

EXCAVATING FREYTAG'S PYRAMID

NARRATIVE, IDENTITY AND THE MUSEUM VISITOR EXPERIENCE

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I, David William Francis, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to trace the thread that links the theoretical concept of narrative to the museum blockbuster exhibition. I adopt a qualitative dialogic approach, exploring the topic of narrative from the perspective of both exhibition makers and museum visitors. Semi-structured interviews with museum professionals provide an insight into the strategies and practices involved in the encoding of narrative in museum exhibitions. Interviews with members of the public reveal how visitors decode exhibition narratives, while also illustrating the role museums play in the stories people tell about themselves.

Narrative is a term that is often used in reference to museums but is frequently under-theorised. My case studies – three blockbuster exhibitions held at the British Museum from 2013 to 2015 – each approach the question of how is narrative as a concept relevant in helping us understand the critical issue of the museum from different perspectives. Drawing on the work of the Roland Barthes and the Mikhail Bakhtin, I investigate how concepts taken from literary theory such as plot structure and narratorial perspective might manifests themselves in the space of a museum exhibition. Using the concept of cultural capital taken from the work of the French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I also explore the role a visitor's social background and familiarity with museums plays in their decision to follow a narrative or reject it.

Two threads run throughout my thesis. One is the use of the term narrative to describe the multimodal, multi-authored nature of museum-making. The other is the role museums play in the construction of narratives about the past. It is in the dialogue between the two narrative threads that this thesis seeks to explore and untangle.

Impact statement

This thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of research into narrative and exhibition design. Its original contribution to knowledge lies in its dialogic approach, which brings together the accounts of museum makers who create exhibition narratives with the accounts of the visitors who experience them. It also contributes to the increasing level of research into how narrative theory can be applied to non-textual media.

In adopting a case study approach, using the British Museum as a case it provides a particular insight into the British Museum's history during a time when it was undergoing an important period of change under the directorship of Neil MacGregor. This research will therefore be useful to practitioners working within the field of museum-making, as it will allow them to reflect on their exhibition-making practices and how concepts taken from narrative theory can be applied to the interpretation of exhibitions. This is particularly true for myself, as I undertook my thesis part time while working as an interpretation practitioner. As a result, my research fed into my own work and my theories around narrative can be seen as manifested in a number of projects I've worked on over the course of the seven-years of the thesis. This includes a series of experimental exhibitions focussing in on single objects in room three of the British Museum, *India and the World: A history in the world in nine stories* hosted by the CSMVS Museum in Mumbai and *Raffles in Southeast Asia* hosted by the Asian Civilisation Museum in Singapore.

Although the British Museum is my case study, a key aspect of my research has been sharing and contrasting my case with museums and researchers involved in the study of museum narratives. This includes the Centre for Anthropological Research in Museums and Heritage in Berlin and the curatorial training school jointly run by the Beijing Paleozoological Museum and the School for the Study of Architecture and the Built Environment at Nottingham University. Through co-hosting a series of workshops involving both theorists and practitioners, I hope that this has allowed some of my research to filter

into both my academic colleagues' research and fellow interpretation consultants' practice. I foresee this leading to further dialogue, exchange and collaboration in the future.

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Chapter 1

Unpicking the threads

Introduction

What is narrative? The *Online Handbook of Narratology* (Hühn 2019) contains over eighty entries exploring how the term has been used across a wide range of genres including the conventional – the novel, drama, oral tale – and the more unexpected such as dance, medical histories and wrestling. It is the fluidity of narrative to move between genres and enable linguistic concepts to be applied to the non-linguistic that has led to the term's popularity as a tool for theoretical exploration. Within my own genre of interest – the museum – the lens of narrative has been taken and applied to understand and conceptualise a wide variety of phenomena. It has been employed in the service of critical deconstruction, as in the case of Mieke Bal (1996) who exposes the ideological and colonial narratives that underpin the structure of displays in the Metropolitan Museum and the Natural History Museum in New York. It has also been used as a means of describing the network of relationships and interactions between object, space, text and visitor that make up the museum experience. For example, Macleod et al. (2012) have explored how terminology borrowed from narrative theory might articulate the previously unspoken role design plays in shaping visitor experiences. Moving to the visitors themselves, researchers like Everett (2009) have looked at the role museums play in forming peoples' identities and the narratives we construct to explain and understand our own lives.

Each of these individual threads run throughout my thesis, which explores the role narrative plays in the summer blockbuster exhibitions of the British Museum from 2013 to 2015. Containing both the textual in the form of labels and panels and the non-textual in objects and space, the museum can be seen as a multimodal form of narrative. In his introduction to *A History of the World in 100 objects*, Neil MacGregor (2010, xvi), the then Director of the British Museum, describes the benefits of an object-based history:

'If you want to tell the history of the whole world, a history that does not unduly privilege on part of humanity, you cannot do it through texts alone, because only some of the world has ever had texts, while most of the world, for most of the time, has not.

In *A History of the World in 100 objects* and within museums more generally, objects represent ideas within space, while still retaining the essential materiality of their 'thingness.' It is this materiality that has led to the critique of the application of terms taken originally to understand language, such as narrative, to the non-linguistic (Whitehead 2016, Harrison 2013). Yet this metamorphosis from one medium to another also offers the opportunity for creative potential in understanding not only the genre that the lens of narrative is being critically applied to but also the concept of narrative itself. In thinking about how to define narrative in the museum, I like many others before me attempt to give it shape and this is where the title of my thesis comes from. 'Freytag's Pyramid' is the screenwriting shorthand for the triangular-shaped diagram the nineteenth-century German dramatist Gustav Freytag used to visualise the shape of Greek Tragedy (fig. 1).

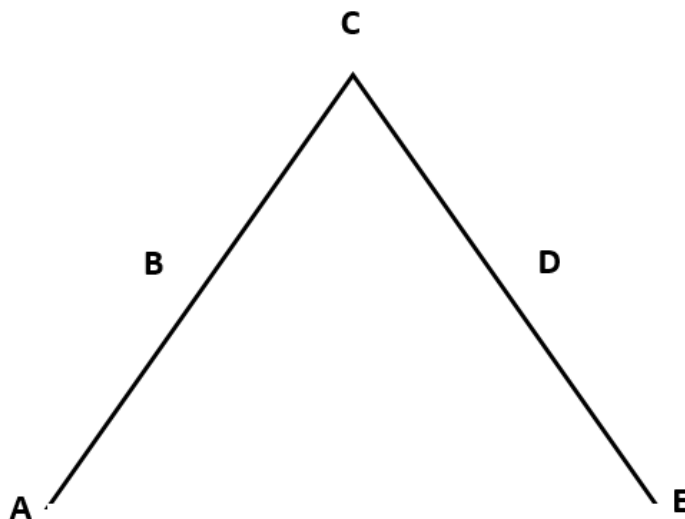


Fig. 1.1 Freytag's pyramid. Freytag describes the letters on the pyramid as representing the following: a) introduction, b) rise, c) climax, d) return or fall, e) catastrophe (Freytag 1997 [1863] 115).

One of the German archaeologists at the Institute of Archaeology, where I wrote this thesis, was pleasantly surprised to see the name Freytag playing such a prominent role in my thesis because in her words 'he has fallen out of scholarly fashion.:' *Excavating* here acknowledges the crucial role the atmosphere and dialogic thinking of the Institute of Archaeology has played in shaping my thesis as a non-archaeologist. It also suggests an attempt to rediscover the viability of narrative theory in the face of the criticism about its usefulness by proponents of the material turn. At the same time, it is also an attempt to imply the ever-present material nature of theoretical work around narrative, which frequently involves the theorist attempting to give the narrative a physical form. A useful precedent is provided here by *Lines: A Brief History* by Tim Ingold (2007), who traces the material traces of the use of lines to describe such as activities as telling a story, going on a walk, or weaving on a loom. The line provides a powerful metaphor throughout my thesis to provide a tangible thread to hold onto when attempting to describe what narrative is. It can be found in the lines I asked visitors to draw on plans of the exhibitions to trace their movements through the space. It is also present in the chain of events the curators, designers and interpretation officers would recount as they tell me the story of an exhibition's making. Finally, lines of people were ever present in the exhibitions themselves. Most notably in the physical queue of visitors that shuffled slowly down narrow case-lined corridors to encounter *Roskilde 6* the largest Viking ship so-far discovered, which was the star exhibit of *Vikings: Life and legend* (2014).

When exploring what we mean by narrative in exhibitions I found it useful to always return back to the tangible of the here and now. This both takes the form of how narrative is physically manifested in the museum but also to understand the wider historical context that has helped to shape it. I first became interested in the relationship between narrative and museums through my role as an interpretation officer at the British Museum, which I began

in 2007 and continued until 2015.¹ Before Neil MacGregor had become Director in 2002, the British Museum's exhibition programme had been savaged in the press for the impressive feat of being 'simultaneously elitist' and 'dumbed down' (Jones 2001). By the end of his tenure, the same critic was lauding the British Museum's exhibition programme as an example to be followed. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* had become an international success and Neil MacGregor, or 'Saint Neil' as he had become known in some areas of the media, had been awarded the accolade of *Times* man of the year (Jones 2010).

Interpretation is a concept that means different things in different institutions and is often a term that is met with baffled looks when explained to museum professionals working outside of a UK or North American context. At the British Museum, a team dedicated to interpretation was one of the new innovations set-up by Neil MacGregor at the British Museum in 2005. The first Head of Interpretation was Dr Xerxes Mazda who had previously worked at the Science Museum in London and was also my internal supervisor at the British Museum during the early stages of my thesis. Much of the visitor-focussed aspect of Neil MacGregor's tenure as Director can be seen as analogous to the approach forged by the Science Museum some ten years earlier, which Sharon Macdonald (2002) traced in her seminal museum ethnography *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*. Macdonald (2002) connects the visitor-focussed approach with the wider societal trends that were happening in Britain in the early 1990s with the introduction of entrance fees for museums linked to a reimagining of the museum visitor as individualistic consumer.

The interpretation officer can be seen as one of the cogs in the blockbuster exhibition machine alongside the key roles of curator, 3D and graphic designer, and project manager.

¹ Footnote: I conducted my PhD part-time but by 2015 felt I needed to provide myself with distance from the British Museum to complete my thesis. Although I no longer am a member of British Museum staff I still do occasional freelance interpretation work for the British Museum including the exhibitions *India and the World: A history in nine stories* (2018) held in Mumbai and *Raffles revisited*.

As already stated interpretation means different things in different contexts but at the British Museum, the interpretation officer's role was to be the audience advocate acting as the liaison between the curator and the exhibition designer. When I first began this role, my idea of what an interpretation officer did was heavily influenced by Beverley Serrell's (1996) *Exhibit labels: An Interpretative Approach*. I believed the primary purpose of the interpretation officer was to reduce the amount of text in an exhibition and as an extension of this to reduce the number of objects on display. This act of linguistic and material pruning was done in the name of the democratising the museum and making it more accessible to non-specialist visitors. The logic followed that visitors had limited time and so would be put off by a 'book-on-the-wall approach' which included reams of text for them to read. Instead, text should be layered hierarchically to allow for ease of reading with 'hooks' of interesting information placed at the beginning of labels to draw the visitors in. The same mode-of-thinking was applied in relation to the number of objects, visitors would be overwhelmed by a vast array of objects and turned-off from even looking at a case if it was too full. 'Less is more' was the mantra on everyone's lips.

While now I don't feel this approach is ineffective and has its basis in the principles of much advice on good writing, I do feel it misses the reason why you are reducing object and texts down in the first place, which I now believe is that an exhibition should craft an argument or narrative. My breakthrough in relation to this came while I was taking my sister Emma, who would be described in visitor segmentation parlance as a non-frequent museum visitor, around the *Moctezuma* exhibition held at the British Museum in 2009. As I guided Emma around the first sections of the exhibition, which explained how Aztec society was organised and who the main Aztec gods were, she nodded with the polite interest of someone listening to you talk but who would rather be using this rare jaunt down to London from our native Cheshire to be browsing the displays in Harvey Nichols in Oxford Street. When we reached the part of the exhibition where the Spanish explorer Hernan Cortez arrived in Mexico and met Moctezuma suddenly, however, I realised she was interested.

She turned to me after we read about the initial meeting between the two and we looked at the glittering turquoise objects that Moctezuma supposedly gave to Cortez as gifts and she asked me: “what happens next?” By the end of the exhibition she cared about Moctezuma and was saddened when she learned of his fate in the final section: betrayed and imprisoned by Cortez and ultimately murdered by his own people. As we passed out of the darkness of the Round Reading Room through the gift shop and into the glare of marble white brightness of the Great Court, I had an epiphany: it was not my skills as a guide that captured my sister’s imagination but the exhibition’s underlying structure. Those parts of the exhibitions that were organised thematically did not catch her attention, but when the structure switched to a chronological approach organised according to a series of unfolding events happening to individual people, this interested her regardless of her lack of familiarity with the subject matter.

I realised then that this was the way to get people who are not typical museum visitors to be interested in museums, not through the purging of academic terminology or the reduction of objects, but through organising those objects to tell a compelling narrative. But what did I mean by narrative? Although like many people working in museums in the mid-2000s, I was quite happy to bandy the word ‘narrative’ around, I struggled to define exactly what I meant by it. Now I realise this is because the term narrative is often used when people are reaching to describe an aspect of a story that is beyond language. This can be in a sense that narrative is pre-language in the case of E.M. Forster (1962, 17) where he likens the plot of a novel to a tapeworm to suggest its primitive and parasitic qualities. It is also used when theorists are trying to describe the shape and materiality of a story, frequently likening a story to lines that exist in other disciplines to indicate a movement through time such as the musical score (Barthes 1990, 29). Narratives appeal as a theoretical tool lies in its ability to cross the textual and non-textual divide. It is a way of talking about texts in a non-linguistic way, as expressed in the first generation of narratologists’ aspirations in the 1960s, under the influence of Saussurean Structuralism, to create a ‘science of narrative.’ At

the same time, it can be used as a means of tools of textual analysis to the non-textual – such as dance, architecture and wrestling.

Within the museums, Roberts (1997) argues the movement from ‘repositories of knowledge’ to ‘spaces that tell stories’ can be seen as a fundamental shift in the purpose of the museum:

The very nature of museums exhibit function has been altered. Once a seemingly straightforward matter of displaying collections, exhibitions can now be viewed as an eminently interpretive endeavor: not just that the information exhibits present is subject to multiple interpretations, but the very act of presentation is fundamentally interpretive. (Roberts 1997, 74–75)

Although this shift from ‘Knowledge to Narrative’ to use Robert’s (1997) term can be seen as a global movement, it does have its own local particularities. In Ross’ (2011) account of the development of the Modern London galleries at the Museum of London in 2010 we can see many of the features of the ‘narrative turn’ in exhibition making that was happening across Britain at the time. One of the distinctions Ross (2011, 3) makes in comparing a museum exhibition and a novel is that a museum contains multiple authors with multiple agendas. Ross (2011, 4) identifies three ‘internal constituencies’ who have a say in the creation of the content – curators, learning staff and designers. Storytelling becomes for Ross (2011, 5) a neutral way to describe their collective endeavour and is also used as a ‘shorthand’ for the multidimensional nature of an exhibitions. Highlighting the need for museum exhibitions to be ‘theatrical’ and ‘experiential’, Ross (2011, 7) states that the look and feel of a story is just as critical as conveying the story experience to visitors as the text itself. Combining these two characteristics of museum exhibitions as being both multi-authored and multidimensional leads to Ross (2011, 7) describing the various elements that constitute an exhibition – the objects, texts, design set-works – as metaphorically being the different *voices* of curator, learning and the designers. Bringing these different constituencies together to create a multi-dimensional, multi-voiced exhibition takes time and Ross (2011, 8) highlights how the adoption of a storytelling approach is not instantaneous, but is instead a

lengthy process in which key messages are defined and refined. This process itself is value-laden, Ross (2011, 9) describes how, despite the fact that the exhibition's key messages remained largely the same, the participants themselves developed on a personal and professional level. She also describes how the adoption of the storytelling approach imbues and empowers the exhibition-makers with a set of values related to the relationship between the figure of the storyteller and the audience. For Ross (2011, 9), representing the audience empowers the exhibition maker to both change the exhibition's content, but also the exhibition making process itself.

Yet despite the democratising drive of the storytelling process, there are also problems that arise from the act of translation. Ross (2011, 6) asks the question what type or medium of story does an exhibition actually resemble and if, in fact, a museum exhibition actually even resembles a story at all? Describing the new Modern London galleries, Ross (2011, 3) is unsure whether the new galleries more closely resemble a short story or a novel. She suggests there are differences between a temporary exhibition, which should be linear, and a permanent exhibition, which should be non-linear. The exhibition design should follow drama in that it should be 'theatrical', while the objects themselves might be likened to oral narratives, echoing the curator's often repeated call 'to let the object speak for itself', because behind each of them is a 'human story'. Finally, when the metaphors of short story and novel are abandoned after being judged inadequate, and after trialling, but also giving up on, website and anthology, Ross (2011, 6) settles on Hollywood film and treasure trove as her two principle metaphors for the galleries. The idea of a treasure trove fitting in any definition of narrative itself suggesting the inclusivity with which the term can be used.

Although the concept of how a museum exhibition actually resembles a narrative remain slippery, the term can be seen to act as shorthand to represent a series of concepts that developed in response to calls to make museums more accessible, which gathered pace in the UK from early 1990s onwards (Macdonald 2002). Taken from Ross' (2011) account these include the idea that museum exhibitions are multi-authored, multidimensional

and that these multiple dimensions contain the voices of the exhibitions numerous authors. Storytelling has an ethical element in that it is used as a means of making museum exhibitions more accessible to visitors, but also the process of creating an exhibition along storytelling lines is enriching for staff members. How different forms of museum display – permanent exhibitions versus temporary exhibition differ – and what form of narrative they actually resemble is an area that requires further exploration.

Yet at the same time, as seeing narrative as particular to the UK museumscape of the 2010s, it would be myopic to say that narrative had not been present in museums prior to this. In fact, the creation of narratives can be seen as one of a museum's primary function dating back to its origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, Whitehead (2009, 19) highlights 'the discursive nature of the museum as one of the institutional agents which construct knowledge and produce narratives about the past.' Museum exhibitions are in the words of Macdonald (1996, 14) 'a theory or suggested way of seeing the world.' Museums in this sense do simply reflect pre-existing theories, but are part of the visualising technology of idea formation (Whitehead 2009, 26). In the ordering and arranging of objects and interrelated media, the theories of structuring and understanding the world are formed and become the orthodoxy. Whitehead (2009, 83) illustrates this using the example of when the Parthenon Sculptures, after being taken from the Acropolis in Athens to the UK by Lord Elgin, were first assessed by a committee of scholars and artists in London in 1819 as depicted in a painting with Archibald Archer (fig. 1.2) . The sculptures were judged on their aesthetic merits and placement in the aesthetic cannon of classical sculpture, with some of the committee placing them a little above and some a little below the Apollo Belvedere. They were not viewed in terms of representing and understanding of Classical Athens and were in a sense stripped of their story and context. Although this moment took place two hundred years ago, this debate surrounding an aesthetic frame or a contextual frame is still present in my third case study, the blockbuster exhibition *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek art*.



Fig. 1.2 The Temporary Elgin Room in 1819 with portraits of staff, a trustee and visitors. Oil painting on canvas by Archibald Archer (1819).

Examples Whitehead (2009) provides to illustrate how such narratives becoming materialised in the museum include the arrangement of the British Museum galleries to reflect the chain of art and the concept of the progress of civilisations (Jenkins 1992). Other examples include Colonel Lane Fox's arrangement of the collections of the Pitt Rivers museum to reflect theories of social evolution (Chapman 1981); Christian Jorgensen Thomsen's articulation of the 'Three Age system into stone, bronze and iron at the Royal Museum in Copenhagen in 1816 (Heizer 1962, 262; 259, Graslund 1987) and H. Barr's genealogical diagram of the development of abstract art at MOMA in New York in 1936 (Whitehead 2009, 38).

One of the key projects of the New Museology in both museums and academia has been to destabilise and contest the grand narrative approach to museums (Vergo 1989). This can take the form of displays that adopt a bottom-up approach, through co-curation with source communities, or the growing body of research (Bal 1996) that reads against the grain of the exhibition to expose the ideological forces at work within the museum. Despite Lyotard's (1996) claim that we have left behind the age of grand narratives with the advent of

postmodernity, narrative remains robust to the critiques of post-structuralism. In fact, although the interconnectivity provided by the internet promised to provide non-linearity and the fragmentation of traditional storytelling forms, narrative as a term seems to be flourishing. The phrase controlling the narrative is part of the lexicon of politics, marketing and PR. For example, Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, described how the political consultancy needed to 'establish the narrative' in order to mitigate against criticism that they used Facebook users' data to aid the Leave the EU Campaign without the user's consent (Lewis Hilder 2018). This idea of being able to control the narrative, to essentially make it up, not only divorces narrative from truth, but also contributes to its slippery quality when attempting to define it. Narrative here is used to describe a story that explains an aspect of the world, which somehow transcends the medium that contains it – be it newspaper, website or 24-hour news cycle. If museums have traditionally functioned as constructors of narratives about the past, or how we view the past in the present, then how might an increasing savviness around narrative construction be used by the museum to create new narratives about the past, or repackage old ones?

My thesis looks at what happen when these two ways of understanding narrative in the museum come together in a dialogue. The case study I am using for my project is the British Museum, during the final years of Neil MacGregor's tenure as Director from 2013 until 2015. I explore this topic through three case study exhibitions: *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (2013), *Vikings: Life and legend* (2014), and *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek art* (2015). These exhibitions were all summer blockbusters held at the British Museum between 2013 and 2015. Each of my case studies allows me to illustrate the critical issues surrounding the relationship between narrative and museums through my research questions. These are:

- 1) What do we mean when we talk about narrative in a museum context?
- 2) How does narrative structure take place in the museum exhibition?

- How do exhibition-makers create a sense of an unfolding narrative structure in a museum space?
 - How do visitors to museums experience exhibition structure as narratives?
- 3) How does narrative perspective manifest itself in the museum exhibition?
- How do exhibition-makers create a sense of narratorial perspective in a museum space?
 - How do museum visitors experience and decode narrative perspective in a museum exhibition?
- 4) What is the relationship between a visitor's socio-cultural background and their attitude towards exhibition narrative?

Rather than adopting an all-or-nothing approach to narrative – in which the blockbuster exhibition is seen as possessing a narrative, while in the blockbuster exhibition narrative is totally absent – I wish to draw on the fluidity offered by Austin's (2012) concept of narrative existing on a spectrum. Encyclopaedic forms of displays can be seen as characterised by a low level of narrativity, in that they are typically non-linear and are meant to be used by the visitor in a similar manner to an encyclopaedia as a tool of reference. Conversely, blockbuster exhibitions can be seen possessing a high degree of narrativity, as they are typically organised in a linear sequence with a distinct beginning, middle and end.

The blockbuster exhibition can be differentiated from other forms of display by its linearity, which builds towards a climax. At the heart of the blockbuster lies a tension between the democratisation of the museum and a belief that commercial success invariably leads to a 'dumbing down' of culture. The museum exhibition is a uniquely multi-modal form of narrative and that any attempt to read these museum narratives needs to take into account the role played by its multiple makers – curator, designer, interpretation officer, project, manager but also its multiple components – object, text, design, space.

In chapter two, I critically explore the problem of defining narrative structure in the museum in relation to attempts to visualise narrative in other media. Museum exhibitions can

be seen as attempts to illustrate ideas in material forms and therefore attempts to define narrative in museums should themselves take a visual form. In chapter two I explore how the idea of the line has been used to provide narrative with a shape, ranging from the ancient Greek myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Labyrinth to the rise and fall of the German Literary Theorist Gustav Freytag's pyramid. Through tracing this line, I identify some of the key components that make up narrative including the idea of sequential causality and the concept of the climax and how these might have their equivalences in museum exhibitions. In understanding how these narrative components work in a museum exhibition I draw on the theories of the French literary critic Roland Barthes and the American screenwriting guru Robert McKee. This idea of a linear structure in a museum exhibition is important because it is closely linked to the issues relating to making museum exhibitions accessible to visitors, while at the same time providing visitors with the freedom and opportunity to construct their own meanings.

In chapter three, I critically explore the validity of thinking of a museum exhibition as possessing a particular narrative perspective. I do this by considering the museum as a multimodal experience created by not a single but multiple authors and explore how ideas around narration and focalisation taken from film theory might be used to understand the visual presence of a narrator in an exhibition's design and layout. Using the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic nature of discourse, I also explore how voices other than those of the museum-makers might be present in an exhibition space. The adoption of techniques originally designed for the analysis of literature has been criticised by thinkers working under the banner of New Materialism for failing to take into account the material qualities of museum collections. I argue that New Materialism can be seen as another form of narratorial device, one that tells the story from the perspective of the non-human rather than the human and that employs a particular form of discourse in its telling. In thinking about narration within the museum, I also look at how the various ways visitors have

been structured and classified can also be seen as a form of narratorial perspectives in relation to museum exhibitions.

In chapter four, I provide the context to my case studies through an overview of the history of exhibitionary strategies at the British Museum using two principle metaphors: the encyclopaedia and the blockbuster. I take the metaphor of the encyclopaedia from the common practice of referring to national European institutions developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like the British Museum, as encyclopaedic (Cuno 2009). This term is typically used to suggest the temporal and spatial breadth of a museum's collections, but also alludes to the museum and the encyclopaedia's shared enlightenment origins and outlook. In using the term blockbuster, I am deliberately drawing parallels between the museum exhibition and the Hollywood film in terms of their format and mass-market appeal. I am also seeking to highlight that both forms of popular entertainment emerged in a particular period – the 1970s – and can be distinguished from their predecessors not only by their particular narrative structures, which sought to make their subject matter more accessible and attractive to a mass audience, but also by the new commercial models they adopted, which contributed to their success.

In chapter five I discuss the methodological approach I adopted to understand narrative structure in my exhibitions and to create a dialogue between the responses of museum-makers and visitors. I outline my principle methods for collecting this data including semi-structured interviews with museum-makers and visitors and by attaching cameras to visitors, with their consent, to track their movement through the spaces of an exhibition.

Chapters six to eight present the findings from my three blockbuster exhibition case studies. Chapter six focuses on the British Museum exhibition *Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Here the focus is on the issue of how to take terms that were developed for written narratives, in particular Barthes' famous five codes, and translate them into spatial narratives. As a means of doing this, the chapter draws on film theory and the exhibition's own filmic qualities.

In chapter seven I focus on *Vikings: Life and Legend*, an exhibition that was staged in London, Copenhagen and Berlin. Here, I adopt MacDonald's (2016) concept of the European museumscape to look at how narrative perspectives differ depending on the country in which the exhibition is taking place. While it may come as no surprise that curators in Denmark present a different perspective on the Vikings than curators in the UK, what I feel is valuable here is how these different perspectives manifest themselves in the presentational elements of the aesthetics. In contrasting the different design approaches of the exhibitions, in particular, their relationship to linear narrative, the multimodal potential of the exhibition narrative is brought out.

In chapter eight, I explore the issue of how museums may actively resist narrative and seek other approaches by which they display and interpret objects. *Defining Beauty* adopts a minimalistic and, at times, an anti-narrative approach that is out of step with the British Museum's usual mode of display. In the designers', Caruso St John's non-linear arrangement of the exhibition's central section and their removal of photographs or colour in maps, we can see some of the anti-narrative elements of the exhibition. Beyond the design, the curator's desire to focus on the ekphrastic encounter prioritises the individual object encounter over the exhibition narrative.

Finally, in chapter nine I conclude with a switch of perspectives, looking at visitors' motivation for going to exhibitions and their relationship to the exhibition subject matter. Exploring their lifelong relationship to visiting exhibitions reveals that visitors' accounts are just as intellectually sophisticated, aesthetically rich and at times idiosyncratically eccentric as those of the museum professionals. In providing the context for their habit of visiting exhibitions, it also allows me to locate visitors' readings of exhibition narratives in relation to their social and cultural backgrounds. This brings my analysis into dialogue with the work of Bourdieu (1991), and the role cultural capital plays in how visitors respond to museum exhibition narratives.

2. Narrative structure and the museum: critical perspectives

Introduction

In this chapter, I critically explore the question of how to define narrative by focussing on the concept of structure. I begin by looking at how the discipline of narratology in the 1960s drew on the structuralism of linguistics to attempt to 'scientifically' understand the constituent parts of narrative. I then change approach looking at how narrative has been defined by being visualised in the form of a line – often metaphorically referred to as a red thread. Linearity remains an important topic within the context of the museum because it exposes a tension between the desire to give visitors the freedom to construct their own meanings from an exhibition, which is at odds with the democratising instinct of the institution to scaffold visitor experience through the use of narratives in order to make museum collections more accessible. In tracing the origins of the idea of visualising narrative structure, I look back to the *ur-text* of the study of dramatic narrative, *The Poetics* by Aristotle, and how this contributed to the famous visualisation of a narrative arc in the form of a pyramid by the nineteenth-century German dramatist Gustav Freytag. In thinking about the line of narrative in the museum, I consider this in relation to how a museum visitor has been likened to a character moving through a *Bildungsroman* novel by the French Philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard and how visitor studies in the museum has visualised visitor movement and behaviour as a line. I conclude by looking at three attributes of the line: the climax, binary oppositions and pacing. Finally, I try to illustrate how these concepts have been used by researchers working in the field of museum studies and how they might be brought into dialogue with theorists from different fields of narrative study including the linguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, the screenwriting guru Robert McKee and the French literary theorist Roland Barthes. These four concepts: the line, the climax, binary

oppositions and pacing will then form the basis for the analysis of structure for my individual exhibition case studies.

2.1. Narratology and the quest to define narrative structure

In attempting to answer the question of what is narrative, the obvious place to begin is with the creation of an entire discipline known as Narratology, which sought to take the tools of science, including definition, analysis, classification and comparison, and apply them to literature. The term *la narratologie* (narratology) was coined by the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov (Herman 2007, 5) in 1966, who alongside thinkers including Roland Barthes, Claude Brémond, Gerard Genette, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Gerald Prince, created a movement that became known as the classical phase of narratology. Forged in the 1960s, Classical Narratology was heavily influenced by the structuralist focus of Saussurean linguistics, which sought to identify 'the key ingredients of linguistic competence' (Herman 2007, 14). Another influential precursor to Classical Narratology, which informed its typological leanings, was the Russian Formalism of the early twentieth century. In particular, Viktor Shklovskii (1990) use of the *fabula* and *sjuzet* to differentiate between story and plot and Vladimir Propp's (1968) attempts to classify the key characters of traditional Russian fairy tales according to their functions within the narrative.

Within Classical Narratology, a divide can be seen between those narratologists who focus on how the underlying structure of plot functions within narrative, including Barthes, Propp, Bremond, Greimas and those who focus on perspective, or point of view including Genette and Prince. In turn, Classical Narratology's focus on structure in literature, can be seen as having influenced the increasing focus on narrative within the humanities and the social sciences in the 1980s. Kreiswirth (2005) used the phrase 'the narrative turn' to describe the application of narrative theory and methodology in different disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, film studies psychology, child development, medical theory and management theory (Herman 2007, 5).

Having provided some background to the formation of Narratology as a discipline, I would now like to look at how narratology has attempted to define narrative. One approach to deal with these multiple definitions provided by Richardson (2000, 169), is to group positions in relation to narrative into typologies and then choose a camp into which your approach falls. Richardson identifies four basic approaches to defining narrative, which are temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional. He defines these positions as follows:

1. **Temporal approach:** posits the representation of events in a time sequence as the defining feature of narrative.
2. **Causal approach:** insists that some causal connection, however oblique, between the events is essential.
3. **Minimal approach:** Drawing largely on the work of Genette, suggests that any statement of an action or event is *ipso facto* a narrative, since it implies a transformation or transition from an earlier to a later state.
4. **Transactional approach:** suggests that narrative is simply a way of reading a text, rather than a feature or essence found in a text.

Of these positions, the most commonly adopted are the temporal and the causal stances. The merely temporal is criticised for being too weak a connection, while the causal approach's requirement of a causal relationship between events is regarded as too severe to include postmodern, or dream-like narratives. Richardson (2000, 169) gives a formulation of his position as 'narrative is a representation of a causally-related series of events'. This allows him to include verbal as well as nonverbal narratives, such as painting, ballet and mime in his definition of narrative. 'Causally-related' here is to be understood as 'generally connected' or part of the same general causal matrix, which is a much looser, more oblique, and indefinite relation than direct entailment (Richardson 2000, 169).

Another approach to the problem of defining narrative, provided by Ryan (2007), is to identify a number of the characteristics that occur across most, but not all, of the various definitions and attempt to build a consensus as to what the component parts of narrative are.

Ryan (2007, 29) lists the following as some of the most commonly occurring characteristics of narrative:

1. A narrative must consist of a sequence of events, linked by causality
2. A narrative must communicate something meaningful to the audience
3. The events of the narrative must bring about a change, or transformation
4. A narrative must have a mental dimension. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents.
5. A narrative must have a spatial dimension; it must occur in space
6. A narrative must have a temporal existence; it must be situated in time

We can see that Richardson (2000) and Ryan's (2007) accounts share commonalities such as the idea that narrative is made up of a series of linked events and that change is an essential component of narrative. However, although this classificatory approach has the advantage of boiling down narrative to its component parts, during the process there is also the sense that something of the intangible essence of narrative is lost. Although narratology has provided us with an extensive vocabulary to talk about narrative it is not the first, nor the only, approach to defining narrative. In thinking about how to capture the essence of narrative as a series of causally connected events without reducing it to abstraction, I now look at examples of where theorists have attempted to define narrative through the use of the visual metaphor of a line.

The American literary critic J. Hillis Miller (1992) argues that the line is such a potent metaphor for narrative because it is embedded in language itself. For example, allusions to narrative as a line can be found in various turns of phrases such as in 'denouement, curve of the action, turn of events, broken or dropped thread, line of argument, storyline and figure in the carpet' (1992, 71). Miller (1992) traces the origins of the line as a metaphor for narrative to the myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Labyrinth. In this myth, Ariadne gives a ball of

thread, also referred to as a clue to Theseus². The hero unwinds the thread as he travels through the labyrinth and then, after killing the minotaur, follows it back to retrace his steps. For Miller (1992, 69), 'the chase has a beast in view' and the story's end, its minotaur, 'is the retrospective revelation of the law of the whole.' Miller (1992, 62) describes the metaphor of the line as taking two different forms as both the thread and the labyrinth:

Thread and labyrinth, thread intricately crinkled to and fro as the retracing of the labyrinth which defeats the labyrinth but makes another intricate web at the same time, pattern is here superimposed on pattern, like the two homologous stories themselves (Miller 1992, 62).

In this double line, Miller locates both the line of the story but also the line of the reader or the critic. Miller (1992) likens the critic's quest to interpret the novel as following a thread deep into the labyrinth of text, until they reach a double-bind at the moment where the path of inquiry falters. For Miller (1992, 62), it is both impossible to reach the centre of the labyrinth of narrative terms and so command it, and equally, it is impossible to escape from it by leaving the maze altogether and thereby see the collective whole. This extends to Miller's exploration of 'the labyrinth of narrative terms', where the end-point of the quest, a settled definition of narrative, always remains tantalisingly out of reach.

In his description of lines and storytelling, Ingold (2007, 52–53) also draws on the labyrinth myth, describing it as 'the most archetypal use of the thread to be found not just in the history of Western civilization but throughout the world.' Describing how Daedalus allegedly modelled the labyrinth on the maze that leads to the underworld, Ingold (2007, 52–53) emphasises the hidden subterranean nature of the labyrinth, 'it is a powerful image of movement and wayfaring in a world of the dead that is believed to lie beneath the surface of

² Higgins (2018) traces the idea of the clue or the clewe to Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*. To find his way through the labyrinth, Theseus must use the "clewe of twyne" that Ariadne gives him. The word "clewe" derives from Old English *cliwen* or *cleowen*, meaning a rounded mass, or a ball of thread. Eventually it became the word "clue". It lost its material significance, and retained only its metaphorical meaning. To quote Higgin's (2018) 'the clue is in the clewe' and 'every step towards solving a mystery, or a crime, or a puzzle, or the riddle of the self, is a length of yarn tossed us by the helping hand of Ariadne.'

the world of quotidian experience.’ In his description of how oral storytelling unfolds, Ingold weaves together the metaphor of thread and the wayfinding path to describe how real life and the story become entangled. Ingold (2007, 91) emphasises the connection between lines, walking and storytelling, ‘as with the line that goes out for a walk, in the story as in life there is always somewhere further one can go.’ For Ingold (2007, 91) the metaphor of the line has an essential duality, it is both a way of knowing, but also in writing a way of remembering and that in both cases, knowledge is integrated along a path of movement. This description is again evocative of the labyrinth myth, in which the line is both the unknown pathways of the maze and Ariadne’s thread, which allows Theseus to remember and retrace his footsteps back to the world of the living.

An alternative thread metaphor to the negotiation of the labyrinth is provided by Goethe in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) (1809). Goethe identifies ‘a thread of attachment and affection’, which is drawn through the main character’s diary with the single red thread that supposedly runs through every rope that is used by the royal navy. Goethe (2013, 125) describes the story behind the line as follows:

There is, we are told, a curious contrivance in the service of the English marine. The ropes in use in the royal navy, from the largest to the smallest, are so twisted that a red thread runs through them from end to end, which cannot be extracted without undoing the whole; and by which the smallest pieces may be recognized as belonging to the crown. Just so is there drawn through Ottilie’s diary, a thread of attachment...

Following Goethe’s usage, red thread or *roter faden* has become one of the main metaphors in the German-speaking world used to describe narrative. Like Ariadne’s thread, the royal navy metaphor has a strong spatial element, in that wherever the ropes and the ships that carry them travel, they can be linked back to the heart of empire. The colour of the thread can also be seen to link to the pink portions of a map, which denote territories held by the British Empire. This link between empire and storytelling has particularly strong

resonances with the role of the museum as a hub that connects the imperial centre with the colonial periphery through the narratives presented in its exhibitions.



Fig. 2.1 The *roter faden* in Hannover © Hannover Tourist Board

The capacity for the *roter faden* to express narrative spatially is exemplified in the German city of Hannover, where a four-kilometre-long red thread painted on the streets lead tourists in a loop from the train station to encounter thirty-six points of interest throughout the urban space (Fig. 2.1).

2.2 Linearity and non-linearity in the museum

The spatial aspect of the line makes it a particularly powerful metaphor when exploring narratives in museums and the linearity or non-linearity of a museum exhibition is closely linked to issues about who museums are for and how they should function. In her seminal museum design manual *On Display*, Margaret Hall (1987, 25), the British Museum's first designer, outlines two forms of strategy for contemporary displays. The first she describes as 'the tunnel show' on account of the exhibition's simple linear approach, 'visitors go in one end and out of the other.' For Hall (1987, 27) the demands of managing the movement of a mass audience for a blockbuster exhibition necessitate a one-way flow.

Conversely, Hall (1987, 27) describes the 'mosaic display' as offering a non-linear route, which provides visitors with more freedom and choice:

Within a broader theme there are many separate displays offering random information from which the visitor can piece together his own selection of information on the main theme, pursuing his own route and following no particular order.

In Hall's (1987) description of the visitor in the non-linear 'mosaic' exhibition, as 'piecing together their own selection of information, pursuing their own route and following no particular order' we find the essence of the tension surrounding linearity and non-linearity in museum exhibitions. The museum educational theorist George Hein (1998) further articulates the benefits of a non-linear structure in providing visitors with the opportunity to construct their own meaning. Hein (1998) divides exhibitions into four categories according to how an institution imagines learning to take within the exhibitios and the ontological position of the museum in relation to knowledge. Hein (1998) argues that museums either adopt an ontological position in which knowledge exists outside the learner, or all knowledge is constructed by the learner. Similarly, Hein (1998) also argues that all museums adopt a position in relation to how visitors learn, arguing that museums either view visitors learning incrementally adding learning bit by bit, or that the learner actively constructs this learning themselves. From this Hein (1998) divides museum exhibitions into four types – didactic expository, stimulus-response, discovery and constructivist (Fig 2.2).

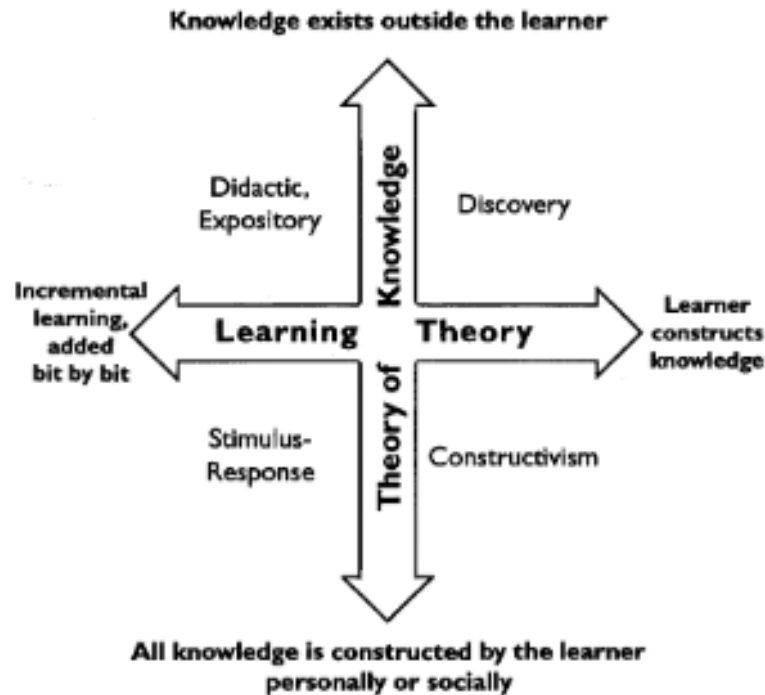


Fig. 2.2: Hein's (1998) model for the four means of structuring an exhibition according to how they align with his theories of knowledge and his learning theory. These four types of exhibition are didactic expository, stimulus-response, discovery and constructivist.

Didactic expository exhibitions are the type of linear narrative exhibitions that correspond to Hall's (1987) description of the tunnel exhibition that make-up the bulk of blockbuster exhibitions staged at the British Museum. Hein (1998) characterises them as having a clear beginning and end with an intended order and they make a claim that the story they are reporting is true – 'it is the way things really are.' Stimulus-response museums have an intended order but do not believe what they are telling the visitors is true. Instead, they adopt a behaviourist approach, which repeatedly impresses the stimulus on the learner and rewards appropriate response. Hein (1998) argues that few museums would accept this position and that stimulus-response museums are apparent only to their critics. For example, Euro-American critics of socialist ideology often claimed that museums in socialist countries were full of 'propaganda' intended to indoctrinate rather than to educate. Discovery learning exhibitions allow exploration, are non-linear and contain interpretation that prompts visitors to find meaning out for themselves but there is some end in mind for the conclusions that visitors will reach. Finally, constructivist exhibitions will have many entry points, no specific

path and no beginning and end. Instead visitors connect with objects and ideas through a range of activities and experiences that utilise their life experiences. Operating from the position that an experiment cannot be valid if you can only get correct results, a constructivist approach does not believe there to be a correct conclusion to reach. As the experimental focus suggests, such constructivist exhibitions typically exist in science centres like the California Exploratorium.

The constraints of linearity in forcing visitors to follow a particular path, while non-linearity allows visitors to explore and construct their own meanings is explored by several theorists working in the area of Space Syntax Theory. This approach works by identifying the key structural features of a museum layout, which can be correlated either with the way in which spaces are categorised, or how visitors move within and between them, or both (Hillier & Tzortzi 2006). At the heart of Space Syntax Theory, as with many theories of narrative, are a set of binaries, including the level of integration and segregation present in space. Integrated here refers to the number of individual units of space you have to pass through to reach all other spaces in the layout. Peponis and Hedin (1983) argue that this level of integration can be related to narrative and the ordering of knowledge. They use the example of the arrangement of the Bird's gallery at the Natural History Museum in London, which orders its cases along both sides of a central aisle. This emphasis on synchronicity and hierarchical order, Peponis and Hedin (1983) argue, reflects the hierarchy of the classificatory ideas of nature that dominated scientific thinking in the nineteenth century.

Choi (1999) similarly identifies two models of how space can structure patterns of movement, based around freedom and constraint. He contrasts the deterministic model in which movement is forced as circulation and choices are restricted with the probabilistic model, in which movement is allowed to be more random but modulated by configurational variables. As with the Peponis and Hedin's (1983) binary of integration and segregation, the probabilistic model, which gives the visitor more freedom, is the approach favoured by Choi. Finally, Psarra (2009) looks at how a museum's built environment relates to its surroundings.

Psarra (2009) contrasts the redisplay of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) with the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. The key binary underpinning Psarra's perspective is whether the building looks inwards, or outwards, with the National Museum of Scotland subjecting the structure of space to the overpowering message of the collection, and, as a result, looking inwards rather than outwards towards the city. Conversely, the Burrell Collection, with its ample glass windows and objects and artworks placed in juxtaposition with the gallery's leafy woodland setting, is cited as an example of where the space rather than the exhibition's semantic message is dominant. In Psarra's (2009) words, 'a visitor to the Burrell is encouraged to look outwards at the surrounding landscape, just as much as they look at the collection themselves.'

