites the visitor to "read into", as said by Certeau (1980, p. 17; cf. also PADIGLIONE, 2012), "a break in the tax system (the text), equivalent to the physical organization of a city or a supermarket... a system of verbal signals or icons representing a reserve of ideas that expect the reader to make his own sense of them". Nowadays it is increasingly common for an expository path to be prepared using electronic media, giving linkage to various languages and records (from textual to aural, from acted to filmic). It then becomes an important practice for the dialog to be developed with the visitor as a narrative which can be presented and communicated so differently. One that poses questions, leaving possible answers open.

This is how my way of working owes much to the prospect inaugurated by Walter Benjamin. Adorned in 1955 (Italian Edition 1979), interpreting the work of this great master of the 1900s, emphasizing that "incessantly placing the centre in the periphery instead of developing the periphery from the centre, which is how the philosophers and the traditional theorists intend to work". In a text from 1989, by many anticipatory verses, Clemente takes a keyword and assigns it as conceptual icon of a program that aims to appreciate popular traditions as features of cultural differences and the ethnographic museums as potential locations for producing futures. In this text, Benjamin Clemente's prophetic tension can be felt, welcoming the "courage to build, despite everything, where cultural construction is most unlikely, but where, at the same time, the event is being publicised, or is trying to shine through" (1989: 57).

A unique challenge for the logic of modernisation, a radical opening of credit towards a unique event, to wait and trigger them in smaller places, with individuals who have already been forgotten, with their small everyday articles. It was this vision and divine venture that matured together with an international scene who support a turn towards the narrative and reflexive, allowing many of us anthropologists and/or museum specialists, to envisage expression within our work and we now find ourselves, inside a wider scientific and professional community, part of a "movement" bearing a mission of its own in ethics and knowledge (cf. PADIGLIONE, 2014).

"Place the periphery in the centre", to offer attention to those who were not recognized by history, those who only suffered the whirlwind of the modern world, i.e. speak of individuals, territories, cultures whose voices were denied and where their identity is a research program and, at the same time, is a poetic narrative for a museum, potentially viable for archaeological, historical and ethnographical museums. This is a commitment to be

exercised by museums and in accordance with the rigor of documented and critical research, a repairing action of fairness towards those who preceded us, leaving us evidence of their own lives. An invitation to act with etiquette in relation to the deceased, to subject copies of cultural alternatives for museums to put on show, and to present a *good narrative* (a narrative that has respect for inheritance and the instances of entitlement, especially for the coming of future generations).

The teaching of museum anthropology and the ethnography of communication. I believe that today we must not be content to be just museologists or museographers. I believe that to potentiate the turn towards the narrative and reflexive we have to interrupt the contrast between museology and museography, i.e. take the delegation given to art historians with relation to museology of collections, and architects in relation to what the composition of the spaces should mean. Both capabilities should be incorporated into the role of the curator of the installation, the one who is chosen to organize the communication of the exposition, showing integrity and equivalent skills in the critical arrangement of the exhibits.

This leads us to "speaking the silence of history" and an exhibition for which I was the curator; *RISARCIMENTI* [*Storie di vita and di attesa*] (Sala della Partecipazione Roma 17-19 June 2011; Sala Santa Rita Roma Capital, 12/26 July 2012), considered a traveling display which has now become permanent at a place called *La stanza della Memoria* (The Memory Room), within the headquarters of the Salvation Army, in the Roman district of San Lorenzo. An installation (PADIGLIONE, 2009) that is configured as an area of knowledge and expressive framework about the occurrences which remain part of the *Army*; a room "dedicated" to autobiographies which is considered a protected area where personal stories and individual testimonies are donated to be stored within the collective memory, as a meeting place between the narrators and those who wish to listen and learn. A reflexive space, not only for providing aid. An archive, a documentation and exposition centre where the donors of stories can be active collectors and organizers of memories, about the lives of the involved and tactics of resiliency, meetings and untold socialites.