In each of the examples cited in Space Syntax theory, a more open outward-looking space is seen as conducive to empowering the visitor and giving them freedom of choice. However, providing visitors with this freedom also comes with the danger that the visitors will become lost in the openness of the space and become unable to construct their own meanings. In her study of the *Food* exhibition at the Science Museum, Macdonald's (2002, 231) research revealed that visitors were disorientated by the non-linear layout, which was designed to encourage people to construct their own meaning. Macdonald (2002, 231) argues that the visitors' 'sense of bewilderment' at the layout of the space also seemed to affect their ability to critically evaluate the exhibition. She states that 'offering so many alternatives without a self-evident framework or narrative...did not prompt visitors into much reflection' (Macdonald 2002, 231).

The French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 54) also makes the point that it is typically only those visitors with high levels of familiarity with a museum exhibition's subject matter that are equipped to navigate them unaided. He gives the example of a student who likens the idea of imposing a fixed direction to a museum a journey in which, they 'go along the by-roads wherever the winds takes me':

'I think it's pointless to want to impose a fixed direction to a museum visit. Personally, I like being free, alone in my choice and inspiration. Without wishing to go too far, I'd compare a visit to a museum to a journey, a journey Montaigne-style, going along the by-roads wherever the winds takes me, enjoying the present moment, away from the crowds, without a guidebook, dreaming of the past.' (student, Louviers) (Bourdieu 1990, 54)

This student is able to wander the museum without a fixed direction because they possess the requisite levels of cultural capital to do so. Bourdieu (1990, 37–38) also makes the link specifically between dwell-time and class finding that on average working-class visitors spend 22 minutes, middle-class visitors 35 minutes, and upper-class visitors 47 minutes in the museum. A linear narrative can be seen as one way of providing visitors with the framework to decode the museum and if it is not provided only those visitors who have a prior education in art or archaeology will be able to engage with the objects on display. I will return to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and how it affects visitor attitudes to encountering objects and narrative in the museum in chapter 3 on museum perspective. For the moment, it serves to illustrate that the issue of linear and non-linear narrative structures are part of a wider debate around the nature of engagement, meaning-making and accessibility within the museum.

In this section, I have attempted to get closer to defining what narrative is and by looking at how it has been tangibly represented as a line. I have looked at some of these qualities that the line possesses such as how it has been linked to the myth of Ariadne and the labyrinth and how this in turn connects it to ideas of stories being told in space. I have also looked at how the issue of the line has manifested itself in the museum around topics surrounding non-linearity and the freedom that this gives visitors to construct their own narratives.

2.3 Walking the line

In a lecture delivered before the Brooklyn Institute in New York in 1889, entitled 'Museums of the Future', the American museum maker George Browne Goode (1890, 55) described, 'an efficient educational museum as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well selected specimen.' For Goode (1890, 55), a museum should be 'much more than a house full of specimens in glass cases. It should be a house full of ideas, arranged with the strictest attention to system.' Although Goode's words are often used to emphasise the educational focus of the museum, they also speak to the essentially multi-modal nature of the museum as a medium. Museums are not just about objects but about the illustration of ideas through material things. In thinking about narrative in the museum, I therefore think it is appropriate to adopt an approach that takes the abstract concept of narrative and tries to give it a visual form. In this next section of this chapter, I look at how narrative has been visualised in the form of a line in the shape of a pyramid by the German dramatist Gustav Freytag. Freytag's visualisation of narrative was specifically developed to understand how plot in Greek tragedy functions and builds on the *ur-text* of European narrative theory: Aristotle's *Poetics*. Before I explore Freytag's model of the pyramid, I will first outline the origins of his ideas in the work of Aristotle. I then go on to look at other examples of how narrative has been visualised as a line in literature and how these ideas might be applied to museum exhibitions.

The *Poetics* is a partially fragmentary text written by Aristotle in 335 BC on the mechanisms that underlie Greek comedy and drama. As the founder of modern sciences, it is often regarded as ironic that Aristotle should provide the first guide to writing drama. However, in Aristotle's atomistic dissection of drama into genres and component parts in the *Poetics*, there is much of the scientific impulse and classificatory drive that will characterise the later structuralist approach of Classical Narratology. Aristotle's prioritisation of plot as 'the soul of tragedy' (Aristotle 2012, 11) rather than a mimetic 'imitation of persons' can also be seen as providing a focus on structure that predominates in future studies of narrative.

Aristotle's famous description of a narrative as consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end can be seen as the basic origins of the line metaphor for narrative. Aristotle's (2012, 13) notion of 'causal necessity' linking the individual stages of a drama, can be seen as a forerunner of both Richardson (2000) and Ryan's (2007) identification of a series of linked events as one of the key characteristics of narratives.

As well providing the idea of sequence in informing narrative structure, Aristotle (2012) also introduces the notion of that sequence having a climax, which is based on an empathetic relationship between the central protagonist and the audience. Central to this is the concept of dramatic irony, which refers to the moment in a drama when the audience is aware of information that the central protagonist is not. For example, tension is built in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, by the fact that the audience knows that Oedipus is unaware that he has slept with his mother and killed his father. Moments in which characters hint at what is hidden, help to build anticipation and tension in the audience for the moment of revelation, which must eventually come. For example, when Oedipus is told by the blind seer Tiresias, 'You mock my blindness, do you? / But I say that you, with both your eyes are blind' (Sophocles 1984, 32, 400–401). Aristotle uses the term *anagnorisis* to describe the moment when a protagonist's perspective change from ignorance to knowledge in relation to their true character and their situation. These moments of *anagnorisis* form the climax of a drama and the experience of witnessing this anticipated moment of revelation in turn bring about a feeling of *catharsis* in the audience, which Aristotle (2012, xxxvii) defines as 'the purging of pity or fear in a cleansing of the passions.'

The nineteenth-century German dramatist takes many of the ideas developed by Aristotle to understand the structure of Greek tragedy and expresses them in the form of a pyramid. Freytag (1997, 135) used his pyramid to visualise the plot arc of a Greek drama, which he described as consisting of 'two halves of the action which come closely together at one point, the drama possesses – if one may symbolise its arrangement by lines – a pyramidal structure.' Freytag further divides these two halves of this pyramid (fig. 2.3) into

five parts: introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, and catastrophe. Alongside these structural components are three dramatic moments or crises, which are the exciting moment or force, the tragic moment or force, and the moment or force of the last suspense.

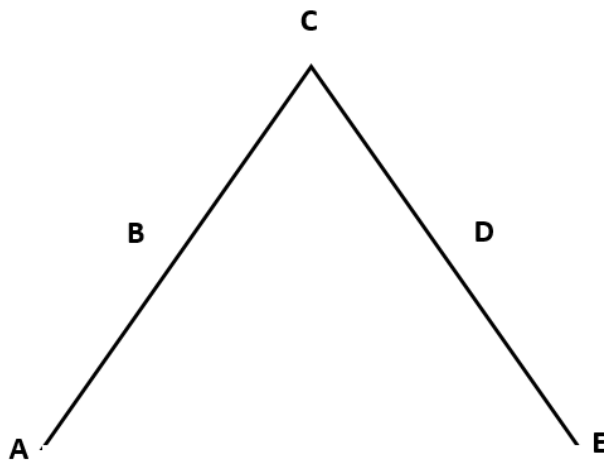


Fig. 2.3. Freytag's pyramid. Freytag describes the letters on the pyramid as representing the following: a) introduction, b) rise, c) climax, d) return or fall, e) catastrophe (Freytag 1997 [1863] 115)

In describing the events of a drama that lead to the climax of his pyramid, Freytag (1997, 135) stipulates that it is important that, 'the catastrophe must not come entirely as a surprise to the audience, as the more violent the downfall of the hero, so much the more vividly must the end be felt in advance'. Freytag (1997, 135) illustrates this foreshadowing of the climax to the audience through examples taken from the plays of Shakespeare. These examples include when Caesar's 'ghost appears to Brutus' or when in *King Lear*, Edmund tells a soldier he must slay Lear and Cordelia should certain circumstances arise (Freytag 1997, 135).

Freytag created his model to understand and explain the structure of theatrical dramas. This is reflected by the role he allocates to the audience in creating the narrative tension in a drama. If the value of the x-axis represents the unfolding of a drama's sequence of events, then Freytag describes the y-axis as representing dramatic action. Freytag (1997, 130) identifies two types of dramatic action, 'the first, the inward struggle of a man toward a

deed', while the second type of dramatic action is the effect of 'fashioning influences from the outer world on a man's inmost being.' Freytag (1997, 135) argues that these two different types of dramatic action bring out different responses from the audience, the first, 'always has the highest charm,' while the second 'is principally a satisfying of excited suspense.' Freytag here gives a preference to an active protagonist, rather than a passive protagonist who is acted upon. In both cases, however, we find the notion of change taking place inwardly in a person brought about by struggle.

Aristotle and Freytag are both writing about drama and, as a result, the reaction of the audience plays an important role in Freytag's visual representation of narrative as a pyramid. In Laurence Sterne's novel *The lives and opinions of Tristram Shandy*, a line is also used to represent the movement of the central character in time and space. Written in the latter half of the eighteenth century when the novel was still in an amorphous state, *Tristram Shandy* famously features several plot diagrams illustrating the life of the titular protagonist (see figs. 2.4 & 2.5). Five diagrams are presented in total in volume VI, Chapter XL, graphically representing the life of Shandy, as he moves through the four volumes of the novel. Punning on both the philosophy of Archimedes and the practical wisdom employed by cabbage planters that, 'the best line!...is the shortest line', Tristram equates the line with both a physical, and a moral journey, but also the telling of a story: 'I shall be able to go on with my uncle *Toby's* story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line' (Sterne 1983, 379).

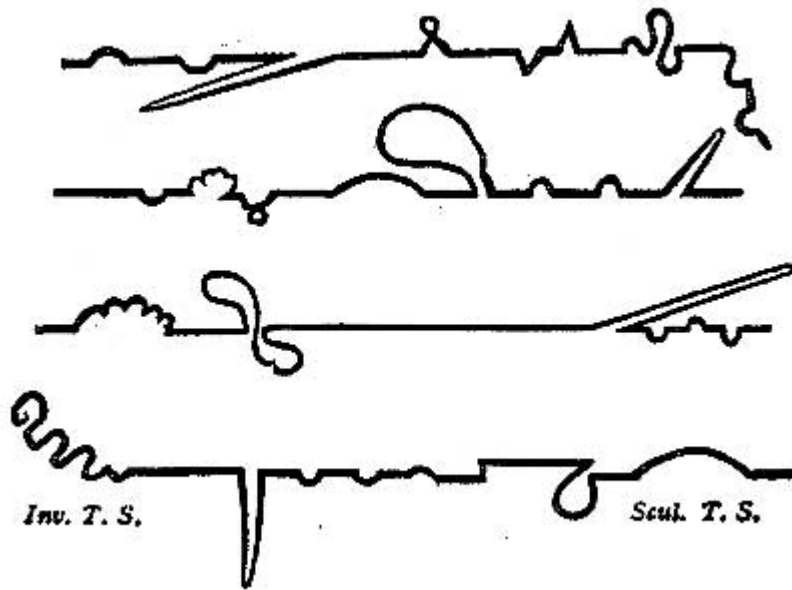


Fig. 2.4 The initial four diagrams illustrating plot in *Tristram Shandy*. Tristram describes them as, 'The four lines I moved in through my first, second, third and fourth volumes' (Sterne 1983, 379).

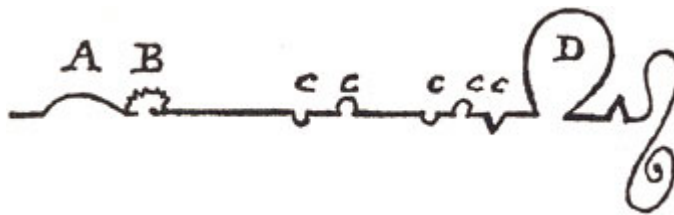


Fig. 2.5 The line of the fifth volume in *Tristram Shandy*. The individual letters are described as representing: A) 'where I took a trip to Navarre, the indented curve B which is the short airing when I was there with the Lady Baussiere and her page, C) they are nothing but parentheses, and the common ins and outs incidents to the lives of the greatest ministers of state, D) John de la Casse's devils led me the round' (Sterne 1983, 380).

Here digressions, both oral and moral, are represented by the wobbling of the line, which occasionally turns back on itself, with letters representing specific events. The horizontal axis, as is often the case with plot diagrams, represents time. The line here is able to turn back on itself to reflect the fact that the narrator, in telling their story, is able to move back and forward through time. However, there is also a sense that what these lines represent remains mysterious and unexplained. There is a disagreement among critics as to whether the lines are to be taken seriously or alternatively to be seen as a joke at the reader's expense, which is quite in keeping with the satirical tone of this work of eighteenth-century metafiction.

Harking back to Aristotle's prioritisation of plot as the soul of tragedy, the line metaphor is used by both Freytag and Sterne to illustrate the importance of plot within their own models of narrative. In contrast, the English novelist E.M. Forster uses the line metaphor to express the parasitic nature of the relationship between plot and the novel. In relation to narrative, Forster is best known for his differentiation between story and plot in his famous treatise *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). In this work, Forster adroitly illustrates the difference between story and plot through two short sentences: 'the king died and then the queen died,' and, 'the king died and then the queen died of grief.' Forster (1927, 60) uses this example to illustrate the connection between sequence and meaning, arguing that the second sentence qualifies as a plot, while the first does not, because in plot 'the time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it.' In the plot example, the queen's death is caused by the death of the king and in her death, and as result her emotional attachment to her husband is revealed. This causal relationship between the death of the king and the queen is absent from the first sentence, which Forster, somewhat confusingly, describes as story. Despite emphasising the importance of causality to plot, Forster, also expresses a deep ambivalence the novel's reliance on it:

The novel tells a story. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different – melody or perception of truth, not this low atavistic form. (1927, 17)

As a result, for Forster the line of a sequence of events is not Ariadne's thread guiding the reader through a labyrinth of meaning but a tapeworm (1927, 17). He uses the tapeworm imagery to emphasise the plot's status as 'the lowest and simplest of literary organisms' (1927, 19). He also uses it to highlight that novel's reliance on plot in order to interest a reader is almost parasitic in nature. For Forster, if the function of the story is to 'narrate the life in time. What the entire novel does – if it is a good novel – is to include the life by values as well.' Making this separation between time and value, Forster argues that time is something that is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity:

So that when we look at our past, it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles. (Forster 1927, 19)

In establishing this binary, Forster gives us a visual image of narrative without ever drawing it. This image of the line piling up into notable pinnacles is akin to the axis of a graph, or the shape of Freytag's pyramid, with the x-axis representing time and the y-axis representing the less easy to quantify intensity.

In reviewing the different ways that narrative has been represented as line, I have attempted to place the linear causal sequence of events as embedded at the core of narrative. I now turn to how visitor movement through a museum exhibition has itself been regarded as a causally connected sequence of events and also has been compared to a character's progression through a novel. Commenting on his own 1984 exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Lyotard (1996) conceptualises the exhibition visitor as a 'body in movement'. He describes this movement as comparable to that of the main character in an eighteenth or nineteenth-century novel concerned with character formation. Lyotard (1996, 167) argues that just as the protagonist of a Bildungsroman becomes a fully-formed human through their journey, experiences and adventures, so the museum visitor – as they move through a gallery – is offered a series of views (*vedute*) by the pictures on display. By identifying these subjects and the manner in which they are represented, the visitor is placed in a situation where they can form herself by their visual experience.

With a similar emphasis on movement and character development, Boon (2011), drawing on the philosophy of Michel de Certeau (1984) regarding cultural consumption, argues that the act of walking itself is an act of enunciation in which space is acted out. Emphasising the freedom inherent in walking, Boon (2011) argues that rather than viewing museum visitors as passive consumers, they are in fact cultural poachers using their *metis* (cunning intelligence) to make new narratives, construct their own meaning, or derail the story onto a new path, and, as a result, reappropriate culture to construct their identity.

Boon (2011, 425) argues that a good exhibition display should contain plenty of 'rabbits' that visitors will want to 'poach,' and use to construct their own personal narratives. Using the galleries of the Science Museum as an example, he makes the case for the use of vistas to create unexpected juxtapositions and for museum displays to operate on a *synchronic* (describing different things from the same time) rather than a *diachronic* (chronological) level, to invite cross reference and non-linear movement.

In the field of Museum Visitor Studies much research has been conducted to understand how visitors move through an exhibition space and their encounters with exhibits. In particular, visitor tracking studies dating back to the 1920s and 30s has established a series of set patterns and behaviours such as the left turn bias exhibited by visitors or the phenomenon of museum fatigue that contributes to the rhythm of the visit (Robinson 1928; Melton 1933, 1935, 1936). In these tracking studies, a visitor's movement through an exhibition is captured and represented as a line on a plan of an exhibition space (Serrell 1998). It is in effect an act of translation from one medium to another, as time, movement and meaning in a three-dimensional space are visually represented on a two-dimensional plan.

Visitor tracking studies have been criticised for their linking of time spent in an exhibition with learning, when there is little actual evidence correlating the two (Doering and Pekarik 1997). Heath and Lehn (2010) provide an alternative to time as a measure of visitor engagement by attempting to capture 'the quality of an individual's experience'. They do this by focussing closely on a visitor's interaction with other members of their social group at the exhibit itself. Heath and vom Lehn (2010) use video footage to access the talk and bodily conduct of visitors at the exhibit face. Rather than try and capture a visitor's experience within the entirety of a gallery or an exhibition, these fine-grained studies typically focus on an individual exhibit, artwork or interactive. Video footage allows Heath and Lehn to capture the bodily arrangements, such as the turn of a head, shifts of orientation and changes in the pace and rhythm of a visit, as visitors fall into step, which function to sequentially organise a visit. Much research into narrative in museum exhibitions looks at how specific designs bring

about certain behaviour in visitors, for example changing the pace with which they move through an exhibition space. In Heath and Lehn's (2010) example however, it is the social group, the fall into step, that causes the visitors pace to slow. Rather than the space dictating the pace of the narrative to the visitor, it is the visitor that imposes their pace on the exhibition narrative. Out of this then we might say that when we think about the narrative structure within the museum there are in fact two lines: the line representing the experience intended by the museum maker and the line representing the actual experiences of the museum visitor.

Over the course of this section, I have explored the different ways the concept of narrative has been visualised as a line. I now look in detail at some of the component pieces that contribute to the creation of the line by looking at the concepts of climax, binary oppositions and pace.

2.4 Defining the line

Throughout this chapter on critical perspectives on narrative structure and the museum, I have tried to interweave ideas taken from museum studies and narrative theory to explore how the metaphor of the line might be used to define narrative. I conclude this chapter by looking at some of the specific components, or qualities, of this narrative line, some of which we have already encountered. These components are the idea that the narrative builds towards a climax – visualised in Freytag's pyramid – the idea that a narrative is built around the fluctuation of a series of binaries and finally the idea of a dynamism or movement in narrative expressed through the concept of pace. In keeping with the dialogic approach I have adopted throughout this chapter, I will explore these concepts by bringing into dialogue an example taken from museum studies with a thinker working in the field of narrative research. In doing so I hope to both define the key concepts related to narrative structure that I will then apply to the analysis of my case study, as well as moving the discussion of narrative structure forward by diversifying its vocabulary and thinking about these projects.

2.4.1 Defining the line – Narrative climax

Drawing on the centrality of the idea of the climax in the work of Aristotle and Gustav Freytag, I begin attempting to define some of the components of the line of narrative by looking at what form this experience might take in the museum. Aristotle's concept of the climax relating to moments of self-revelation – for both the central character and the audience – resonates with Skolnick's (2012, 90) description of how the cumulative effect of an exhibition results in single instances of revelation. Skolnick (2012, 83) likens these instances of revelation to the epiphanies experienced by characters in the novels of James Joyce, which he describes as 'a particular, revelatory moment that is the cumulative result of already received information.' The epiphany is for Skolnick (2012, 83) the opposite of what many museum/exhibition narratives do, 'which is explicit, didactic exposition.' Epiphanies are

connected to the Christian theology of divine revelation, and the two examples Skolnick provides come not from museums but from Christian architecture and music. The first is the 'cumulative effect of space, scale, light, materiality, ornamentation, sound and scent of Westminster Cathedral' (Skolnick 2012, 87). His second description of epiphany is taken from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with its 'staggering range of theme and variation, melody and harmony, polyphony, density and volume, poignancy and majesty, tension, chaos, longing and resolution' (Skolnick 2012, 92). Skolnick here contrasts the linearity of narratives in the museum with the sense of epiphany, created by the cumulative effects of both cathedral architecture and classical music, whose parts are difficult to disentangle.

I now wish to bring Skolnick's concept of epiphany as climax into dialogue with the idea of the moment of evaluation in Labov and Waletzky's (1967) work on oral narratives in the field of socio-linguistics. In their research, Labov and Waletzky's (1967) attempt to define the key narrative components of oral testimonies in New York Black English vernacular culture. Although their methodology was first developed in the 1960s, it remains the basis for much current research into oral narratives (Macaulay 2002, 289). Labov and Waletzky hypothesised that fundamental narrative structures are to be found in oral accounts of personal experiences – the everyday narratives of ordinary speakers. They attempted to identify and relate the formal linguistic properties of narrative to their functions. Like the literary narratologists of the same period, their model was fundamentally structuralist in that they attempted to set aside what they take to be surface differences in their pursuit of the deeper structural similarities. Labov and Waletzky (1967, 12) proposed an analytical framework that isolates 'the invariant structural units which are represented by a variety of superficial forms.'

In identifying the structural units of oral narratives, Labov and Waletzky (1967) are looking to understand how a narrative functions. From their research they identify two key functions for oral narratives: the referential function and the evaluative function. The referential function refers to the function of narrative as a means of recapitulating experience

in an ordered set of clauses that matches the temporal sequences of the original experience. Labovian analysis works by attempting to relate the sequence of clauses in the narrative to the sequence of events inferred from the narrative (Labov & Waletzky 1967, 20). If we think of this referential function in visual terms, the sequence of events inferred from the narrative can be seen to correspond to the X-axis of a Freytag's plot pyramid, as it is the basic unit by which an oral narrative progresses. The second function of oral narratives that Labov and Waletzky identify is the evaluative function. This relates to the users of narratives and notes the strong requirement that a narrative has a point, is worth telling, as far as the teller, and preferably the addressee also, is concerned. This can be seen as corresponding to the y-axis of Freytag's pyramid, effectively the evaluative function is the point of the story.

From these two functions of oral narrative, Labov and Waletzky establish a six-part model, which outlines the structure of narrative (table 1).

Table 1: The narrative structure of Labov and Waletzky's model of oral narratives (Labov 1972)

	Category	Description
1	Abstract	What, in a nutshell, is this story about?
2	Orientation	Who, when, where, what?
3	Complicating action	Then what happened?
4	Evaluation	So what, how is this interesting?
5	Result or resolution	What finally happened?
6	Coda	That's it, I've finished and am 'bridging' back to our present situation.

This table suggests a sequential progression of an oral narrative from the *abstract* to the *coda*, with the evaluative function sitting at the fourth stage of the narrative. Labov's (1972) (fig. 2.6) diamond diagram complicates this linear progression.

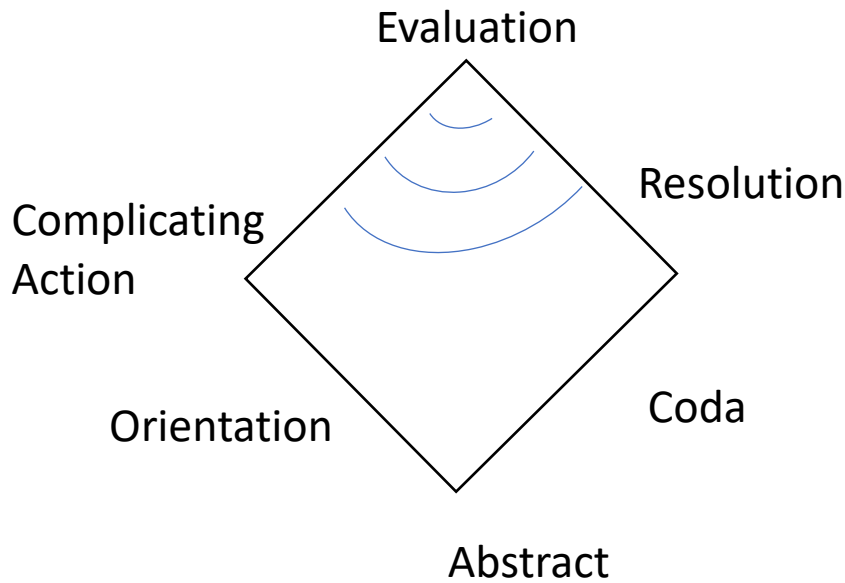


Fig 2.6 Labov's (1972) diamond model showing the six-part structure of oral narratives.

The diagram illustrates how evaluation, while sitting at the peak of the narrative after the complicating action, also permeates across the whole of the story. This is indicated by the spreading waves, which resonate out giving evaluation a presence in the other segments of the story. The evaluative function, the moment when the teller indicates to the listener why they are telling them this, sits at the tip of the diamond and is the point of the story.

There are two things I think that unites Skolnick's account of the epiphany and the Labov and Waletzky's account of the evaluative moment. The first is that just as Skolnick finds it impossible to disentangle the constituent parts of Westminster Abbey to identify the one that causes the epiphany, so although the evaluative moment comes at a specific point in the story it also radiates out into all of the other component parts. When thinking about climax within the museum then, we should think not just about how it is present in its demarcated zone but also how it radiates outwards across the space. It is not simply the star object that creates this climax but entangled with the other exhibit elements that contribute to the display. Secondly, there is the idea that the climax is not just a moment of revelation about the subject matter of the exhibition but where a visitor suddenly has a self-awareness about themselves. This is present in the idea of epiphany as divine self-revelation but also in

the evaluative function of an oral narrative in which the teller reveals to the listener why this story is important to them.

2.4.2 Moving narrative forward – binary

The climax is the centre point of any narrative but how a climax is built and constructed is harder to define. One of the building blocks of narrative common to both museums exhibitions and film is the idea of creating tension through the presentation of binary oppositions. In her reading of the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, Laura Hourston Hanks (2012) illustrates how binaries are used to create the overall three-act structure of the exhibition. Hourston Hanks (2012) identifies the exhibition's design as being based around a binary of 'order and disorder', which oscillated as visitors moved through the space. This binary was played out across the design of a three-dimensional grid, which Hanks argued acted as a *leitmotif* for the exhibition. The designers, then 'started the process of dissolution by fracturing planes within the grid to create a metaphorical or symbolic disorder,' which represented 'the fragmentation of life in Germany in the Pre-War years' (Hourston Hanks 2012, 27). During the 'rigid totality of the Nazi regime, the grid reasserts its authority,' and the structure becomes 'rational and tightly structured,' to reflect 'the order of the Nazi industrial killing machine.'

Hourston Hanks (2012, 27) makes the analogy between exhibition design and the pacing of sentences, arguing that 'just as a clipped sentence places emphasis on action rather than description, and quickens the pace of a novel,' so design in the exhibition channels visitors through the space more hastily. As well as applying the terms of binary and opposition and pacing to an exhibition, Hourston Hanks also refers to the structure of an exhibition as being made up of acts. Finally, Hourston Hanks (2012, 27), quotes the exhibition's designer Stephen Greenberg, who identifies the exhibition as having 'the tripartite structure of a three-part drama.' The initial opening act is home to artefacts revealing the normal lives of Jews in Germany before the rise of National Socialism. The second act continues 'with a physical and metaphor descent to the horrors of the

extermination camps.’ The third and final act, which consciously echoes the oval form of the introductory space, is taken over by an audio-visual display, which ‘offers an important opportunity for reflective contemplation and depressurization’ (Hourston Hanks 2012, 27).

I want to bring Hourston Hanks (2012) idea of how binary structures an exhibition into dialogue with the screenwriting guru Robert McKee’s (2006) idea of events and value and how they inform the overall structure of a Hollywood movie. Events are for McKee (2006, 34) the basic unit of narrative and correspond to moments when change occurs in a character’s life situation, or alternatively they experience a shift in their values. McKee (2006, 35) argues that there should be no scene that does not consist of an event. The amount of scenes in a story varies between genres, McKee (2006, 35) argues that the average number of scenes for a play is around forty, while a novel consists of around sixty scenes. Scenes can be broken down further into beats, which McKee (2006, 37) describes as an exchange of behaviour. He gives the example of a scene consisting of six different behaviours with a clear change of action, or reaction between characters (McKee 2006, 38).

Scenes come together to form a sequence, made up of two to five scenes, which culminates in a scene with greater impact than any previous scene (McKee 2006, 38). These sequences then come together to form acts, which McKee (2006, 41) defines as coming together in a climactic scene which causes a major reversal in the value-changed condition of the character’s life. Acts then come together to form a story, described by McKee (2006, 42) as ‘simply one huge master event’, in which a change occurs that is absolute and irreversible. The number of acts is not limited, as is the case with Aristotle, to three but varies according to the film.

Implicit within the idea of the ‘event’ is ‘value’. McKee (2006, 112) describes any story as having a *Controlling Idea*, which is the story’s ultimate meaning expressed through the action and aesthetic emotion of the last act’s climax. The *Controlling Idea* names a story’s root or central idea, but it also implies function as it shapes the writer’s strategic choices (McKee 2006, 114). A *Controlling Idea* may be expressed in a single sentence

describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end (McKee 2006, 115).

The *Controlling Idea* itself is made up of two components: Value plus Cause (2006, 115). It identifies the positive or negative charge of the story's critical value at the last act's climax, and it identifies the chief reason that this value has changed to its final state. The sentence composed from these two elements, value plus cause, expresses the core meaning of the story. McKee (2006) uses an electrical metaphor to describe value as a positive or negative charge that comes into the world or life of your character, as a result of the final action of the story. The oscillation of a plot diagram might therefore be seen as a change in the charge of this value. From this relationship between events and the controlling idea, McKee (2006, 181) describes a story as being made up of five parts, which are: the inciting incident, progressive complications, crisis, climax and resolution (see table 4).

Table 2: McKee's (2006) model of the stages of cinematic narrative

#	Narrative stage	Description
1	The inciting incident	The inciting incident radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life (McKee 2006, 189)
2	Progressive complications	Generates more and more conflict as the characters face greater and greater forces of antagonism, creating a succession of events that passes points of no return (McKee 2006, 208)
3	Crisis	Crisis means decision (McKee 2006, 303). This dilemma confronts the protagonist who, when face-to-face with the most powerful and focussed forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his/her object of desire.
4	Climax	The climax is a revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive with or without irony – a value swing at maximum change that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.
5	Resolution	The resolution is any material left after Climax and allows subplot (McKee 2006, 312). It also can show the spread of climactic effects. But the principle use is: 'a line of description at the bottom of the last page that sends the camera slowly back or tracking along images for a few seconds, so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts and leave the cinema with dignity.

As we can see from table 4, change lies at the centre of McKee's model of storytelling. It is an irreversible change in values that lies at the climax of a narrative. Drawing on Aristotle's concept of catharsis, McKee (Lott 2016) argues, it is the witnessing and resolving of this conflict that drives an audience to experience narrative, narrative is 'a consolatory refraction of reality, by witnessing our own true dilemmas realistically on screen or page we receive a form of relief' (Lott 2016). McKee expresses the forces that underlie this structure in diagrammatic form (fig. 2.7)

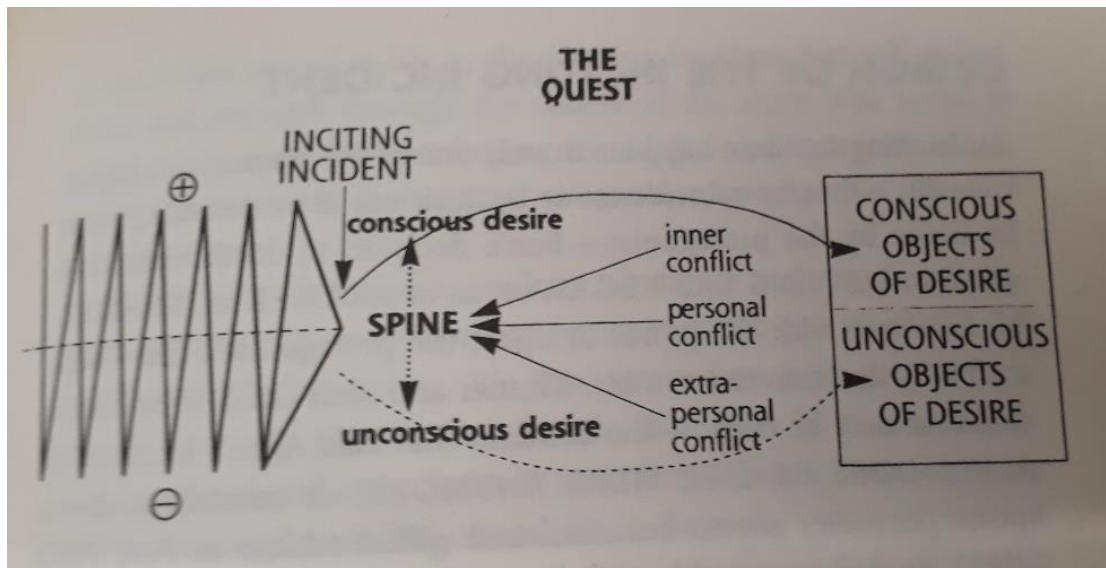


Fig. 2.7 McKee's diagram of the question narrative

Of all the visualisations of narrative I have discussed so far in this chapter, McKee's (2016) is the most elaborate. On the far left of the diagram, the undulation of the line represents the fluctuation in the charge of values from positive to negative. The inciting incident then upsets the balances of forces in the protagonist's lives. This inciting incident relates to the desire of the protagonist, which may be conscious or unconscious. Out of this inciting incident comes conflict, which may take three forms inner, personal and extra-personal. By personal McKee is referring to conflict within the protagonist's family and friends and extra-personal refers to wider societal conflicts. Finally, the story revolves around whether the protagonist achieves their objects of desire, be they conscious or unconscious.

What unites Hourston Hanks and McKee's accounts of how binaries function in an exhibition narrative and a film narrative is that they begin with a single idea built around a binary. It is through the oscillation of this binary be it the fluctuation from order to disorder in Hourston Hanks (2012) account of the exhibition design, or McKee's (2006) description of the negative or positive charge of value that create a sense of dynamism in the visitor or viewer. In Freytag's pyramid the value of the x-axis can be seen as relatively easy to define as movement of the causally-connected sequence of events through time, however, the value of the Y-axis is more difficult to define. This is because as Hourston Hanks and McKee illustrate the Y-axis is related to the value inherent in the binary that forms the controlling

idea of the story. In exhibition terms the x-axis would always represent the visitor's movement through the exhibition space, while the value of the y-axis would always be determined by the values expressed in the Big Idea that informs the exhibition's story.

2.4.3 Pace and dynamism

In further thinking about how narrative draws us as viewers/readers/visitors through film/text/exhibition, I want to look at two examples provided by Tricia Austin and Roland Barthes who both explore the mechanisms by which narratives unfold. To add to the idea of structural sequence and revelatory climax, there is also the issue of what drives us to visit and 'read' museums. Austin (2012, 108) argues that humans experience stories both intellectually, but also corporeally, and that these two types of narratives cannot be separated. Addressing how narratives might be experienced corporally, Austin draws on the psychologist JJ. Gibson's (1978) account of affordances, which argues that 'our bodies are constantly making sense of the world by learning and becoming accustomed to act and interact offered by it.' Austin locates the desire to experience museum narrative as located in the corporal bodies of the museum visitors themselves:

If your body schema is unprovoked and a narrative is not developed, you remain passive and unchanged. (Austin 2012, 109)

Within the narrative environment of the exhibition, this provocation of the body schema comes about through the construction of a sense of tension. Although there must be 'a sense of orderly, unfolding to aid visitor navigation,' there must also be 'physical and mental elements of uncertainty that arouse a desire for resolution in the visitor' (Austin 2012, 109). A visitor's sense of uncertainty may be provoked by unfamiliar surroundings, or objects, or provocative new information presented by the exhibition.

In *S/Z* the French literary theorist Roland Barthes explores this idea of what provokes us to finish a text and the important role that uncertainty plays in it, through his close reading

of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* (1831). Barthes' focus on narrative is on the act of reading itself. He distinguishes between the readerly and the writerly text, with Barthes (1974, 4) arguing that the aim of literary work should be to produce the former, not the latter. The goal of the readerly text, for Barthes (1974, 4), 'is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text.' Emphasising the active element of meaning-making, Barthes (1974, 10) describes reading not as a 'parasitical act', but 'a form of work,' with the reader's task 'to move, to shift systems whose meanings are established not by me or by others but by their systematic mark.' To read, for Barthes (1974, 4), is 'a labour of language – to find [...a text's...] meanings and to name them.'

Barthes identifies five means by which a text and a reader can interact to create meaning, which he divides into units known as codes. Barthes describes the codes as both forces, 'that can take over the text and of which the text is the network' and as voices, 'out of which the text is woven' (1974, 20). Relating back to the red thread, Barthes uses a weaving metaphor to describe how the codes combine to create a kind of network, 'a *topos* through which the entire text passes, or rather, in passing, becomes text.' The five codes are the proairetic code, the hermeneutic code, the semantic code, the symbolic code and the cultural code. A brief description of each of the codes can be found in table 3.

Table 3: Roland Barthes' five narrative codes

	Code	Description of code
1	The proairetic code	Creates suspense in the reader by the anticipation of an action's resolution.
2	The hermeneutic code	Creates suspense in the reader through unanswered questions regarding a mystery.
3	The semantic code	The equivalent of metonymy and is used to describe an instance in the text when an object, or thing, is used to connote a wider meaning.
4	The symbolic code	Relates to a binary opposition whose presence also suggests its opposite.
5	The cultural code	A reference to a science or a body of knowledge, Barthes lists the following as examples of the <i>cultural</i> code: traditional human experience, art, play on words, ethnic psychology and medicine.

Of the five codes, the *proairetic* and the *hermeneutic* are irreversible because their affect is dependent on them being encountered in sequential order. To illustrate, if readers were to be told the revelation of the mystery at the start of a novel, then the narrative would lack a *hermeneutic* drive. The other three codes – the *semantic*, the *symbolic*, and the *cultural* – are reversible and can effectively be moved around and encountered at any point within a text.

If we again attempt to visualise Barthes codes on a diagram akin to Freytag's Pyramid, then the *proairetic* code would be situated on the x-axis, and the *hermeneutic* code would be situated on the y-axis. The *proairetic* code is used to describe a series of actions, both large and small, that causally connect. Barthes (1974, 82) also describes the *proairetic* code as 'a series of actions folding and unfolding'. He argues that that this act of unfolding is mirrored in the action of reading, which he describes as 'proceeding from name to name, from fold to fold' (1974, 83). The *proairetic* code implies 'a logic of human behaviour', or, 'the ability to rationally determine the result of an action' (Barthes 1974, 19). Barthes sometimes labels the *proairetic* code as an Act because it is frequently related to actions that produce effects. When annotating the text, Barthes gives examples of large and small-scale actions of this code, such as the career progression of the protagonist Sarrasine: firstly moving to Paris, studying with a great master, then leaving the master, winning a prize and being praised by a great critic (Barthes 1974, 96–101). On a smaller scale, a series of actions such as a door being approached, being knocked upon, being opened and the protagonist entering can also be codified as *proairetic* (Barthes 1974, 82).

Defined by Barthes as the 'revelation of truth' (1974, 29), the *hermeneutic* code relates to all the means by which 'an enigma [...or questions...] can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed' (1974, 19). In Barthes' example, taken from Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*, this enigma initially surrounds the identity of a mysterious old man at a grand party in the novella's opening scene. It then shifts to the mystery of the gender of the beautiful opera singer Zambinella, initially intimated to be a

woman, but later to be revealed – to both the protagonist Sarrasine and the reader – to be a castrated opera singer, known as a castrato. The ultimate enigma is the connection between Zambinella and the old man at the party, which the novella's conclusion reveals are the same person.

The other three codes – the semantic, the symbolic and the cultural code – can be seen as functioning as supporting the revelation of this enigma. The *semantic* code is principally metonymic and used to describe an instance in the text when an object, or thing, is used to connote a wider meaning. In *Sarrasine*, Barthes uses the examples of money standing for wealth (1974, 39), which, of course, relates to the mystery (the *hermeneutic* code) of how the old man in the story obtained his fortune. Similarly, the *symbolic* code establish a binary, such as male and female, which the revelation of the mystery will destabilise and confuse. Finally, the *gnomic* or *cultural* code (1974, 19) refers to 'prior knowledge or wisdom to which the text continuously refers'. The *cultural* code is typically a reference to a shared body of knowledge. This might be a particular scientific discipline, such as psychology or discipline, but it also might refer to a commonly held truths. In *Sarrasine*, it is the title character's lack of knowledge regarding the world of the Italian opera and the figure of the castrato that leads to his undoing.

Barthes (1974, 75) makes an analogy between how the *hermeneutic* code functions and the rhythm of poetry, arguing that in a similar way that rhyme in a poem conveys, 'an expectation for desire and recurrence, so the *hermeneutic* structures a text according to the expectation and desire for its solution.' Barthes (1974, 75) argues that the *proairetic* and *hermeneutic* code have different functions within a text, the 'unfolding' of the *proairetic* code 'moving the story along', while the *hermeneutic* code performs an opposite action, 'setting up *delays* and providing stoppages' (1974, 75). Out of this process of moving the story along through a character's actions, while at the same time delaying the revelation of its central enigma, Barthes creates a ten-part structure, which I outline in table 4.

Table 4: Barthes' (1974) ten-part structure showing the unfolding of the hermeneutic code

1	Thematisation	What in the narrative is an enigma?
2	Positioning	Additional confirmations of the enigma.
3	Formulation of the enigma	
4	Promise of an answer of the enigma	Circumvention of the true answer.
5	Fraud	Mixture of fraud and truth.
6	Equivocation	
7	Blocking	The enigma cannot be solved
8	Suspended answer	Stopping the answering after having begun.
9	Partial answer	Some facets of the truth are revealed
10	Disclosure of the truth	

Barthes does not create a diagram to illustrate the structure of plot, but he does visualise it by using a musical analogy to describe the relationship between the *proairetic* and the *hermeneutic* code. He describes the *proairetic* code, which corresponds to the sequence of actions and causality in the novel as harmony. He then describes the *hermeneutic* code, which relates to all the elements of mystery and suspense in a text, as melody. Together these two codes resemble 'two lines (of notes) on the polyphonic table' (Barthes 1974, 29). For Barthes (1974, 29) 'there is the same constraint in the gradual order of melody and in the equally gradual order of the narrative sequence.' Through this melody-harmony metaphor we can see that Barthes' gives the *hermeneutic* code priority over the *proairetic* code. The reader is meant to follow the *hermeneutic* code of the novella, just as the listener to a piece of music is meant to follow the melody.

In Barthes musical analogy of the *proairetic* code as harmony and the *hermeneutic* code we can see the tension suggested by Austin between orderly unfolding and uncertainty

that provokes in the visitor a desire for resolution and compels them to finish the story. We can also see that Barthes with his musical analogy is reaching to express that which cannot be expressed through text alone but suggesting, like Austin, that narrative is experienced on a corporeal unconscious level. Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to define what narrative structure is by interweaving examples from museum studies with concepts from narrative theory. Central to this has been the idea that textual definitions alone are not enough to define narrative as a phenomena and so writers and theorists have attempted to capture its qualities visually in the form of a line. Even then on an affective and corporeal level some of the qualities of narrative remain unexpressed. It is this issue of how the visual and the material might express ideas and how they might relate to museum exhibitions that I turn to in the next chapter.

2.5 Objects of desire: Application of narrative theory to museums

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined how narrative in museum exhibitions has been conceived of according to a spectrum that on one side focusses on the perspective of the exhibition maker and on the other on the perspective of the visitor. Now, using the concepts of narrative as line, which I have outlined in sections 3.2 and 3.3, I want to think about how a theoretical framework related to museums can be reframed according to the idea that narrative structure can be visualised according to the interaction between the values expressed on the x-axis and the y-axis. These ideas will then be explored in the study of narrative structure in my theory chapters.

For Labov and Waletzky (1967), Barthes (1974) and McKee (2006) the x-axis of their models of diagram are tied to ideas of sequence and causality. This might range from the order of events told in an oral narrative that create the referential function of Labov and Waletzky (1967), to the six different behaviours that lead to a clear change of action of a character in a screenplay (McKee 2006). What unites these elements is that they are the building blocks, or as Barthes (1974) calls it the *harmony*, of the narrative. Thinking about

this idea of the building blocks of narrative in terms of the museum the key dynamic is the interaction between space and time. In Hourston Hanks' (2012) example, it is the progression of time that link together the events of the Holocaust that corresponds with the visitor's progression through the exhibition. Similarly, for Austin (2012, 109) it is the sense of 'orderly, unfolding' of the exhibition and for Lyotard (1996) the idea of a 'body in movement' in the exhibition space. Boon (2011) emphasises the need for a *synchronic* rather than a *diachronic* level of movement. Space Syntax Theory also emphasises the spatial over the chronological, with Peponis and Hedin (1983), Choi and Psarra (2009) all favouring open spaces that give visitors more freedom, over spaces that provide visitors with an easy to follow but constraining path.

If in each of the three narrative models the value of the x-axis can be allocated to the movement of a visitor through the space of an exhibition as time unfolds, then the value of the y-axis appears to be more genre dependent. For Labov and Waletzky (1967) the y-axis is the evaluative function, which explains why a particular story is worth telling. For Barthes (1974), the y-axis is the hermeneutic code – the central mystery whose delayed revelation compels the reader to finish the text. For McKee (2006), the y-axis corresponds to the controlling idea of the story, which is made up of value plus causality, which results in a change in the protagonist's world view. In each of the examples, the variation in meaning can be attributed to the specificities of the genre, in which a different quality is valued. For example, Barthes (1974) places the emphasis on the revelation of the mystery, while an oral narrator can deliberately state the purpose of a story to the narratee in a way that would seem inappropriate in a realist novella or screenplay.

Turning to the museum, the studies I have looked at give an idea of some of the genre-specific qualities that constitute meaning in the context of the museum. For Skolnick (2012, 87) it is the multimodal combination of space, scale, light sound, scent and architecture that leads to his moment of revelation, which he likens to an epiphany. For Austin (2012, 109) the y-axis bears some resemblance to Barthes' hermeneutic code in that

it is a 'physical and mental elements of uncertainty that arouses a desire for resolution in the visitor'. For Boon (2011, 425) the emphasis is placed on the moments that visitors are freed from the exhibition narrative to use their *metis* (cunning intelligence) to make new narratives and construct their own meaning. Likewise, for Psarra (2009) the moments of value correspond to when visitors switch their perspectives from looking inward at the museum narrative to extending outwards to understanding the context in which the museum is set.

From the relationship between these two values, or forces, each of the three narrative theorists build their structures, which then informs their models and accompanying diagrams. Across the three narrative structures, we can see some similarities and some differences. Firstly, there is the idea of a narrative having a beginning or set-up. For Labov and Waletzky (1967) this is the *abstract and orientation*; for Barthes (1974) this is the *thematization, position and formulation of the enigma* and for McKee (2006) this is the *inciting incident*. The next stage is an event that prevents the narrative from ending straight away. For Labov and Waletzky (1967) this is the *complication action*, for Barthes this is the *fraud* and for McKee (2006) this is *progressive complications*.

In thinking about the peak of the narrative corresponding to a Freytag's pyramid shaped visualisation, there is a differentiation between the three models. For Labov and Waletzky (1967) and McKee (2006) this climax occurs around the three-quarter mark, with the *Evaluation* and the *Climax*. For Barthes (1974) the climax occurs at the very end with the *Disclosure of Truth*. Again, the difference in the positioning of the climax can be related to the particularities of the medium with the revelation of the *hermeneutic* mystery requiring it to be saved to the very end. Labov and Waletzky (1967) and McKee (2006) follow their climax with what they describe as the *resolution*, in which any threads that are not resolved are tied up. From the literature surrounding museum exhibition narratives what emerges is not an overall structure but individual components. For example, Hourston Hanks (2012) describes how the Imperial War Museum exhibition is structured around the binary of order and disorder and how the exhibition adopts a three-act structure. However, in comparison to

literature, linguistics, or film there is not the same level of structural breakdown in museum exhibition literature, as in other media. One of the purposes of my analysis chapters will be to extend the concept of how exhibition narratives are structured using the terminology and concepts taken from this chapter on the critical perspectives of narrative structure.

Summary

In chapter three, I explored theories and models of narrative structure in relation to museum exhibitions. These include how motifs recur to create a sense of repetition in the visitors, to think about what drives visitors to visit exhibitions and to conceptualise the underlying systems of knowledge that underpin museum exhibitions. In thinking about how to use museum exhibitions, themselves a visual medium, I explored how narrative in literature and film has been visualised in the form of the line. The line is a useful means of conceiving of narrative because it both outlines the idea of the sequential causality of events that lies at the heart of narrative, but it also relates to mythological concepts of stories in space such as the labyrinth. In looking at three models of narrative that have their origins in, or were inspired by, the structuralist focus of the classical phase of narratology I hope to draw out four points. Firstly, in attempting to think about the structure of exhibition narrative structure I must begin by documenting the building blocks of narrative, which in the museum exhibition revolve around the issues of time and space. Secondly, is the key issue of what constitutes meaning or value in a museum exhibition, which is associated with the combination of a museum's multimodal elements. Thirdly, there is the idea of how the various elements that constitute an exhibition's narrative combine to create the overall structure of the narrative. Fourthly, there is the issue of how I might visualise this narrative myself from my analysis.

Chapter 3

Narratorial perspective and the museum: critical perspectives

Introduction

When we think about how narrative might be present in a museum exhibition it does not require a huge imaginative leap to draw a parallel between the underlying structure of text and the linearity, or alternatively the non-linearity, of a visitor's route through a museum exhibition. How the perspective of a narrator, one of the key areas of theoretical research in the discipline of narratology, might be present in a museum is less immediately apparent. In this chapter, I seek to explore how we might apply the concept of narratorial perspective to museums in order to gain a deeper understanding of exhibitions as multi-authored and multimodal narrative mediums. Central to my thinking is the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his view of discourse as inherently dialogic in that any text is always created in dialogue with an intended, and often imagined, other in mind. Through his theory of *heteroglossia*, Bakhtin (1981) illustrates how multiple voices may be present in a text and how these perspectives are often linked to particular forms of discourse such as the scientific report or the diary entry. I draw a parallel between how these different discourses have a material form and how we might consider the different materials that make up an exhibition, such as the design, the text and the objects themselves, as conveying the perspectives of the various museum makers involved in a display's construction. Central to my approach is the differentiation between narration (that which is said) and focalisation (that which is seen) and how the Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal (1996) has employed cinema's language of frames, pans and close-ups to understand how narrative perspective might be manifest in the curation and design of museum exhibitions. The link between multimodality and perspective extends beyond how museum exhibitions have been understood to how the figure of the museum visitor has been conceptualised and

categorised. Halfway through this chapter, I thus switch my own perspective from the museum maker to the museum visitor, in order to understand how visitor studies has viewed the exhibition experience through 'the eyes of the visitor'. This ranges from the *close-up* of the encounter at the exhibit face to the *longshot* of how social class and cultural capital inform a lifetime habit of exhibition visiting. In bringing these two forms of perspective together I seek, in the spirit of Bakhtin, to create a dialogue between museum maker and visitor about how narratorial perspective might be located in the exhibition space.

3.1 The shift towards perspective in narrative theory

The role of the narrator and the concept of perspective adopted by a text has always been an important aspect for consideration in models of narrative. Dating back to the nineteenth century, Goethe (Stanzel 1984) created an evolutionary model to explain the development of narratorial perspectives, which drew heavily on the Linnaean system for classifying the development of plants. In the Classical Narratology of the 1960s, the most prominent theorist to explore the issue of perspective in narrative was Gérard Genette (1980, 186), who used the term focalisation to bring together two key issues: the point of view of the novel (who sees and creates the mood) and the novel's voice (who speaks to the reader). Combining these two categories, Genette argues that there are three principal types of focalisation (Jahn 2007, 97). The first is non-focalisation in which events are narrated from a wholly unrestricted point of view and is typical of nineteenth-century realist novels, such as Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The second is internal focalisation in which the story's events are focalised through one or more of the story's internal characters and narrative information is restricted to data available to their perceptions, such as in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1927). Genette's third category is external focalisation which restricts itself to 'outside views', reporting what is visible and audible to a virtual camera, such as the narrator of Hemingway's *The Killers* (1927).

I wish to draw two parallels between how Classical Narratology approaches the issue of perspective in the novel and how perspective might be manifests itself in a museum

exhibition. Firstly, Classical Narratology shares with the nineteenth-century museum an interest in taxonomic classification connected to evolutionary progress. Drawing on Goethe's linking of the classification of narratorial perspective with the development of plants, Genette's (1980) model has an evolutionary impulse with the stream-of-conscious first-person narrators of European literary modernism seen as evolving out of the third-person omniscient narrators of the nineteenth century. Secondly, in Genette's model narratorial perspective can be understood as existing on a spectrum ranging from distant to close. Non-focalisation provides an unrestricted but distant view of the characters thoughts and feelings, while internal focalisation brings the reader closer to how the character thinks, sees and feels but at the cost of a restriction of data available to the reader. In the third category of external focalisation, we can see Genette reaching for a non-textual metaphor, the idea of the virtual camera, to explain how narrative will be understood. Like narratology's use of the line/or thread motif to explain structure, the camera proves to be a powerful metaphor for perspective, which recurs again and again in the work of the various narrative theorists discussed in this chapter. In turning to how perspective might be present in the museum, I wish to initially explore it through this sliding scale of closeness and distance. Perspective might be thought of as existing in the close-up of an object (Lidchi 1997), or alternatively as being viewed from afar in the form of the *Museumscape* (Macdonald 2016).

Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Lidchi (1997, 164) makes the analogy between Barthes' division of the linguistic unit of the *sign* into *signifier* and *signified* to understand how an object symbolically conveys meaning to a visitor. The substance of the *signifier* is always material (sounds, objects, images), whereas the *signified* is not "a thing but a mental representation of "the thing" with that of the object (Lidchi 1997, 164). While the materiality, or physical presence of an object remains the same, the *signified* – the mental representation of the thing – changes depending on the context in which it is displayed. Lidchi (1997, 164) uses Barthes' concepts of *connotation* and *denotation* to explore the articulation of signification. *Denotation* refers to the first level or order of meaning which

derives from a description relationship between *signifier* and *signified*. *Connotation* refers to a second level, or order of meaning which guides one to look at the way in which the image (object) is understood, at a broader more associative level of meaning. Lidchi (1997, 164) uses the example of Comanche – a horse that survived the battle of Little Big Horn – to illustrate the relationship between object as a *sign* and meaning on the level of *denotation* and *connotation*. While the physical presence of the stuffed horse and its first level or meaning, or *denotation*, as representation remain unchanged, what Comanche *connotes* changes according to the context in which it is displayed. Comanche is first displayed as an oddity in a zoological collection, then as a lucky symbol of the conquest of the American West in the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, then as an educational tool in the University of Kansas representing the colonial oppression of Native Americans by White settlers (Lidchi 1997, 164).

From a mid-range vantage point, narratorial perspective can be seen as existing on the level of an individual exhibition or a museum. For example, in *Double Exposure* the narratologist Mieke Bal (1996) critically reads the positioning of object, text and space in the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, to expose the ideological discourses that lie beneath its surface. Specifically, she investigates the act of 'exposure' in museums, drawing on the Greek word *apo-deik-nemi* to refer to the action of, 'making a public presentation', or 'publicly demonstrating'. Bal (1996, 2) does this to explore how museums present, reveal, or lay bare the 'truth' of the cultural object. Bal (1996) argues that different forms of looking are encouraged in different museums and that museums use specific conventions of display to mask structures of power and authority from view. Bal (1996) also critically reads museum texts to determine who is speaking, and identifies the disciplinary discourses, such as anthropology and archaeology, which inform the text's perspective. Bal's analysis is very much in the tradition of Foucault, identifying the museum as a site of authority that exerts power and control over meaning – and by extension its visitors – through the discourses it employs. The traditional means by which the voice and perspective of the exhibition's author have been located in the museum is through

a critical analysis of the exhibition's texts, including the exhibition catalogue, panels and labels. For example, Bennett (2006) aligns the museum text with that of the monological curatorial or institutional voice and links the colonial discourses latent in the texts with the colonial practices that led to many of the objects arriving in the collections. Bennett (2006, 46) argues that the perspective of museums needs to be decentred away from its White, European origins through the presentation of multiple perspectives, which will result in a creative tension that in turn destabilises some of the traditional power structures and associated discourses that exist within the museum.

Finally, we can pan even further back in our discussion of the relationship between meaning and materiality in the museum to think about how an entire cluster of museums, or *Museumscape* (Macdonald 2016) in an individual city or country combine to create a particular perspective. In her work on the role of the ethnographic museum in coordinating different, identity and cultural citizenship, Macdonald (2016) uses the term *Museumscape* to refer to a set of museums within a particular city. Looking at the constellation of museums in Berlin and the development of the Humboldt Forum on Museum Island, Macdonald (2016) argues that they combine to perpetuate a binary of 'Europe and various others.' Originally moving the ethnographic collections, which were housed in Dahlem, on the outskirts of Berlin, to Museum Island was intended to restore a balanced presentation and perception of global cultures. For Macdonald (2016), however, this goes beyond a simple matter of geography but instead extends to a labelling 'as one of historical belonging to a particular story of Western identity.' As part of this binary, the 'non-European' remains outside of this history and in its positioning on the other side of the island, the inclusion of the non-European might have a refraction effect, sharpening the dichotomy still further. Macdonald (2016) extends the idea of perspective beyond the borders of a single institution to encapsulate the idea of a *Museumscape*, in which a collection of institutions' presentations of heritage is imbued with a collective viewpoint. Describing a project about European Historical Consciousness, Macdonald (2013) noted how particular countries had different

attitudes towards national history, which is in turn reflected in how they present heritage. For example, German models of heritage are seen as premised on having come to terms adequately with the past, which must become something that is faced, addressed, and overcome (Macdonald, 2013, 26). In contrast Eastern European heritage was more likely to talk about national history in a positive manner as a means of carving out of an identity outside of Communism.

Returning back to our idea of perspective in relation to Genette, we might consider these accounts as operating on a spectrum of closeness and distance: Lidchi's (1997) account focussing in on a single object close-up, while Sharon Macdonald's (2016) exploration of the European *Museumscape* pans outwards to encompass a wider view. Perspective can also thought of in terms of surface and depth, with the Comanche denoting a physical specimen of a horse at the surface level (Lidchi 1997), or the deeper ideological level of meaning that Bal (1996) is keen to lay bare through her methodology of *exposure*. The idea that meaning might be encoded into an object or institution through text and modes of display and that these meanings may in turn be decoded, leads to a consideration of who is involved in these practices of encoding and decoding.

In his seminal article 'Encoding and decoding in Television discourse', Stuart Hall (2015) creates a new vocabulary for reading the non-textual and a new theory of cultural production and reception (Turner 1990). Using the medium of television dramas, Hall (2015) traces how television discourses are encoded to convey dominant meanings, which are connotively signified. Hall then considers how an audience relates and untangles these meanings through the process of decoding. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Frank Parkin, Hall (2015) argues that we can identify three hypothetical positions from which the decoding of a television message may be constructed: he calls these *the dominant-hegemonic position* (the preferred reading), *the negotiated position* and *the oppositional position*. If the *preferred reading* takes the message at face value and the *oppositional position* directly opposes it, then the *negotiated position*, accords the privileged position to

the dominant definition of events, while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to local conditions (Turner 1990, 137). In the moments in which disjunction occurs between the encoded and decoded meanings, we see exposed the signs of structural difference produced and determined by other social, economic and cultural forces.

The means by which an exhibition's meaning is encoded is best revealed by ethnographies of the exhibition-making process, such as Macdonald's (2002) study of the development of the *Food* gallery at the Science Museum in the early 1990s. Such studies have revealed that far from being a neutral affair, the creation of an exhibition narrative is a power struggle with different protagonists competing for the inclusion of their own perspective within the finished display. Macdonald (2002, 93) describes this exhibition-making process itself as a story, beginning with 'encoding' (the production of the exhibition) and ending with 'the text' (the finished exhibition). Within this narrative are 'sub and parallel plots' that 'occur through the making of the exhibition to its final opening and viewing' (MacDonald 2002, 93).

At the heart of the ethnography is question of the authorial puzzle (Macdonald 2002, 93), which effectively forms – to use Barthes' term discussed in my structure chapter – the *hermeneutic* mystery of the text: who is the author of an exhibition? Although acknowledging the common perception of the senior curator as the principle author of an exhibition, Macdonald's (2002, 110) research reveals the role both designers and staff with junior roles played in shaping the narrative of the displays. The dynamic of teams who make exhibitions differs over time and the team behind the creation of the Science Museum's *Food* exhibition were made up of six curatorial staff who created the content, some of whom did not have a background in food science, and two external designers. Alongside these team members, Macdonald (2002, 94) utilising actor network theory also identifies a number of other actors and actants – directors, sponsors, the public, the objects themselves – who intersect with and shape the exhibition. Using Foucault's term, the author function, Macdonald (2002, 94) argues that authorship is a 'proprietary discourse which binds

particular agents to a particular text or product and is intrinsically tied to issues of authorship and authenticity.’

The ethnography of the *Food* exhibition plays out over a lengthy period of time, with Macdonald (2002, 96) tracing ‘twenty months from opening with a feasibility study, and only fifteen months of production with the full team in place’. However, locating the actual inception of the project was in Macdonald’s (2002, 96), words, ‘an extremely murky concept in practice’ pointing to the fact that origins of exhibitions can be traced back years, even decades to past exhibitions and moments of inspiration in a curator’s childhood. Within the fifteen-month period of production, Macdonald (2002, 131) outlines three phases, effectively structuring the exhibition-making process in three acts. These are: the *reorganisation*, the *retreat* and the *rethink*. Overall, the process is described as moving from ‘very creative to hard slog...from proliferation to constraint’ (Macdonald 2002, 131). Macdonald illustrates how different actors become involved at different stages of the exhibition-making process with the *reorganisation* stage being led by the curators, the *retreat* led by the designers and the *rethink* triggered by the director.

In outlining the three key moments that shape the exhibition, Macdonald (2002) not only tells the story of the exhibition, but also outlines its key characters in the curators, designers and directors. There are also absent or imagined characters, such as the imagined visitor, who are frequently invoked in arguments about flow or bottlenecks within the exhibition space. Finally, there are non-human characters such as the sausage-making machine, whose weight and operating demands mean it had to be surrounded by protective glass – to protect the visitors from it, as much as to protect the machine from the visitors themselves. What ethnographic studies like MacDonald’s (2002) reveal is the narrative shape of the exhibition-making process, the length of time it takes and the various actors – both human and non-human – that are involved at its different stages.

3.2.1 Bakhtin and the dialogic

From Macdonald's (2002) ethnographic account of the making of the *Food* exhibition at the Science Museum we can take the idea that a museum exhibition has multiple authors and therefore has the potential to contain either multiple points-of-view, or a synthesis of their perspectives. We can also see that exhibition-making has a dialogic aspect and that we might conceive of the exhibition decoding process as being similarly dialogic in its relationship between the museum maker who encodes and the museum visitor who decodes. In exploring this relationship between museum-maker and visitor, I want to situate ideas about narrative perspective in museum exhibitions within a broader framework of dialogic communication. Christian's (1988) positions the dialogue as an alternative to the European Enlightenment's focus on the self as the conceptual centre of being, epitomised in the French philosopher Rene Descartes famous maxim, 'I think therefore I am.' As a riposte to this self-centredness, Christian's turns to Jewish German philosopher's Martin Buber's (1970) iconic phrase 'in the beginning is the relation', taken from his work *Ich und Thou* to argue for the primacy of dialogue in what it means to be human. Dialogic approaches can be found in a number of different disciplines such as in Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of *praxis* in educational pedagogy, or Olivier Escobar's (2011) alternative formats to the traditional academic lecture such as the world café. Within narrative theory, the work of the Russian literary theory Mikhail Bakhtin is best placed to understand how a single perspective never exists in isolation, but is rather always in dialogue with an intended other. In relation to discourse, Bakhtin (1981, 280) argues:

'Every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word...it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction.'

Using this premise as a starting point, Bakhtin (1981) explores its ramifications in several different ways. Firstly, Bakhtin regards no discourse as existing in isolation, but rather situated in the binary between a system of a unitary language and the individual speaking within this language. This unitary language consists of an expression of, 'the

centripetal forces of language that serve to unify and control and also to centralise the verbal ideological world' (Bakhtin 1981, 270). Bakhtin (1981, 273) regarded the traditional fixed forms of poetry, such as the epic or the lyric, as examples of genres that, 'reinforce the political centralisation of the verbal ideological world'. He contrasts that with the centrifugal force of language, *heteroglossia* – that which 'decentralises and disunifies'. Examples of *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin 1981, 273), include the speech of clowns in street performances, folk-sayings and anecdotes, and anything that is parodic and polemically against the official language of any given time.

For Bakhtin (1981), the textual medium that had the great potential for *heteroglossia* to manifest itself in was the novel, which was intimately connected with the spread of literacy and the widening of education in the nineteenth century. This was because of the stylistic uniqueness of the novel, 'comprised of a series of compositional stylistic unities, which combine to form a structured system, a style that could not be identified with any of the unities, but rather in their combination' (Bakhtin 1981, 262). These stylistic unities were:

1. Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants)
2. Stylistic unities of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz*)
3. Stylistic unities of the various forms of semi-literary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)
4. Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnography descriptions, memoranda and so forth).
5. The stylistically individualised speech of characters

Citing the examples of the novels of Turgenev and Dostoevsky, Bakhtin (1981, 316) argues that social *heteroglossia* enters the novel primarily in the direct speech of the characters – in dialogues. Incorporating other genres into the novel, such as lyrical songs, diary and travel notes, brought in other languages, and further intensified the speech

diversity provided by the characters in fresh ways. Not all novels possess these *heteroglossic* qualities, however, Bakhtin (1981, 282) famously regarded Tolstoy as too polemical and his prose too concrete to allow these other voices to break through.

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the dialogic nature of discourse is a useful theoretical lens to apply to understanding museum exhibitions because it helps fragment the idea that the museum possesses a single, monologic institutional voice. A museum exhibition does not have one single author, as is often perceived, but is rather a collaborative undertaking with the multi-dimensional nature of the exhibition medium requiring a variety of specialisms. Bakhtin's (1984) notion of *polyphony* in the novel, of multiple voices engaged in dialogue and struggle, is therefore present inherently in museums through the collaborative undertaking of exhibition making and the multi-modal nature of the exhibition form. If a cross-spectrum of late-nineteenth century Russian society can be seen as manifested in the vernacular speech dialogue of Dostoyevsky's characters, then the voices of the exhibition's numerous authors – curators, interpretation officers, designers, projects managers – can be found in the exhibition's objects, text, design and graphics. These voices are not neutral but rather engaged in a struggle of power and representation, which can be read and decoded in the finished text of the exhibition.

Bakhtin's concept of *polyphony* can be extended to the academic discourses that inform the displays. For example, Foucault (1989) argues that museums are small institutional bases that help to give diffuse bodies of knowledge – such as archaeology or anthropology – disciplinary status. Museums codify knowledge that is subsequently used for scientific and moral justification for colonial expansion. Bakhtin (1981) also offers a model in which institutions traditionally linked to the preservation of the status quo, as national museums frequently are, can be potentially radical and subversive. Many of the examples that Bakhtin cites as containing *polyphony*, are from traditional canonical texts, including Shakespeare, Rabelais and Dostoyevsky.

Finally, Bakhtin's emphasis on discourse as always existing in dialogue with an *other*, necessitates that any study of museum narratives takes into account multiple perspectives, both the multiple authors involved in creating the exhibition and the perspectives of those the exhibition is intended for: the audience. The most obvious candidate for the study of this audience are the visitors to the exhibition. However, the tracing of this dialogic *other*, reveals other potential audiences, including other museum professionals, the arts media, and previous exhibitions on the display subject matter, whose influence is still felt even though they may have long since closed.

3.2.2 Museum as dialogic spaces

In thinking about how narratives in museums can be seen as dialogic spaces, Witcomb's (2003) use of the concept zone is useful in thinking about how museums can be read as an unstable institution attempting to come to grips with the affects of the colonial encounter, an attempt which has both positive and negative effects on those involved. Witcomb (2003) uses Pratt's (1991) idea of the contact zone to redefine the museum as a social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Mason (2004, 25) has also made this argument, that the museum functions more as a permeable space to transcultural encounter than as a tightly bounded institution disseminating knowledge to its visitors' (Mason 2004, 25). There has been criticism of this application of the contact zone from Boast (2011, 67) who argues that the new inclusiveness of museums is merely another manifestation of the museum as an instrument of governmentality. Bennett (1998, 213) also saw the contact zone, as a space for cross-cultural dialogues and source community expertise, to be merely an extension of the museum as an instrument of governmentality, expressed as multiculturalism. Bennett (1998, 213) asked, are "museums not still concerned to beam their improving messages of cultural tolerance and diversity into civil society as far as they can reach?" Witcomb (2003) agrees with this and argues that the contact zone is an asymmetric

space where the periphery comes to win some small, momentary, and strategic advantage, but where the centre ultimately gains.

3.3.1 Perspective in other media

This leads me to a discussion of the role of the voice of the object in the exhibition. Throughout this section, I have used dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense to explore the possibilities of the exhibition's multimodal qualities allowing for the presence of multiple human voices. But what about non-human voices, is it possible as many curators claim to allow the objects to 'speak for themselves? Harrison (2013, 31) uses the term dialogical in another way to consider how heritage might be connected to broader social, political and environmental issues. In attempting to erase the separation between cultural and natural heritage, Harrison (2013) is arguing for a removal of the hierarchies that privileges the human over the non-human. In doing so, Harrison (2013) is exploring the possibilities provided by a flat ontology in which agency is given not only to humans, but also to animals and things as well. One of the challenges provided by such a flattening is a call to move beyond the application of the theory developed for words to a theory that captures the materiality, or the 'thingness', of the objects themselves. Over the course of the next section, I look at the challenge to narrative in museums provided by this 'material turn', in particular with references to the ideas of Latour and Deleuze and Guatarri.

3.3.2 The riposte to narrative – the material turn against narrative

As Whitehead (2016, 7) notes the use of linguistic metaphors to understand exhibitions brings with it the dangers of excessive ontological difference with the object of study – 'a gallery wall is manifestly not the same as a paragraph.' This criticism of the application of narrative theory to the museum can be seen as stemming from the material turn in archaeology and anthropology. It is also connected to the practice in museums and art galleries of removing interpretation to encourage an unmediated encounter with the object. An example of this unmediated approach is the Tate Britain rehang of 2013 by then

Director Penelope Curtis. Beginning first with the material turn in archaeology and anthropology, Harrison (2013, 112) while acknowledging the role a discursive approach to heritage has played in producing a field of critical heritage studies, argues that such an approach does not always produce an account that adequately theorises the role of material 'things'. An approach that only focusses on discourse can reduce heritage to the level of text and tend to ignore its affective qualities (Harrison 2013, 112). Harrison (2013, 113) advocates a method which retains a critical approach to the discourses of heritage with a more thorough consideration of affects. He argues that Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides this potential material-semiotic method that captures not only the way that heritage operates as a discursive practice, but also its corporeal influences on the bodies of human and non-human actors. At the heart of this approach is the idea of the interconnectedness of people, things and their environments in relation to heritage.

Describing the origins of the material-cultural turn in archaeology and anthropology in the 80s and 90s, Hicks (2010) locates it as developing from museum-based studies of 'technology' and 'primitive art' during the late nineteenth century. This in turn led to a focus on material culture in British archaeology and anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s. The material-cultural term developed out of a reconsideration of the limitations of making an analogy between things and text, which had allowed linguistic structuralism to be applied to things. The material turn argues that 'objects do far more than represent' (Thrift 2007, 329) and that the 'very physicality of objects' (Rowlands et. al. 2012, 478) has led to an increased interest in the physical properties and affects of materials. Another important aspect of Actor Network Theory is that a theory of agency can be a property of 'non-humans' as well as humans.

Campbell and Smith (2016) have criticised critical heritage's theoretical borrowings from New Materialism for attributing agency to the non-human actors and the material world. Describing this as 'theoretically untenable', and an 'implausible vitalist importation', they argue it trivialises and sidelines the social, as well as the human and personal agency. One

of the aspects of Flat Ontology, Campbell and Smith are most critical of is its dimensionality, its flatness and the self-organisations, flows, networks and assemblages that make it up. Campbell and Smith (2016, 8) argue that Flat Ontology's focus on the local and the immediate – first order causes – prevents talk about non-flat and unfashionable things such as 'class', 'institutions', or the economy. They argue that in the clamour of non-human actants to be heard we risk losing not just a sense of the critical, but of any sense of personal agency or of the social at all. In place of a New Materialist approach to heritage and museums they advocate for work that, while taking into account the material, makes people the primary focus. For Campbell and Smith (2016) Critical Heritage should tackle such issues as social memory, personal or family memory work, negotiating regional, class, ethnic, gendered or national identities.

Using examples from two German museums of history, Schulze (2014) argues that changes in exhibition design over the last fifty years are related to changes in epistemological knowledge. He traces how the clearing of exhibition halls of objects and displays and replacing them with wallpapers of texts was related to calls for museums to fight for more public relevance by local left-wing governments. During the 1990s, curators distanced themselves from the semiotics of objects arguing that narrative installations devalue objects to be background actors in a story that is alien to them. Objects were returned back to the glass cases of classical museum designs, lit under single spotlights and text was removed from the exhibition. These old designs were supposed to free up the possibilities of encounters with the collected objects. As Schulze (2014) argues instead of using the objects as illustrators of stories communicated by other media, these museums of things were letting the objects do much of the communication. Schulze (2014) argues that this object-focussed approach relies substantially on the ideas of the Material Turn, in that things alone are supposed to be the actors and mediators of the topic displayed.

An example of an approach advocating a return to the material in the UK, can be found in Lahav's (2012) work at Tate Britain, which explores the benefits of an encounter

with an artwork unmediated by interpretation. Lahav's (2011) study focusses on the period between the appointment of Nicholas Serota as director of the two London-based Tate galleries and his decision to change the chronological approach of the galleries to a thematic one. This thematic approach required more explanation, which was largely achieved with an increase in the production of all types of interpretive materials.

Lahav (2011) uses filmed interviews to compare how visitors describe paintings depending on whether they are beside or some distance away from the accompanying label text. She found that those visitors who were asked to describe the painting away from the label text began to physically and spatially build the image in front of them. They embellished these images with hand gestures and recalled certain elements of the painting, such as people sitting on a merry-go-round, or a down-looking gaze. In contrast, those people who had read the wall text and then looked at the work responded in a less physical way, seemingly 'speaking text' to me' in some words using actual quotes (Lahav 2011, 189). Lahav (2011) argues that positioning captions alongside paintings may be encouraging the visitor to look at words and images as they might a diagram and text, 'too close, too connected and too reliant on one another.' Lahav's (2011) study can be seen as an intellectual forerunner of Penelope Curtis' rehang of Tate Britain of 2013, which returned the galleries to a chronological layout and removed much of the textual interpretation. This rehang would have an important influence on the interpretation style of my third case study exhibition: *Defining Beauty: the body in ancient Greek art*.

Bruno Latour (1996) argues that the Material Turn is not an abandoning of the discursive, or what he calls the linguistic or semiotic turn, but a building on it. Latour (1996, 8) argues that semiotics is a necessary step in this venture but that in making 'meaning production the only important thing to study' it ignored everything else. Actor Network Theory takes from the toolbox established from semiotic, but extending it to nature, unhuman entities and context, which it had previously bracketed out (Latour 1996, 8). For Latour semiotics is a method to describe the generative path of a narration. He argues that it is only

because semioticians studied texts in the broadest sense – fictions, myths, popular cultures, fashions, religions political discourse – instead of things, that they felt obliged to limit themselves to “meaning”. In creating a semiotics of things, Latour drops the meaning and instead replaces it with the idea of path-building, order making, or the creation of directions. This approach allows Latour to both analyse language and objects as part of one connected system.

In thinking about the application of the metaphor of the network to the museum it is useful to turn to Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) and their alternative metaphor for the network, the rhizome. Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) describes the rhizome as an ‘image of thought’, a complex unity that has no evident origin or end. The vectors of its development are multidirectional and show no sign of termination, but rather interweave in plateaus. Deleuze (1988) contrasts this with an arborescent or tree-like conception of knowledge. This tree-like conception of knowledge and history forms the basis for many of the systems of knowledge that underpin museum exhibitions. The rhizome provides an alternative model to this, rather than presenting history and culture as a narrative, the rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences without a specific origin or genesis

The critique of the application of narrative to museums has been that it is inappropriate to apply concepts designed for language to material things. However, even in the ur-text of narrative theory in Europe, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the non-textual in the form of the staging and movement of the actors plays an important role in the unfolding of the story. As I illustrated in my exploration of the metaphor of the line in my previous chapter on structure, narrative has often been a means of trying to understand story without recourse to text. Similarly, in the narrative turn of the 1980s, discussed in the next section, we can see narrative theory broaden to explore how story is present in the non-textual. Both Latour (1996) and Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) advocate an approach to understanding relationships through engineering, mathematics and science rather than the literary. In his account of *heteroglossia* in text, each of Bakhtin’s discourses is differentiated by the form

they take – letter, diary, oral narration – as the ontological worldview they espouse. The use of the language of maths, science and engineering can be seen as the addition of another discourse, albeit one that employs a series of different metaphors and linguistic tricks. Furthermore, New Materialism’s use of diagrams, or the plateau metaphor, to express meanings can be seen as paralleling the use of diagrammatic representation in narrative theory, such as Freytag’s pyramid, to represent that, which text alone cannot represent. Although it might be said that Freytag’s focus is on a narratives relationship to time, whereas Latour (1996) and Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) diagrams and rhizomes are exploring things in relation to space. To conclude I would argue that narrative theory and New Materialism are often approaching the same problem – how to represent that which can be expressed solely through language – but from different perspectives. What narrative theory in the museum can take from the New Materialism is that the multiple perspectives present in a museum exhibition need not always be human. Furthermore, the critique of linguistic metaphor makes us aware of the limitations, and linguistic leaps, used in any textual account of a museum exhibition. In the next section, I look at how the narrative theory expanded beyond the textual in the 1980s and how this decentering away from solely human perspectives to also include the non-human also necessitates a broadening of what it means to be dialogic.

3.3.3 Perspective as existing beyond text

Under the influence of Genette, (Ryan 2012) Classical Narratology developed as a project almost exclusively devoted to literary fiction. Kreiswirth (2005) used the phrase *narrative turn* to describe the application of narrative theory and methodology to many different disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, film studies psychology, child development, medical theory and management theory (Herman 2007, 5). Alongside this extension of narrative in different disciplines, this narrative turn is also characterised by an investigation into how narrative might be present in different media. Wolfe (2008) uses the term *intermediality* as the medial equivalent of *intertextuality* to refer to the participation of

more than one medium – or sensory channel – in a given work. He gives the example of the opera as *intermedial* through its use of gestures, language, music and visual stage setting. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) use the term *multimodality* for works that combine several types of signs, such as images and text. *Multimodality* frequently looks at how developments in technology allow language to combine with other media to create a narrative, such as the gestures of oral storytelling, the soundtrack of film, or the choreography of actor movements on stage. Thinking about how narrative perspective might be present in non-textual media. A useful parallel can be taken from studies of film narrative, where Deleyto (1996, 217) makes the distinction between the narrator ('who speaks?') and the focalizer ('who sees?'). In film, the 'who sees?' is provided by the camera lens, which may be seen as analogous to the film's visual narrator, or to use Black's (1999, 4) term, the 'camera eye'. In thinking about perspective in museum exhibitions we might then explore how perspective might be represented by different aspects of the exhibition medium – the positioning of objects, the text, the design, the graphics and the space itself.

The application of narrative theory to museum exhibitions has been specifically criticised for being inappropriate for the medium of the museum exhibition itself. Thieme (2013) argues that terms taken from narrative theory are a poor fit when dealing with an exhibition's narrative, and museology needs to develop its own language to describe and analyse exhibitions, rather than borrow the terminology of other disciplines. In the sphere of museum practice this has begun to take shape, in the 1980s Margaret Hall (1987, 27) was using the term *book-on-the-wall* to refer to a text heavy exhibition, while those exhibitions that heavily privileged objects and featured minimal text she described as *aesthetic* exhibitions.

Museum exhibitions, by their very nature, are collaborative affairs involving multiple makers including designers, interpretation officers and project managers in their production. Although it may be difficult to read their voices in the text itself, traces of their perspectives can be read in the exhibition design, and increasingly this is a focus for the study of

exhibition narrative. Drawing on Herman's (2002) concept of story world, Piehl (2016) argues that the perspective or narratorial voice of the exhibition is not only formed through the labels and panels, but is also present in the material, spatial or visual cues created by the exhibition's 3D and graphic design. Similarly, Bal (2007), borrows concepts from photography and film theory, to explore the way exhibitions create filmic effects, such as the close-up, or the pan, through the use of vistas and unexpected juxtapositions of artworks.

Piehl (2016) uses transmedial narrative theory to gain a deeper understanding of exhibitions with respect to the relationship between different components of verbal, visual and material content. Piehl (2016) argues that in an exhibition the various material, spatial and visual cues combine to create a *storyworld* in the minds of the visitor. Piehl (2016) takes this term *storyworld* from Herman (2002, 5) and uses it to refer to the 'mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative.' Piehl (2016) illustrates this through the case study of the exhibition *The American Way – The USA in Germany* at the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn, to understand how the graphics contribute to the creation of an author-narrator perspective. Key to Piehl's (2016) argument is the distinction between the perspectives of the *author-narrator* and the *author-protagonist*. An exhibition that adopts the graphic language of the institution and maintains a distance from the content of the exhibition, presents the perspective of the author-narrator as a distant but authoritative expert. Drawing on the museum's scientific discourse, it instils a sense of trust in the visitor but maintains an emotive distance. Conversely a narrator-protagonist assumes a close visual proximity to the content. The author-protagonist positions themselves not as a distance observer but as part of the *storyworld*. In Piehl's (2016) example, *the American Way* – an exhibition about changing German perceptions of and attitudes towards the USA from the end of WWII to the present day – the visual cues of graphic components, including photographs, text and maps contribute to creating the impression that this exhibition was not told from the point of the Haus der Geschichte, but from that of the German people.

Another approach to thinking about how narrative might be applied to the multiple components that make up an exhibition is provided Bal (2007), who uses film as a metaphor to understand how the contemporary art and photography exhibition *Partners* functions. Bal (2007) describes how the visitor's journey through the exhibition is made up of a series of events, which constitutes a plot. She argues that, like in the novel where the reader accumulates an understanding and affective relationship with the events and characters, walking through an exhibition creates an accumulative relationship with the art on display (Bal 2007, 80).

Bal (2007) uses specific cinematic techniques to describe the affect produced by the curation of artworks in the exhibition. For example, Bal (2007, 80) likens moving from a room filled with objects to moving to a room containing a lone sculpture of a small kneeling figure, titled *Him*, as producing the 'estranging sense of a sharp cut between one episode and the next, set in a completely different space.' Bal (2007, 80) goes on to liken the visitor's movement upon reaching the sculpture as the 'kinetic equivalent of a zoom-in from a long shot to a close-up.' Then as the visitor turns to face the front of the sculpture and see that the artwork *Him* has Hitler's face, this is cinematically an isolated close-up. For Bal (2007) this close-up freezes time and undermines the linearity of temporality that the cinematic has just installed, 'leaving us alone with a relationship to the image that is pure affect.' Alongside the close-up and the zoom, Bal (2007) also uses other cinematic techniques such as the dissolve and the flashback as metaphors to describe the affect the positioning of artworks in an exhibition elicits in visitors.

3.4.1 The multiple lenses of visitor perspective

Through this chapter, I have considered how the concept of the *multimodal* nature of the museum allows for the co-existence of multiple narrative perspectives to be present in an exhibition. Just as the unique multimodality quality of an exhibition needs to be taken into account so too does the perspective of the visitors themselves. Unlike a film, or a novel, or a traditional theatrical drama, visitors do not passively sit and consume the narrative of a

museum exhibition. Rather they need to actively move through the space in order for the narrative to unfold. In visitor studies, museum exhibitions have developed a whole discipline dedicated to understanding how visitors decode exhibitions and construct their own meanings. In adopting a dialogic approach towards narratorial perspective, which sees perspective constructed in a dialogue between museum maker and visitor, it is therefore vital to take into account how visitor experience is conceptualised in exhibitions. In a similar manner to how earlier in the chapter, I explored how objects conveyed meaning on a sliding spectrum of perspective, so I also argue that visitor experience can also be understood in terms of closeness or distance of perspective and multimodality.

I now shift my approach to look at how narrative perspective in an exhibition might be considered from the point-of-view of the visitor. I do this through looking at ways in which visitors have been seen to engage with museum exhibitions through the prism of motivation and also through their life histories. Just as I considered narrative in exhibitions in relation to multimodality, I also explore how we might think of visitor perspectives, engagement and motivation in the museum as being multimodal. I then look at how the idea of the multimodality of engagement has been linked to visitors' social backgrounds. This has particular relevance to the level of mutability of visitor perspective and how it is connected to identity. Some studies have viewed aspects of visitor identity as mutable and capable of changing depending on the circumstances of the visit, for example if they are visiting with friends, family or on their own. Other studies have focussed on the fixed aspects of visitor identity, such as social class, gender and race and argued that these are the primary prism through which visitor engagement should be understood. In adopting a narrative-based approach, I seek to explore the connection between both of these aspects of visitor identity and how it might be played out in how visitors narrate their experiences of a visit.

Early visitor studies conceived of visitors in terms of their demographic characteristics, such as age, gender and socio-economic background. In the UK in the 1990s the focus was on a need to gather more detail on the demographic profile of visitors including adult visitors from lower socio-economic groups five to eight, visitors from ethnic

minorities, the number of adult visitors who considered themselves to have a limiting long-term illness, disability, or infirmity, or the number of children and adults in outreach activities outside of the museum (Atkinson 2012, 9). The purpose of these types of studies was to understand who visitors were, how they behaved and how to best attract them (Lindauer 2008). One of the uses of these types of studies was to predict participation in the museum, including engagement patterns with the educational provision across a range of types of museum (Hohenstein and Moussouri 2018, 212).

A more multifaceted view of visitors developed out of studies that attempted to move the idea of learning in the museum beyond the realm of the purely cognitive. For example, one way that visitor engagement with the educational provision has been understood is through the idea that visitors have a specific 'learning identity', which refers to how individuals view themselves as learners in relation to domains of knowledge such as art or literature. One example of this is provided by Davis and Gardner (1994, 91) who apply Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences to museums, arguing that there are seven different learning profiles – visual-spatial, bodily kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic and logical-mathematical (Davis and Gardner (1994). Gardner's (1994) theories of multiple intelligence have been used to suggest five different 'windows' on the museum experience for visitors with different learning profiles. These entry points are narrational (what story does this art work depict?); logical/quantitative (how much do you this work of art is worth); foundational (why is this considered a work of art?); aesthetic (how are the forms you see organised or balanced?) and experiential (can you draw the shapes you see in the work of art?).

Several of Davis and Gardner's (1994) windows can be seen as corresponding to the specific modality of different narrative elements of the museum. For example, the narrational can be seen as corresponding to engagement with the museum's texts, the aesthetic towards how objects and the design function, and the experiential towards opportunities for interactivity in an exhibition. Another important idea used by Davis and Gardner (1994) is the idea of value, with the quantitative relating to an artwork according to its monetary value,

while the foundational focusses on the philosophical value of what is considered a work of art.

In the UK, Hooper-Greenhill et al.'s (2003) Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) model is another example of a multimodal approach to learning in the museum. The GLOs attempt to reframe the idea of the museum outside of the purely cognitive domain by thinking of learning outcomes from museum experiences in five different ways. The five GLOs are an increase in knowledge and understanding; an increase in skills; changes in attitudes of values; evidence of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity; and evidence of activity, behaviour and progression. The GLOs provide both a basic framework within which learning outcomes can be identified and described, and also a research framework for generating, interpreting evidence of learning (Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2003, 28).

In attempting to capture all that learning in the museum might encompass, Packer and Ballantyne (2002) argue that there has been a shift from focussing on learning to the broader category of experience. This is part of a move away in recent museology from a cultural transmission paradigm towards a visitor meaning-making paradigm (Rounds 2004). Visitor experience has been conceptualised according to a variety of different theoretical positions using a range of different methodologies. What is common across all these approaches, however, is a focus on the multidimensionality of visitor experience.

For example, from their work at the Smithsonian Museum, Pekarik et al. (1999) developed a list of satisfying experiences. They found that there was 'often a common thread, a single type of experience, that surfaced repeatedly in these stories.' These four types of experience are object experiences, cognitive experiences, introspective experiences and social experiences. Each experience is closely linked to a preference for one aspect of the multimodal elements of an exhibition. Object experiences are connected to the material cultural object, or 'the real thing. Cognitive experiences are connected to the interpretive or intellectual aspects of the experience. Introspective experiences are those in which the individual turns inward, to feelings and experiences that are essentially private. Social

experiences are outward involving interaction with someone else or taking satisfaction from watching one's children learn.

Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1995, 36) use the concept of 'flow' to describe the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement. They describe 'flow' as 'a state of mind that is spontaneous, almost automatic, like the flow of a strong current.' When an individual is in 'flow' they lose the sense of time and the sense of self, but at the same time through a dialectic between integration and differentiation their sense of self grows. Within the museum, 'flow' manifests itself in the form of the total aesthetic immersion in the work of art. Csikszentmihalyi's model of flow (1991, 124–5) also has a multimodal aspect:

1. *Cognitive dimension*: through which artworks appeals to prior knowledge
2. *Emotions*: which are difficult to express in rational terms, but enrich our lives
3. *Visual impact*: that artwork makes and causes perceptual refinement in the viewer
4. *Communicative dimension*: in which artworks help us understand ourselves and others by making us reflect on what transpires when encountering the artwork.

In their attempt to map the visitor experience in the St. Gallen Fine Arts Museum, Kirchberg and Tröndle (2015) combined computer-modelled movement-tracking and physiological maps of the visitors in complement with entrance and exit surveys. They attempted to look at how the type of experience visitors are seeking generates physiological responses. They do this through the use of a data glove that records the visitors' exact path and time spent in front of an object, label or panel, as well as two physiological responses – the heart rate and the skin countenance level. The results suggested that visitors fell into three groups, which again might be seen as corresponding to a particular mode of experience.

The *contemplative museum experience* corresponds to visitors who are open to the aesthetic beauty of the arts and wish to be surprised and entertained by this experience, as well as connecting deeply and reflecting on the exhibited arts and the exhibition design. The *enthusing museum experience* corresponds with the familiarity, i.e., the recognition of famous art already experienced and known before. The *social museum experience* corresponds very

highly with the experience of companionship, with the togetherness of family or friends and correspondent entertaining situations, not with introspective silence or a deep connection with the exhibited art itself.

Each of these three models of visitor experience, come from different theoretical backgrounds and utilise different methodologies. Nevertheless, commonalities emerge that suggest some of the key elements of the visitor experience. Firstly, there is the binary those visitors who exhibit a preference for the material object and those visitors whose preference is for the non-object. Secondly, there is the idea of a cognitive response and a non-cognitive response, which might be manifested as aesthetic contemplation or emotional affect. Thirdly, there is the idea of the experience revolving around the presence of other people. This might manifest itself in the people who are part of the social visitor group, other visitors in the exhibition, or the imagined or absent other that the museum experience reminds us of. In outlining these different attempts to understand visitor experience, these models and theories provide me with some of the key types of experience that might equate to specific moments in the museum narrative. For example, when thinking about how visitors describe their experiences of museum climaxes, this might be done in cognitive, aesthetic or emotional terms.

3.4.2 Motivation and identity

In the previous section, I outlined the different ways that visitor experience in the museum has been theorised and drew out some of the key commonalities. A question that arises from this body of research is where do visitor preferences for different types of experience come from? Over the course of the next section, I look at two different ways of locating these preferences – firstly in visitor motivation and secondly in visitor identity. Although these two approaches are not contradictory, they tend to place different emphasis on the ability of visitors to have access to different types of experience. Studies looking at motivation tend to see the possibility for visitor experience to change depending on the particular circumstances of the visit. A visitor's motivation might vary depending on who they are visiting with and as a result they could have very different experiences. Those

researchers looking at identity tend to focus on how certain types of museum experience are related to social factors, like social class, gender and race. Bourdieu (1990) for example argues that those visitors with high cultural capital typically participate in different visitor experiences than those with low social cultural capital. Over the course of the next section, I explore both approaches and how they might relate to a better understanding of how narrative connects to the museum visitor experience.

The origins of research into visitor motivation can be seen as a reaction against the emphasis in museum on demographic data to meet government targets. Grouping visitors according to their motivation was originally developed by leisure theorists such as Denby (1989), specifically to understand people's leisure choices. Proponents of motivation such as Hood (1989) and Falk (2009, 29) argue that race, ethnicity, age, income and education offered a poor explanation for museum-going. They also argued that while collecting demographic data explained who came to the museum, it did not explain why they came. The concept of motivation can be seen as an attempt to meld together the two strands of visitor research conducted by the museum marketing and education departments.

The first influential application of this type of research in museums was undertaken by Molly Hood (1989) and focussed on visitor leisure choices at the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art. Drawing on leisure, science, sociology, psychology and consumer behaviour literature, Hood (1989) collected data through in-person and telephone interviews. From this, Hood (1989) identified six key concepts that affected people's decisions about their leisure choices, these were:

1. Being with people (social interaction)
2. Doing something worthwhile for the self or others
3. Feeling comfortable and at ease in their surroundings
4. Challenging new experiences
5. The opportunity to learn
6. Actively participating

Other models of segmenting visitors around motivation have built on Hood's (1989) research. These include Packer and Ballantyne (2002) who identified six motivational factors that impact on visitor experiences across a museum, art gallery and an aquarium. The museum consultancy agency Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2005) have similarly used a psychographic segmentation model with motivation as the central factor, which has been adapted as the main way visitors are categorised by many of the national museums in the UK, including the British Museum, the Science Museum, the V&A and the National Gallery.

Perhaps the most influential of the psychographic segmentation models is Falk's (2006, 154) concept of the motivation for visiting a museum being closely aligned with an individual's sense of self and identity. Drawing on psychology and science-learning theory and combining face to face interviews, personal meaning mapping and visitor tracking, Falk (2009, 57) identified five categories of what he describes as identity-related motivations for visiting museums, these are:

1. Explorers – curiosity-driven with a general interest in the content.
2. Facilitators – socially motivated and focus on enabling the experience and learning of others in their group.
3. Professional/Hobbyists – feel a close tie between the museum content and their professional or hobbyist passions.
4. Experience seekers – perceive the museum as an important destination and are satisfied with 'having been there and done that.'
5. Spiritual pilgrims – seeking to have contemplative, spiritual or restorative experience.

In using the term identity here, Falk (2009, 158) stresses that he is referring to small 'i' identities (personal identity as opposed to collective identities) and, in particular, those aspects of identity that change before each visit. In Falk's model a visitor could enter the museum on different days, each time with a different identity.

The mutability and universality of Falk's model of small 'I'-identities and their relationship to larger collective identities has been subject to criticism. Briseno-Garzon (2010), for example, has studied the role social and cultural practices of Mexican families play in their learning in the museum, and identified subtle differences between Anglo-American and Mexican descriptions of the social role of a visit. These include the role played by Latin American concepts of *educacion*, which emphasises the family's role in imbuing in children a sense of moral, social and personal responsibility, which serves as the foundation for all other learning (Briseno-Garzon 2010, 22).

The use of motivation as a means of classifying visitors has been criticised by Davis and Heath (2013, 6) in their literature review about summative evaluations conducted by museums. They reported finding little 'evidence or warrant for these particular concepts and classification schemes' (Davis and Heath 2013, 6). Dawson and Jensen (2011) have taken this critique further, criticising motivation, and Falk's application of it in particular, for being 'too reductive in its treatment of the complexity of visitor experiences', and for 'the de-emphasising of the role of demographic factors in identity construction' (Dawson and Jensen 2011, 132). Citing research by Sandell (2002) and Holland et al. (2001), Dawson and Jensen (2011, 132) argue that demographic factors such as class and ethnicity are 'the most durable social positions', and have an important link to people's behaviours, attitudes, expectations and experiences, and, as a result, have a fundamental role to play in understanding museum visitors.

Dawson and Jensen (2011, 132) argue for a contextual turn in visitor research, which abandons short-term, behaviourist approaches in favour of a model that authentically accounts for the way in which museum visitors approach, and make sense of their visits to cultural institutions and other sites of public engagement. Citing Bourdieu's work on *habitus* and cultural capital, Dawson and Jensen (2011, 132) argue that class is an important factor in determining a person's enjoyment of art and in explaining non-visiting patterns). Dawson and Jensen's (2011) call for a contextual turn in visitor studies had led to other visitor researchers, such as Booth (2015), identifying their own work as part of this contextual turn.

Falk and Dierking (2013) have also responded by adding two extra categories to their model that takes into account demographic factors. These are: *Respectful Pilgrims*, 'who visit museums out of a sense of duty or obligation to honour the memory of those represented by an institution/memorial' and *Affinity Seekers*, 'who visit a museum because it speaks to their sense of heritage and/or Big 'I' identity or personhood.'

I now turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his 1966 study *the Love of Art* to explore in more depth the role demographic factors such as social class influence visitor perspectives in the museum. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of cultural capital developed out of his large-scale study of visitors to art museums in five European countries: France, Greece, Holland, Poland and Spain. Rather than an interest in art being innate, Bourdieu (1991, 36) describes cultural devotion as being 'inculcated from earliest infancy by the encouragements and sanctions of family tradition'. Bourdieu's makes the link between the family and education, arguing that an education in relation to art can only be effective if enabled by the family:

Given the underlying presuppositions which govern it, the educational action of the traditional school system can only be fully effective as long as it is exercised on individuals already equipped by their family upbringing with a certain familiarity with the world of art. (Bourdieu 1991, 27).

If the family is where the cultivation of the museum visiting habit begins for Bourdieu (1991), then education is the next stage that develops this interest. One of the key aspects of the role of education is that it is 'once obvious and hidden', in order for the accumulation of cultural taste to appear innate. For Bourdieu (1991, 27) culture attempts 'to sanction the attribution of all abilities to the 'unfathomable fates of grace or to the arbitrary of talent, whereas, in reality, they are always the product of unequal education.'

Bourdieu (1991, 71) contrasts those visitors who occasional visit the museum, which is often done simply by chance, with those that regularly visit. He argues that regular visiting is connected to a visitor's ability to apprehend the information offered, to decipher it and to

perceive meanings – or rather, meaningful forms. Bourdieu (1990, 62) also makes the link between regular trips to the museum with equally regular trips to the theatre, and to a lesser extent, to classical music concerts. Out of these habits of visiting different forms of culture, develop constellations of knowledge and taste that are closely linked to an appreciation of art forms, but also to the idea of international travel and the visiting of heritage sites.

In Bourdieu's (1991) description of how people encounter and experience art objects we find two ideas, one that masks the other. On the surface the encounter with the object is so undefinable that it has a religious quality. Bourdieu (1991, 87) describes the museum as 'a church where certain chosen individuals come to nurture a virtuoso faith...and wait patiently in long lines to have a brief glimpse of a masterpiece designated for collective adulation, much as in the past a crucifix or a reliquary was kissed.' Those who possess the love of art are described as 'the chosen' or receiving a 'grace', while the actual encounter with a work of art is described in terms of 'self-abandonment and surrender.'

Behind this undefinable experience, lies that which is very much definable – a system of learnt rules and hierarchies. Bourdieu (1991, 39) defines artistic competence as a mastery of a classification system in which each element of the (artistic) universe can be situated in a class. The sophistication of this artistic competence depends on the degree of refinement of this classification system, which results in the ability to distinguish more or less refined classes. For example, dividing Gothic architecture into primitive, classical and late period (Bourdieu 1991, 41). The opposite of this is the inability to classify or distinguish things. Those visitors who lack this classification system are limited in the type of objects they appreciate and how they consume them. Visitors with low cultural capital are more interested, Bourdieu argues (1991, 56), calls 'minor' works, such as furniture, ceramics, or folk of historical objects. The reason for this affinity with the everyday, Bourdieu argues (1991, 56), is that visitors with low capital can relate and understand these 'minor works' through their function.

As well as exploring the relationship between how people with different levels of cultural capital consume objects, Bourdieu (1991) also looks at their relationship to exhibition narrative and accompanying interpretation. Bourdieu (1991, 93) argues that the only way to 'lower the level of transmission of a work is to provide, along with the work, the code in which is encoded, in a verbal or written explanation, or which continuously provides the key to its own decipherment.' Bourdieu states, however, that members of the cultivated classes are loathe to use the more academic aids. Guidebooks are 'scoffed at with a refined irony', while, in contrast, working class visitors are not put off by the clearly scholarly aspect of a possible course of training' (Bourdieu 1991, 52).

I have likened visitor learning, visitor experience and visitor motivation in the museum to how a narrator adopts a particular perspective in a narrative. They can be seen as a particular lens, often linked to an element of an exhibition's multimodality, through which the museum visit is filtered. As Bourdieu (1991) has illustrated, however, these perspectives are not simply available for everyone to adopt but closely related to a visitor's socio-cultural background. I now look at those approaches to understanding visitor meaning-making that attempt to connect a visitor's preference for a particular mode of engaging with an exhibition with a person's socio-cultural backgrounds.

This idea of a visitor's prior expectations being related to the exhibition content is explored in Doering and Pekarik's (1996, 20–23) concept of the *entrance narrative*. Unlike motivational models of classifying visitors, which tends to focus on the particular multimodal lens of the experience, Doering and Pekarik's (1996) concept of the entrance narrative focusses on the exhibition's subject matter. They argue that museum visitors are not blank slates but come to an exhibition with an integral storyline about the exhibition subject matter that they call the entrance narrative. They break this entrance narrative into three distinct components:

- A basic framework: i.e. the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world

- Information about the given topic, organised according to that basic framework
- Personal experiences, emotions and memories that verify and support this understanding

Doering and Pekarik (1996) acknowledge the importance of formal education in shaping a visitor's relationship with the museum and stress how entrance narratives work to reinforce visitors' prior expectations. For example, when visitors encounter the contents of an exhibition, they 'necessarily place them within the narrative that they have previously constructed to explain objects and ideas of this type, they certainly do not intend to have their narratives radically revised' (Doering & Pekarik 1996, 21). The experience of most museum visitors thus tends to be, 'subtle, incremental and supportive', although an object may lead to questioning, 'the goal of the questioning is usually to place that thing even more firmly within the visitor's established entrance narratives' (Doering & Pekarik 1996, 21). Things that do not fit, that cannot be resolved, are usually deeply disturbing and are generally avoided and forgotten or distorted until they do fit.

Doering and Pekarik (1996, 22) suggest the museum is generally conceived of as a place of settled understanding not as a place of active conflict. Visitors in turn tend to see museum presentations as 'objective truth rather than as the informal speech of an individual or groups of individuals with particular perspectives and intentions' (Doering and Pekarik 1996, 22). Indeed, it is only when a museum's storyline deviates in radical ways from the visitor's own entrance narrative that an individual is likely to become conscious that exhibitions have authors and interests to serve. According to Doering and Pekarik (1996, 22), museums must ask themselves the question 'what is the ideal reaction they want from a visitor to take with them, an exhibition's key messages, or to question and interrogate and disagree with an exhibition?', and in turn what are the best ways to provoke such behaviours in a visitor?

Macdonald (2002) and Moussouri's (1998) concept of the visitor agenda, based around Lave's (1988) idea of a list, offers a potential alternative to visitor motivation, in that

the museum visitor is not defined according to a set series of types. Instead, visitor experience is understood according to the interaction of a variety of categories that make up the museum agenda. Macdonald (2002, 223) defines visitor itineraries as, 'a set of desires, needs and expectations for what the visit will hold', which relate to family profile, sociocultural patterns, the personal context, the social context and the exhibition itself. Macdonald's (2002, 222) concept of visitor itineraries make it possible to think about visitor motivations as fitting into wider sociocultural patterns – the idea of lists being somehow 'out there being evident in visitors' own articulations.' In the case of the Science Museum, visitor itineraries included the following: life cycle, place, family and education.

A list, a series of things ordered in a sequence, can be regarded as the skeleton of a narrative, or a proto-narrative. Moussouri (1998) argues that it is through the interaction of the visitor agenda and the museum agenda, 'the set of messages and behaviours that the museum expects the visitors to attend respond and adapt', that creates the museum experience. Essentially the individual components that will make up the visitor's narrative of the exhibition are formulated through their visit agenda and then solidified into a sequence during their visit.

Using Macdonald's concept of cultural itineraries to conceptualise motivation, Moussouri and her colleagues have identified ten distinct categories of motivations related to visiting exhibitions (Hohenstein and Moussouri 2018, 251). These are: education/participation, place, social event, life cycle, entertainment, flow, biophilia, introspection, political/participation and therapeutic. A common finding across all studies Moussouri (1998) and her colleagues have carried out is that people have multiple motivations for visiting. Furthermore, their research, has shown that visitors do not perceive these reasons to be conflicting, a finding supported by other studies (Packer & Ballantyne 2002). Moussouri (1998) also used a situated approach to motivation to explore how the motivating force of cultural itineraries varies according to how salient the world of museums is to visitors and to their level of 'experience' with them. Furthermore, Moussouri (1998)

makes a link between the complexity of engagement and a visitor's level of 'experience' with museums and the frequency with which they visit museums.

Moussouri (1997) also explores how their prior motivations play out across the course of a visit. Moussouri (1997) uses the term *visit strategy* to refer to both a specific plan of what visitors might see or do in the museum, as expressed by visitors during interviews, and also to observable behaviour manifested by visitors' movements through the exhibition space, recorded through the collection of observation data. Moussouri (1998) identifies three types of visit strategies: open, flexible and fixed. Moussouri (1998) found that visit strategies were directly related to social groupings with distinct motivations. In their work on visit strategies at London Zoo Moussouri & Roussos (2013) found that families with an education/participation motivation actively sought to engage in exhibit-related activities, while families with a social event or entertainment motivation were likely to engage in at least one activity with a non-exhibit function during their visit.

One approach to understanding how a visitor's social background manifests itself in their interactions with an exhibit is presented in Leinhardt and Crowley's (2002) research into the components of visitor conversations in museum galleries. Describing learning as 'conversational elaboration', they have classified museum conversations into five categories based on their underlying structures. These categories are listed below (2002, 27):

1. List – refers to simple identification, or short-phrase evaluations.
2. Personal synthesis – refers to comments that connect an object or activity to a personal circumstance or possession.
3. Analysis – refers to language that examines one or more specific features with an object or activity.
4. Synthesis – refers to conversations that connect an object or idea, to other objects or activities within the exhibition, or to similar objects or ideas found elsewhere.

5. Explanation – refers to language that investigates some aspect of causality, either with respect to how a specific object or particular effect was created, or with respect to how a larger thematic idea progressed within an exhibition.

These five thematic categories are considered hierarchical, and often a segment can contain more than one code. If this was the case the highest code in the hierarchy would be used. The conversations were coded according to five overarching themes unique to each exhibition, which were identified in collaboration with the curators, often in relation to a geographically defined section of an exhibition, or a set of objects. Leinhardt and Crowley's (2002) study suggests that conversational engagement can be predicted by both the identity of the group and the response of the group to the learning environment. Rather than relating these to the different media in a museum exhibition, or a specific lens adopted by the visitor, Leinhardt and Crowley's (2002) model look at how visitor conversation relates to both the stories visitors present about their own lives and the stories presented by the exhibition.

Everett (2009) uses a methodology taken from narrative inquiry to study how understanding the life experiences individuals have with a museum can lead to the development and maintenance of sustained visitor/museum relationships. Everett (2009) defines narrative inquiry as a means of understanding the ways in which individuals and communities story a life and live their stories. Everett (2009) traces thirty years of the visitor-museum relationships to understand the complex set of personal and situational factors that influenced the formation and development of a sustained visitor/museum relationship. Exploring the life of a single individual, Everett (2009) explores how some of her interlocutor's reasons for visiting museums relate to common motivations, such as a desire to learn and a preference for engaging in leisure time activities that are worthwhile and challenging, while others do not. For example, Cecilia, Everett's (2009) case study, is not a person with a high level of income and education, nor was she exposed to museums as a child and only started visiting them in her mid-twenties. An important contribution narrative inquiry is the opportunity to place museum visitation within the broader context of people's

lives and that a narrative research design provides the opportunity to follow threads and identify tensions that influenced Cecilia's museum visitation. In tracing how Cecilia's relationship with the museum has changed over time, Everett's (2009) study provides depth to other research that identifies museums as important sites for fulfilling identity-related needs (Falk, Heimlich, & Bronnenkant, 2008; Rounds, 2004).

Everett's (2009) narrative inquiry approach to museum visitors can be seen part of the wider Post-Classical phase of narratology, beginning in the 1980s, which marked a shift in focus away from classification. Rather than viewing narratives as an abstract system of signs, narratives were to be understood within their wider historical and social contexts. This was increasingly done through the lens of the emerging critical theory, such as feminism, queer theory and post-colonialism (Herman 2007). In the social sciences, Andrews (2007) sees Post-Classical Narratology as combining the post-war humanist approach – often including attention to individual case studies, biographies and life histories – with post-structuralist concerns such as narrative fluidity, contradictions, unconscious as well as conscious meanings, and the notion of a fragmented subject. In turn the scope of narrative research broadened away from understanding texts in the literary sense to instead applying narrative to a diverse range of social phenomenon. This ranged from mapping individuals' biographical accounts of crime in the community (Holloway and Jefferson 2000), tracing the life histories of individual artists (Freeman 2004), to understanding how personal lives traverse social change (Andrews 2007).

This contextual turn of post-classical narratology away from the syntax of 'storied events', to the semantics of narrative experience was brought about because it was felt that a focus purely on structure neglected key elements of what it means to tell a story (Mishler 1986). In the field of socio-linguistics, Squire (2008, 41) illustrates the limitations of a purely structuralist approach in three ways. Firstly, a focus on events leaves out any talk that is not about events but is significant for the narrator's account of who they are. Secondly, a focus on events omits interactions between storyteller and listener and the co-constructed nature

of stories. Thirdly, structuralist approaches to oral stories do not take into account the changeable nature of accounts. Stories are distanced from the happenings they described, have many meanings, and are never the same when told twice. Squire (2008) locates Post-Classical narratology's focus on experience in the work of Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur (1984, 1991) narratives convey experience through reconstituting it, resulting in multiple and changeable story lives. In telling and understanding stories, we are thus, working on the relationship between life as a story in its nascent state (Ricoeur 1991, 29) and its symbolic translation into the recounted narrative.

Applying a post-classical perspective to narrative in a museum exhibition, we can say that any account by an exhibition maker or an exhibition visitor about an exhibition narrative is also an account about themselves and their relationship to that exhibition. Each interview is in fact an insight into the perspective of a particular first-person narrator. In defining my own approach to visitor experience, I will be looking to explore its multimodality. This will include how visitors respond to the different multimodal elements that make up a museum exhibition narrative. I will also be looking to explore how visitors connect their relationship with the exhibition's subject matter and exhibition visiting in general with narratives in their own lives. Out of this, I hope to investigate some of the issues of perspective brought up in the first half of this chapter surrounding the role narrative plays in making museum's accessible. In particular, I will be looking to address research question four: *What is the relationship between a visitor's socio-cultural background and their attitude towards exhibition narrative?*

Summary

In this chapter I have explored the concept of narratorial perspective in museum exhibitions and drawn parallels between the multimodality of exhibition narratives and the focus on multidimensionality in understanding museum visitor experience. Out of these different theories, I take the following five concepts that I will be applying to the analysis of the case studies in my narrative chapters. Firstly, rather than thinking of a single unified

exhibition narrative, I will be attempting to trace the multiple threads and voices that comprise the whole narrative. Secondly, rather than just looking at perspective as only being found in text I will also be locating it in the positioning of objects, the design of graphics and the arrangement of space. Thirdly, I will be seeking to trace how these various voices entered the exhibition narrative during the making process. Fourthly, I will be adopting a dialogic approach looking not only at the museum-makers but also how the museum visitors decode these exhibition narratives. Fifthly, I will be looking at ways that visitor identity and their relationship to and preference for particular types of exhibition narrative shape their accounts of their museum visits.

Chapter 4 The encyclopaedia and the blockbuster

Introduction

This chapter seeks to do two things, firstly I want to situate my three case study exhibitions within the broader historical context of the British Museum and, secondly, I want to explore two contrasting models of museum narrative: the encyclopaedic exhibition and the blockbuster exhibition. These two forms of display are themselves historically situated with the encyclopaedic model, as its name suggests, arising out of the museum's Enlightenment origins while the blockbuster exhibition came to prominence as one of the forms of the mass popular culture in the 1970s. Although there are multiple differences between the two forms of display, the most prominent structural distinction is that encyclopaedic exhibitions are predominantly non-linear and blockbuster exhibitions tend to be linear, which in turn affects how visitors are expected to use these spaces. Encyclopaedic displays are intended to be used as tools of references and like an encyclopaedia to be revisited on different occasions as the visitor/reader seeks out the answer to particular research inquiry. Conversely, blockbuster exhibitions have a distinct beginning, middle and end and are meant to be consumed in one sitting like their Hollywood Blockbuster movie namesakes. I want to stress, however, that it is not simply a case of Blockbuster exhibitions being redolent with narrative potential, while Encyclopaedic exhibitions contain no elements of narrative. Rather I'd like to draw on Austin's (2012) idea of narrative existing on a spectrum with some types of exhibition displaying more characteristics of narrative than others. Blockbuster exhibitions seek to make their narrative as overt to the visitor as possible through the linearity and design of the space. In contrast, as the likes of Bal (2007) and Jenkins (1992) have shown encyclopaedic displays still possess narrative but it is often concealed, readable to those who possess the requisite interpretative framework to access it. The narratorial perspectives of the museum are also not fixed but fluctuate over time and in this chapter, I use the changing approaches to displaying the ethnographic collections at the British museum to illustrate this. In attempting to understand the specific context that led to the creation of the

blockbuster exhibition, I look at the example of *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* display held at the British Museum in 1972. Often credited as the first blockbuster exhibition (Collins and McNamara 2014; *The Economist* 2014, 65), *Treasures of Tutankhamun* shifted the museum into the realm of popular culture and laid the blueprint for blockbusters, which is still being used today. In exploring the qualities, both aesthetic and political that led to *Treasures of Tutankhamun* capturing the public imagination, I aim to gain a better understanding of why the British Museum revived the Blockbuster exhibition during Neil MacGregor's tenure as Director in the mid-2000s.

4.1 The revival of the British Museum

The first decade of the new millennium was a period of contrasting fortunes for the British Museum. In 2003 the institution celebrated 250 years since its foundation, but it was also beset by problems. Attendance figures were down (Lebrecht 2006, 39), and there had been a thirty percent shrinking in its government grant (Lebrecht 2006, 39), a number of strikes related to pay (Lebrecht 2006, 39) and the wrong kind of stone had been used in the restoration of the Great Court (BBC 2000). Also, the British Museum exhibition programme had been criticised for lacking direction and purpose, encapsulated by this review of the *Agatha Christie and Archaeology: Mystery in Mesopotamia* exhibition (8 November 2001 – 24 March 2002): 'it (the British Museum) has no brain just diverse limbs, flopping about. It doesn't seem to know who it is for, or why?' (Jones 2001). In the same review the Museum is also accused of being simultaneously elitist in its lectures programme, while 'dumbing down' its exhibitions for the general public, 'there is a disdain for non-specialist visitors. We are idiots to be led by the nose' (Jones 2001).

By the end of the decade the British Museum's fortunes had changed. Its general attendance figures had grown to make it the most visited attraction in the UK (ALVA 2008). Its exhibition attendance had rocketed with 850,000 people coming to see *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* (13 September 2007 – 6 April 2008), the highest attendance at a British Museum exhibition since *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* (30 March

to 30 September 1972). Following these exhibitions and the success of the *A History of the World in 100 Objects* radio program, the British Museum's Director, Neil MacGregor, was named *the Times* Briton of the year for 2008 (Campbell-Johnston, 2008). Far from being critically panned for lacking direction, the exhibition programme was now lauded as a model for others to follow:

For several years now its (the British Museum) exhibitions have followed a master plan and its blockbusters have linked together to offer an argument about world culture. This is brilliant, and gives me the feeling of being taken on an educative journey. I would like to see similar approaches by other galleries (Jones 2010).

In this chapter, I use the metaphors of the encyclopaedia and the blockbuster to consider how the British Museum under the Directorship of Neil MacGregor transformed its fortunes. Although they are different exhibitionary narrative formats, I argue they are closely entwined in terms of influencing how the narratorial perspective of the British Museum was shifted. Drawing on the work of James Cuno (2009), the term encyclopaedic was used to suggest the temporal and spatial breadth of a museum's collections. It also alludes to the museum and the encyclopaedia's shared Enlightenment origins and outlook, including the idea that museum predated the idea of the nation state and was therefore internationalist and universal in the outlook.

This inherently international nature of the museum was also present in MacGregor's reinvention of the blockbuster around 'the principle of using objects and the forum of an exhibition to try to understand the complex world in which we live' (MacGregor 2012, 9) . This is illustrated by the press conferences surrounding the exhibition *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* (2008), in which the exhibition curator Thorsten Opper deliberately tried to connect exhibition's with the burgeoning Stop the War movement which surrounded the second Iraq War. He did this by provocatively saying that the first thing that Hadrian did when he became emperor was pull his troops out of Mesopotamia – modern-day Iraq (quoted in Akbar, 2008).

The British Museum's self-styling of itself as an encyclopaedic museum can be seen as growing out of the use of the term universal museum, in a document called the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" released in 2002. Signed by eighteen institutions including the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum in New York the primary purpose of 'the Declaration' can be seen to repudiate calls for restitution by arguing that the museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. The sculpture of Classical Greece was used as a case of in point³ of how the accession of collections into public museums throughout the world had led to 'marking the significance of Greek sculpture for mankind as a whole' and thus 'museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation' (ICOM 2004). The evocation of universality was met with criticism however, as all but one of the museums was located in Europe or North America. George Abungu (2004), former director general of the National Museums of Kenya, decried the idea that these museums could in fact hold a universal perspective but argued instead that 'the museum's "universalism" is an ideological position that has its own history and its own politics, and the universal museum is fighting to preserve its own heritage not the world's.'

With claims of 'universality' deemed as problematic, the term morphed into the encyclopaedic museum with the publication of the collection of essays: *Museums matter: In the praise of the encyclopaedic museum* (Cuno 2011). In this work James Cuno, President and CEO of the Getty Trust, makes the case for the importance of the Encyclopaedic Museum. In another publication, Neil MacGregor (Cuno 2009, 50) argues that 'the great achievement, I think, of the Enlightenment museum, the encyclopaedic museum like the British Museum, was the notion that the context of the museum would allow truths to emerge that could not emerge if the objects were studied only in the context of objects like them; that is, among only objects from the same culture.' This global vision, for MacGregor (2009, 50) is what differentiates the Encyclopaedic Museum in Europe and America from other

³ No doubt with renewed calls for the restitution of the Parthenon Sculptures back to Athens in mind.

countries such as China, which possesses great collections but come from a single perspective.

4.2 Encyclopaedic museums

The term encyclopaedic has been critiqued for its Eurocentricism and as a mask to avoid arguments about repatriation, but it has been less obviously thought of in terms of the narrative structure it implies. Museums like the British Museum are often given the label encyclopaedic, which both suggests the temporal and spatial breadth of their collections and also hints at their shared enlightenment outlook and origins: the British Museum was founded in 1753, Diderot's encyclopaedia was written between 1751 and 1772. Given that for the first hundred and fifty years, the Director of the British Museum was invariably also the Principal Librarian, it is perhaps unsurprising that objects were organised and displayed as tools of reference like an encyclopaedia. Just as an encyclopaedia is not meant to be read from beginning to end in a chronological fashion, so the ninety permanent galleries of the British Museum are not intended to be experienced in their entirety in one visit, nor are they meant to be read in a particular order. Yet at the same time, clues are provided in the museum's architecture and layout as how to navigate and decode the permanent collections of the British Museum.

As visitors approach the colonnade above the entrance of the British Museum, if they glance upwards, they will be greeted with a view of the Westmacott Pediment (fig. 4.1). Designed by the sculptor and trustee of the British Museum Richard Westmacott, the arrangement of sculptures is titled *The Progress of Civilisation*. In an explanatory letter to the Principal Librarian Henry Ellis, Richard Westmacott describes the narrative that unfolds as a viewer reads the sculptures from left to right. 'Commencing at the Eastern end...Man is represented from a rude savage state through the influence of religion' (Westmacott 1851 quoted in Bryant 2016). The sculptures of man with cattle represent man 'personified as a Hunter and a Tiller of the Earth.' As the sculptures ascend to the peak of the pediment, in the words of Westmacott (Bryant 2016), 'Civilisation is now presumed to have made

considerable progress.’ At the peak of the pediment is astronomy, which then descends to mathematics, drama, poetry, music and natural history.’



Fig. 4.1 The Westmacott Pediment with an accompanying illustration by Richard Westmacott. The pediment begins with man in his rude, savage state on the left, reaches its peak with astronomy in the centre and culminates with natural history in the lower-right hand corner.

The Progress of Civilisation portrayed in sculptural form by Westmacott can, like the thread given by Ariadne to Theseus, be seen as a master narrative by which visitors can guide themselves through labyrinthine corridors of the encyclopaedia. It speaks to a time when the Museum was intrinsically linked to the construction of disciplines and not limited to archaeology or art, but contained the collections that would become the British Library, the National Portrait Gallery and the Natural History Museum in South Kensington as well. These are the ‘grand narratives’ of the nineteenth century that the French Sociologist Jean-Francois Lyotard (1996) argues people no longer believe in, in the age of Post-Modernism. The visitor to the museum can be seen as undergoing the same narrative of self-cultivation, travelling from an untamed natural state among crocodiles and wolves, seemingly emerging from a primordial swamp, where at the conclusion of the pediment he reclines with elephants and lions tamed at his feet, representing his mastery of the world around *him*. However, just as this narrative is only apparent to those with the requisite level of knowledge to interpret Westmacott’s allegorical meanings, so it only those with the required level of cultural capital who will be able to decode the Museum’s collections. As Butler (2007) has shown the

location of the pediment in the context of Greek sculpture, can also be seen as the British suggesting they are the rightful inheritors of Greek culture and in a sense the museum itself can claim the mantle of being the culmination of civilisation. At the same time, the rise and fall of the triangular pediment, mirroring the rise and fall of a narrative arc, suggests a narrative of not only progress but also decline, which will feature prominently in the story told within the British Museum's galleries.

For example, Jenkins (1992) has traced how the classical galleries of the British Museum were arranged to illustrate a narrative about the progress and decline of Greek classical sculpture according to the concept of the *chain of art*. Based on Aristotle's idea of the chain of being, the chain of art was a developmental system used to explain how the depiction of the human form developed in, and between, different cultures. Originally this was used to create a narrative explaining how the perceived rigidity of Egyptian sculpture transitioned to the flowing movements of the human form in Classical Greek sculpture, which reached its zenith in the sculptures of the Parthenon, and then fell into decline with the overly exuberant sculpture of the Hellenistic period, and the derivative art of the Roman period (Jenkins 1992). Continuing the evolutionary metaphor, the archaeological excavations of Nineveh and Nimrud beginning in the 1840s effectively provided a 'missing link' in the narrative between Egyptian and Greek sculpture.

Jenkins (1992) has shown how this notion of the chain of art was an important narrative device by which people navigated the collections of the British Museum. For example, a print by James Stephenoff that arranges the sculptures of the British Museum in a hierarchical order, placing what were regarded as the 'primitive' sculptures of India and Central America at the bottom, the Ancient Egyptians and Assyrians at the second tier, the Lydian relief of the Harpy Tomb to follow and the Parthenon Sculptures occupying the pinnacle.



Fig. 4.2 *Watercolour by James Stephanoff (1845) showing sculptural collections in the British Museum arranged hierarchically beginning at the base with 'Hindu and Javanese sculpture, colossal figures from Copan and Palenque; Persepolis and Babylon, followed by the Egyptian, Etruscan, and early Greek remains, and surmounted by the pediment from Aegina; bas-reliefs and fragments from Xanthus and Phrygia and figures from the Parthenon.'*

Finally, the concept of the chain of art can also be traced in the layout of the British Museum galleries themselves, which were designed to allow visitors to effectively walk the chain in a linear fashion. This manifested itself in two forms, both in terms of the development of sculpture in ancient Greek culture, but also to compare across cultures with visitors entering through the Egyptian sculpture gallery, traversing through via the Assyrian sculpture gallery, then encountering Greek culture from around 480–470 BC in the form of the Harpy Tomb, and finally arriving at the climax of the journey, the Parthenon sculptures. Although as Jenkins states the idea of a chain of art would be rendered redundant with the advent of cultural relativism in the early twentieth century, and it is unmentioned in the

interpretation of the galleries, it is still the path many visitors tread as they walk through the museum's ancient world sculpture galleries today.

Although a strong narrative element can then be located in the encyclopaedic permanent galleries of the British Museum, this would not be overtly presented to the visitors in the form of museum interpretation. Rather they would be expected to have the necessary education to deduce it for themselves. Furthermore, although the plans in the nineteenth-century guidebooks reveal how sequences of rooms connected together to suggest sequences of narratives within the museum, these were often undermined by the somewhat chaotic and hybrid nature of the displays themselves. A good example of this are the arrangement of the natural history collections, which are organised in a linear sequence to illustrate the chain of being, a neo-Aristotelian sequencing of animals according to their type (Jenkins 1992), but are then disrupted by incongruous additions. For example, in the Mammal's gallery where a large basking shark is inexplicably placed in the centre of the room (fig 4.3). Similarly, in the Birds' galleries the walls are decorated with rhino heads and portraits, which formed the nucleus of what was intended to be the beginnings of a national collection that would eventually become the National Portrait Gallery (2.4). The presence of these paintings hints at the organic nature of the development of the permanent displays at the British Museum and also illustrate how the rigidity of these galleries breaks down over time. Comparing the floorplan from the nineteenth-century guidebook (2.5) with a contemporary museum map (2.6), we can see that although sequences still exist, such as the European run of galleries, they are no longer as coherent and clear as their nineteenth-century layout. Part of the reason for this, is that the master narrative around the *progress of civilisation* has now been discredited but no all encompassing alternative has been found to replace it.

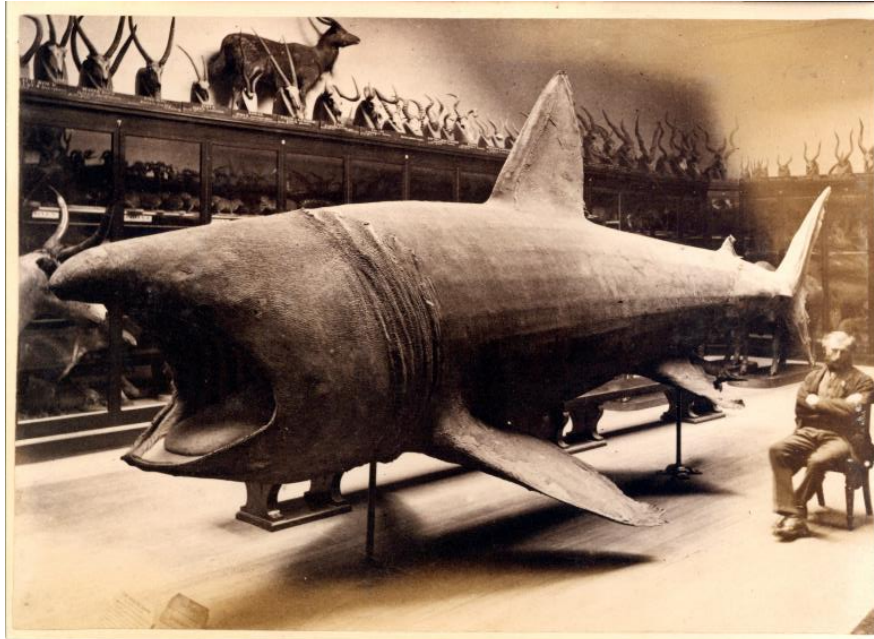


Fig. 4.3 Basking shark in the Mammals gallery (currently room 40) at the British Museum. Photograph by Frederick York, around 1875.



Fig. 4.4 The Birds gallery (currently room 52) at the British Museum. On the wall are oil paintings, which would form the nucleus of the National Portrait Gallery. Photograph by Frederick York, around 1875.

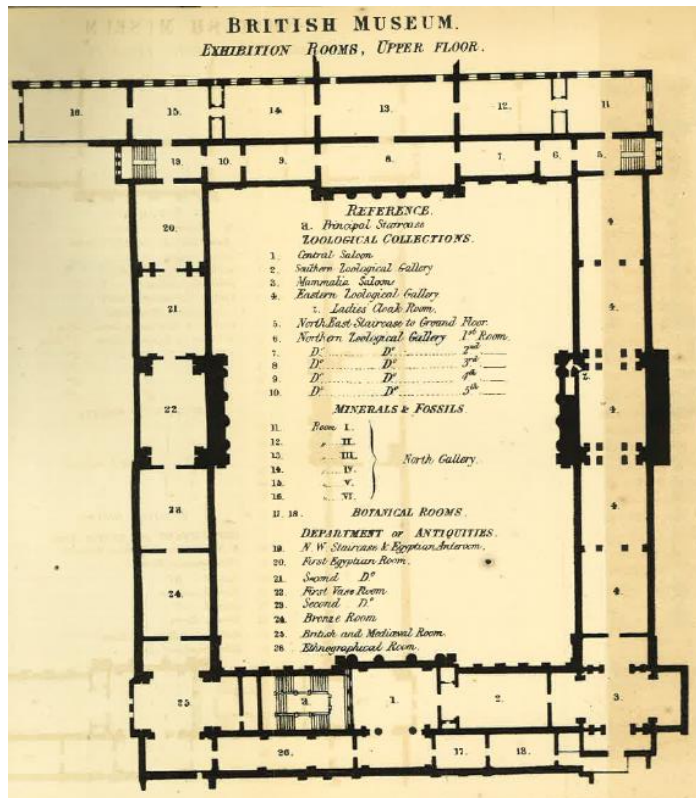


Fig. 4.5 Plan of the British Museum galleries from the *Guidebook of the British Museum* (1848). After ascending the stairs visitors would proceed through a continuous run of rooms (one to ten) all featuring zoological specimens.

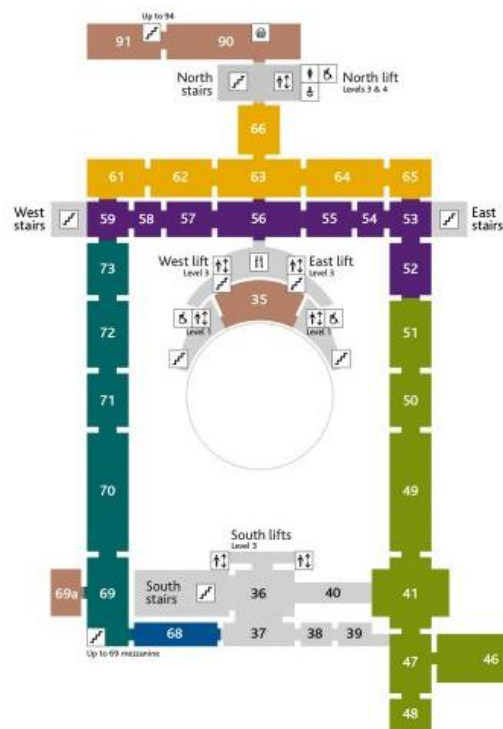


Fig. 4.6 Plan of the British Museum galleries from the British Museum website (2016). By the 2000s, the galleries have become more fragmented and the logic of the 19th century has been lost. 68 is the money gallery, 69 to 73 is Greek and Romans, 59 to 52 is Mesopotamia, 61 to 65 is Ancient Egypt, 38 to 51 is Europe.

The struggles that arise from the question of what to replace the disintegration of this initial master narrative around 'the progress of civilisation' and how its ghosts continue to haunt the galleries can be illustrated by the changing models of display the British Museum has adopted to display its ethnological collections over time. Originally the nucleus of the ethnographic collections were displayed in room one of the South Wing of the Museum. The role of ethnographic objects as illustrating non-European otherness and its positioning within the hierarchy of civilisation is reflected in the entry in the British Museum Synopsis (1842, 4), which describes the display as 'a series of artificial Curiosities from the less civilised parts of the world.' In the 1860s with the departure of the natural history collections to South Kensington, the ethnographic galleries were finally given their own run of galleries. Located in rooms forty-one to fifty-two, they were displayed in a roughly geographical arrangement in densely packed cases, which were the hallmark of the collection's curator Augustus Franks (fig. 4.7). So tightly-packed were the displays that the sculptor Jacob Epstein, who regularly visited the ethnographic collections seeking inspiration, was reputed to have produced a work based on a striking-looking but unusual Pacific Bowl decorated with two birds, not realising that it was a number of bowls stacked together (Mack 1997, 47).



Fig. 4.7 The crowded cases of the Ethnography galleries at the British Museum, 1870, Photographer Frederick York.

This approach was criticised by Henry Lane Fox, the founder of the Pitt Rivers Museum, who declared that while this was a satisfactory system for the expert, it was no use whatsoever for the education of the masses (Chapman 1981). He contrasted the British Museum's displays with his own typological system where he used specimens to illustrate an educational sequence showing how certain forms must have preceded or followed others in the order of their development. Typology in the words of Pitt Rivers (1891) 'forms a tree of progress and distinguishes the leading shoots from the minor branches.' Underpinning Pitt Rivers' 'tree of progress' was a series of assumptions linking technological sophistication with racial evolution, which would be discredited with the advent of cultural relativism in anthropology pioneered by the likes of Franz Boas.