The aim of the exhibition was to invite visitors to reflect on the value of personal and social memories, with the belief that shedding light and recognition on obscured desires, stories and experiences, means we all expand our boundaries of knowledge and imagination of what is possible. Can we forsake the idea of damage, the unjust suffering and painful tragedies, silent aspirations, dreams denied, and wait in vain for donations? And can we imagine that compensation not only amounts to an economic compensation, but could possibly mean cultural recognition? The *RISARCIMENTI* exhibition unites a growing collection of instances of 'social remembering' and equality within museums and institutions "dedicated" to memories. It is the result of an ethnographic research and a collaborative exhibition aimed at relating students of the Faculty of Medicine

and Psychology of the "Sapienza" University of Rome to guests of the Salvation Army who used to reciprocally avoid each other. Fighting the "civil inattentiveness," is an ambitious goal. It triggers a manner of formal respect which makes institutions and people marked by hardship and strong social connotation invisible; put another way, it transforms the ineffective tone that governs and divides distinct "cultural intimacy" (HERZFELD, 2003) causing, through ethnographic inclusion, attentive relations, openings, translations and a fusion of horizons. In practice we're "ingesting" the existences, sorrows and dreams of others. The individuals who narrate are people who belong to a cultural horizon that prefers orality; custodians of the extraordinary art of storytelling (SOBRERO, 2008). Founded in the belief that the narrative adds depth and complexity to the collective memories of the district's urban cultures, the project aims to retribute and give voices back, especially to women, the elderly and the lower classes making them aware of the richness of their world and their own experiences of social disputes through their own narratives, presenting, at the same time, as if it were official history, public, escaping the domestic, everyday life, as if it was proven for a long time, a significant and important part of social experience.

RISARCIMENTI gives power to the weak to subvert hegemony, exposing a bizarre collection of personal documents: 600 pieces of paper, 500 tin boxes, 40 suitcases filled with various objects, 20 pillows, 11 life stories on video, 11 transcriptions of autobiographies and 12 photographic portraits. The day to day heroes' faces appear. We see them telling stories, this time as winners, against suffering, darkness and bad luck. We experience the "extreme lives" of the Salvation Army guests, transformed and made vivid by the narration. The intimate stories motivate us to remember and to imagine. They reveal. Suggest ways to manage the experience. They are interpretations that redefine schemes, contexts and intentions. Throughout the exhibition there are videos, narrations, autobiographical accounts that trace existences, paths and places. Psychology students and guests of the Salvation Army have handed in the testimonies of their dreams made up from from the many tiny sheets of paper that have been studied. They were all carefully placed back in their old tin boxes and suitcases. The little cake tins, which were used to store photos, buttons, trinkets and other family memories, have been entrusted as donations, like a message in a bottle at sea, where no one knows to whom they were directed. They include requests for compensation, replies necessary to live, aspirations to not crush themselves in regret. Suspended *pillows*, resting on the balusters or emerging from the walls containing impressions of faces and secret messages. They narrate of vivid imaginary nights and, happy and stirred dreams, falling into nothingness and excess. Passing worn suitcases from one hand to another, from place to place, buildings, stuck in damp cellars or dusty mezzanines, waiting for the journey that never comes, a desire to get closer to a "place they can call home", a place they will be able

to finally recognize. Now they also receive bits of paper and miniature landscapes of the soul. The witnesses of the autobiographies appear to be protagonists in Federico Mozzano's photos. Looking surprised in a semi-serious posture, waiting, holding a gift box. Framed from the bottom upwards, past events revealed in their very expressions. Dense and elusive portraits, visual ethnography that invites the spectator to restore an unresolved tension between familiarity and 'unfamiliarity', between what is seen and what is imagined, between the smoothed out images and the porosity of reality.

Another example of a narrative museum is the Etnomuseo Monti Lepini (PADIGLIONE, 2001). An exhibition institution characterized by narrativity that does not take its origin from a collection, but from ethnographic research (dialogical and polyphonic practices) and from a collaborative museology project compiled from the community's requirement to reflect on their own identity. A path that poses questions was created, asking: "What does cultural identity look like? What does it mean to say that we here are different from others? To be and feel like you are from Roccaforte or Rome, what can this be compared to?" (PADIGLIONE, 2001, p. 44) and this encourages them to seek answers in local narratives that the ethnographic research has been able to document. The first installation shows the geographical map that the people of Roccaforte studied in the Sixties and Seventies. It is a fragment of a map but, it is obvious, that Roccaforte is not on it, and the Lepini Mountains are not mentioned. The inhabitants of the little town studied a map that did show their own location! On this narrative plot, we implemented the museum mission as cultural redemption, as a knowledge space for denied and re-appropriated identity. The first document acquired by the museum was a photograph of the community in 1992, with over 3000 inhabitants posing in the beautiful baroque square of the little town: a very successful photograph which has since become "historic". We took the photo, having invited the civil society to the square, asking the town's associations meet there.