Fig. 4.8 The diorama-style of display of Solomon Islands canoes in the Museum of Mankind exhibition 'The Solomon Islanders' 1974–1975.

In 1970 these ethnographic collections were moved to a purpose-built institution in Burlington Gardens in Piccadilly, which given the title the Museum of Mankind. Here the objects were displayed in dioramas (fig. 4.8) populated by models and mannequins, which aimed to bring the objects' relationship with people and the context in which they were used to the forefront (Shelton 2006, 73). This innovative approach to employing scenography and dioramas in their displays provided the opportunity for experimentation. Conversely, the displays have been criticised as misleading simulacras with the diorama barrier effectively reinforcing a viewer/other binary reminiscent of the humans zoos of the nineteenth century.

When the African portion of the ethnographic collections returned to the British Museum in 1997, following the departure of the books and manuscripts collections to the newly-built British Library, they were given a new narratorial perspective again and viewed as works of art (fig. 4.9). This was partly influenced by Epstein and Moore's use of the British Museum's ethnographic collection to inspire their own work. The reimagining of African objects as artworks was a means of attempting to escape from the problematic racial motivations, like those of Lane Fox's, that lay behind their original collection. The interspersing of the works of contemporary African artists among the original collection

sought to mediate the displays and allow the curatorial voice to fade into the background (Spring 2015, 46).



Fig. 4.9 The contemporary art approach for the Sainsbury's Africa galleries which open in 2001, displayed objects by material and resembled the ethnographic style of displays of the nineteenth century. © The Trustees of the British Museum

The reclassification of African objects as art had its problems, however, for example, in the association Lord Sainsbury made in the exhibition sponsorship panel between African objects and the influence of the 'primitive' on modernist sculptors like Moore and Epstein:

I am someone who liked artists who liked primitivism and were influenced by the primitive... I liked Henry Moore's carving – Henry Moore liked primitive (Spring 2015,18).

Although the problematic term 'primitive' was later removed by the curator, the racially-loaded discourses of the gallery remain present in the organisation of the gallery according to materials, which resembled the typological approach of nineteenth-century ethnographic displays. Furthermore, Lane Fox's original criticism that the ordering of the Museum's Africa collections was unintelligible was echoed by Dean (2006, 24–32) who argued that the classification of these objects as art stripped them of their background context and how they were used. She went on to argue that the organisation of the gallery

into themes based around materials effectively presented an Africa lacking a history (Dean 2006, 24–32).

In exploring the origins of the encyclopaedic mode of display at the British Museum I have outlined some of its inherent narrative qualities. These include that the systems that underpin these displays are closely related to a narrative of civilisational progress, which can be interpreted by those with the requisite level of initiation. Although a sequence may be present through the alignment of rooms, the individual galleries themselves are arranged in a non-linear fashion to aid the researcher-visitor locate their research inquiry as they would browse through the pages of an encyclopaedia. In providing a chronological overview of the different narratorial perspectives adopted by the ethnological collections of the British Museum, I have illustrated how interpretive and design strategies fluctuate over time. I have also shown how even if these displays are change to deal with problematic narratives, these hidden ghost narratives frequently resurface. It was the departure of the ethnographic collections to the Museum of Mankind in 1970 that freed up the space for *Treasures of Tutankhamun* to take place at the British Museum. It is to understanding the narrative qualities of this new form of display, the blockbuster exhibition that I now turn.

4.3.1 The blockbuster reborn

The first blockbuster exhibition that the British Museum held in the Round Reading Room was the *First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* (2007–2008), which attracted over 800,000 visitors and became the second most visited museum exhibition in the British Museum's history. From the very announcement that the exhibition *First Emperor* (2007) was set to take place, both the museum and the press encouraged parallels to be drawn between exhibition and *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, some thirty-five years its predecessor:

If China does agree to the loan, the public interest could rival that prompted by the exhibition of the treasures of Tutankhamun in 1972 (Jury 2006).

Coincidentally, this was happening when Tutankhamun was returning to London in a new guise as *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs* (15.11.2007–24.08.08). However, rather than returning to the British Museum, the exhibition was instead being displayed at the former Millennium Dome, now renamed the O2 arena. Having now grown to approximately 130 treasures in eleven different experiential galleries (History & Chronology of Tours & Exhibitions of Tutankhamun Artefacts in North America & Europe 1961–2012), the Egyptian Archaeologist Zahi Hawass (2007) explained that one reason for the exhibition not returning to the British Museum was simply a matter of space. Beyond the mere limitations of physical space, the decision not to restage *Treasures of Tutankhamun* but instead focus on China reflected an ambition by the Director Neil MacGregor for the British Museum to remain relevant to the contemporary world of 2007. Just as *Treasures of Tutankhamun* had tapped into contemporary interest in Egypt following the Suez crisis, so the British Museum deliberately referenced the increased UK media focus on China in the build-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. 'Every child in Britain learns about ancient Egypt,' remarked MacGregor in a press conference outlining the details of *the First Emperor*, 'but for some reason, there is no requirement to teach this other great civilization, of which there are traces in every museum in the land. Everyone says China is the future. We cannot afford to ignore it' (quoted in Lebrecht 2006).

Held at the British Museum between March and December of 1972, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* has often been credited as being the world's first blockbuster exhibition, achieving a record-setting figure of over 1.7 million visitors for its year-long run (Collins and McNamara 2014; *The Economist* 2014, 65). As a means of understanding the specific narrative qualities of the Blockbuster exhibition, I now want to look back at *Treasures of Tutankhamun* and how it defined a new genre of museum display and the context in which it developed. The exhibition was staged in a series of galleries stretching from rooms forty-one to fifty-two (Fig. 4.10).

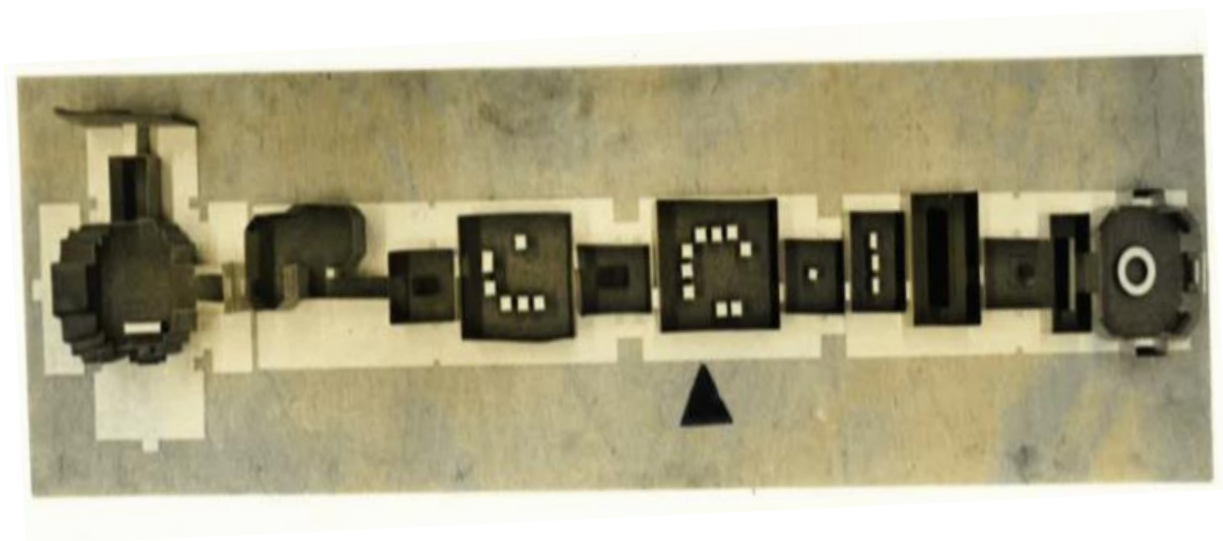


Fig. 4.10 The original model of *Treasures of Tutankhamun's* tomb details the layout of the exhibition. Visitors entered via room forty-one (far left) and then exited via room fifty-two (far right).

As the photograph of the model of the exhibition illustrates, the exhibition display spaces were twelve rooms within rooms. These rooms had been created by the designer Margaret Hall to display the objects in a darker setting than the usual stark neo-classical interiors of the British Museum's galleries, but also to give visitors an impression of the atmosphere Howard Carter experienced when he first descended into Tutankhamun's tomb. An account by Philip Taverner (Watts-Plumpkin 2008), who as Marketing Director of Times Newspapers was instrumental in the marketing and organisation of the exhibition, captures the experience of a visit:

Visitors entered the temporary galleries via a ramp and then descended slowly into the tomb... you came across treasure after treasure brilliantly staged until the supreme moment when you were faced with the staggering mask of solid gold, beaten and burnished, which had once been placed over the head and shoulders of Tutankhamun's mummy.

Photographs of the exhibition reveal how the design attempted to recreate the atmosphere, described by Taverner, of descending into Tutankhamun's tomb. Visitors entered the exhibition via a ramp through a white portal which evoked, rather than attempting to reconstruct, the gateways to the tombs in the Valley of the Kings (fig. 4.11). At the top of the ramp an image of Tutankhamun's iconic death mask, cued visitors to anticipate the exhibition's final room, which contained its most famous object. In the first room, a series of panels told the story behind the discovery of the tomb.



Fig. 4.11 *The ramp and portal that visitors used to ascend into the exhibition. Beginning at a raised height, it allowed visitors to then descend into the exhibition, evoking Howard Carter's own descent into the tomb. The*

image at the top of the ramp acts to build anticipation for the final object visitors will encounter in the penultimate room of the exhibition – the gold death mask of Tutankhamun.

Visitors then encountered objects, some of which, such as the Ritual Cow Bed in room five (fig. 4.12), were displayed in isolation to give them extra aesthetic impact. Other rooms contained multiple objects all made of the same material. For example, all the objects in room four were made of wood and alabaster (fig. 4.13). These rooms, filled with artefacts, gave a sense of the richness and density of the assemblage encountered by Carter. The model of the exhibition illustrates how a room containing multiple objects was always followed by a room containing a single object. This alternation in the modes of display created a sense of rhythm in the visitors as they moved through the space. Alongside this, the colour scheme of the rooms successively darkened as the exhibition progressed, changing from a sandy yellow to a dark black, adding to the feeling of descending underground. It was in this pitch-black room that visitors experienced, in Taverner's (Watts-Plumpkin 2008) words, 'the supreme moment when you were faced with the staggering mask of solid gold' (fig. 4.14). Visitors then exited the exhibition through the final room, a purposefully built gift shop.



Fig. 4.12 *Room five in which the ritual cow bed of Tutankhamun is displayed in isolation.*



Fig. 4.13 *Room four in which visitors encountered a series of objects made of wood and alabaster.*



Fig. 4.14 Room ten in which visitors encounter the gold death mask of Tutankhamun, spot-lit in splendid isolation.

Three distinctive elements are present in *Treasures of Tutankhamun* that contribute to the exhibition having what Austin (2012) would call a ‘high-level of narrativity.’ Firstly, there is the issue of linearity, as Hall organised the displays into a sequential line and, as a result, visitors feel a sense of progression as they move through the space. In the encyclopaedic exhibition the linear nature of the ‘progress of civilisation’ narrative was present but concealed, so that most visitors were unaware of its presence. Secondly, there is the concept of change and rhythm in the staging of design, created by alternating the rooms from single to multiple object displays and through the gradual change from light to dark in the exhibition colour scheme. This can be contrasted with the uniformity, overcrowded and, at times, chaotic nature of the encyclopaedic display. Thirdly, there is the idea of foreshadowing and building anticipation for the climactic encounter with the exhibition’s star object the gold death mask of Tutankhamun. All of these elements can be thought of as contributing to the structure of the exhibition’s narrative.

4.3.2 Narrative perspective and the multimodality of museum exhibitions

In the images and accounts of visiting *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, one of the most prominent elements is the role design plays in creating a sense of what I will call narrative drive in the visitor. By narrative drive, like Barthes' (1990) idea of the *hermeneutic code* I mean that which compels the visitor to reach the end of a narrative. With this concept in mind, I now explore how the idea of a narrative perspective might be thought of as being present in its design and interpretation. *Treasures of Tutankhamun* was innovative in the role design played to evoke a particular sense of perspective through its use of colour, lighting and reconstruction. In Tavener's words (quoted in Watts-Plumpkin 2008):

The exhibition helped to revolutionise design treatment not only in subsequent major exhibitions, but, to an extent, in museums and galleries throughout Britain and further afield.

This brings us to what MacLeod et al. (2015) have described as the uniquely multimodal quality of museum exhibition design, where narrative is constructed through the interplay of objects, design, space, graphics and text. In this sense, the exhibition designer Lady Margaret Hall can be regarded as much as the exhibition's author as the curator Dr I.E.S Edwards. The fact that *Treasures of Tutankhamun* had a designer at all was in itself innovative, as during this period most British Museum exhibitions were arranged solely by the curators (Hall 2015). Hall had been appointed as the British Museum's first exhibition officer in 1964, a title which was changed to Head of Design in the mid-1970s. Hall's (2015) appointment was met some resistance, as she recalled:

One curator was rather dismissive and said what a pity I hadn't come sooner as I could have arranged the flowers in his recently opened exhibition. And I was snubbed by Rupert Bruce Mitford [Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities] who remarked that his Department would have no need of my services as all his curators were appointed for their artistic flair and arranged their own displays.

Hall also had to campaign for the design of the exhibition be kept in-house rather than be given to an external architect (Wilson 2002). As well as the exhibition design and the curation, other authors and voices helped to shape the exhibition narrative. *The Times* had sponsored the original excavation and its editor-in-chief Denis Hamilton had been heavily involved in the diplomatic arrangement of the exhibition, and, as a result, they also played an active part in the exhibition's interpretation. There were no object labels in the exhibition so as to encourage visitors to move quickly through the space. Instead, each of the fifty objects was given a number and visitors were provided with a booklet with a description of the object (fig. 4.15). These were around one hundred words in length and written by the exhibition's curator Dr I.E.S. Edwards. Below is the entry for Tutankhamun's death mask:

The gold mask. Mask of beaten burnished gold inlaid with glass and semi-precious stones. The face is certainly a portrait of Tutankhamun, perhaps slightly idealised. The eyes are made of quartz and obsidian. Both ears have perforated lobes. On the brow are the vulture's head and the cobra, emblems of sovereignty over Upper and Lower Egypt. Engraved on the back is a magical spell which identifies the individual parts of the mask and of the king's head with the corresponding parts of the bodies of different gods. The mask was placed over the head of the wrapped mummy of the king. (*Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition booklet)

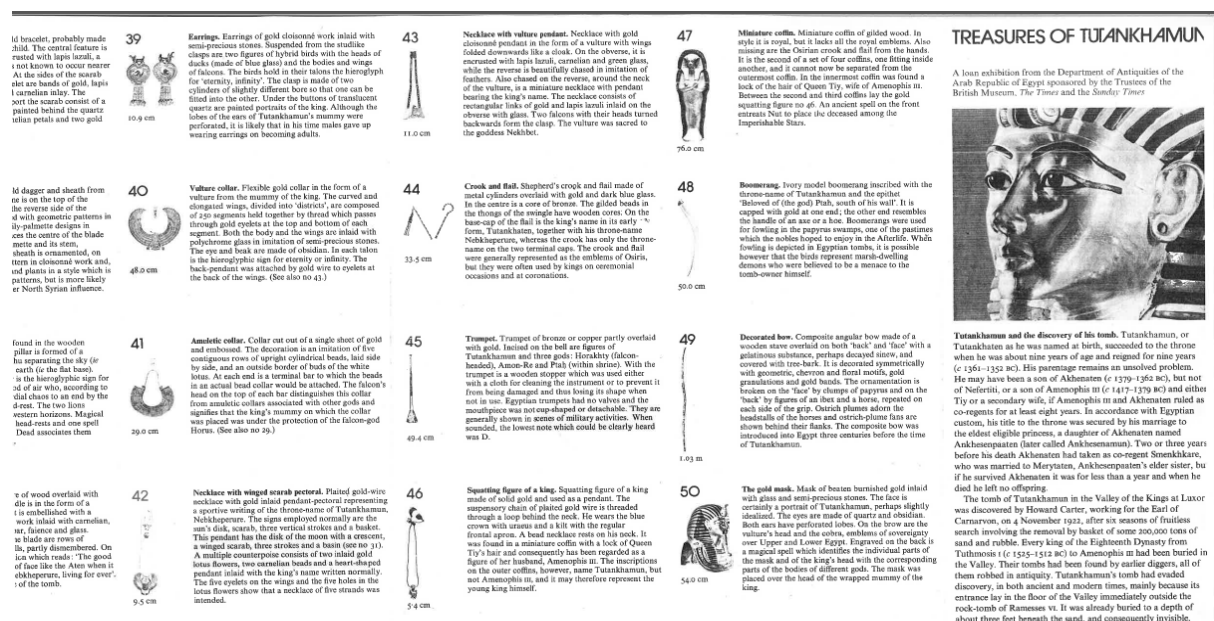


Fig. 4.15 An extract from the booklet that accompanied the exhibition, which contained the text describing the exhibition's objects.

This booklet text is written in the discourse of art-history and is principally concerned with identifying the materials from which the object was made: 'burnished gold, 'eyes made of quartz and obsidian.' The text also explains some of the symbolism present on the mask, such as the 'vulture's head and cobra' being 'emblems of sovereignty over Upper and Lower Egypt.' What is absent from the label is anything identifying Tutankhamun's death mask as one of the most iconic treasures of Ancient Egyptian art, or anything about the life and personality of the man who wore it.



Fig. 4.16 *The second room in the exhibition containing panels telling the story of the tomb's discovery.*

As well as the accompanying booklet, panel texts in the first two rooms of the exhibition recounted the story of Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. As fig. 4.16 shows, this room contained no objects. As a result, it fell outside of the jurisdiction of the curator and the breathless prose of the panels filled with patriotic rhetoric about 'two Englishmen (who) astounded the world' were written by a *Times* journalist. Unlike the text for the booklet, the panels do not demur from highlighting the importance of the objects, for example describing the tomb's assemblage as 'the most spectacular archaeological find

ever made.' People are also present in this text, but the focus is not on Tutankhamun but on the tomb's two English discovers, Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon (fig. 4.17).

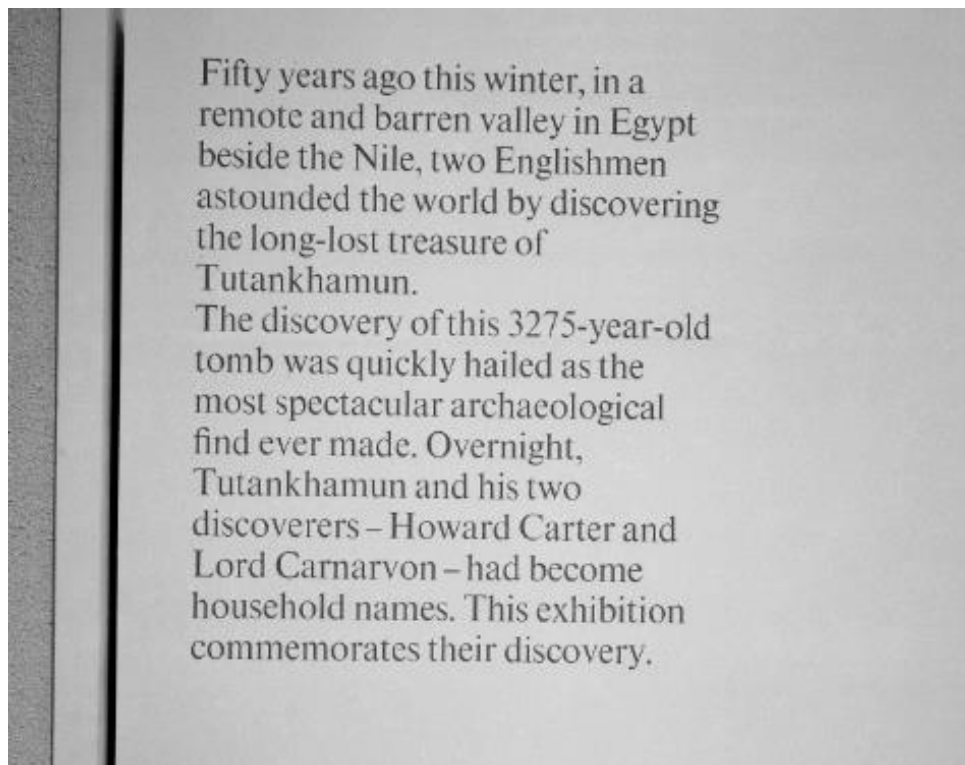


Fig. 4.17 *The introductory panel to the exhibition tells the story of the moment fifty-years ago when 'two Englishmen astounded the world.'*

A famous and evocative quote in relation to the discovery, 'what can you see anything? Yes...wonderful things!' is placed just before visitors enter the exhibition (fig. 4.18). This piece of dialogue is said to come from an exchange between Carter and Carnarvon at the moment Carter descend into the tomb. The immediacy of the text and its positioning at the threshold of the exhibition encourages visitors to imagine themselves, like Carter and Carnarvon, poised on the brink of making a new discovery as they enter the long-lost tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh.



Fig. 4.18 The text visitors are met with before they enter room three of the exhibition, where they will encounter the first objects. The impact of Carter's response to Carnarvon is emphasised by the shift in font size.

Treasures of Tutankhamun illustrates how multiple perspectives may exist in museum exhibition text. Four different voices can be identified – the curator, the journalist from *the Times* and the voices of Lord Carnarvon and Howard Carter themselves. In turn, it is possible to identify some of the underlying discourses that are encoded, to use Stuart Hall's (1980, 137) term, into these texts. The curatorial text is laden with the terminology of art history, while the journalistic text is encoded with the nostalgic patriotism of a British broadsheet newspaper. A fifth voice may be added as well in the form of Margaret Hall's design. Just as an underlying ideology can be detected in the textual voices, it can also be located in the language of the design as well.

4.3.3 The visitor, the blockbuster and commerciality

One of the design elements of the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition that appears the most strikingly contemporary to us is the use of the first room as an admissions desk and the use of the final room as a gift shop. The museum gift shop has become symbolic of how the blockbuster exhibition monetarises heritage. The street-artist Banksy uses *Exit through the gift shop* for the title of his 2010 film, which teasingly pokes fun at the gap between the

museum's lofty intellectual pretensions and its commercial realities. Although innovative in 1972, looking at the photograph of the gift shop in *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (fig. 4.19) we can see that it is quite sparsely populated with merchandise. The space is dominated by the slick black square of the counter in the centre of the room and a display of the exhibition catalogue on sale for seventy-five pence. Also available for purchase are reproductions of Tutankhamun's jewellery, as well as wall-charts, posters, cards and slides. On the rear wall, the text reassures visitors concerned about the commercialism of culture that 'All profits from the exhibition will go to the UNESCO fund for saving the temples of Philae.' The level of merchandise would escalate during the North American tour of the exhibition (1976 – 1979). At the Metropolitan Museum in New York, life-size resin replicas of the goddess Selket coated with gold leaf were on sale for fifteen-hundred dollars (Hindley 2015). While the unofficial merchandise ranged from an exclusive line of Tut-inspired jewellery specially commissioned for the New York department store Bloomingdales to women's t-shirts, emblazoned with the slogan 'Hands off my Tuts,' sold by hawkers on the sidewalk in front of the museum steps (Hindley 2015).



Fig. 4.19 The final room in the exhibition is a purpose-built gift shop in which visitors could buy the exhibition catalogue for seventy-five pence, alongside reproductions of Tutankhamun's jewellery, wall-charts, posters, cards and slides. On the back wall, the text assures visitors that 'All profits from the exhibition will go the UNESCO fund for saving the temples of Philae.'

Equally significant as *Treasures of Tutankhamun* having its own gift shop is the implementation of an entry charge for the exhibition. This was the first such charge in British Museum history and directly contravenes the British Museum act of 1753. This act which was brought about during the creation of the British Museum as a public institution stated that the museum was 'one general repository shall be erected' for 'public use to all posterity' with 'free access' to 'all studious and curious Persons' (Quoted in Ashton 2012).⁴ The introduction of an entrance fee for *Treasures of Tutankhamun* went against this concept of free entry to all, but was justified on the grounds that a portion of the money raised would go to pay for the UNESCO programme of the relocation of the temples at Abu Simbel (Edwards 1996). After much debate, the price of fifty pence was decided upon rather than forty pence, on the grounds that the cashiers would not have to provide change (Edwards 1996). In total, some £654,000 was raised, which much to the exhibition organiser's delight was higher than the previous donations raised in the exhibition's runs in Tokyo and Paris (Edwards 1996). This paying-for-entry model would pave the way for the blockbusters we are familiar with today, not raising funds for heritage salvage operations but as a supplement to the museum's annual income. Today, the entrance price for a British Museum blockbuster like *Defining Beauty* is £16.50 and – with an average attendance of 200,000 visitors – a special exhibition can be expected to bring in around three million pounds for the Museum. Although a substantial amount of this is taken through the cost of insuring loans, building and staffing the exhibition, the special exhibition also offers the opportunity to generate income via other means. This includes sponsorship, merchandising and, if the exhibition is created largely in-house, through touring a version to other venues, often overseas. All of these commercial

⁴ In reality, for at least the first hundred years, entry to the British Museum was free only for the privileged few who had leisure time other than a Sunday. The debate about Sunday opening at the parliament continued in the British Museum from the 1850s until 1895. It also required the would-be visitor to go through the laborious process of applying for a ticket, coming to collect it and then returning at a later date when the ticket was valid (Wilson 2002, 170).

opportunities make the blockbuster exhibition the central component of the museum as a profit-making enterprise.

It is this profit-driven mentality that distinguishes the special exhibition from the free permanent galleries of the British Museum and also links it to the box-office focus of its Hollywood equivalent. Originally, blockbuster was a term applied to neither museums nor exhibitions but was coined in America in the 1940s to describe incendiary bombs capable of destroying a whole block of streets (Hall 2014, 5). The metamorphosis of the term into its current meaning signifying commercial success in the film industry began with Hollywood epics like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). Here, the destructiveness of the explosion equates to the film's ability to smash cinema box office records, while the block referred to are the queues that stretched 'around the block' outside the cinema. This is, of course, reminiscent of the famous queues to attend *Treasures of Tutankhamun* that meandered around the British Museum forecourt and were reputed to last for up to eight hours. Although the term blockbuster was applied to the early Hollywood epics of the 1930s and 40s, it is with the release of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* in 1975 that the modern blockbuster era of Hollywood movies is said to begin (Neale 2000). What distinguished *Jaws* from its predecessors was its relationship to time. *Jaws* has been described as the first 'event-film,' in that it employed a marketing strategy and release schedule that deliberately tried to make it synonymous with the summer of 1975 (Neale 2000). Lew Wasserman, Chairman of Universal Pictures, actually reduced the number of theatres *Jaws* was playing in so that people would have to drive distances to see it and 'the picture would play all summer long' (Shone 2015).



Fig. 4.20 The queues for the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition at the British Museum, which extended around the forecourt. Accounts from the time report that people queued up to eight hours to see the exhibition. Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum.

Like *Jaws*, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* was an ‘event-exhibition’ and it had its own release schedule that helped to contribute to its pop-cultural phenomenon status. It dominated the cultural life of London in 1972 running from the 29th of March to the 30th of December and then went on to generate similar huge crowds on its world tour. From London, it travelled to three venues in the USSR (1973–75), eight venues in North America (76–79), and then five venues in West Germany (1980–1981) (History & Chronology of Tours & Exhibitions in North America & Europe 1961–2012). It is worth noting that the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition was not the first time a collection of objects from Tutankhamun’s tomb had been displayed outside of Egypt. From 1961 until 1965, an exhibition called *Tutankhamun Treasures* opened in the National Gallery of Art in Washington and toured twenty-five cities in North America with thirty-one objects on display (History & Chronology of Tours & Exhibitions in North America & Europe 1961–2012). These exhibitions were often quite short-term, usually with a running time of a month, and attracted visitors in the low hundred-thousands (History & Chronology of Tours & Exhibitions in North America & Europe 1961 – 2012). It was only really when the exhibition visited three venues

in Japan as *The Tutankhamun Exhibition* (1965–66) and Paris as *Tutankhamun and his time* (1967) that visitor figures began surpassing one million.⁵

It was in part this rigorous touring schedule that helped to transform *Treasures of Tutankhamun* from a museum exhibition to a cultural phenomenon. It gave the exhibition a finite lifetime in each location which drove demand to see the exhibition. While the British Museum's acquisition of the Parthenon sculptures or the Assyrian reliefs in the nineteenth century drew large crowds, visitors attended knowing these objects would remain in the British Museum in perpetuity. In contrast, the death mask of Tutankhamun could only be seen for nine months. Simultaneously, the fact that the exhibition toured on a scale that had never been attempted before gave the exhibition a global pop-cultural reach comparable to the Hollywood blockbuster. This manifested itself in the 'Tut-mania' that swept across the United States, which can be seen as reaching its pop-cultural zenith in Steve Martin's 1978 performance of the platinum-selling single King Tut on *Saturday Night Live*. The link between commerciality and the museum was made explicit in the line: 'now, if I'd known/they'd line up just to see you,/ I'd trade in all my money/ and bought me a museum' (McAlister 2001).

⁵ The Tokyo National Museum achieved figures of 1,300,000, while *Toutankhamon et son temps* (Tutankhamun and His Time) reached 1,240,975. The change in titles reflects the fact that the exhibition at the Petit Palais in Paris wanted to differentiate itself from previous exhibitions. It contained 45 objects in total, only seven of which had been in previous exhibitions.



Fig. 4.21 Steve Martin in his 1978 performance of King Tut on Saturday Night Live. Martin begins the performance with the following faux-serious introduction, 'I'd like to talk seriously just for a moment. One of the great art exhibits to tour the United States is the Treasures of Tutankhamun or King Tut. But I think it's a national disgrace the way we have commercialised it with trinkets and toys, t-shirts and posters.' He then launched into the line: 'King Tut/Now when he was young man/ he never thought he'd see/ people stand in line to see the boy king.'

Just as *Jaws* would create a formula for the marketing and release of future blockbusters such as *Rocky* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977), so *Treasures of Tutankhamun* would usher in a new era of blockbuster exhibitions in London. The British Museum staged a series of exhibitions that achieved visitor figures in excess of 400,000, notably *Turner Watercolours* (1973, attendance 585,046), *Thracian Treasures* (1976, attendance 424,465) and *The Vikings* (1980, attendance 465,000). What is remarkable is that prior to *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, according to the former director of the British Museum David Wilson (2002, 273), the British Museum was not a venue that was associated with major exhibitions. The exhibition market in London was instead dominated by the V&A and the Royal Academy. It was not only the British Museum that enjoyed success during this period. Philip Taverner would go on to take his experience project managing *Treasures of Tutankhamun* to create a series of blockbusters at the Royal Academy, including the *Genius of China* (1973–4, 771,000), *Pompeii AD 79* (1976, 633,000) and the *Great Japan Exhibition* (1982, 523,000) (*The Times* 2017).

Just as the Hollywood blockbuster has been derided for putting profit before quality, so in a similar manner the blockbuster exhibition has been criticised for 'killing art' (Tweedy 2011). For example, Colin Tweedy (2011) Chief Executive for the arts and business fund, commented that: 'It is not the right way to see great artists. In the next five years, museums will stop doing these exhibitions because they are too much trouble.'

Moss (2011) writing in *the Guardian* makes a similar argument, describing blockbuster exhibitions as 'a desperately hoped-for-money-spinner for cash-strapped galleries.' He goes on to say that timed tickets are 'pretty disgusting too', as they assume that a two-hour stint is the norm. Far better, Moss (2011), suggests is a return to the old non-linear model of permanent galleries, 'to go and look at a couple of Gauguins in a gallery and live with them for a while.' In provocatively declaring the death of the blockbuster in the 2010s Tweedy and Moss were fighting against the tide. They were writing at a time when temporary exhibitions were enjoying a revival in London with *the First Emperor* exhibition opening at the British Museum in 2007. It attracted over 800,000 visitors and, after *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, it was the second-most visited exhibition in British Museum history.

In making this link between the blockbuster exhibition and the blockbuster Hollywood movie, I have tried to emphasise the importance of commerciality. Latent within critiques of the commerciality of the blockbuster is that the content will be simplified to make it more accessible to a mass audience. Or, in popular parlance, it is 'dumbed down.' The use of the term 'dumbing down' again links the blockbuster exhibition to its cinematic counterpart, as the term was first used 'as a slang expression in 1933 by screenwriters to mean 'revising [the script] so as to appeal to those of lower education or intelligence' (Donnelly 2007). Rather than seeing this accusation as a removal of difficult content, I argue that 'dumbing down' is primarily about a change in form.

4.3.4 Political narratives

The role of narrative in the museum is often viewed with suspicion because it is associated with monological presentation of grand narratives of the achievements of empire, at the expense of the voices and perspectives of the experience of the colonised (Bennett 2006). It would be wrong, however, to view museum discourses as only being linked to views of the past when they are just as likely to be formed by the political relations of two countries in the present. In situations where the historical or current political relationship between countries is strained, or there is a repatriation claim associated with objects on display in exhibitions, these narratives may become highly politically charged. The story of an exhibition's making is itself an unfolding narrative of which the final exhibition is the material trace.

In the case of *Treasures of Tutankhamun* negotiations for the exhibition began in the aftermath of the Suez crisis and was part of a complex renegotiation of the relationship between a declining imperial power of Britain and the rapidly modernising republic of Egypt, run by an Arab-socialist government following the revolution of 1952. Although Egypt had never been a colony of Britain, British forces had occupied Egypt since the Mahdi uprising in Sudan in 1882 and acted as an unofficial de-facto protectorate over the country. Following the revolution, the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced plans to construct the Aswan High Dam to regulate the flooding of the Nile river valley and allow the storage of water for agriculture, and later for the generation of hydroelectric power. In order to pay for this project, Nasser announced that he would nationalise the Suez Canal Company. The UK, which had strategic military and economic interests in the canal at the time, sent in a force along with France and Israel to occupy Suez. However, after pressure from the USA, the USSR, and the UN, the UK was forced to withdraw troops in November of 1956. Subsequently, Britain was left embarrassingly isolated on the world stage, which in turn led to Prime Minister Anthony Eden's resignation in January 1957. The Suez crisis became regarded as the final death knell for Britain's imperial ambitions.

Against this political backdrop, we can see that *Treasures of Tutankhamun* was one part of a complex set of negotiations to reconcile the two countries. I. E. S. Edwards (Edward 1996, 3), then Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, recalls that in 1961, when discussions surrounding the exhibition first began, Egypt and Britain had broken off diplomatic relations and Britain stood as one of seventeen countries vying for the exhibition. In exchange for lending the exhibition to Britain, the Egyptian government initially issued a series of demands in return, including a request for a performance in Cairo by the Royal Ballet, a private appearance by Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, performances by the Oxford Playhouse Company, and photographs of Egyptian heritage sites taken by Lord Snowdon which could then be used for publicity purposes (Edwards 1996, 5). These demands could unsurprisingly not be met. It was not until 1967 that Dr Edwards (1996, 7) felt the exhibition might take place, after the President of Egypt Gamal Nasser told Denis Hamilton, the editor of *The Times*, that, in Hamilton's words, Britain could have the exhibition "if we wanted it." Events in the Middle East would delay the exhibition further, as Dr Edwards recalled: "Our hopes (of staging the exhibition), however, were short-lived: on our way from Printing House Square to the Museum, we saw on the posters of an evening paper the news, 'Nasser marches into Sinai.' The Six Day War against Israel followed and the whole plan had to be abandoned" (Edwards 1996, 8). It would take another five years for the exhibition to travel to Britain. When it was finally mounted in 1972, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* was not only an opportunity for the British public to revisit the discoveries made by Howard Carter fifty years earlier, it was also the result of a complex diplomatic exercise in which Britain had renegotiated its position with Egypt, but also come to terms with its own post-imperial status.

Beyond the relationship between Egypt and Britain, Harrison (2013) has illustrated how the relocation of the Abu Simbel temples was one of the most important expressions of a post-war focus on heritage reconstruction. Describing it as a fundamental part of the origin story of UNESCO, Harrison (2013, 59) argues that the political context of the campaign is consistently ignored in UNESCO's retelling of events. For example, half of the

archaeological finds ended up in the museums of the member states involved in helping with the relocation of the temples. In this way, the campaign offered a new model for colonial nation-building, in which the power and influence of member states was expressed by the level of support offered and, by extension, the number of Egyptian antiquities that travel back home. Numerous artefacts were sold to museums in New York, Leiden, Madrid, Turin, and West Berlin (Harrison 2013, 59), but not to London, where relationships were still strained. What was also ignored in UNESCO's origin narrative was the displacement of an estimated 100,000 living Nubians who occupied the area that was flooded by the dam's construction (Hasan 2007, 83). Also, while the building of the dam was a key part of Nasser's plan to transform Egypt into a modern nation state, ironically the campaign helped to promote an idea that heritage was a universal concern, beyond the management of individual nations, to a more global sense of heritage as something that was collectively owned (Harrison 2013, 61). Although the model of how Egyptian antiquities were acquired had changed since Howard Carter's excavations in 1922, it was still those with the most power and financial resources who could decide what was to be done with them and ultimately where they ended up.

Blockbuster exhibitions are not just narrative in the form they take, but also in the telling of the stories of their making. Like a mushroom which is visible on the surface only briefly, an exhibition can have a germination period of years and its rhizomic roots can stretch far and wide. The traces of the dialogue and diplomacy that lead to an exhibition's becoming can be found in the media coverage surrounding an exhibition and in the placement of objects and the content of the label texts themselves. A good initial starting point to begin this tracing of power and diplomacy are maps where an exhibition's political allegiances – for example, the decision to use the term Persian Gulf, Arabian Gulf, or simply the Gulf – are laid bare in the naming of topography and the presence or absence of borders. In Bakhtinian terms, the heteroglossia of the exhibition is not only made up of the

exhibition makers – curators, designers, interpretation officers – but also of politicians, diplomats and the media itself.

Summary

Through its exhibition programme, Neil MacGregor (2012 xxx) repositioned the British Museum as ‘an Arena Where Meaning and Identity Are Debated and Contested on a Global Scale.’ Central to this was the drawing of two forms of narrative the encyclopaedic and the blockbuster. While the blockbuster was the means by which the museum was able to create public attention, it was the logic of the encyclopaedic that used to deal with the most highly contested debates such as those around repatriation. As we will see in the example of the Parthenon Sculptures in the exhibition *Defining Beauty*, the museum uses the example of cross-cultural comparison in the encyclopaedic form to make the case for its retention of the objects in the face of calls for them to return to Greece. Just as the narrative of the making of *Treasures of Tutankhamun* reveals to us much about how post-Suez Britain is coping with the loss of empire, so the making of *Defining Beauty* also tells us a lot about the UK’s ambitions place in the world order on the twenty-first century. The exhibition developed out of a lucrative touring exhibition to China, and while the claims of Greece are ignored, Russia is actively courted through the loan of the Illisos river god sculpture from the Parthenon to the Hermitage to celebrate the anniversary of its founding. This loan is made in the name of the fraternity of the enlightenment, that the British Museum and the Hermitage as enlightenment institutions, predate the notion of nation states and are somehow above the claims of nation states, which are a mere invention of the nineteenth-century. Like UNESCO and the relocation of the temples of Abu Simbel, new grand narratives are created to replace the discredited nineteenth-century narratives of the progress of civilisation. Over the course of my next three chapters analysing the blockbuster exhibitions *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, *Vikings Life and Legend* and *Defining Beauty: the Body in Ancient Greece* I explore what these new narratives might be.

Chapter 5: Methodology / methods

Introduction

In this chapter of my thesis, I outline the methodological approach and methods chosen to address my research questions. I detail my research design and explain the selection of my methods that I used to collect my data, which was collected from both museum exhibition-makers and museum visitors. I outline the reasons behind why I selected the three exhibitions, which acted as the micro-case studies for my overall study. I also address the tools and processes I use for coding and analysing the data. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the research ethics that informed my study.

5.1 Research questions

My methodological approach is derived from my research questions outlined in my introductory chapter. They are:

- 1) What do we mean when we talk about narrative in a museum context?
- 2) How does narrative structure take place in the museum exhibition?
 - How do exhibition-makers create a sense of an unfolding narrative structure in a museum space?
 - How do visitors to museums experience exhibition structure as narratives?
- 3) How does narrative perspective manifest itself in the museum exhibition?
 - How do exhibition-makers create a sense of an unfolding narrative structure in a museum space?
 - How do museum visitors experience and decode narrative perspective in a museum exhibition?
- 4) What is the relationship between a visitor's socio-cultural background and their attitude towards exhibition narrative?

5.2 A qualitative case study approach

In differentiating between methodology and methods, Hohenstein and Moussouri (2018, 32) describe methodology as 'like a further layer of theory: a set of theories about the use of methods.' They argue for the importance of including the philosophy that lies behind the research, in particular the researcher's ontological position, which they define as the way 'reality is construed by someone who is interested in studying it' (Hohenstein and Moussouri 2018, 32). My study's focus on how people create and experience museum narratives lends itself to an ontological approach that views reality as subjective and open to interpretation, rather than objective, measurable and independent of the people who study it. Out of these ontological positions stems the epistemology, which Morgan & Smircich (1980) define as 'the different grounds for obtaining knowledge and what type of knowledge is seen as valid.' My epistemology can be seen as interpretivist, as I am interested in how narrative is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted by focussing on social meanings, interpretations, practices, discourses, processes, or constructions (Mason 1996). This is opposed to a positivist stance that believes there is an objective reality that exists outside of the participant and as a result looks for objectivity in data collection and analysis.

Further refining my ontological position, I adopt a dialogic stance in that I am interested in understanding narrative and human experience experiences as constructed by, and through, acts of communication (Escobar 2011, 9). This builds on my perspective chapter's focus on Bakhtin and the dialogic nature of all discourse, that no discourse exists in isolation but is instead dialogical, it is always situated between a self and an other' (Bakhtin 1981, 134). In locating my ontological position as dialogic, I am situating myself within a body of theorists, including the Jewish philosopher German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and the Brazilian pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire, whose ideas can also be seen as a reaction against the dominant concept of the self in western enlightenment philosophy as existing in solipsistic isolation (Christians 1998, 18). Buber's (1970) famous maxim, 'in the beginning is the relation', can be seen as a retort to Descartes 'I think

therefore I am', in its assertion of the primal nature of dialogue. Rather than our true selves existing in isolation from others, dialogue can be seen as a kind of communicative primordial soup from which the self is shaped.

This dialogic approach is a particularly appropriate lens through which to analyse museum exhibition narratives, because unlike the novel – with its singular author figure – exhibition narratives cannot occur without the collaboration of a number of practitioners from different disciplines. Exhibitions are, an inherently collaborative practice created through the dialogues between curators, designers, interpreters, project managers and, increasingly, the exhibition's audiences themselves. I argue that only by adopting a dialogic approach can we understand the holistic whole of the phenomenon of narratives in the museum. In bringing together a range of voices and perspectives in relation to the exhibition narrative I hope to yield new insights. In the tension between alternate accounts of narrative, I am able to identify the key issues for both exhibition analysis and exhibition-making practice. This extends not only to creating a dialogue between exhibition-makers and visitors, but also to creating a dialogue between the visitors' voices and their behaviour. It is also present between the description of how an exhibition maker intended an exhibition element to work and how the visitor experienced it as they moved through the space.

From this combination of the ontological and epistemological position comes my research approach (Hohenstein and Moussouri 2018, 32). I adopt a qualitative case study approach as my methodology. Chris Kraus (1997) in her semi-autobiographical novel *I Love Dick* makes the case for the case study, arguing that 'the only way to understand the large is through the small, because if the only material we have to work with in America is our own lives, shouldn't we be making case studies?' Similarly, I am approaching the issue of museum narratives from the position that the best way to understand the issue of narrative is through the detailed analysis of a single case – the British Museum. Yin (2003) defines a case study approach as an extremely in-depth look at a particular person or place, the idea being that an understanding of this person/place can provide insight at least about similar

people or situations. Similarly, Blumer (1969, 149) argues that through exploring the distinctive expression of a particular case, wider general trends can be detected and studied. Qualitative case study calls for the examination of complexities and for making relationships understandable (Geertz 1973). Lincoln and Guba (2000) point out that much qualitative research is based on a view that social phenomena, human dilemmas and the nature of cases are situational, revealing experiential happenings of many kinds. These situations cannot be created in lab conditions.

The British Museum is a case in the sense defined by Flood (as reported in Fals Borda 1998) in that it is a 'bounded system' that has working parts and purposes. I undertook an instrumental case study, as I was interested in illustrating how the issues surrounding narrative and exhibitions were manifested in the case of the British Museum. This is opposed to an intrinsic study approach, which is solely concerned with drawing the researchers towards an understanding of what is important about the case within its own world, regardless of the focus of the researchers and theorists. At the same time, I was interested in capturing the particularities of the case's own issues, context and interpretations, through understanding people's expressions and activities in their local contexts. I did this through attempting to capture what Geertz (1973) describes as 'thick description', which might include conflicting perspectives, the charisma of individual actors, working relationships, interest, or lack of by various participants. In these particularities lie the vitality, trauma and uniqueness of the case.

Case studies are singular, but it has subsections, groups, occasions, dimensions and domains. Within my case of the British Museum there are also embedded micro-cases in the form of the three summer blockbuster exhibitions that I collected data on. Silverman (2000) argues that a case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry. In that sense then these three micro-case studies contributed to the understanding of the case of blockbuster exhibitions as a whole.

A key challenge for all interpretivist researchers concerns how you can be sure that you are not simply inventing data, or misrepresenting your research participants' perspectives (Mason 1996, 76). A case study approach in particular can be represented poorly by single cases or samples of a very few cases, and such small samples can provide questionable grounds for advancing grand generalisations. To ensure that qualitative research can be considered trustworthy, Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue it must be scrutinised according to the lens of credibility. Credibility here means the research findings reflect the researcher, participants and readers' experience with a phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss 2008), alongside acknowledging that these findings maybe interpreted in a different way. One way of increasing the credibility of the data is to study not one but multiple case studies, or micro-case studies in my case. Another means of achieving credibility is through the process of triangulation, which has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, thereby verifying the repeatability of an observation (Stake 2000, 453). Triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the case is being seen (Flick 1998, Silverman 2000, 454). This fits with a case study approach, which aims to facilitate the conveying of experience of actors and stakeholders as well as the experience of studying the case (Stake 2000, 454). The qualitative researcher is interested in the diversity of perception, even the multiple realities within which people live. Triangulation helps to identify these different realities.

Another important issue in relation to trustworthiness is reflexivity. Reflexivity entails the researcher recognizing his or her own knowing and practice as 'implicated in the production of knowledge' (Mason 1996, 179), and being aware of his or her inherent biases (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 203). During the course of my study, I worked as an interpretation officer at the British Museum, although I did not work on any of the exhibition's that were used as my embedded case studies. As a result, I may have some intrinsic biases towards

the Museum and take certain things for granted, which make it harder for me to critically analyse the museum staff's perspectives, or view the institution as an outsider would. At the same time, being an accepted member of the museum who was already known to many of the museum makers gave me an advantage in interviewing them. Viewing me as an insider who had experienced the process of making exhibitions myself they were more likely to be open and confide in me about their views on the process. One of the key motivations for me to undertake the research was to try and reflect on the reasons behind my practice: why was I as an interpretation officer trying to make museum exhibition's accessible and what role did constructing narratives play in this? My research was then a process of self-reflection in which I tried to question many of the inherent assumptions that as a practitioner I had taken for granted.

5.3 Research design

I now outline the main phase of my research, comprising periods of intensive fieldwork of approximately one month's duration for each exhibition. I discuss the fieldwork methods, the ethical issues involved, and conclude with the methods used to analyse the data. In terms of gaining an insight into how narrative is encoded in museums, I employ two principle methods. Firstly, interviews with members of staff that designed the exhibition, these will include curators, designers, interpretation officers and project managers. Secondly, the reading or analysis of exhibition documents such as scope papers, section plans and large print guides coupled with a reading of the exhibition's objects, texts, graphics and space itself. In order to understand how museum visitors decode exhibition narratives, I employ semi-structured exit interviews and observations of the visit using video recording equipment to determine the key events that make up their visit narrative.

Part of the reason for adopting these multiple approaches is to capture multiple perspectives and then bring these voices together in a dialogue. Collecting data from multiple sources also acts as a means of triangulation, which lessens the likelihood of the data collection being misinterpreted.

5.3.1 Selection of micro-cases

In differentiating a case study approach from an ethnography, Hohenstein and Moussouri (2018, 45) outline some of its key qualities in that rather than looking at the broader picture in the way the ethnography does, the case study tends to hone in on the way a person, or institution in my case, passes through some experience by gathering as much information as possible about the experience from the person's perspective. In the example of my case study, I was interested in understanding the phenomenon of narrative in the blockbuster exhibitions of the British Museum. These exhibitions had been a hallmark of Neil MacGregor's tenure as director of the British Museum from 2002 until 2015. As I have outlined in chapter two, the opening up of space has been the cause of major change in the narrative strategy of displays at the British Museum. The departure of the natural history displays to the newly built Natural History Museum in South Kensington allowed space for an extensive redisplay of the ethnology collections in the 1870s. In turn, the departure of the ethnology collections to the Museum of Mankind freed up space for the British Museum to host *Treasures of Tutankhamun* in 1972. The return of the blockbuster to the British Museum under the tenure of Neil MacGregor in the form of the *First Emperor: China's terracotta army* in 2007, had been enabled by the departure of the collections of the British Library to a purpose-built building in Saint Pancras in 1997. This freed up space in the form of the Round Reading Room that once again allowed the British Museum to have an exhibition space that could host big blockbuster exhibitions, albeit temporarily.

The opening of the new World Conservation and Exhibition's Centre, at the cost of £135 million pounds one of the largest and expensive building projects in British Museum history (British Museum 2013), felt like a significant moment. I was interested in how this new space would potentially result in changes to the British Museum's display strategy in relation to narrative. As I was conducting my PhD on a part-time basis, while continuing to work as an interpretation officer, this also allowed me a longer time period to collect data. As a result, I was able to collect data for the British Museum's big summer blockbusters for

2013, 2014 and 2015. This enabled me to capture the last exhibition to be held in the British Museum's Round Reading Room (*Life and death in Pompei and Herculaneum*, 2013), the first in the new display space of the World Conservation and Exhibition's Centre (*Vikings: Life and legend*, 2014) and also the follow-up summer blockbuster in 2015 (*Defining Beauty: The body in Ancient Greece*). Effectively, this allowed me to tell the story of how this change in space affected the display strategies of the British Museum. As the last exhibition staged in the Round Reading Room, *Pompeii and Herculaneum* can be seen as a culmination of curatorial, design and interpretive lessons learned from the previous nine shows held in the space. *Vikings: Life and legend* attempted to employ many of the same strategies as the Round Reading Room exhibitions, but the shape and feel of the new space proved unexpectedly problematic to this kind of narrative approach. As a result, *Defining Beauty: The body in Ancient Greece* can be seen as a reaction against the narrative approach employed by *Vikings: Life and legend*, as the museum adopted a variety of strategies, which prioritised the encounter with the individual object over the overall narrative of the exhibition.

As well as telling the story of the transition from different spaces, the three micro-cases also tell the story of the final year of Neil MacGregor's tenure as Director. In 2015 Neil MacGregor left the British Museum to take up a new position as founding director of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. During his time as Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor had developed a distinctive style 'of using objects and the forum of an exhibition to try to understand the complex world in which we live' (MacGregor 2012, 9). This object-based approach proved to be extremely successful in terms of visitor numbers, the critical acclaim given to radio series *A history of the World in 100 objects*, and resulted in Neil MacGregor being announced by the *Times* as Briton of the Year in 2008 (Campbell-Johnston 2008). As the final exhibitions of his tenure, these displays can be seen as both a reaction to what has come before and a forerunner of what is to come. *Pompeii and Herculaneum's* focus on the lives of everyday people can be seen as a direct reaction to the first four exhibitions in the Round Reading Room, known as the Great Ruler series, which

focussed on the reigns of great men. *Vikings: Life and legend* was staged in collaboration with institutions in both Copenhagen and Germany and can be seen as an attempt to reflect on European identity. Finally, *Defining Beauty: the body in Ancient Greece* can be seen as Neil MacGregor's response to a question that was frequently posed to him during tenure: should the Parthenon Sculptures be returned to Greece? This issue of a repatriation brings forth the tensions that lie at the heart of MacGregor's vision of the role of the universal museum in the twenty-first century.

5.3.2 Recruiting participants

For staff interviews the curator of the exhibition was initially approached and then other members of the exhibition team including the designers, interpretation officers and project managers. Interviewing core members of the museum exhibition team would lead to suggestions of other actors who were involved in the exhibition-making process.

Visitor groups were approached as they queued to buy tickets for the exhibition. They were asked if they were willing to take part in a research project and were told that if they took part they would gain free access to the exhibition. It was important that visitors were motivated to visit the exhibition prior to me interviewing them. This enabled me to investigate the visitor's motivation for visiting the exhibition and also their prior relationship to the exhibition's subject matter. To avoid ethical issues around interviewing children, only visitor groups in which all participants were over the age of sixteen were interviewed.

5.3.3 Narrative interviews with exhibition makers

For the interview with museum professionals I adopted a narrative interview approach. The narrative interview was introduced by Schutze (1987) as a special method for collecting narratives. Participants are asked to remember and recount their experiences in relation to specific larger changes and developments. In the narrative interview, the informant is asked to present the history of an area of interest in which the interviewee participated, in an extempore narrative. In the case of the exhibition interview this would be

related to their involvement with the exhibition. For the curators in particular this could often date back to how they developed an interest in their chosen subject in their childhood.

A precondition for successfully conducting the interview is to explain the specific character of the interview situation to the interviewee. I would always begin by telling the interviewee the three part-structure of the interview and why I was interested in the topic of narrative and the museum exhibition. A narrative interview is begun using a 'generative narrative question' (Riemann and Schutze 1987, 353) refers to the topic of the study and its intention to stimulate the interviewee's main narrative. I usually began each interview by asking the museum-maker to tell me about how they created the particular exhibition and when did they first become involved with its creation?

The interviewer's task is to make the informant tell the story of the area of interest as a consistent story of all relevant events from beginning to its end. (Hermans 1995, 183). It is crucial that interviewer does not interrupt or obstruct the narrative by interrupting with evaluations or questions. Instead, I acted as an active listener, waiting for a coda that indicated that the story had come to an end.

The next stage of the interview was to give the staff member a map of the exhibition and ask them to talk me through how they thought the exhibition narrative functioned. Talking through the plan allowed me to undertake narrative probing in which the narrative fragments that were not exhaustively detailed in the interview before were filled out in detail.

The final stage of the interview is the balancing phase, where the museum maker was asked questions that aim at providing a theoretical overview of the story of the exhibition's making what happened and at balancing the story, reducing the 'meaning' of the whole to its common denominator' (Hermans 1995, 184). This might be likened to what Labov and Waletzky (1967) call the evaluative moment of the narrative, in which the teller reveals to the listener the point of the story. In this balancing phase, more and more abstract

questions were asked, such as 'what do you think is the role of narrative in museum exhibitions?' which aimed to encourage the museum maker into description and argument.

5.3.4 Episodic group interviews with visitors

The interviews with visitors were semi-structured and took what Silverman (2000) describes as an episodic group approach. If visitors came to the exhibition as a group, they were interviewed collectively as a group. Group discussion corresponds to the way in which opinions are produced, expressed and exchanged within the exhibition itself. The decision was made to conduct group interviews rather than interview individuals separately because as Pollock (1955, 34) states 'studying the attitudes, opinions and practices of human beings in artificial isolation from the contexts in which they occur should be avoided.' Within the museum, Leinhardt and Crowley (2002, 159) have shown how when groups talk about a specific object, an idea connected to that object, and a thematic interpretation of it, they are building up shared meanings surrounding that object or concept. Leinhardt and Crowley (2002, 159) argue that this kind of combined knowledge leads to more extensive discussion and understanding and talking is a tool for socially-constructed thought, not just evidence of it.

Groups interviews have been conducted in a number of studies (Merton, Fiske and Kendall 1956; Fontana and Frey 2000; Merton 1987) and one of the advantages of group interviews is that it can lead to discussion between the participants that can illuminate an issue. A group discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another's disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device I know of (Blumer 1969, 41). During the group interview, one of my main tasks was to prevent single participants or partial groups from dominating the interview and thus the whole group with their contributions.

The interview then took an episodic form in which the visitor recounted the experience of the exhibition from entering to exiting. The starting point for the episodic

interview (Flick 2000a; 2007b,) is that assumption that subjects' experiences of a certain domain are stored and remembered in forms of narrative-episodic and semantic knowledge. The episodic interview relies on a distinction between episodic knowledge which is organised closer to experiences and linked to concrete situations and semantic knowledge, which is based on concepts, assumptions and relations which are abstracted from these and generalised.

An episodic interview approach was chosen rather than a narrative approach during the interviews with museum makers because some people have greater problems with narrating than others. An episodic approach meant that visitors were not immediately asked to formulate a coherent narrative of their visit but rather construct each episode of their visit, which they could reflect on and then form into a coherent narrative if they so wished.

Visitors were interviewed after they had exited the exhibition and were provided with a hot drink in the British Museum Great Court Café. This provided me with a comfortable public space in which visitors could recount their narratives. To facilitate the episodic recollection of the exhibition visit, visitors were asked to draw their route on a plan of the exhibition and mark up anything that stood out in their minds on the plan. This could be a memorable object, a piece of information they'd read, an encounter with another visitor, or anything else they recalled from their time in the space. They were then asked to talk me through what they'd marked up on the plan, which provided the episodic structure of the first part of the interview.

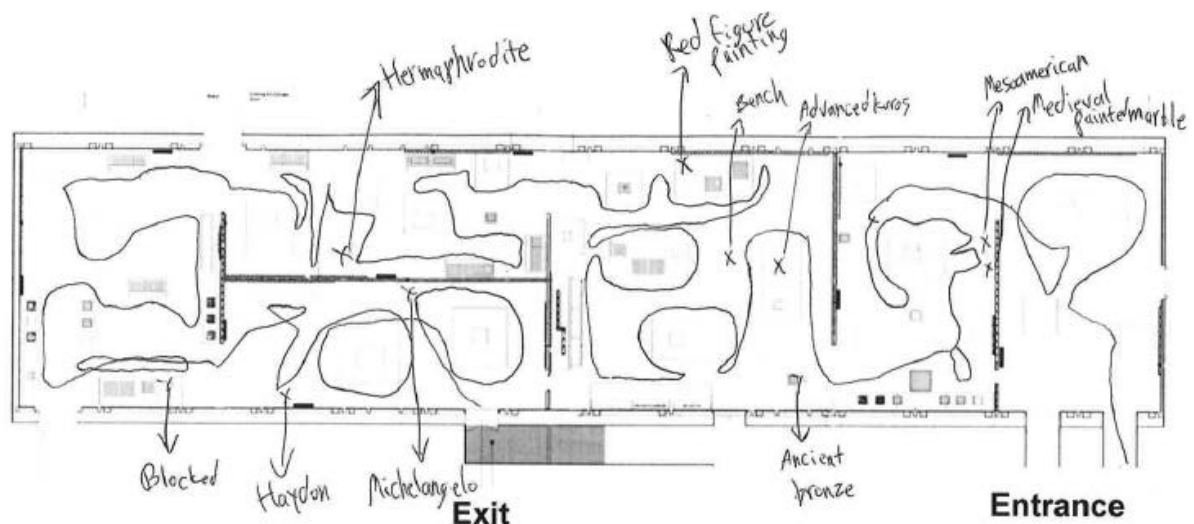


Fig. 5.1 An example of a marked-up visitor plan of the Defining Beauty exhibition

The second phase of the interview was a balancing phase in which the interviewer's subjective definitions and abstract relations to the exhibition were probed. This allowed visitors the opportunity to reflect on what they'd said as a whole and draw out what might be the main evaluative moment of the narrative they told me. Visitors were also asked to talk about the relationship to the exhibition subject matter and museums and heritage more broadly. They were asked what interested them in the exhibition subject matter and whether they had any formal education in relation to it. They were also asked about why they visited museum exhibitions and when they first began doing it? The country of origin, group composition, age range, educational background of the visitor groups was also collected in this portion of the interview.

5.3.5 Observation

As well as interviewing the visitors, one member of each visitor group wore a video camera. This was hung around their neck in the fashion of an audio-guide to remain unobtrusive and avoid the visitors feeling self-conscious. This provided a first-person perspective of the visitor's movement through the exhibition, which could then be compared with how visitors described their visit in the episodic interviews. The main focus of my study was to create a dialogue between the narratives of the exhibition makers and the narratives

of the museum visitors. The video footage provided the opportunity to supplement the visitor interview data with observation about how visitors actually behaved within the space. For example, in *Vikings: Life and legend* it allowed me to see what particular strategies visitors adopted to cope with the overcrowded nature of the exhibition. In *Defining Beauty* the video footage allowed me to understand how visitors chose to negotiate the non-linear space of the exhibition's central section. The video footage provided the opportunity for triangulation, which is an important aspect of achieving validity in qualitative research. For example, researchers undertaking experience-centred narrative research have also looked to triangulate oral accounts with other data, for instance comparing the recollection of an interview with a newspaper article reporting on the same event (Chamberlayne et al. 2002).

5.3.6 Documentary sources and reading the exhibition as a text

As well as drawing on the perspectives of the exhibition makers and visitors, another source of data was the texts that were used to construct the exhibition. These texts include both planning documents such as the scope paper and section-planning form. These documents were primarily used as a means of gaining a better understanding of the exhibition-making process.

Texts that were used for analysis also included the panel and label text that make up the exhibition. Again, these texts provided a way of triangulating what exhibition makers and museum visitors had told me about the content of the display itself. Occasionally, as was the case with the texts that were inserted into *Defining Beauty* by the Director, it was not just the content of the text but their graphic treatment that was revealing. With this in mind, it was important to be able to look at texts in the exhibition, and in photographs, as it was to access the complete script of the exhibition, which was provided by the large print guide.

Finally, texts include the idea explored by Whitehead (2016) that a museum display itself might be likened to a script, or a text, to be read. Whitehead (2016, 7) makes the point that although the idea of the museum as a text is more or less orthodoxy that opens up opportunities for inquiry but forecloses others. In particular, the idea of the museum as a text

is challenged by those theorists working in the domain of New Materialism, which I have outlined in depth in Chapter four. Nevertheless, in attempting to apply some of the narrative concepts outlined in my Chapters three and four to the museum as text, I am drawing on a rich tradition including amongst others Bal (1996; 2007), Lidchi (1997) and Lyotard (1996).

5.4 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

This study followed the guidelines of the UCL Research Ethics Committee. The main ethical consideration of this study is the potential for making visitors feel uncomfortable about their lack of knowledge about the subject matters covered within the museum. The study only approached adult-only groups (over sixteens) to avoid any ethical issues regarding interviewing children. None of this data was published in an identifiable form to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Data was stored according to the criteria outlined by the UCL ethics committee. Reflexivity has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasising the importance of self-awareness, political or cultural consciousness, and ownership of perspective (Patton 2002, 64). MacBeth (2011, 35) defines reflexivity as an exercise for locating the intersection of author, other, text, and world and for penetrating the representational exercise itself. The researcher will acknowledge his own role as an Interpretation Officer at the British Museum and how this might affect his own relationship to the institution and its exhibitions.

5.5 Analysis

Data analysis began from my five research questions, which are listed at the start of this chapter. These five questions provided the initial concepts to orient myself towards the data. I was interested in anything that exhibition makers or visitors said that was related to structure, perspective, anti-narrative or social background and museum visiting and narrative more broadly.

Reading through the transcripts of interviews, I searched for threads, tensions and themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which created subthemes that arose from the data. These four initial themes allowed me to focus my reading of the initial interviews. From there much of my data analysis was informed by a grounded theory approach, which involved the inductive development of categories related to key narrative elements and the deductive application of these categories to interview data. Key to this was the process of coding, Corbin and Strauss (2008) described as a dynamic process of taking raw material to a conceptual level. Adopting a grounded theory approach was thought to be appropriate because it allowed codes to emerge from the data, which are not imposed *a priori* upon it.

This had a three-stage process, initial coding which was open and involved going over the transcripts of the interviews and marking up relevant passages with different coloured pens. This produced a vast array of different themes, which came from the text itself. For example, foreshadowing developed as a code in relation to several visitors describing moments in *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* in which the exhibition's ending was foreshadowed. This word 'foreshadowing' to describe this was used by one of the visitors to describe this moment.

I then used the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo to undergo what Straus and Corbin (2008) describe as axial coding, which established the core categories that related to my research questions. These resulting codes were then group into categories, which were particularly relevant to the research question. The code of *foreshadowing* was grouped into the category that contained all the ways the structure of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* built towards the exhibition's climax. A key part of axial coding was to develop diagrams, which allowed the relationships between categories to be illustrated. This involved both inductive thinking in which I developed concepts categories and relations from the text and deductive thinking in which I tested these concepts, categories and relations against the text (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 114). NVivo enabled me

to store my data and also to organised it hierarchically into a series of categories, which made analysing the data smoother.

Finally, I undertook a process of selective coding, scanning the data for more evidence of these core categories to develop what Strauss and Corbin (1990, 131) describe as the storyline of the case. This storyline creates essentially one central character and one central focus of the case and my storyline is the role of narrative in the museum. As part of selective coding, the theory is formulated in greater detail and again checked against the data. Although I describe the process of coding as three stages, often these were not temporaraly separate phases in the process. Often the result of coding of one my exhibitions would lead to me returning back to a previous exhibition to see if similar codes could be found there.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I explained my methodological approach to investigating how narrative might be thought of as existing dialogically in the museum. The combination of methods I used is meant to reflect the research questions and also glean perspectives from all of the relevant actors to this study. The use of both interviews and observations is meant to ensure that the data collected is well rounded. Data analysis begins from my research questions and then is grounded in the various themes that arise from the data.

Chapter 6

Disasters narratives and *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*

Introduction

In my first analysis chapter, I explore the relationship between space and narrative in the British Museum exhibition, *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (28 March – 29 September 2013). Space is an issue that runs through all three of my case studies, but is particularly prevalent in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, which is structured around the space of the Roman home. Each of my chapters is organised around the floorplan of the exhibition, as a visitor would experience the actual exhibition itself (see fig 6.1).

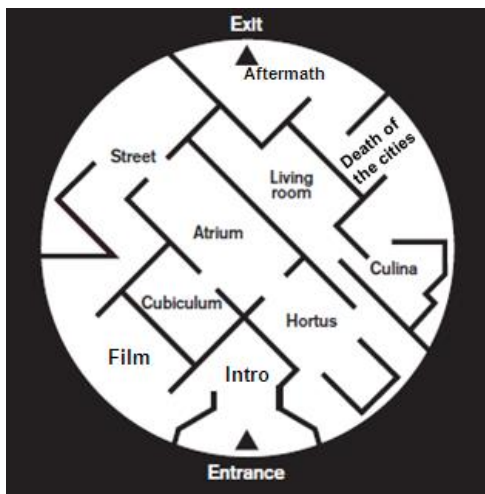


Fig. 6.1 A plan of the *Pompeii and Herculaneum* showing the ten different sections of the exhibition.

In chapter 6, I explore how the narrative of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* is constructed in terms of both structure and perspective. This relate to my research questions 2 and 3 outlined in my introduction. In terms of structure I explore how the exhibition establishes a binary of life and death, which builds towards the exhibition's climax – the encounter with the casts of the bodies. I look at how visitors experience this foreshadowing and encounter with the climax, but also reason for why they might reject this. In terms of perspective, I explore

the exhibition's focus on the everyday and how this was influenced by the curator's social background. I also look at how visitors empathetically relate to the Romans and occasionally reject them, particularly in relation to sexuality. Finally, I consider the issue of space and reconstruction. I look at how the curators and designers navigate the tricky line between evocation and reconstruction and how visitors often yearned for the Museum to push these imaginative elements of the narrative further.

6.1 The space of the round reading room

Before detailing how the combination of objects, texts and design contributes to the narrative of *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, it is important to consider the architectural space that the exhibition takes place in. The exhibition *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* did not exist in isolation but was the last in a sequence of ten exhibitions that were staged in the Round Reading Room. The Round Reading Room was replaced by a purpose-built exhibition space, the Sainsbury's Exhibition Gallery, in 2014. Each of the designers who worked on these displays had to negotiate the challenge of how to create exhibitions in a space that was not originally designed for this purpose. Some of these issues could be surmounted by practical means: a raised floor was used to allow the listed desks and other library furniture to remain in place. Other challenges, such as how to create a series of square rooms within a circular space, or how to prevent Smirke's colossal dome from overshadowing the objects on display, required more conceptual design solutions. As the last in the series of exhibitions held in the Round Reading Room, *Pompeii and Herculaneum* can, therefore, be seen as both a culmination of and reaction to the lessons learned during the construction of its nine predecessors.



Fig. 6.2 A display of terracotta warriors in the exhibition *The First Emperor*. Held in 2007, this was the first exhibition to be held in the Round Reading Room.



Fig. 6.3 *Hadrian: Empire and conflict* was held in 2008 and was the second exhibition in the Great Ruler series.

Originally, the use of the Round Reading Room as an exhibition space was supposed to be a one-time-only event to accommodate the vast crowds expected to visit *The First Emperor* exhibition staged in 2007 (see fig. 6.2). But like *Treasures of Tutankhamun* before it, *The First Emperor* would act as a trigger for a series of high-profile blockbuster exhibitions, each occupying the Round Reading Space. In total, ten exhibitions were held in the Round Reading Room before the construction and opening of the

Sainsbury's World Conservation and Exhibition centre provided a purpose-built alternative. Although originally devised separately, the first four exhibitions – *The First Emperor*, *Hadrian: Life and legacy*, *Shah 'Abbas and the Remaking of Iran* and *Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler* – were grouped together under the collective title – the *Great Ruler* series. *Pompeii and Herculaneum* was deliberately positioned by the exhibition's curator as providing a different approach to history than the exhibitions in the *Great Ruler* series, in particular to the Museum's previous Roman blockbuster *Hadrian: Empire and conflict*. If those exhibitions had emphasised big history and prominent male rulers, then the curator wanted *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* to, in contrast, focus on the lives of everyday people:

Then there was a lot of interest obviously with the Hadrian exhibition...even back then I was thinking about doing something Roman but daily life. Thorsten did the emperor, the high life, from the very beginning I wanted to do ordinary life. (Curator)

The *Great Ruler* series did go beyond the lives of the exhibition's protagonists to explore the wider societies in which they lived. For example, *Moctezuma* featured sections on Aztec religion, while *Shah 'Abbas* focussed on the practice of royal gift giving to Shi'a shrines. The real difference, however, lay in the exhibitions' narrative approaches. While the exhibitions in the *Great Ruler* series were structured around the chronological unfolding of their protagonist's life, *Pompeii and Herculaneum* was organised spatially around the layout of a typical Roman home. The spatial structure adopted by *Pompeii and Herculaneum* – and it is important to note that exhibitions need not have only one single structure, but that different narrative threads can be interwoven – can be seen as drawing on the approaches used in the *Spiritual Journeys* series. As its subtitle suggests, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* led visitors through the labyrinth of the Ancient Egyptian afterlife. *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam* also adopted a structure based around a journey, in which the layout of the exhibition mirrored a Hajji's pilgrimage to Mecca. Both *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam* can be seen as adopting a dramatic and immersive approach to design similar to the British Museum's original blockbuster exhibition *Treasures*

of *Tutankhamun*. A digital animation of the climactic moment in which the heart of the deceased was weighed, was used as the centrepiece of *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (fig. 6.4). In *Hajj*, when visitors eventually reached the Mecca section they were confronted by a scaled-down replica of the *Ka'ba* – the black cube-shaped 'house of god', which pilgrims circumambulate as an essential part of the rituals of Hajj (fig 6.5). Given its theatrical subject matter, *Shakespeare's Restless World*, the ninth exhibition held in the Round Reading Room, had a licence to take the exhibition scenography even further. Sections on the landscape of Elizabethan England took place in a series of stylised trees that evoked the Forest of Arden (fig. 6.6), while the final section that explored the arrival of Europeans in the Americas took place within the starkness of a white cube. Both in terms of curation and design, these prior Round Reading Room exhibitions can be seen as exerting an important influence on *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Indeed, as *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* was produced by Land Design who were the designers for *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*.



Fig. 6.4 One of the thresholds in the exhibition *ancient Egyptian book of the dead*. Digital media was used extensively in this exhibition to give visitors an impression of journeying through the ancient Egyptian afterlife.



Fig. 6.5 The Ka'ba display which formed the climax of the 2010 exhibition Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam.



Fig. 6.6 Shakespeare: staging the world deliberately adopted theatrical devices and set dressing in its exhibition design.

As the curator of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* commented, the Round Reading Room series of exhibition would usher in a very different exhibition-making process than when he first joined in the mid-nineties:

I did a couple of exhibitions working with Susan Walker. We did the Ancient Faces/the Mummy Portraits and so I learned a lot about an exhibition process. Not the same one that we have now obviously. There was no exhibitions department, no interpretation back then. What was that? (Curator)

This process of internal change was not unique to the British Museum, but can be seen as part of a wider cultural trend that has occurred in a number of museums in Europe and North America as they attempted to become more audience focussed.

5.2 The introduction – establishing a structure

As visitors enter the Round Reading Room for the *Pompeii and Herculaneum* exhibition, the first vista they encounter is at the top of the stairs and consists of three objects. The three objects (see fig. 6.7) – a cast of a dog from Pompeii, a carbonised tripod table from Herculaneum and a fresco of a couple drinking on a bed – can semantically be seen as representing the key binaries that would form the underlying narrative structure of the exhibition. For example, the fresco symbolises life while the cast of the dog symbolises death. By placing them together they establish the binary of the ‘life and death’ of the exhibition’s title. Similarly, the dog represents Pompeii, while the table represents Herculaneum.

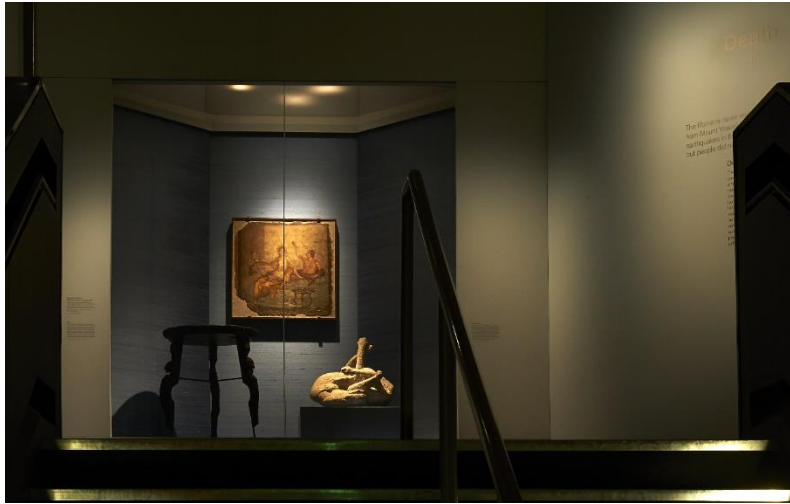


Fig. 6.7 The vista that visitors were greeted with of three objects at the top of the stairs in the introductory area of the exhibition.

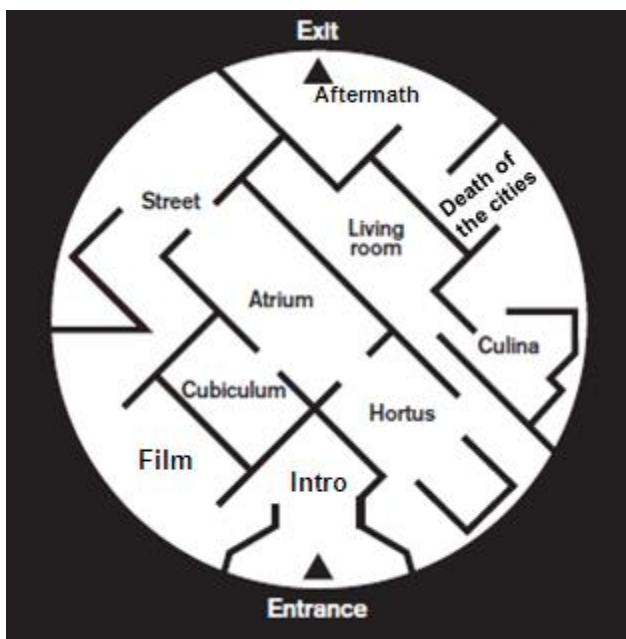


Fig. 6.8 Plan of the exhibition showing the location of section 1: the introduction



The establishment of the exhibition's key binaries



Fig. 6.9 The narrative arc of *Pompeii and Herculaneum*. The red represents the arc as suggested by the interviews of the museum makers and the green represents the arc as suggested by the interviews of the museum visitors. The rendering of the arc is subjective and my own interpretation. In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* the arc as told by the museum makers and the visitors resembled one another. In act 1 the exhibition's key binaries are established.

This was not the only binary, however, that these three objects established as the curator explained:

The key objects that were chosen at the beginning were the dog to represent Pompeii, but in the case of the dog to also represent death. The life was represented by a fresco showing a scene of daily life – lovers in a bedroom having a drink. The drinks resting on a wooden table and then having the wooden table from Herculaneum next to it. And then, in one fell swoop, if you like you've got the idea of life, death, Herculaneum and Pompeii. What is new – the table, what is familiar – the dog. You've got two cities, life, death, new things, old friends, that really sums up what the exhibition is going to be all about. (Curator)

In the words of the curator, *'it's vital you get that right at the beginning. It's no use having that later, that's got to hit them between the eyes.'* These three objects can, therefore, be seen as an example of how an introduction to an exhibition functions. If the beginning of a novel or a film, should establish the time, the locality, the key characters and the motivation, then this is what these three objects also do. Furthermore, objects do not necessarily do this in isolation but in their juxtapositions: the placement of the fresco containing a table with the carbonised wooden table from Herculaneum invites connection. This grouping of objects relates back to the spatial elements of the exhibition. Visitors approach the objects by ascending a flight of stairs. These objects are both seen from a distance and seen in isolation from any other objects. Apart from the final section, which contains two objects, this is the least object-dense area of the exhibition.

In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* this binary is initially established by the exhibition's title: *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Structuring an exhibition around a binary is common museum practice and is repeated in the next exhibition I analyse *Vikings: Life and legend*. The origins of the focus on the everyday as one of the key themes of the exhibition can be traced back to the curator's early childhood, growing up as the son of restaurant owners in the North of England:

From the very beginning, I wanted to do ordinary life. I grew up in a restaurant, I love food, I speak to ordinary people, that's the angle that interests me and has always interested me...you know in a previous life I would have been one of the slaves serving people their dinner. I might at a push have owned the restaurant, but I wouldn't have been one of the masters, absolutely certain. (Curator)

This focus on the everyday was important both for the curator in reflecting his own background and for the visitors as a central prism by which they read the exhibition. It also had another function, as it helped to differentiate the exhibition from what the curator described as the *'off-the-peg ones, the tours that had gone around the world.'* Although the curator was offered one of the standard exhibitions, he already had a clear idea of what he

wanted to do: 'if you don't mind I'd rather do my own because I want to do the house, I want to do domestic life, and all the space I want to give it over to everyday life'. When the curator outlined his approach to the superintendent in Naples it proved extremely popular:

The Italians loved the idea of a different exhibition. They liked that idea, they liked very much the idea of putting Herculaneum on a level with Pompeii because it never is. (Curator)

The curator's comments here typify the tension that exists at the heart of the blockbuster exhibition as a narrative genre. It can be both a work of scholarship, the culmination of one individual's life work, and, at the same time, it can also be seen as something that lacks uniqueness or originality. As Bakhtin (Morris 1994, 4) states, 'no text exists in isolation but is always in dialogue with another.' Both my case studies for my following analysis chapters – *Vikings: Life and Legend* and *Defining Beauty* – can be seen as in dialogue with one exhibition in particular. For *Vikings: Life and legend* it is the *Viking* exhibition held at the British Museum in 1980. For *Defining Beauty: The Body in Greek Art* it is the permanent exhibition in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens. *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* can be said to differ from these two exhibitions in that it was not in dialogue with a specific exhibition, but exhibitions about the subject of Pompeii and Herculaneum exhibitions as a genre. The curator cited the treatment many exhibitions gave to the cast bodies as particularly problematic. He gave the example of one, which he did not care to name, in which Barber's *Adagio for Strings* played in the background. The sheer frequency of touring exhibitions about the subject is reflected in the fact that the exhibition team took several visits to touring exhibitions in Washington, Paris and Halle, during the exhibition build-up. Although some ideas were borrowed from these exhibitions: the inclusion of a full room of garden frescoes as shown in Paris proved to be an important influence. Generally, these exhibitions functioned as something for the curator to react against. Just as the blockbuster film is often criticised for its stock format and formulaic structure, so the curator wanted to react against the format of typical exhibitions on Pompeii.

When we talk about exhibition narratives, we are generally referring to the story that the exhibition objects, texts and design are combining to tell. Yet the development of the exhibition can also be regarded as containing a similar narrative structure, which builds to the climax of the opening of the exhibition. This is something that the exhibition curator specifically references, drawing a parallel between the narrative arc of the exhibition and the story of the exhibition-making process:

In a way, the exhibition mirrors my journey going through it. And you get the climax at the end and all hell breaking loose, and I'm not saying it was death and destruction but my Christ it was intense, that six months of the exhibition being on. Then the lead up to it, and then the writing of the book beforehand. All of these things were happening. It was an incredible experience, it nearly broke me... But it was one and the same time, the most enjoyable thing I've ever done in my life. I will never do another one. Never. Because I would never enjoy it like I did this one, this was part of me. (Curator)

The curator of *Life and Death in Herculaneum* is not alone in describing the exhibition-making process as consisting of both moments of exultation and despair. Both the curators of *Vikings: Life and Legend* and the curator of *Defining Beauty* talked in similar terms about the highs and lows of the exhibition-making process. Although blockbuster exhibitions are often portrayed as commercial enterprises created to a specific formula, such testimonies illustrate the deeply personal relationship a curator has with their particular exhibition. Some curators will only ever produce one blockbuster exhibition in their lifetime and as a result the exhibition can be seen extension of their values, interests and social background.

5.2.1 Visitors and the everyday

This focus on the everyday not only differentiates *Pompeii and Herculaneum* from previous Round Reading Room exhibitions, it also dictates a particular way of looking at and encountering the objects. The interpretation officer makes the distinction between how we

look at everyday objects compared to great works of art. She argues that there is a phenomenological difference, that our familiarity with the everyday gives us access to the tactile and haptic qualities of these objects:

'There's also that kind of phenomenological thing about how they [i.e. visitors] feel when they look at very, very familiar objects like a saucepan, or some jewellery, and that way that we all know how those things feel like. The weight of them and the touch of them, and how those kind of affects can impact on the experience when it's this kind of really familiar subject matter.' (Interpretation officer)

In his study of the role objects play in the lives of everyday people living in a single street, Miller (2008) argues that the objects we amass and display in our homes are a way of telling stories about our own lives. In displaying everyday objects in the setting of a home, the exhibition could also be seen as presenting a more familiar way of understanding an object for visitors than in the traditional gallery. The everyday was a theme that was frequently brought up by visitors as to how to read and understand the exhibition. Andrew described it as, *'giving you a sense of everyday life'*. Casper describes the exhibition as, *'a picture of a life cut short, a life that we would all understand and be familiar with in our lives'*. Frasier highlighted the notion of the everyday as distinguishing the exhibition from other exhibitions:

I mentioned this to you beforehand. This is going to be just another, I don't mean just another exhibition, but I thought maybe there isn't something so distinctive but as we got into it, it really is, it really is different... It wasn't just the kind of elite stuff but everyday things.

As the interpretation officer suggested, these everyday objects were often understood because of their familiarity. Freida likes the bottle of fish sauce because she enjoys cooking: *I liked the fish sauce, the fish sauce really drew my attention because I like cooking and that whole thing very minute description of how they made this fermented mackerel, remnants of mackerel bones.*

A variety of objects were read and understood through this lens of familiarity. For example, Catherine likes *the kitchen utensils, the scales, the baking tray* because they *looked modern*. Similarly, Norbert remarked about objects appearing newer than they actually were, '*Yes that beautiful table with the panther. It looks like 17 or 18th or 19th century.*'

Familiarity was not simply an important quality in itself, but rather a means by which visitors felt they could make a connection with the inhabitants of the cities. The power of the object is often related to its perceived authenticity, visitors talk about the impact of encountering objects that they have seen in television, magazines and marketing material in the museum. The casts of the bodies from Pompeii and Herculaneum certainly fall into the category of iconic objects. Everyday objects have a different kind of authenticity, an authenticity that allows visitors to connect with individual people who lived in the past. Such objects give visitors an insight into what it would have been like to live in a different time and a different place.

As well as actively encountering everyday people through the objects they owned, depictions of people were also a means by which visitors could access and feel a connection with them. The object that was most frequently spoken about in these terms was the portrait of the baker and his wife (See fig. 6.10). Visitors had been cued to encounter it as the lead image of the marketing poster, but it also had encountered by some visitors elsewhere. Emma knew the image from a postcard she had been sent by a friend: '*The baker and his wife. I've got a picture of those two somewhere. My friend sent me a picture of literary women throughout history, and I like baking.*'



Fig. 6.10 The portrait of the baker and his wife

This object allowed visitors to encounter Romans face to face, *'they're so real aren't they'* (Emma). As well as their familiarity, visitors also related to the portrait because they perceived it as presenting a certain level of equality between the sexes. This was something Charles, Catherine and Christine spoke about:

Catherine: *I liked the way the women were equals* (laughs)

Christine: (Laughs) *Yes, I was just about to say the same thing.*

Charles: *Sort of, sort of.*

Catherine: *Yes, they weren't really but the business partners, the two in the painting with the scroll. With both of them looking straight at you.*

Relationships between men and women were not the only forms of behaviour that visitors also found relatable in the exhibition. Scenes such as *'the punch-up in the tavern'* were brought-up because of their *'humanity'*, it *'relates to the world we now live in'* (Barry). The rules listed in the dining room of, *'Don't cover someone's wife something like that and*

take your quarrels home with you' were also regarded as 'a hundred years old quite a good...set of rules, useful I think used in our home now.' (Harry)

Both of these examples have a certain element of humorous transgression about them. This humorous tone, not often found in museum exhibitions, can be seen as part of the exhibition's focus on the everyday. It can be related to what Bakhtin regards as the carnivalesque quality of everyday life, found in the writings of Rabelais. This was not only suggested by the particular objects that were displayed, but also by the tone of voice adopted by the exhibition's label text and audioguide. Describing the text-sign off process, the interpretation officer remarked that there had been some initial resistance when the text was presented to the project team. She put this down to two main reasons. One was that the certain labels were sexually frank, the term '*cocksucker*' was used in one label. The other was that it was quite different to the normal '*BM tone*' in that it '*sounded quite down to earth and was very humorous.*' These two features caused some concern: *There were some concerns. Is that really the kind of thing the British Museum should be doing? That's not really how we do things. That's not a BM tone of voice. There was a dish in the kitchen, you know it was a lasagne dish and we said maybe that was used to make lasagne. There was criticism of that. And just generally the tone of voice was not automatically signed off. It took some persuading.* (Interpretation officer)

Visitors tended not to comment on the tone of the label text. The exception to this was when it was felt that the label text was trying to make the visitors think or feel something. Then an authorial presence was remarked upon. An example of this is Emma who noted that the exhibition curation was seeking to '*push women*': *I was interested whoever was curating it was obviously pushing women. [Laughs] Which is good, but it felt slightly forced...obviously it's good to have a lot of women but I felt it was the lady doth protest too much slightly. But I'd rather have that than not. So give me that any day.* (Emma)

In contrast to Emma, Fredrick and Fiona felt that the moments where you noticed the agenda underlying the text detracted from the exhibition. In particular, this was related to when the text was attempting to elicit an emotional response in the visitor:

Frederick: *There's the odd place but not too many where they tell you what you should think. Like 'we all live in fear of natural events.' And then I think with the resin woman, 'this is the most moving'. So, you're being told what to think.*

Fiona: *I would cut out all that emotional stuff. I thought let me just concentrate on the objects. I don't want to hear about why this is so moving and why we should be thinking how terrifying it was, because obviously everybody thought about it. And it's not necessary to exaggerate that.*

This suspicion that the text was trying to elicit an emotional response in the visitor also relates the use of an audio soundtrack in certain sections. Fredrick again commented that this was something that jarred with him because of its lack of authenticity: *There are one or two things I didn't like. I don't like the sound of horse hooves and birdsong and all that sort of thing. It was a bit kind of fake.* (Fredrick)

This use of sound effects was also a cause of debate within the exhibition team. Initially, the curator had doubts about the presence of birdsong playing in the garden room: *Then you had the bird song. As soon as you came into the room you heard the twittering of birds. I hated the idea. When the designer first said about birds, I hated the idea. I thought it would be kitsch and awful.* (Curator)

However, when the curator heard the bird song in the space he underwent a conversion:

And then I heard them in the space, and I thought this is beautiful, people will love this. And I saw people reduced to tears by the bird song. I was reduced to tears by the bird song on one occasion. I just thought this is sublime this is lovely.



Fig. 6.11 The garden section of the exhibition in which an audio soundtrack of birdsong was played.

The issue of what is fake and real and the role of non-objects in the exhibition narrative is a central one to *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. It is also present in my latter two case studies: *Vikings: Life and legend* and *Defining Beauty*. In the next section, I turn to what is absent and what cannot be represented – the wider city of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the actual house itself – and how digital media attempts to compensate, or fill, this absence.