The journey through the EtnoMuseo Monti Lepini stimulates a micro-narrative, realizing a suitable atelier which has lasted seven years and is open to the young people of the town. The gallery has more than 400 paintings representing, in the form of enigmas and riddles, many surnames of existing families in the town. But perhaps the presence of narratives in this museum is entirely relevant in the *Pasqua Rossa (Red Easter) exhibition* space in which we reconstructed the testimonies of a massacre that occurred in 1913. The stories can be heard within a scenic space simulating the elderly witnesses' chambers which can be visited by researchers; a contextualization which makes the voices and location, the heart of the narratives, and not the square where was the tragic event occurred.

I would like to conclude the narrativity examples, as the core of museum itineraries, with two museums for which I curate, whose stories are dedicated to the analysis of brigandage. Museo del Brigantaggio di Itri (PADIGLIONE, 2006) I wanted to mention the *opening*

narrative, an installation which is encountered before entering with which I sought to introduce the visitor to the purpose of the museum, which is dedicated to a phenomenon of severe and prolonged social upheaval in local and national history. There is a body on the ground, approximately reconstructed, made up of local stones. It is the body of a brigand, who in the nineteenth century, was not considered worthy of burial. They would undergo the insult of being killed, dismembered and their remains dispersed outside the town. The fact-finding mission and ethics of the museum consists of tracing and reconstructing the sources and documents of a history which has been denied, recomposing the scattered parts of the brigand (the "corpus documentary") collected by anthropologists, historians and collectors. In the *concluding* section of the museum, this story is fulfilled: an installation that represents a grave where the brigand's body is finally buried so it does not trouble our own or anyone else's nights.

In the last example, the Museo del Brigantaggio de Cellere (PADIGLIONE; CARUSO, 2011) it gives the account of a very daring operation as the narrative dimension plays a first person role. The substance that connects the various sections of the exhibition is constituted by a journalist's reportage that tells the story from the second half of the Nineteenth Century about Tiburzi, a local brigand who became nationally famous. The reportage uses a narrative source, that is paused throughout the museum itinerary to give the impression of time passing, containing explicit and implicit, rhetorical figures, allusions and prejudices, but also including updates from memories of modern day poets and local storytellers. In short, the reportage is contextualized in time and reflective contemporaneity. A train is imagined going through a landscape of trees to signify the ethnographic interpretation that we can speak of brigandage as a form of "lame modernity", or a "wait betrayed by modernity", because that much desired train never got past the trees which connected the coast to the towns of the Tuscany region and Maremma Laziale.

By granting even more emphasis to the literary figure of the *uchronia*, the museum itinerary concludes with imaginaries of the brigand Domenico Tiburzi, as if, we were in the past, they speak of him as if he is at large in the modern day. I was interested in creating a reflexive ruse stemming from the only available photo that represents the bandit, an image that shows him as if he were alive when he was in fact already dead, which used to happen frequently to give more substance and glory to those who caught him. With a daring cinematic achievement, we reproduced this apparent realism with the image represented by the photo. An actor resembling Tiburzi was used along with credible scenography. The photos became a video and the subject is made invigorating, wielding a rifle and walking away. Effects were used to replicate the world's first cameras (Tiburzi dies in 1896) putting *uchronia* into a scene helping us to imagine how history could have been different. It is a very interesting exercise, which opens up many possibilities in the museum environment.

For me a narrative museum can, explore this format of imaginaries with great potential, not just for fun, but to reflect on the way in which people can approach the many possible variants of history. Often, as in the case of Tiburzi, the stories were imagined by generations of local history. The counterfactual history of Tiburzi evokes in its own way many divided memories and many conflicting stories, not only those about brigandage. The euhronia in the museum is an experience of virtual history that you can configure as a possible cognitive exercise. It is a narrative that offers representation to an imaginary space where even the weak exert some power, where aspirations of happiness and fairness can express themselves. Through this literary system, contemporary tension enhances the value of an overlooked past, valuing the collector and the researcher exposed in the vision of Benjamin (1966) to create the "battle of distraction", who was tasked to "mediate on the remains and relics to speak the silence of history" (SCHIAVONI, 1985, p. 55).

We must have a very critical threshold on what we communicate; we must reflect especially on the way in which we put information, (but perhaps it would be more appropriate to say imposing information) a huge amount of reminiscence to the young generations, a heritage that, in some way, risks removing them from their vital space and project. However, it is important that, infatuated by heritage as we are, as we reflect, we must be careful not to saturate history with our stories. For some time, we have told many a utopia; today we risk saturating their lives with an overload of memories, fruit of our sensitivity but also our uncertainty. So, in my opinion, in our line of work we must be careful and make sure to assume a reflective dimension, to make sustainable actions, to produce not dictatorial and monolithic works but partial works that can also be easily dissected and criticized. It is better, of course, to tell polyphonic and open stories.

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