6.3.1 Digital media and the reconstruction of reality in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*

The interplay between space and objects is key to the narrative of *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Some things, however, cannot be represented through objects, nor can the space contain everything. As visitors left section one, the introduction, they next entered an area showing a film, which made the comparison between the lives of the citizens of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* and contemporary Italians. Initially, there had been suggestions that the exhibition begin with this film. However, the curator insisted that the exhibition begin with objects, rather than the film, as the opening encounter '*dictated the tone of the exhibition*'. He elaborated: *My belief was that it was essential to have the objects first so that people were not confused. If you'd launched straight into a film, for example, people will get the impression that the film is going to dictate the tone of the exhibition and then when they see the objects they will find that it doesn't... You get objects first, and you remind people that you are a museum. Get the things in.* (Curator)

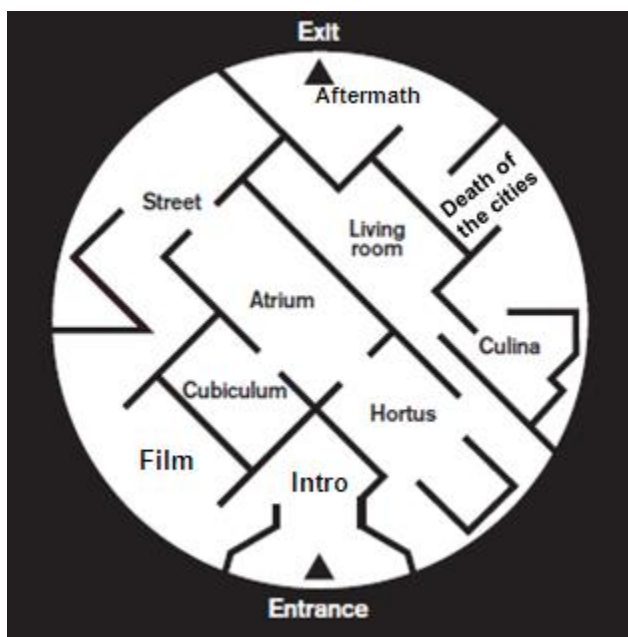


Fig. 6.12 A plan of the exhibition. The digital media film was located in the second section.



Fig. 6.13 The film section of the exhibition.



Fig. 6.14 The introductory film delivered the key binaries of the exhibition, but in a different format.

Despite the curator's insistence on the primacy of the object, there have always been aspects of an exhibition subject matter that have proved difficult to represent through objects alone. In the case of the original blockbuster, *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, this was the feeling of what it was like to descend into the tomb. For *Pompeii and Herculaneum* it was the town beyond the home that the exhibition struggled to replicate. This was something that was commented on by several visitor groups who had actually visited the site itself:

It doesn't, it doesn't substitute, it's not a substitute for visiting the site. Because what you get from the site is the scale of the city and more of the civic works, aspects like the drains, and the rutted roads, and the road signs – (Burt)

I guess the only thing missing is the site... oh, I don't know... It's like when you're out there, you're just wow, it's massive. Just massive? And there's a kind of central square area for the people and people doing like different types of business, and all the houses... (Beatriz)

The other aspect of the exhibition that couldn't be represented through objects alone was the eruption of Vesuvius. Key issues such as, how to explain technical terms like pyroclastic flow to visitors, how this led to the preservation of material culture and the bodies, and also how to address misconceptions such as Pompeii being buried beneath magma and lava. This challenge was not unique to the British Museum exhibition. In the Museum of Naples, a scale model of the city was placed beneath a digital reconstruction showing a 'fly-through of the city.' This showed visitors individual houses, including the House of the Tragic Poet, alongside the public architecture of the city, including the forum and the theatre. A similar idea was suggested for *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* with an initial fly-through placing the house in the context of the town, and a multimedia installation at the end of the exhibition explaining the volcano.

Both of these digital media aspects were downplayed, however: the flythrough was reduced to a small monitor at the start of section two, and the multimedia display explaining

the eruption of Vesuvius was replaced with a timeline of the events on the day of the eruption. Instead, a digital film was created in the second section of the exhibition. Rather than a digital reconstruction, which was deemed old-fashioned, the film interspersed close-ups of the objects in the exhibition with footage of contemporary Neapolitans living their lives in much the same fashion as their Roman predecessors. From a curatorial perspective the film was controversial for two reasons. Firstly, in the curator's words, it remained, *'the territory of the exhibitions department.'* The curator expressed some ambivalence about the content of the film, describing it as *'not mine by conception, it was not mine by execution.'* He described his role as *'feeding into it to provide factual accuracy'*, and described the end product as *'what a filmmaker will do'*. Some visitors, he felt, liked the content: *I think for some people who quite rightly had no concept, and why should they have a concept of Roman daily life, it could have been quite helpful to present a modern framework. Especially because it's Italy and therefore it's closer to the real action.*

However, he felt that some other visitors didn't like it, feeling it *'disingenuous to try and compare anything ancient with anything modern.'* The curator's interpretation of visitors' response to the film was in line with how the interviewees responded to it. Thirteen visitor groups were positive about the film: *That film at the beginning where you're taken through the house. Well, that could beat anything on Grand Designs. It was a beautiful place to live. A courtyard with cooling winds and open plan. Just lovely. I'd love to live in a house like that.* (Lilian)

Three, however, expressed negative opinions, chiefly related to the tone of the film: *Half of it was fine, the sort of live action bit. This illustrated sections with the animated words describing what it was portraying 'pyroclastic', 'collapsed' I thought it was a bit puerile, to be honest and I mean Horrible Histories does something similar. But it does it in a 'we're being educational here guys kind of way.'* And I thought considering the audience was on average about 50 and above yes, it felt a bit forced. (Monica)

The other aspect of the film that was felt to be problematic by both the curator and the interpretation officer was the length, which ran to around ten minutes. Before the exhibition opened it was felt that visitors either might not stay for the entirety of the film or if they did, would leave when the film looped. However, the majority of visitors stayed until the film finished. This led to bottlenecks of queuing visitors as they left the Film section and entered the Street section. This was commented on by the curator: *Because no matter what people said about people will come in and then they'll leave, no people watched it from beginning to end. And at the end of the film, you had that exodus, and that was a real problem acknowledged by everyone. Visitor services said it was at some points it was dangerous it was so. Which loads of people left when it got... when it looped and that made quite a big crowd.* (Curator)

Due to limitations of space and budget, only one major piece of digital media could be used in the exhibition. The curator therefore felt that the introductory film came at the expense of both the flythrough of the town and a digital reconstruction of the volcano. He said: *I would have wanted a reconstruction of an urban area – the forum for example and then to pan to the house and to go into that house. I think that was never clear, and the film was the only place we can do that. I wanted more volcano, I'm sorry I don't believe you should say, well people will know what it looks like, you can say that about anything.* (Curator)

Digital reconstruction can act as a stand-in for what cannot be represented by objects, but it cannot represent everything. In *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* the everyday lives of Italians are represented at the expense of the city and the volcanic eruption. Furthermore, it is important that film, rather than physical reconstruction or digital animation, is chosen as the medium by which this aspect of the city is represented. This can be seen in part as the exhibition designers trying to differentiate themselves from what might be deemed old-fashioned, or first-wave, heritage interpretation. It also ties into the overall notion of the blockbuster exhibition from Tutankhamun onwards sharing close affinities with

its Hollywood blockbuster namesake. This comes into play both in terms of how the designer draws on film and theatrical techniques when building the exhibition-set. It also manifests itself in the use of the 'disaster movie' metaphor which the curator and the interpretation officer use to describe the 'plot' of the exhibition. Finally, it is present in the phenomenon of *Pompeii Live*, described as '*The first live cinema event ever produced by the British Museum, offering an exclusive private view of the major exhibition.*' This experimental broadcast, which was discontinued after a second attempt to repeat it with *Vikings Live*, can be seen as a means of merging the genres of cinema and exhibition ever closer.

6.4 Space and the house

After watching the film, the next six rooms of the exhibition can be seen as combining together to form a larger unit – a typical Roman home. These rooms were the street, the atrium, the cubiculum, the hortus, the living room and the *culina*. In staging the house, the designer was keen to 'evoke' and '*suggest the home*', rather than provide a '*slavish reproduction*'.



Fig. 6.15 The atrium located in the area of the exhibition that was designed to evoke the Roman home.

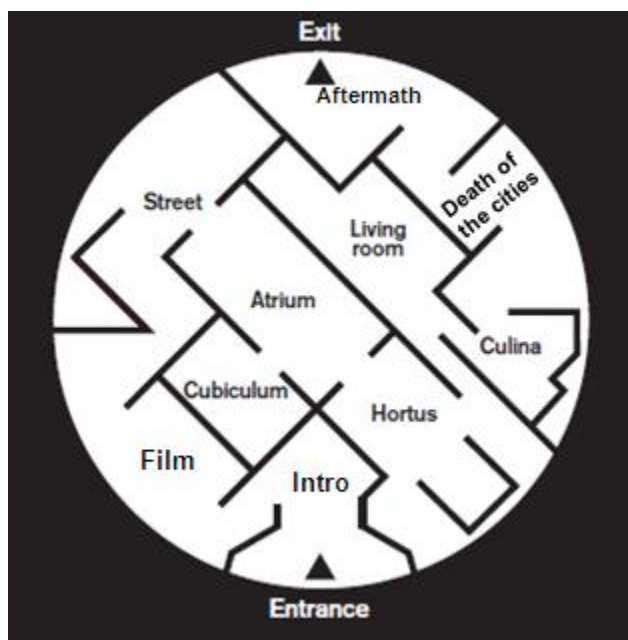


Fig. 6.16 A plan of the exhibition showing the areas that were developed according to the layout of a roman home, including the street, atrium, cubiculum, hortus, living room and culina.

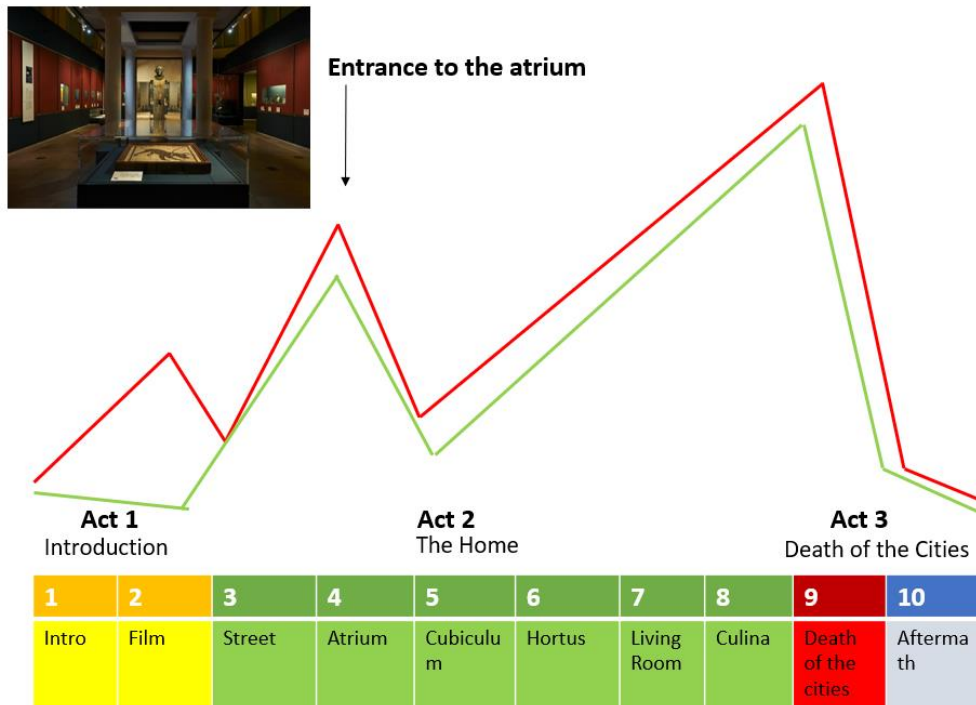


Fig. 6.17 The vista of the atrium provided a mini climax in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*.

The designer had previously worked on a number of exhibitions which had used design to evoke rather than reconstruct spaces. One of these was *Journey through the afterlife: Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*. In this exhibition the designer created: *A false roof to deliberately block out the round reading room and create the feeling of being lost in a labyrinth.* (Designer)

In an exhibition at the Natural History Museum, the designer had also tried to recreate Scott of the Antarctic's hut. The designer did not build actual walls but used a one-to-one scale floorplan of the building, which visitors could walk through to get a sense of the size and layout. In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* colour played a vital role in evoking the feel of the Roman home: *I'd seen some of the wall paintings for Pompeii and Herculaneum and they reminded me of Rothko. So, I wanted different rooms to have different Rothko style colours – a warm red for the atrium, a more subdued olive green for the bedroom.* (Designer)

Later, after deciding on the colours, the designer travelled to Pompeii and Herculaneum to view the site. He found it both '*amusing*' and '*showing remarkable synchronicity*' when the curator had told him that Rothko had been inspired by Pompeii and Herculaneum after he himself had visited the towns. The vivid nature of Roman colours was also something that visitors, such as Catherine, picked up on: *The colour of the walls surprised me. We imagine this austere, marble grey, stern thing about Rome, and they were really gaudy. Everything was like red and yellow.*

I have already touched on the relationship established between objects and film in the first two sections of the exhibition. This cinematic influence is also present in the exhibition's design, which draws on the designer's previous training in theatre and television. An example of this is the designer's account of the moment when visitors stood at the bottom of the darkened stairs in section one and saw the spot-lit objects at the top. For him, this resembled a *proscenium*, marking the boundary between the audience and the stage: *As you came in we wanted to take visitors breath away with this initial vista as they walked up the stairs. You see the objects, but you can also see the roof of the Round Reading*

Room. And this is a bit like how the proscenium in a theatre works. From the audience's point of view, it creates a boundary, an arch marking the boundary of the stage. (Designer)

Elaborating on the theatrical metaphor, he likened the exhibition to promenade theatre in which visitors step into the world of the stage and into the domain of the actors. Visitors to the exhibition are then at once actors performing in the theatrical space of the exhibition, but also, because of the exhibition's subject matter, citizens living within the home: *You kind of animate it with the people who are there visiting. So that in a sense they're becoming more than just a visitor in an exhibition. They're becoming the people who populate the home.* (Designer)

This was, however, the last exhibition held in this space and as a result, the designer was allowed more freedom in the design, in particular how the exhibition was lit. The lighting rig had been installed for the first exhibition held in the space, *The First Emperor*. It was deliberately designed to resemble the circular shape of a *bi* – the Chinese jade artefacts that were typically associated with the sky. Although appropriate for the subject matter of *the First Emperor*, it had meant that all subsequent designers had to incorporate this bi-shaped lighting rig into their designs. Freed from having to work with this particular device, the designer replaced it with lighting on the frame of the house, using techniques borrowed from his work on film sets. When the exhibition was being designed the designer did not know that *Pompeii and Herculaneum* would be the first exhibition to be filmed live. The lighting he had based on a technique used in television would ultimately be used for the lighting of the exhibition as a literal film set.

6.4.1 The house and themes

British Museum blockbuster exhibitions are typically linear, with one room following on from the other. What made *Pompeii and Herculaneum* unique was that visitors could have encountered the rooms of the house potentially in any order. This led to it having a unique narrative structure, which the interpretation officer commented upon:

I think the exhibition tells a story. And we usually talk about temporary exhibitions as having a linear narrative by which I think we normally mean that you can tell a story in a certain order... I actually don't think this has got a linear narrative in that way. The fact that it's rooms of a house means that it didn't matter which rooms you went into and which order. But it kind of was a linear narrative in how the text was structured, we did assume people would have read one thing before they read another thing. So from that point of view, it was. Just explaining what certain things were like lares – domestic gods, explaining what they are in an earlier section. Meaning that when you came across them later you don't have to go into a whole explanation.

In her description the interpretation officer distinguishes two forms of narrative. The first is the spatial narrative of the rooms of the house, which can be potentially encountered in any order. The second form of the narrative is '*how the text was structured*', which needs to be linear in order to explain unfamiliar terms to visitors who had not heard them before. In describing the exhibition as spatially non-linear but textually linear, the interpretation officer identifies one of the key aspects of exhibition narrative – that an exhibition's spatial and textual narratives can function differently in a way that would be difficult to achieve in film or theatre.

The concept of organising the individual sections around the house proved popular with visitors. For example, Norbert said: *And as for the layout in terms of going through the house, I thought that was a brilliant idea of organising the whole thing.* As well as these individual rooms, visitors spoke about the house design as possessing a natural narrative progression or flow. Gertrude describes the exhibition as being: '*The big thing, my overall impression, is that it's trying to lead you through a house...I think generally that it's the story of the house and its inhabitants rather than the structure of the city and its inhabitants.*' She also describes the idea that, '*you flowed through the house. You could see that one bit flowed to another bit, room by room.*'

Daniel describes the exhibition as *'properly laid out, things led onto each other naturally.'* The only thing that detracted from the house was the crowded nature of the exhibition. Barry commented on this: *Uh, I think if it was less busy, you'd appreciate it more. For me, it was more just a series of rooms with themes. You couldn't really get a sense...other than when you were in the atrium, that was kind of obviously the atrium and the entrance, but beyond that, it was just a series of rooms.*

As well as the fact that the rooms did not necessarily have to be encountered in a particular order, another unusual feature of *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* was that themes were not limited to a single room. In the early planning stages this had not been the case and the idea had been to try and allocate a particular theme, such as sex, or slavery, to a particular room. However, as the curator did more research into the topic, the exhibition's approach shifted: *But as I read more and more I realised it was untenable to have a woman's section of a children's section. Because that isn't how they were in the house. The lady of the house wanders everywhere. Not like the Greeks, where the women are shut in the women's quarters. Roman women are everywhere in the house, they can be seen, they can do things in society, they can run businesses.* (Curator)

The curator sees the long exhibition development time as particularly important in helping him develop these ideas. This was brought about by the fact that the curator was required to finalise the object list by July 2009. The reason for this early submission was because after the curator submitted his list, the superintendent at Pompeii/Naples promptly retired: *I submitted a good list at the end of July, it wasn't a final one but it was a good idea. It was too long. In August, he retired. And there then followed a period of absolute and utter chaos and there was no boss, no superintendent, and projects were cancelled left, right and centre, but because I'd got my list in, in time the exhibition was secured.*

This establishment of a close to final object list at this early stage meant that the curator had both more time to plan the exhibition's individual sections, what he describes as *'the boards'*. It was useful that a project manager joined him at an earlier point than usual.

Both of these factors were important in allowing the curator to develop the idea of the themes being spread out throughout the rooms: *What was useful with the boards was to realise that the rooms and not themes had to be the governing feature of the exhibition. We could have themes going through the rooms, but the rooms themselves are the focus of the exhibition. What happens within those rooms. So, for example, very early on, we threw out the idea of having a woman's section or a children's section. And this was informed as well by what I was reading. Because I'm an expert on Roman daily life generally, but I'm not an expert or at least I wasn't until recently on the Roman house – specifically. I wasn't an expert on the Pompeii House specifically. But as I read more and more I realised it was untenable to have a woman's section or a children's section, because that isn't how they were in the house. Children are everywhere, women are everywhere in the house so doing the boards really helped work out those things.*

With the themes running across rooms and the rooms not necessarily having to be encountered in a particular order, there was a danger that the exhibition might lack coherence. This was countered by giving the rooms distinctive aesthetic identities and different interpretative approaches. The atrium introduced the concept of the house and provided the exhibition's most spectacular vista (see fig. 6.15). The dining room adopted an art historical approach, detailing the four stages of painting found in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The kitchen adopted a more archaeological style of display, featuring a case crammed with detritus found in the drains of the Roman cities. The garden room was meant to be more experiential, text was kept to a minimum, a birdsong soundtrack was provided for the room and seating was available to encourage visitors to sit and contemplate.



Fig. 6.18 The culina, or kitchen. The object dense 'archaeological-style' case can be clearly seen on the right.

In the final two subsections of this section on space, I look in depth at two key examples of theme, aesthetics and space combining to contribute to the exhibition narrative. The first looks at the curator's identity as an archaeologist and how this affects his treatment of the garden room.

6.4.2 Space and tone: Archaeology and the garden room

The curator's interest in the everyday can be related back to his disciplinary identity as an archaeologist, as well as to his social background. Describing the genesis of one of the exhibition's key exhibits, the garden room, (see fig 6.19), the curator describes how while researching the exhibition, he saw it as a single panel in Washington. This had a profound effect on him and he was determined that within his exhibition visitors would be able to understand its context as part of a complete room:

I'm an archaeologist and seeing that one panel in isolation in Washington, I thought how art historical, how beautiful, but how completely misleading because it could be a free-standing painting of that size... In Washington it meant nothing, it was beautiful but it gave no idea at all of what that room was. What we had to do was show people that it was a complete room. So, when I said to the head of exhibitions

in Pompeii: 'Can I have the garden room?' She said, 'of course, do you want the Washington Panel?' And I said, 'no I want the whole room please'. And she said, 'oh it's so nice dealing with archaeologists.'



Fig. 6.19 A close-up of the garden room during construction showing the three walls as they were displayed.

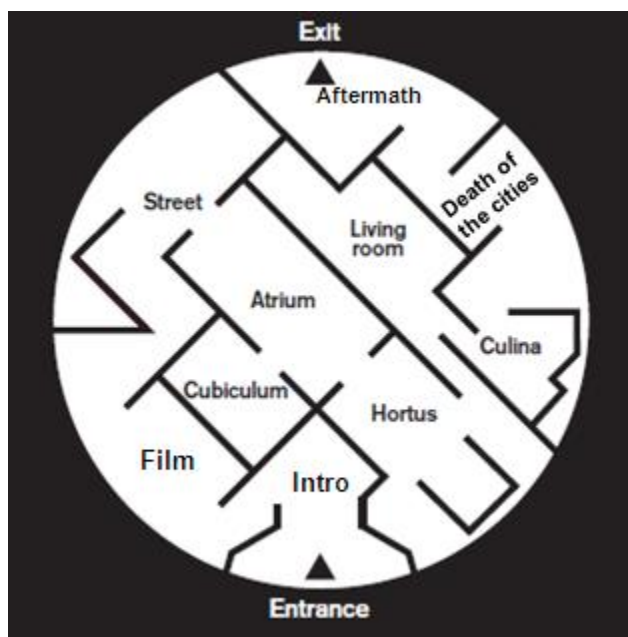


Fig. 6.20 The garden room was located in section 6: the Hortus.

This idea of making visitors aware of the context can be linked back to one of the key themes of the exhibition: the everyday. The everydayness of the object here is not found in this object being familiar to the visitors. This fresco is more obviously an aesthetically beautiful object than the interpretation officer's example of a saucepan. The curator has pointed out that a segment of the wall could easily be confused with a painting. Rather its everydayness is made manifest by showing the context in which it was originally found – as a 'complete room' situated in a Roman garden. The curator relates this display strategy to his own identity as an archaeologist, as opposed to being an art historian. In Washington it is the aesthetic beauty of the object that is prioritised; in London, it is its context and function.

This divide between the aesthetic and the contextual, between the art historical and the archaeological, reoccurs in my next two case studies *Vikings: Life and legend* and *Defining Beauty*. It is also one that Bourdieu makes when in *the Love of Art* (1991) he categorises the different types of objects that appeal to different visitors from different social backgrounds. Bourdieu (1991, 56) argues that members of the lower classes are attracted to 'minor works, such as furniture, ceramics, or folk or historical objects'. Bourdieu (1991, 56) relates this perceived preference to the fact these are objects which have a use or function, 'they know what they were used for.' Bourdieu (1991, 56) also relates an appreciation of everyday objects to the fact that 'the culture required to understand such objects, namely, historical culture, is more common' (Bourdieu 1991, 56). This means that working-class visitors have 'at their disposal elements of comparison and criteria of evaluation (or, rather, appreciation in the true sense of the word)' for minor works, which Bourdieu argues they lack for paintings and sculptures.

In displaying the garden fresco in its original context as part of a room, the curator can be seen as attempting to make the work accessible by illustrating its context and function. This extends beyond simply presenting its context and function. Rather the mode of display allowed visitors to have access into the original space of the room itself. In contrast to the presentation of the fresco in Washington, the curator had also seen the

garden room presented in Halle. Although there, it had been presented as a completed room, a barrier had been placed in front of it to prevent visitors entering. The curator described this as: *An unsophisticated form of torture, to allow the public so close that they could see those beautiful birds from a distance. And they could see the plants and not let them in to see it.* (Curator)

The curator wanted to allow visitors into the space of the room. However, there was a fear from the designers that allowing visitors into the room, in its original size would lead to bottlenecks. The room was therefore ‘*exploded*’, meaning that all three panels would be presented in a room-shape, but it would be at a larger size than the original room. The curator described this as ‘*a difficult decision for me because, yes, I’m an archaeologist and I wanted to if at all possible preserve the integrity of the room.*’ The curator justified that this compromise was worth it, based on the reaction of the visitors: *And seeing people’s faces when they went into that room. I would stand in that room and watch people, and the joy that people got from that room, from those birds from those plants, you couldn’t make any other decision – you had to let them in.*

The garden was mentioned by twelve of the sixteen visitor group interviews, and while none spoke of the garden in quite the rapturous terms described by the curator, it certainly provoked reflection on gardens in general. For example, Martin and Maria said:

Martin: *The garden room I was amazed... and much more aware of the importance of gardens. Because we never paid much attention to that before. We only had one in recent years and now we don’t have one anyway but the idea of it being a peaceful... Really struck home to me. But obviously, we didn’t appreciate it enough when we had one.*

Maria: *You can imagine people going there, sitting on one of these stools. Thinking, contemplating.*

Martin: *Wasting time. Not wasting time but enjoying time.*

Martin and Maria talk about this space not in terms of what they learned about Roman gardens, or about the aesthetic appeal of the painting, but in experiential terms. They describe as being '*peaceful*', of '*sitting on one of those stools*', of '*thinking*' and '*contemplating*.' Even though visitors cannot touch the space, experience its weight, they can still, in a sense, be in it. In this sense, space, like a familiar object, is something visitors can possess and take ownership of. One of the ways Martin and Maria do this is by relating it to their own lives, and to the garden they once had. But not all objects are so easily relatable. Indeed, they can be both simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

6.5 The exhibition climax: The death of the cities

Section nine, Death of the Cities, where the visitors finally encounter the casts of the bodies, can be seen as the climax of the exhibition, akin to the moment of *anagnorisis* in Greek tragedy in which the hero realises his fate. The space was carefully designed to elicit a specific response in the visitors. The curator had seen numerous bad displays of the bodies before, what he referred to as the '*adagio for strings moment*'. Rather than displaying the bodies on sculptural plinths, as the designer had initially conceived them, they were displayed in small cramped spaces. This was meant to encourage an intimate encounter between the visitors and the objects, but was also designed to be reminiscent of the spaces the citizens sheltered in as they died.



Fig. 6.22 The 'family' of casts were displayed in a deliberately claustrophobic, cramped space.

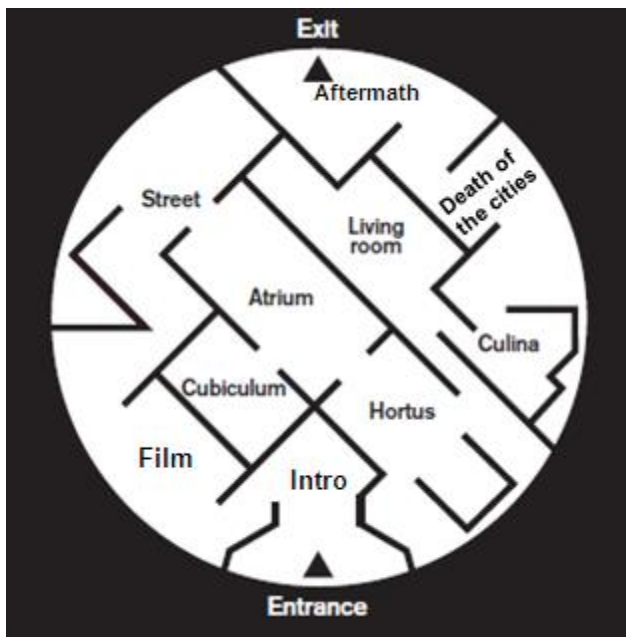


Fig. 6.23 Death of the cities was the ninth and penultimate section in the exhibition.



Fig. 6.24 Throughout the house section various objects foreshadowed and built to the exhibition climax with the casts of the bodies.

These spaces were painted a crimson red and text was kept to a minimum. The curator describes the designers deliberately made the visitor pathways '*cramped*' and used colour to '*deaden*' this section. Objects that had initially been included in this section because they were related to the theme of death were removed if they added too much levity. The interpretation officer describes how a mosaic of a skeleton with the Latin motto, '*live well today because tomorrow you might die*', was moved to another section because it was deemed to be too humorous:

The idea behind him was live well today because tomorrow you might die. And originally that had been positioned at the beginning of the final section of the death of the cities, and I was very keen for the final death section to have an emotive tone of voice and I felt that starting it with a humorous object such as that, wouldn't really fit with the tone I wanted to have. (Interpretation officer)

The size and intimacy of the space, its colouring, the minimal text, all of these were devices used to encourage an emotional response of the visitor. But beyond this, one of the key aspects was the positioning of the objects in the penultimate section of the exhibition to create the sensation of a reveal. This can be related to what Barthes' calls the *hermeneutic* code.

6.5.1 The exhibition climax and the *hermeneutic* code

Barthes defines the *hermeneutic* code as the enigma that lies at the heart of the text. In S/Z he uses the example of the reveal of, first, Sarasine's gender, and then the identity of the mysterious man at the party, as examples to illustrate what this *hermeneutic* enigma might resemble. A key aspect of the *hermeneutic* code is the foreshadowing of what is to come. Just like a novel, an exhibition can use the reveal of what happens at the novel's conclusion to drive visitors to finish it. This need not be a total mystery to the visitor. The interpretation officer likened *Pompeii and Herculaneum* to the movie *Titanic* in that visitors go into the exhibition '*knowing how it ends*', but are still compelled to finish it. Alongside this familiar aspect of the *hermeneutic* code, there is a form of it that is unique to the exhibition. This is the first-hand encounter with an iconic object. All of the visitor groups to *Pompeii and Herculaneum* were aware of the casts of the bodies before entering. The curator of the exhibition was adamant that the exhibition's most iconic objects – the casts of the bodies were to be saved until the end. This was for two reasons, to emphasise that the weighting of the exhibition was towards life: '*Ours was not, it was a life show that happened to have death in it.*' (Curator)

It was also felt that the impact of seeing the bodies of people, was '*too shattering*' to be positioned at the start of the exhibition, and this was something that was echoed in comments by visitors:

Harry: *Seeing that at the end, it was still quite sad. It wasn't positive*

Heathcliffe: *It wouldn't have worked at the beginning.*

Delaying the encounter with the bodies to the end of the exhibition also helped to build the sense of anticipation for the visitors: *I thought as I was going around I was thinking where are the bodies, where are the bodies? And I thought well maybe they decided not to display them out of some, well there is this issue about how far back in history does someone have to be that you can just display their body without their permission. So, I thought maybe they decided not to do it. And then at the end, obviously, I thought well here are the bodies.*

The effect of this hermeneutic code was not only created by only saving the casts of the bodies until the end of the exhibition. The curator describes how throughout the exhibition a combination of objects and text were used to build up this sense of anticipation: *Things come up like the: death is coming...You're reminded, even if you don't realise it. Oh god, it's not going to end well.'*

The curator describes these objects as 'clues – suggesting ohhh something is around the corner.' Objects with a similar theme can be positioned throughout an exhibition to function as a thread to guide visitors towards its conclusion. The presence of death was present in nearly all the objects in the exhibition as the eruption of Vesuvius had led to their survival. However, several key objects were used in the exhibition to specifically deliver this message. These were the baby's cot, the earthquake mosaic, the skeleton mosaic and the cast of the dog. Initially, the curator had not wanted to position the dog at the top of the stairs because he wanted to reserve death to the end:

But I was convinced and now I very much agree it was the right thing to do. We need to have death at the front but it was a wonderful way of doing it. If you'd had a person at the very beginning the illusion would have been shattered. To have had a person there is just...to put the death of a person right at the beginning...In some way and don't ask me how, to have the dog was still very effective, it was very moving but it didn't shatter the rhythm of the story. (Curator)

Several visitors commented on how they noticed how the objects linked and that death effectively bookended the exhibition:

Andrew: *It did start off with the dog which could be an intention to have ... at the beginning and the family at the end...*

In attempting to visualise the *hermeneutic* code in order to understand how it functions, Gustav Freytag's (1863) notion of the pyramidal structure of plot provides a useful model. For Freytag (1863), the climactic moment of a Greek tragedy occurs at the moment of *Anagnorisis*, when the hero makes a critical discovery about themselves. An example of this would be in *Oedipus Rex* when a comment from the blind seer Tiresias leads Oedipus to the moment of realisation that he has had sex with his mother and killed his father. In *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, for most visitors, the climax occurs when visitors encounter the exhibition's most iconic objects – the casts of the bodies. But it is not simply a case of recognising objects that visitors are familiar with beforehand. In encountering the casts of the bodies, visitors are also addressing issues of mortality and feeling an empathetic connection with the people that the casts represented. The next subsection explores how visitors responded to the subject matter of death and how it can be related back to the exhibition's key theme of everyday life.

Alongside visitors reading the exhibition in terms of how closely the Romans resembled us and how much they differed from us, the other major binary that structured the exhibition was that between life and death. This was deliberate, the curator frequently spoke about *Pompeii and Herculaneum* as an exhibition which included death but was about life:

I've seen exhibitions where bodies were put right at the beginning and it sort of turns the exhibition on its head. And sends out all the wrong messages – this is a body's show. Ours was not, it was a life show that happened to have death in it, as an essential element of the story. (Curator)

How visitors responded to death in the exhibition can be seen as closely-related to how they respond to everyday objects. If objects like the fish sauce put visitors in the mind-set of how people used these everyday objects, then death was also seen in empathetic terms. This took the form of visitors describing what it would be like to experience a natural disaster such as a volcanic eruption. As Deborah expressed:

I think the Pompeii story has a sort of...a human grip to it doesn't it. Because it involves frying and being fried.

One of the frequent ways that visitors made sense of the eruption of Vesuvius was to relate it to a contemporary disaster. These included tsunamis, hurricanes and also terrorist attacks and war:

I think it's the enormity of the explosions too. I suppose in a way we've been to Sri Lanka, we went to where the tsunami was and we were taken by survivors and they've lost all their family. And so there is that personal element which you see in that first part. (Larry)

I mean I thought, well when I said at the beginning natural catastrophes and things like hurricanes and they move you because you see people driving and suddenly the car is lifted and kind of crushed against the walls. And you do imagine yourself being caught up in that scenario. (Georgina)

Well, I suppose one thing is about all the conflicts nowadays and how terrifying it must be being bombed and everything, so in comparison with that, I think you would think it's not so terrifying. It's worse, being in a war must be worse. (Fred)

Beyond the idea of experiencing the wider events of the eruption of Vesuvius, visitors also spoke about experiencing the bodies on a very personal level. Words like 'shattering' (Fred), 'poignant' (Lucinda), 'raw fear' (Barry), 'tragic' (Mark), 'awful' (Clara), were frequently used by visitors to express their emotions regarding encounters with these objects. Sadness

was one of the most common descriptions used to describe how people felt about the casts.

Both Norman and Andrew spoke about the casts in these terms:

It must be very sad, overwhelming...My overwhelming feeling is one of sadness. It's kind of like, I think ...it's because there are those casts. That really does puts a flavour on the entire exhibition. (Norman)

And a sadness as well really sort of you know that whole families were wiped out together. That last scene of the family, you know parents and two children wasn't it, you know, just lots of...death very sad. Quite moving really. (Andrew)

The sadness stems from empathy, just as visitors can relate to the Romans through their similarity to us in terms of the objects of daily life, so seeing their bodies brought them closer to them:

But those casts there, you can see their form, their size, they were as big as us, they were the same as us. They seem like quite contemporary characters that doing much the same things that we do every day.

It makes you put yourself in the same position as these people and they're just ordinary people and it's a moment in time. They're living people breathing and in a second they're gone. Did it hurt? Were they aware of it? (Clara)

This empathetic response is closely linked to the everyday nature of the people who died, in the words of Charles:

It's more moving because you've seen that they're ordinary people...if it's an exhibition about the high and mighty you're kind of less touched by it. But since it's people much like yourself it's much more moving. You can relate to it much more vividly. (Charles)

Not all visitors, however, reported feeling emotionally moved by the elements of death in the exhibition. Beatrice talked about the aspects of death in the exhibition eliciting in

her a macabre fascination. Although this was less related to the bodies themselves and more to the baby in the cot:

I wanted the baby to be in the cot with its woollen blanket on. Because I wanted to know what looked like and how they knew it was a woollen blanket and things, but I was informed that was a bit distasteful for me to want to see that. But I'm not sure why.
(Beatrice)

Fred also spoke about how this exhibition had not affected him in a similar way to a museum he had visited in Mexico:

I mean it's a big distance in time, I went to the most bizarre museum I've ever been to in my life and it's the time I went without you. I was doing some work in Mexico and I went to a museum of recently exhumed bodies. People had rented graves but if they didn't have enough money to rent it for a long time. They were exhumed and put on show. So, you were looking at bodies from forty years ago, and so that was, that was. Well to say it was moving, it was disturbing. I didn't find this so. (Fred)doc

Fred had also talked about experiencing feelings of resistance towards the exhibition text suggesting he should feel a particular way in relation to an object. In terms of the bodies he reported a duality, being aware that he should feel moved, but not actually experiencing that emotion:

Well, I think you do and you don't. I think you feel I ought to feel moved by this but actually I can't say to be honest I do. I looked at it and I thought this is moving. But I'm not particularly moved. That sounds rather callous but... (Fred)

One of the most interesting visitors to explore the concept of empathy and objects is Devorah, a thirty-four-year-old female doctor from Northumberland. Devorah had a uniquely heightened response to the exhibition's subject matter. This was based on a combination of her profession as a doctor who works with patients with Parkinson's Disease and also

having recently read a book by Mary Beard on Pompeii. Devorah describes how she was prepared for the ‘*objects with shock value*’, such as the casts of the bodies or the baby’s crib through reading about them in Mary Beard’s book:

I think the cradle, that’s sort of in the middle and there was a baby in it and that’s tragic and awful, but I was prepared for that. I was surprised when I first read about but I was expecting to see it. I read the book with spoilers. (Devorah)

Devorah also felt that the impact of these objects was lessened by the fact that as a doctor she regularly has to deal with death:

When you’re a medical student you see your first corpse for dissection and that’s a shock and you dissect, and then on your first night shift you’ll see a patient who dies for the first time and that’s a massive deal and it’s very emotional and then there’s a lot of brave-facing after that. That you care for your patient but when you’re faced with a body you know, it’s fine, it’s fine I don’t care. And everyone does care, no one gets away from the fact that this was a human being. It doesn’t lessen it... The pugilist poses and the burning tendons and the child’s face. This is what they dealt with and you get a little shock of reality. And you still get that, but I think it had less of an impact because I see death more than most people. (Devorah)

This combination of familiarity with the objects and her strategies for dealing with death means that Devorah does not describe being emotionally moved by the bodies or the baby’s crib in the same way as other visitors. However, this does not mean Devorah is numb to empathetically identifying with the victims of the eruption of Vesuvius. Rather she finds these emotional connections in moments which she describes as, ‘*every so often something gets under the skin and you think to yourself – hang on this was a real person.*’ Devorah gives several examples of moments from outside the exhibition, which she describes as ‘*jarring*’. As a self-confession ‘*Ricardian*’ one was ‘*standing in the field in the battle of*

Bosworth.' Another was touching a fragment of Neville's Cross discovered closed to where she lived:

The first time I put my hand on that I got a bit of reality about what war would have been like and what battle would have been like. (Devorah)

Finally, she gives the example of one of the Bodyworld's exhibitions containing the preserved remains of real people where there was a dissected body of a man:

There must have been two of his thighs and his liver and he still had a fragment of a tattoo on his arm. One of these Celtic bands that all men between the age of 20 and 30 have, and he was real to me as well. (Devorah)

Each of these occasions, a battlefield associated with a historical king, touching a piece of cross, seeing that the tattoo of a man, allowed Devorah to connect to the past in a way that familiar objects did not. In her own words, it '*makes it real for you.*' In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* several objects possessed this jarring feel of the real. For example, she contrasts the familiarity of seeing the casts of the voids, with seeing unexpected objects such as '*the pile of coins that fused together*', or the '*carbonised figs*', or the '*curtain hook*'. Describing why these particular objects affect her she says:

'I don't know why but that...that was kind of a...a bit striking. It's the stuff that you don't expect that moves you the most.' (Devorah)

What typifies these objects is that '*they're just reminders that they were just normal people.*' Another factor could their size, which give the piece a sense of intimacy, '*sometimes it's the little things like a hairpin, or a fragment of a meal, or a shard of pottery, that makes it real for you.*'

One such piece that stood out was the surgeon's kit, which Devorah strongly related to: *Well medically, the medical instruments, that was quite nice. That poor guy, I assume it was a guy, he had his tweezers and his surgical instruments not by chance.*' She goes on to

relate how, as a doctor herself, she always carries a medical kit with her in case of an emergency: *'If you're ever in any kind of stop at the road side. If there's a car accident or something you've got a wee bit of kit in your car. But I totally understand why he would have his case with him, I totally understand it. Because you always think you can help somebody.'* This smaller individual point leads Devorah to speculate on history and hindsight and what she would do if she were caught up in the eruption of Vesuvius: *We have a saying in medicine that retrospective is twenty-twenty. There are loads of different natural disasters that we thought. It's funny with history when we're reading it that Britain would win World War Two, but they didn't know. It's so obvious to us. And I think your instinct is to be that way about history, and you kind of put yourself in that position because you know obviously the slightest rumble and I would have been out of there, but you wouldn't would you. You would have owned a shop, or lived with a family and you would have stayed. And you probably would have died. We're not better than the people before us, we've got more advantages, we might have more technology, but we're not better.*

Devorah goes on to describe some of the things she would do if she could go back in time to Pompeii: *'go to a bookshop, I would go see a play, I'd make sure I had no cuts and then I'd go to the baths, go to a whore house just to see what they do and to get a feeling for the mores.'* She goes on, however, to qualify this statement, suggesting that she would only travel to the past if she had the option of helping people: *But would I want to be there towards the end if I knew I was going to be fine just to see it all happen. It seems a bit wrong. Maybe I'd ring the town bells and try and get everyone to run away, but then it would all be very Cassandra. I don't think you could be there physically unless you knew you could help someone.*

Devorah's identity as someone who professionally cares for others and her familiarity with the subject matter allows her voice her emotional response to the exhibition in a manner that other visitors struggle to articulate. Rather than seeing Devorah as an exception, however, a kind of finely-tuned empathy rod for the historic past, we should see her as

illustrating some of the characteristics of objects that provoke both empathy in visitors, and explain why visitors may be drawn to objects that are not iconic works of art. One of these factors is size, often these objects – the figs, the coins, the surgeon's tool kit – are small, allowing visitors to get close to them and to imagine holding them in their hands. Another aspect is their unexpected nature, which connects with different forms of the *real* in objects. One form of the *real* relates to authenticity in the Benjaminian sense as the encounter with 'the real' artwork that one has known before through books, television and film – the stuff of Stendhal syndrome. This is the type of *real* described by Emma when she encounters the cast of the muleteer, '*it was good seeing that because I'd read about the muleteer before, so it was good seeing that. It was good just to see the real ones.*' The nature of real here is interesting because the cast of the muleteer is the cast of an absence. What Devorah describes, to use her own term, is a void of a body that has long since decayed, but whose presence remains through the solidified plaster of Paris. In contrast, the real, as described by Devorah, is not a real that puts you in touch with the object itself but the person who made it and the time that they lived in.

Devorah describes the nature of that experience as '*sudden*' and '*jarring*', '*something that gets under your skin*'. Yet these sudden, jarring moments can also come together to produce something longer, something more akin to a reverie in which the person cannot only feel a connection with the individual owner of the object, but also imagine what it is to live in an entire society from which this object and person came. The object then can also be seen as acting as a conduit to the person who owned the object, a sudden jarring epiphany that the object seen in the museum case connects the viewer to a real person.

6.5.2 Aftermath – alternative endings

Although reserved to the end and functioning as the exhibition's climax, *Death of the Cities* was not the final section in the exhibition. The curator felt that the disconnect between

seeing the casts of the bodies and the gift shop would be too jarring. Instead, the exhibition finished with a final section containing two portrait busts – one male and one female.

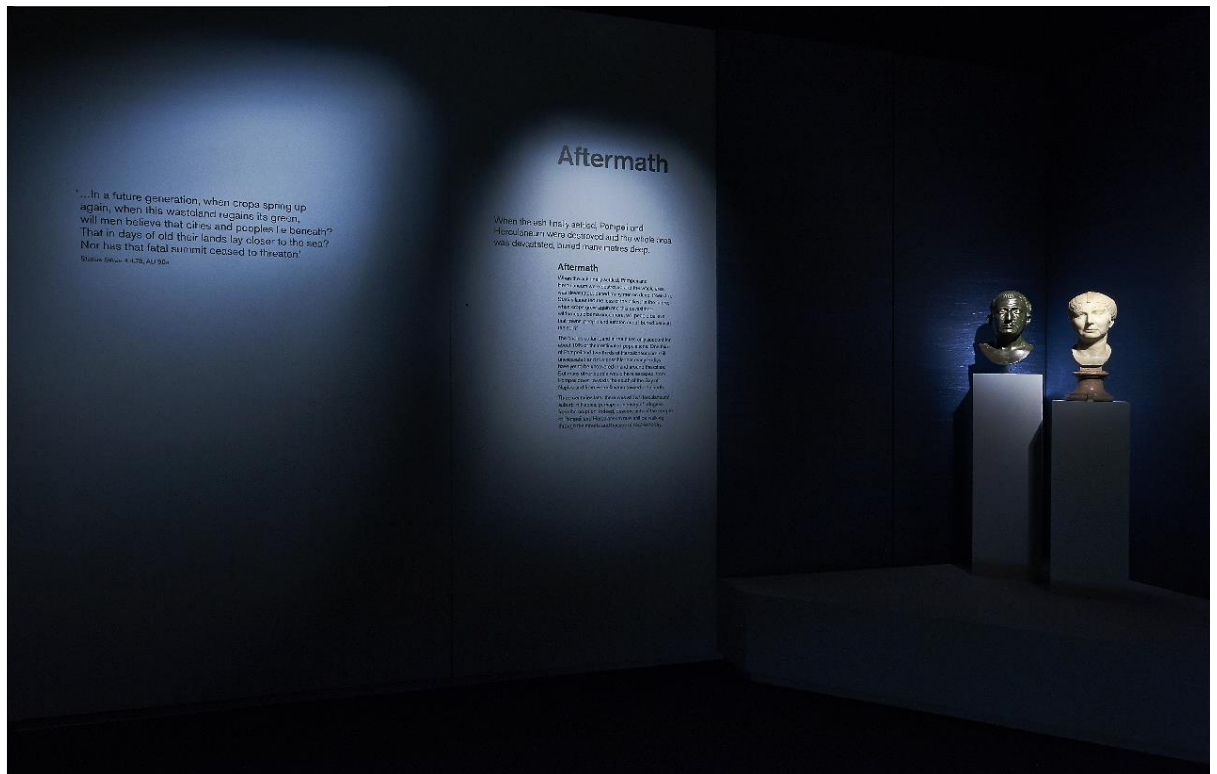


Fig. 6.25 The Aftermath section which concluded the exhibition contained only two objects – two portrait busts.

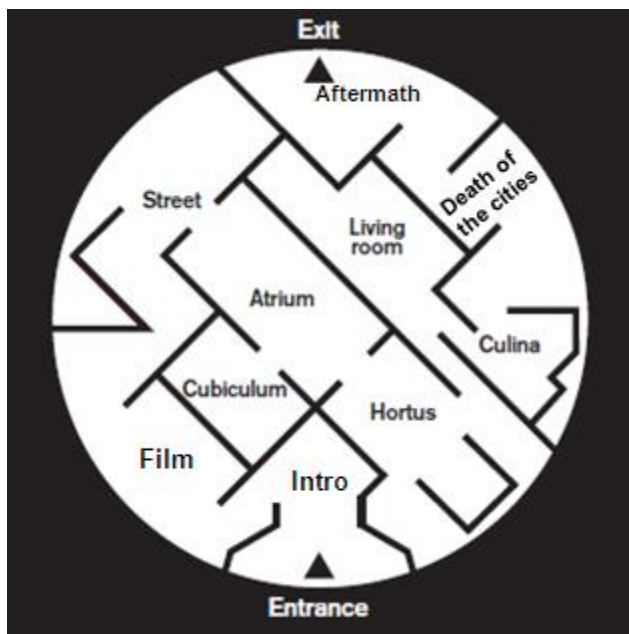


Fig. 6.26 After visitors exited the Aftermath section they entered the gift shop.

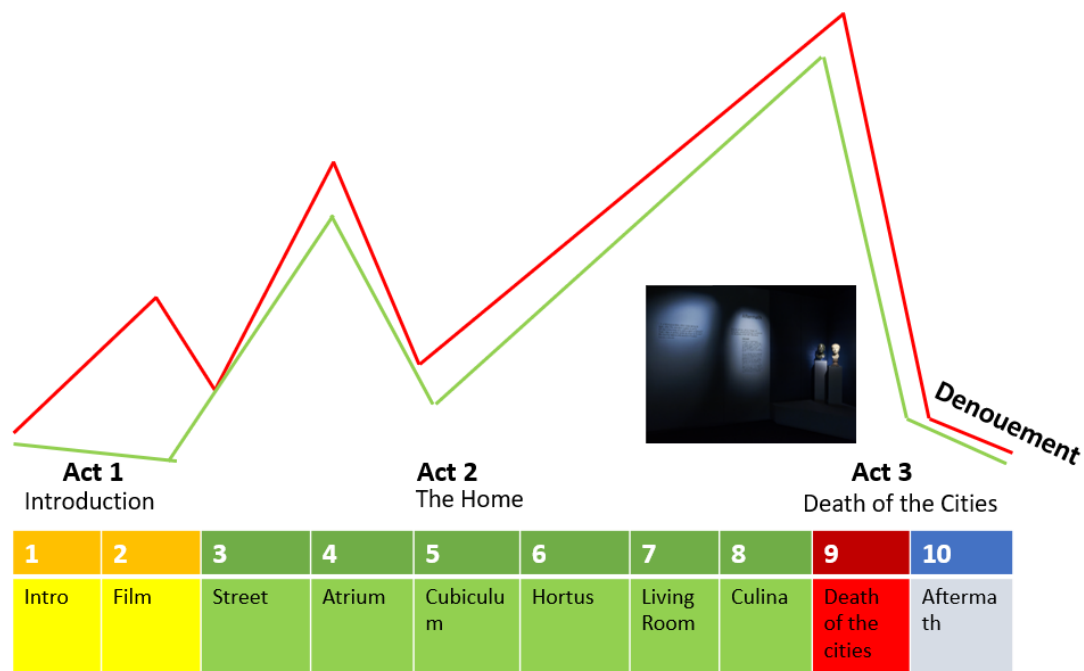


Fig. 6.27 The exhibition did not finish with climax of the bodies but instead finished with the Aftermath section, which acted as the denouement.

This section emphasised that not everyone would have died in the eruption and that the inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum were in some sense living on through the artefacts that the exhibition preserved. The curator describes the exhibition's final section as 'a decompression chamber': *If you like the two heads were a decompression chamber to keep it going relentlessly to the end would be too much for the poor buggers. I mean you can't do that.*

The exhibition, therefore, ends on an upbeat note and even the gift shop was seen as contributing to this. The curator making his own filmic analogy in the form of a trip to the cinema with his sister to see the 1974 disaster movie *Earthquake*: *I think in a curious way when people came out of the exhibition into the bookshop, in a way it must have been a relief... I remember when I was a kid going to see the film Earthquake with my sister, who lived in Birmingham, who had been utterly traumatised by this film. Been completely shaken*

literally, because they had sensors things in the seats and the relief about coming out into the open air, and the relief about coming out into the open air, the relief of coming out of the cinema. And just thinking, those buildings are still here.

Fifteen of the sixteen visitors talked about the layout of the house in positive terms. Often this was related to the exhibition's emotive portrayal of death, coupled with the house design. Mathew's response was typical: *I do like the arrangement – that they're arranged by rooms. That you walk into the living room, to the bedroom. I quite like the way they arranged it. I think that's quite good.*

One visitor, Emma, however, felt unsatisfied with the exhibition's ending and this was specifically related to the concept of the house. Emma describes how after being led through the house she expected a reconstruction, or a fake house to be positioned at the end: *Urrm I think there were excellent objects and I can understand that concept. But somehow even if it was a fake house, you needed a fake house to go into or see. You could see that one bit flowed to another bit, room by room. Because you're led through the atrium and all the other rooms and somehow to me, it needed bringing together. And it was hugely expensive to bring all of those things over and they're fascinating but it does seem to lack the end chapter.*

Although other groups (Beatrice & John) had asked for a model of the city or a reconstruction of the house: *My experience would've been enhanced and I'd felt more immersed in the house, I think.* (Barry)

This did not particularly detract from their overall enjoyment of the exhibition. For Emma, however, the lack of a reconstructed house meant that the exhibition lacked narrative closure: *'it does seem to lack the end chapter.'* Drawing on her experiences of visiting Tutankhamun's mask in Cairo, Emma felt that as well as seeing the original object, that you also wanted to experience the context from where it came: *For example, if you go to Egypt and you go and see Tutankhamun's mask and all the other bits. You also want to go and see*

what it looked like when Howard Carter found it. It's easier for people to understand and I think the Tutankhamun is really a good example of that, where you've got these extraordinary things and when you see them all together it really hits you.

Emma is an experienced museum visitor who also related the diorama displays of the Museum of Mankind in reference to the exhibition: *'They used to have different houses and things in there... I just think it's quite nice when you've got a mock-up of something that really puts it altogether.'* In some ways then Emma is herself drawing on this previous generation of museum display where reconstructions are more common.

You wouldn't want it without the objects, but it would have just been. I mean you've seen all the pictures of them eating on the couches on the frescoes. But it would have just been nice to have a room with them on the couches.

Although Emma herself would not want to *'sit on the couch and eat like a Roman'*, she feels that *'there are people who would.'* In particular, she felt the approach could have made the exhibition more family friendly: *There were a few kids in there bless 'em who were not gripped.*

In both its subject matter and objects *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* can be seen as having an ideal narrative arc. The casts of the bodies are the most well-known objects from Pompeii and Herculaneum, while the eruption of Vesuvius and death of the cities acts as a climactic moment worthy of a Greek tragedy or a Hollywood blockbuster alike. For fifteen of the sixteen visitor groups, this proved to be suitably dramatic and emotional climax. Yet for Emma it was lacking in something. This can be partly explained by Emma's own experience of visiting Roman Villas at Lullingstone and Fishbourne: *They've got some lovely mosaics at Fishbourne, I mean Lullingstone hasn't got a huge amount but you just get a concept of what a whole villa would have looked like, because it was a villa and that I didn't get.*

Her reading of the exhibition which focusses on its architectural elements can be seen as influenced by her professional identity as a Headmistress who has recently overseen a twenty-three million-pound major building project at her school. As a result, the layout and architectural design of buildings were fresh in her mind and this provided an unexpected resonance when she visited the exhibition:

Any new school they have to have an atrium and they're got a blinking waste of space, which you can't heat. Because in a hot country that's exactly what you want isn't it. I fought not to have an Atrium because to me it's a waste of space because we don't need it...And then I come into this exhibition and the central room is an atrium – so that made me laugh.

It would be unfair for the curator, designer or interpretation officer to anticipate the critique of the exhibition from a headteacher with a grudge against atriums. Yet although fifteen of the sixteen visitor groups felt the exhibition worked, Emma's critique exposes one of the potential flaws in the exhibition narrative. Although the exhibition successfully builds to the hermeneutic code of the reveal of the bodies, the proairetic code of movement through the space of the house does not really have a climax or conclusion. Visitors exit via the kitchen into the death of the cities section and the overview of the house that Emma is seeking is never provided. Furthermore, in her references to Tutankhamun and the dioramas of the Museum of Mankind, Emma is seeking a style of exhibition display that emphasises the context from where the object came, as key to the encounter between visitor and object. This is opposed to a style of display that emphasises the aesthetic appreciation of the object over its context. This is an accusation that could hardly be levelled at *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, where the curator is keen to express his identity as an archaeologist through his display style. Yet the rejection of scale models and the minimisation of the flythrough of the house can be seen as justified on aesthetic grounds, that these models of interpretation are deemed old-fashioned. This issue of an aesthetic-mode of display limited to both the form and content of interpretation presented to the public will become even more prominent

in the next two case studies I explore: *Vikings: Life and Legend* and *Defining Beauty: the Body in Greek Art*.

Finally, in Emma's response to the exhibition, we see the important role that our own experiences play in acting as a lens by which we read an exhibition. Earlier in this chapter, Devorah spoke about her own experiences as a doctor both distancing her from the bodies, but also connecting her to the surgeon's kit. When looking at Pan and the Goat, Arthur and Amy are able to make the imaginative leap to imagine how the Romans thought differently to us. Whereas for Andrew it provokes only confusion and disgust. Emma's own experiences meant that for her the emphasis of the exhibition was on the architectural structure. As a result, the appearance of the bodies at the end did not fully compensate for the lack of a house.

If we return to the question of how exhibitions function as a narrative medium, then one of the key aspects of the climax must be empathy. Just as a moment of epiphanic realisation forms the central character in Greek tragedy, so a moment of sudden connection with the person who owned or made this object forms the basis of what makes a good museum narrative climax. Yet, just as there are different genres of films and drama, so there are different types of exhibitions. The subject matter of an exhibition affects how visitors relate to it. People empathise with the Vikings in different ways than with the Romans. Similarly, visitors will relate to an exhibition about the classical world differently if the objects are presented as the archaeological remnants of everyday life, compared to if they are presented as art objects. Both of these issues will be explored in my next two chapters.

Chapter 7: Reinterpretation and *Vikings: life and legend*

Introduction

As you enter *Vikings: Life and legend*, the first object you encounter in the opening case is a brooch in the shape of a ship (fig. 7.1).



Fig. 7.1 The brooch in the shape of a ship, the first object visitors encounter in the exhibition *Vikings: life and legend*.

The label text for the object reads as follows:

Brooch in the shape of a ship

This copper alloy brooch is shaped like a stylised ship. Ships form a popular motif in Viking art, reflecting their central role in society. Travel by boat was the easiest way of connecting trading centres and rural communities.

800–1050

Tjørnehøj II, Funen, Denmark

Copper alloy

The National Museum of Denmark

If, as we have seen in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, the exhibition introduction establishes the key themes and binaries of the exhibition, what is striking about *Vikings: Life and legend* is its use of a small, intimate object to do so. Here, the boat metonymically represents the important role ships played in Viking society. It will be the first of several of what the interpretation officer describes as ‘gateway objects’, which explore this ship theme and are strategically positioned as visitors move through the exhibition. The objects’ status as gateways is subtly indicated by the graphic design of their labels, each of which is given a distinctive blue background. These objects’ function within the exhibition’s wider narrative is to foreshadow the climax – the encounter with Roskilde 6, the largest Viking ship ever discovered, which visitors will encounter at the half-way point of the exhibition. These gateways are comparable to the objects themed around the subject of death in the *Pompeii and Herculaneum* exhibition, which hermeneutically build anticipation for the encounter with the bodies in the penultimate *Death of the Cities*. They are part of what Barthes would call the *hermeneutic* code of the exhibition, both establishing and reinforcing the thematic importance of the ship in the Viking’s lifestyle, but also reminding visitors of what they came to encounter, which the exhibition does not reveal to them until they reach section 6. For some visitors, this will be around the forty-five-minute point of their journey through the exhibition.



Fig. 7.2 The introductory room of the exhibition. The ship broach can just be seen pinned at the top of the blue board at the back of the case. The blue label indicating it is a gateway object can be seen as the first label to the left of the glass case.

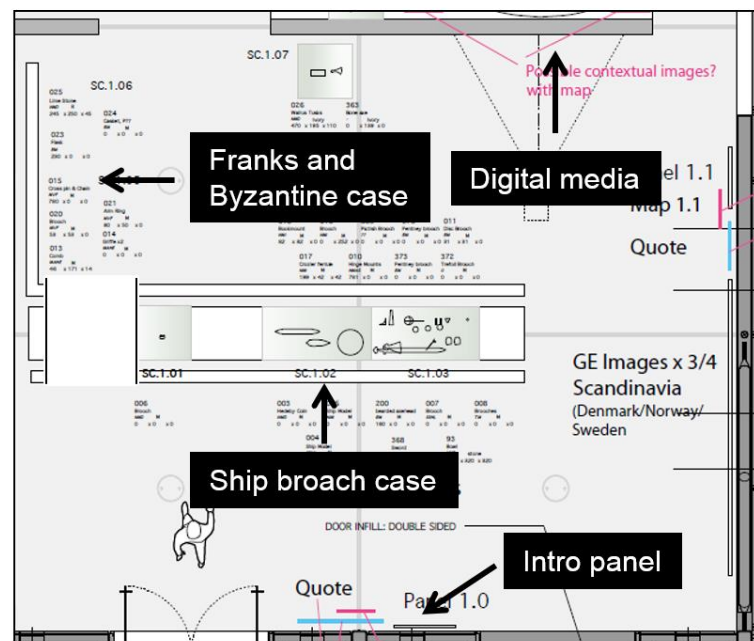


Fig. 7.3 A section of the exhibition plan showing the introductory area of the Vikings: Life and Legend exhibition

The British Museum's opening vista (fig. 7.2) contrasts sharply with the scene that greeted visitors in the Berlin-version of the exhibition staged in the Martin Gropius Bau in

Kreuzberg (fig. 7.4). Here, we immediately encounter *Roskilde 6* at the beginning of the exhibition and all ideas of building-up to a climax are abandoned. Instead, *Roskilde 6* is encountered and then re-encountered from different angles as visitors move from the central space into side rooms and then back out into the central atrium again.



Fig. 7.4 The introductory vista that greets visitors as they enter the Vikings exhibition in the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin.

In the Copenhagen version of the exhibition, an approach which is somewhere in between these two extremes is adopted. The view of the ship is in the words of the Danish curators partially hidden by cases, but still visible to draw people through the exhibition space. Even more prominent than the actual ship, *Roskilde 6*, are the vast digital screens that sit behind it. These screens show a digital video of Viking raiders embarking on a voyage across stormy seas as torrents of rain pour down around the sailors. The darkness is in stark contrast to the natural light of the atrium of the Neo-Renaissance Martin Gropius Bau, where *Roskilde 6* is surrounded by mosaics and the coats of arms of various German states.

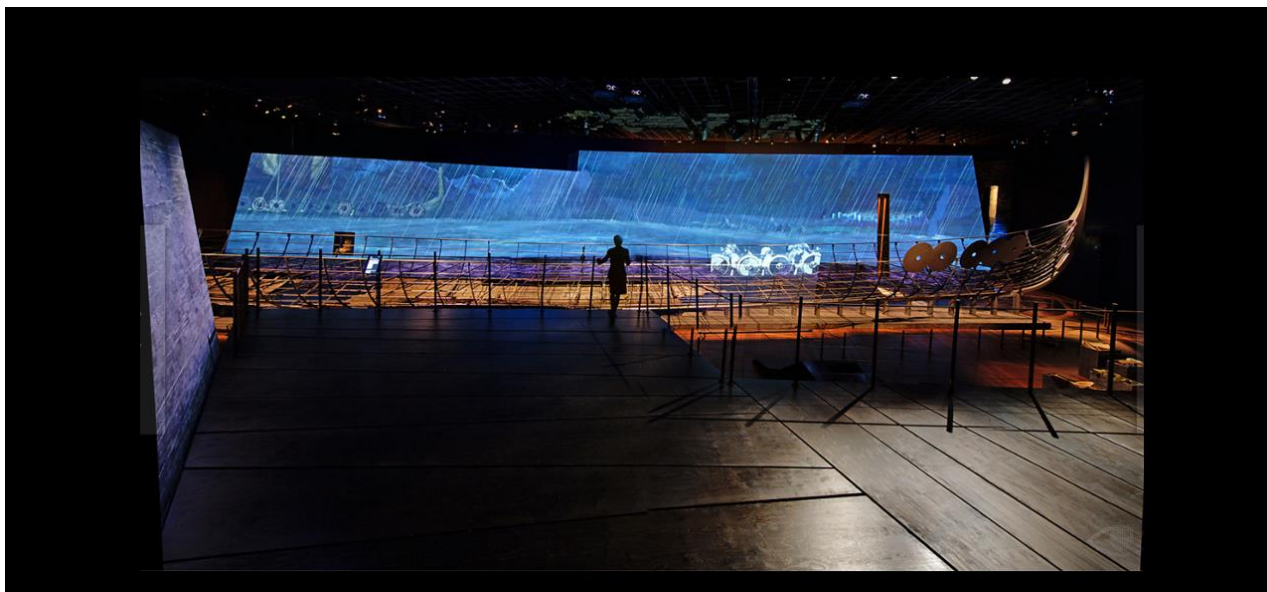


Fig. 7.5 A view of *Roskilde 6* in the Vikings exhibition staged in Copenhagen. Behind the ship, two digital screens show an animated film in which the Viking sailors are caught in a storm as they return home after a raid.

As these three alternative entrances illustrate, what differentiates *Vikings: Life and legend*, held at the British Museum from 6 March to 22 June 2014, from either of my other two case studies was that it was developed collaboratively with two other museums – the National Museum of Denmark, and the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The Copenhagen version of the exhibition, simply called *Viking*, was the first of these exhibitions running from the 22 June to 17 November 2013, while the final iteration of the exhibition was staged in the Martin Gropius Bau in Kreuzberg in Berlin from the 10 September to the 4 January 2015.

The exhibition was collaboratively created by all three exhibition curatorial teams but, as the entrance to these exhibitions reveal, the design formats they adopted varied significantly. All three exhibitions drew on the same body of material to create their exhibitions and the ideas that informed the exhibition were created collaboratively though a series of workshops, yet the exhibitions look and feel radically different. Although each of the collection's curators invariably put their own stamp on the exhibition, this helps to elucidate the role other museum professionals – designers, interpretation officers – play in creating

exhibitions. This is apparent both in the choices of the sequencing of the exhibition, as well as in the design which gives the exhibition its particular identity and feel.

More broadly, thinking about museological narrative perspective in this way might reveal that it is not simply a product of the individual museum professionals who work on the exhibition, but shaped by the particular museumscape of a city or country. MacDonald (2016) uses the term museumscape to illustrate how different countries have differing attitudes to heritage, which is manifested in the discourses, strategies and idiosyncrasies of their museum cultures. For example, she contrasts the German attitude to heritage, in particular its determination to confront and bear witness to that which is traumatic and difficult in German history, with the British attitude to the past, which is often celebratory and triumphalist.

This is particularly relevant in relation to the Vikings who in comparison to the other historical peoples of my case studies – the Romans and the Ancient Greeks – maintain a powerful hold on visitors' imaginations that is related to a sense of place and identity. Invariably, the perspective in relation to how each exhibition asked the visitor to relate to the Vikings was entangled with where the exhibition was staged. In Copenhagen, the Vikings were seen as the ancestors of contemporary Danes, which is reflected in the animated film that shows anxious mothers and children waiting for their husbands to return. In London visitors frequently imagined themselves in the position of the victims of the Vikings raids. In Berlin, both curators and visitors were keen to stress that the Germans had no relation to the Vikings whatsoever. This was due to both parties wishing to distance the exhibition from appropriation by the far right.

Within the London context, *Vikings: Life and legend* was an exhibition that was held in the run-up to the Scottish Referendum and questions of Britishness and the individual provinces of the UK's relationship and attitude towards Europe was prevalent in the media. An oil-rich Norway with a heavy taxation system that was used to fund high social welfare provision was one of the societal models being suggested to Scottish voters as an

alternative to the increasingly privatised current UK model. *Vikings: Life and legend* was also keen to problematise notions of the essential Scandinavian qualities of the Vikings, focussing on Russian Vikings and intermarriage within the Muslim world. The exhibition also playfully suggested a special relationship between parts of Scotland and the Viking World, in particular the Islands of Orkney and Shetland. This was illustrated linguistically and genetically and in the division of the UK along north and south lines according to the Danelaw.

The Scottish Referendum has often been seen a precursor to Brexit and in a collaborative project between three museums in different northern European countries we see both the similarities and differences drawn out. This is reflected in terms of differing levels of identification with the Vikings but also in the particular aesthetics and commercial culture of their museums. If on several levels, *Vikings: Life and legend* challenges the idea of a United Kingdom being somehow separate from other European countries, then I want to use *Vikings: Life and Legend* as a means of understanding how a particular British museumscape might contrast with its European counterparts. The chapter concludes by suggesting parallels between how the combination of a material-focussed approach to interpretation and design, might be connected with the concept of a Metropolitan London and a Britain that was on the road to Brexit.

7.1 Reinterpretation and narrative

Upon leaving the first case in the gallery at the British Museum, the next major exhibit element visitors came upon are three screens showing a digital map. This map illustrates the extent of the different routes that the Vikings travelled, and reveals that these journeys extend all the way from Scandinavia to Constantinople and Russia. To the right of the screen are photographs that illustrate the different landscapes of the Viking's Scandinavian homelands. If the exhibition's opening object establishes the ship as the central motif of the exhibition, then the map suggests the direction that the exhibition's narratorial perspective is facing. Rather than an exhibition that is looking westwards to the Atlantic, this is an exhibition that has turned its focus to the East. This digital map establish that this first section of the exhibition will be about travel and trade, but it also functions to differentiate itself from previous exhibitions about the Vikings.



Fig. 7.6 The introductory room of the exhibition – the screens are positioned on the grey wall behind the introductory case and can be identified by their bright glow.

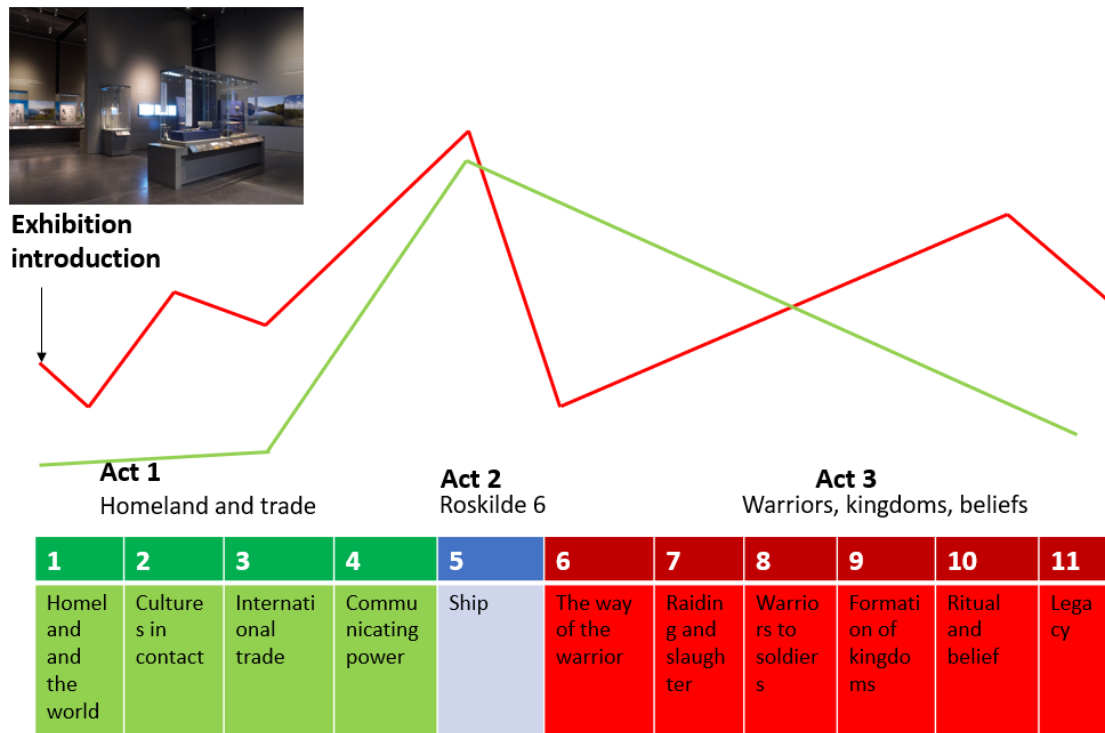


Fig. 7.7 *Vikings: Life and legend* had a three-act structure and built to the climax of the ship *Roskilde 6* in section 5. The red line represents the narrative arc of the exhibition according to the perception of the museum makers, while the green line represents the perception of the narrative arc for the museum visitors. After encountering the climax of the exhibition *Roskilde 6*, most visitor's interest in the exhibition narrative faded due to museum fatigue.

Of the three exhibitions, the London version is the only one to be given a subtitle – *Vikings: Life and legend*. As with *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* this binary, what Barthes would call the symbolic code, establishes the narrative structure of the exhibition. Unlike *Pompeii and Herculaneum* where life and death are threads that run throughout the exhibition, the themes of life and legend are largely kept separate in *Vikings: Life and legend*. The first half of the exhibition focuses on Viking life issues of travel and trade, and power and status, the second half of the exhibition is about the more legendary qualities of the Vikings, their reputation as warriors and their mythology and religion. The exhibition's principle climax *Roskilde 6* is located at the halfway point of the exhibition straddling the two themes, and giving the exhibition a three-act structure

It is telling that the exhibition is ordered life and legend, rather than legend and life. Here, less familiar, and less glamorous themes, of *Cross-Cultural Contact* and *Power and*

Status are placed in the first half of the exhibition, saving the more familiar and sensational themes of *Warfare and Expansion* and *Ritual and Belief* until the second half. As the interpretation officer explained, this was done because the exhibition was keen to challenge some of the preconceptions visitors had about the Vikings: *Our remaining sections focussed on warfare, and that's the section that most resonates with people's preconceptions, but hopefully by then we've armed them with a lot more information so they've expanded their views of the Vikings.* (Interpretation officer)

'Armed', here, is a suitable metaphor to suggest the potential danger involved in approaching these more sensational aspects of the Vikings. It also points to the fact that people are coming to the exhibition with a set of preconceptions about the Vikings in mind, which the museum feels it needs to address. It is rare that a visitor attends an exhibition with no prior knowledge of an exhibition's subject matter whatsoever. In their concept of the entrance narrative, Doering and Pekarik (1996) have hypothesised that visitors tend to be drawn to what is familiar to them and that which is unknown or challenging they ignore. Nevertheless, *Vikings: Life and legend* feels like an unusual case in that visitors are not only coming with a broad prior knowledge of the Vikings, but also a knowledge of the fact that what we know about the Vikings has itself been reinterpreted multiple times.

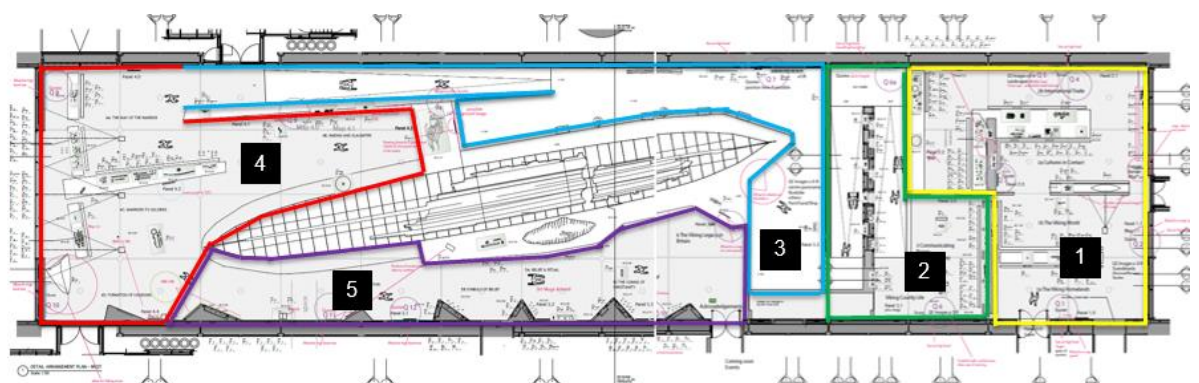


Fig. 7.8 Plan of the exhibition. Areas 1 and 2 can be seen as focusing on the life part of the exhibition title, while areas 4 and 5 are focussed on the legend part. Area 3 where visitors first encounter the ship acts as the fulcrum of the exhibition and sits between the two poles of the exhibition's central binary.

Kenneth Clark's BBC television series *Civilisation* provides us with a good example of this first-generation interpretation of the Vikings. In spite of the title, the series opens not with an artwork embodying civilisation, but an object threatening its demise. First written and broadcast in 1969, the initial episode, provocatively titled *The skin of our teeth* makes the comparison between 'the collapse of western civilisation in the dark ages' and the threat of nuclear oblivion faced by Europe during the Cold War. Standing in front of Notre Dame Cathedral, Clark argues that the history of civilisation is not the same as the history of art, as he suggests, '*great works of art can be produced in barbarous societies.*' He asks us to imagine '*looking out onto the Seine in the ninth century and seeing the prow of a Viking ship coming up the river.*' As we hear Clark's opening monologue, the camera cuts to a close-up of a rotating dragonhead of a Viking warship in a museum, a dramatic crescendo of organ music plays, and Clark's voiceover tells us:

Looked at today it's a powerful work of art, but to the mother of a family trying to settle down in her little hut it would have seemed less agreeable, as menacing to her civilisation as the periscope of a nuclear submarine. (Clark 1969)

Clark goes on to contrast the dragon-headed prow of the Viking ship with the sculpture of the Apollo Belvedere, which, from his perspective, '*surely embodies a higher state of civilisation.*' For Clark, the Hellenistic imagination presents '*an image of harmonised proportion and human reason,*' while the Northern imagination '*takes shape in an image of fear and darkness.*' The series is subtitled '*A personal view*', but Clark's description encapsulates a wider debate regarding the dual interpretation of the Vikings as both producers of powerful works of art, and menaces to civilisation. Contrasting the Vikings with the '*harmonised proportion and human reason*' of ancient Greece and Rome, Clark argues that the Vikings and their material culture are representatives of the opposite of what embodies civilisation.

Just over ten years later, the British Museum presented a very different interpretation in its seminal exhibition *Vikings* held in 1980. This was one of the most successful

exhibitions in British Museum history and attracted over 400,000 visitors. If during the period when *Civilisation* was broadcast the Vikings were primarily seen as raiders, then in ten years' time, the prevailing view has changed and what may be deemed the 'trader' interpretation of Vikings has come to the fore. The catalogue's foreword, written by the then Director David Wilson, set the scene for this '*redressing of the balance*' regarding the Vikings:

The Vikings have had a bad press...The British Museum by means of this book and the exhibition which it illustrates is trying in some ways to redress the balance...The Vikings were administrators as well as pirates, merchants as well as robbers. (Wilson 1980, 3)

The curator of the 2014 London exhibition explains the reason for the 1980 reappraisal as formulated by new archaeological discoveries of the period: '*The exhibition was part of a generation of Viking Studies influenced by the largescale urban excavations that took place in York and in Dublin in the seventies and eighties.*' (Curator)

The objects taken from these excavations allowed museums to highlight '*the trade, the production, the craftsmanship in a way that it hadn't been possible to do before.*' However, while acknowledging that the 1980 exhibition did not shy away from warfare, with its inclusion of weapons and armour, the exhibition curator argued that, '*the pendulum probably did swing a bit too far in that direction...and what we tried to do was move back to a more central position.*'

The curator described the 1980 exhibition as '*one of the most memorable experiences of my own childhood.*' He also wanted to qualify that the 1980 exhibition was, '*a broad inspiration rather than something we set out to emulate*', explaining that this was '*because we had specific stories we wanted to tell that wouldn't be possible in 1980.*' Alongside new stories, a reduced budget, a smaller space and a more formalised exhibition development process were also given as reasons that the 2014 version had to differentiate

itself from its 1980 predecessor. As well as the 1980 exhibition, *Vikings: Life and legend* also tried to differentiate itself from the most recent major exhibition on the subject – *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, which was organised by the Smithsonian and toured North America between 2000 and 2002. This decision to differentiate itself from previous exhibitions meant that ‘*some areas of the Viking world would be treated much less than others.*’ *Vikings: Life and legend* would focus less on urban living and the North Atlantic exploration story and instead focus on the ‘*European and Eastern story*’ (Curator). Reacting to previous exhibitions as one of the drivers for reinterpretation was not unique to London. The lead curator for the Copenhagen exhibition recalls in exasperation how an academic colleague told her, ‘*they were looking forward to seeing the exhibition, but knew it could never live up to the 1991 Vikings and Crusaders exhibition held in both Copenhagen and Berlin.*’

It is important to note the role that needing to differentiate yourself from your predecessors plays in the exhibition-making process. There is an element in this curatorial approach of what Bloom (1973) called the *anxiety of influence*, which he uses to describe the ambiguous relationship between the Romantic poets and the poets that preceded and influenced them. Bloom argued that a rereading, or misreading, needs to take place in order to free the poet from the pressure of living up to the high standards set by their literary forbearers. Within the context of the museum exhibition, reinterpretation – the adoption of new approaches or perspectives – can be seen as a way of creating exhibitions about subject matter that has already been given a thorough exhibitionary treatment.

Reinterpretation can here legitimise an exhibition, even if its predecessors were created during periods of bigger budgets and larger exhibition spaces. This remains a key motivation behind reinterpretation despite the fact that only a few of the visitors to the 2014 exhibitions will have experienced the Viking exhibitions of previous generations. This need for reinterpretation manifests itself physically in the exhibition in two ways. The London Curator was keen to highlight how the British Museum exhibition did this through ‘*the incorporation of the latest finds*’, such as the mass Viking burial from Weymouth, which was

only discovered eighteen months before the exhibition was opened. The Danish curator also stressed that alongside these new finds the Copenhagen exhibition would also experiment with '*new approaches of display*'. This relationship between new discoveries and new modes of display as part of the reinterpretation process is explored in the following section

7.1.1 Reinterpretation and visitors

If reinterpretation is a common device used in exhibitions, then what is unique about *Vikings: Life and legend* is the level of public awareness about this act of reinterpretation, and the speculation that arises about the motivations that lie behind it. In early newspaper articles surrounding the exhibition's press conferences, the '*swinging back of the pendulum*' and reintegration of the warrior into the Vikings narrative was greeted enthusiastically by several tabloid newspapers: *For decades historians have tried to convince us that Vikings were nothing but peaceful traders and farmers. But now, historians in Copenhagen have shown that they were in fact the fearsome warriors we had previously thought them to be* (McCann 2013). Here, the act of reinterpretation is presented by the *Daily Mail* as an act of vindication for the 'common-sense' approach of the general public and media, suspicious of the political motives of the historians of the seventies and eighties.

The issue of reinterpretation and the Vikings is talked about in the exit interviews by thirteen of the seventeen visitor groups. However, although visitors are clear that there is some form of reinterpretation taking place, there are differing opinions regarding in which direction, to use the London curator's metaphor, the exhibition's pendulum is actually swinging. Rather than seeing the exhibition as an attempt to reinsert the role of the warrior into the heart of the Viking narrative, some visitor groups regarded the exhibition as presenting a more peaceful trading Viking. Some visitors were also consciously aware, and potentially suspicious, of the act of reinterpretation itself.

Reinterpretation was one lens visitors used to read the exhibition. Evan for example, frequently spoke about the exhibition in terms of the questions it generates: *I mean the*

questions they were begging, they have to have been more than just warriors, because of the amount of trade they undertook with different cultures. This idea of an exhibition being based around questions that challenge your preconceptions, creates a visitor experience akin to what Barthes (1990) calls the *hermeneutic code*, where an enigma or mystery lies at the heart of a narrative that drives the reader to finish the work and untangle it. Visitors adopting the lens of reinterpretation, approach the exhibition searching for answers, attempting to reconcile their prior entrance narrative of the Vikings, as warriors or raiders, with the craftsmanship exhibited in the variety of material culture on display.

Although the exhibition was trying to '*swing the pendulum*' back to a more balanced view of the Vikings, many visitors' own reinterpretations focussed on the idea of a shift from raiders to traders:

Fiona: *And I think it was also good to learn about the Vikings, because you've just got this idea of rape and pillage and sort of...*

Fred: *And they weren't so. Well in some ways they were. They settled, it was surprising the different things you can learn from it.*

Fred talks about reinterpretation in terms of '*learning*', however, the accumulation of new facts is only one part of the reinterpretation process. For many visitors, reinterpretation is associated with the affective domain, of empathising with the Vikings. Brenda describes leaving the exhibition thinking the Vikings were, '*a more cultured, interesting people. It's like they were more open-minded in a way.*'

Brenda's comment suggests the important role that empathy plays in reinterpreting the Vikings, as the previous chapter has shown it plays in relating to the inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Visitors are reading the exhibition in order to understand the Vikings, to see the world from their perspective, but also find in their culture values that they can relate to. This can lead visitors when they talk about their readings of the exhibition, to emphasise certain characteristics of the Vikings, while downplaying others. For example,

Evan emphasised the trading and engineering role of the Vikings, while downplaying the sophistication of their weaponry: *The weapons weren't as fearsome as they were often portrayed. They were no different to other weapons at the time. They weren't particularly well made. People were carrying spears all over the world. Much the same design. There were arrows of a superior ilk.* (Evan)

Reinterpretations of the Vikings were also not always positive. Four visitor groups reported being previously unaware of the Vikings' involvement with slavery and the revelation of this could lead to some visitors feeling distanced from the Vikings. Also, while some visitors were keen to read the exhibition as reinterpreting the Vikings from raiders to traders, other visitors found this interpretation as disappointing. Liam describes leaving the exhibition '*craving more gore and destruction*', while Carol laments what she perceives as a lack of focus on raiding: *I don't think it had much about the raids in it, which is a massive focus... In everything I've really read about it, it seems like a big focus. Like specifically talking about it. I mean obviously it [the exhibition] has pictures and things like that. But it wasn't a massive focus.*

The acceptance, or rejection, of the exhibition's reinterpretation narrative was intimately linked to what Bourdieu (1990) describes as a visitor's cultural capital. Those visitor groups that were less familiar with the exhibition's subject matter, and less regular attenders of blockbuster exhibitions tended to accept the reinterpretation narrative at face value. Those visitors who had more familiarity with the subject matter, or were regular exhibition goers, tended to be more self-aware or ambivalent about reinterpretation. Andrea for example, who has a PhD in English literature and had previously been to several British Museum exhibitions, describes the Vikings as: *Having been done a lot and there's a lot of self-consciousness. Maybe encapsulated by that whole helmet with horns thing. They're very mythologised and you're very aware that they've been very mythologised. So, you're like hang on, what's true and what's not true about the Vikings. Are we going to put up some*

myths that we're going to demolish through an exhibition? And you're, kind of like, I'm not sure what the myths are anymore, are they all straw men? (Andrea)

For Andrea, this issue of Viking helmets and whether they have horns or not, metonymically encapsulates this issue of reinterpretation surrounding the Vikings. Helmets were mentioned by seven visitor groups, and for some, such as Brenda, *'the helmets stood out. Because they weren't like the stereotypical Viking helmets with two horn things.'* Fred recalls dressing up for a re-enactment in a school production and wearing a helmet: *This is the worst part, is that they've got a made-up helmet and what did they do, put the horns on it. That's the most... sort of, isn't it? ... the curator would have a good laugh if he saw it.*

The interpretation officer recalled that during the formative focus groups for the exhibition, one of the participants described finding out that Vikings don't actually wear horned helmets as almost being a rite of passage: *'of course our son is at the stage where he realises that the Vikings didn't wear horned helmets.'* Such a response illustrates how the connotations surrounding objects change over time and reinterpretation can become almost a cliché for some visitors.



Fig. 7.9 A photograph of Viking re-enactors outside the British Museum during the 1980 Vikings exhibition, many of whom are wearing horns with helmets (c) The Times.



Fig. 7.10 Jorvik Viking centre in which visitors travel on an automated carriage around a reconstructed section of Viking York.

A photograph (fig. 7.9) featured in *The Times* in the build-up to the British Museum's *Vikings* exhibition staged in 1980 captures how the connotations we associate with objects change. It shows a group of re-enactors dressed as Vikings, standing in front of a reconstructed boat on the British Museum lawn, many of them are wearing horned helmets. A similar photograph for the 2014 exhibition – when the idea of Viking helmets not having horns in the words of Andrea has become '*almost a cliché*' – is unthinkable. This is not only because of changes in curatorial research, but also because of how public awareness about reinterpretation changes as well. However, as well as reflecting how the connotations around objects change, the photograph also illustrates how the accompanying exhibitionary culture around the Vikings shifts and metamorphosises. In the 1970s and 1980s, re-enactment was closely associated with Viking heritage, particularly in the form presented by the Jorvik Viking centre at York (fig. 7.10), using some of the urban excavations the curator mentioned, which opened in 1984. As well reinterpreting the meaning surrounding the Vikings, the 2014 exhibition was also a reinterpretation in the sense of the visual language and exhibitionary tools it adopted to tell this story. This will be discussed in greater depth in the next section.

7.1.2 Reinterpretation and multimodality

Returning back to the photograph (fig. 7.2) and the plan (fig. 7.3) of this introductory area of the exhibition we can see a disparity between the two. The plan shows the introductory case attached to the wall of the exhibition, while the photograph shows that there is a clear walkway to the left of the case. This discrepancy between plan and image is not a result of the designer reading the plans incorrectly, but due to the fact that the photograph was taken several months into the exhibition's run after the introductory area had been changed at the request of the Director. This change was brought about due to a fear that this area of the exhibition was overcrowded with visitors.

The design of the space effectively presents visitors with a choice of three options as they enter – after this period of initial orientation ten groups turn right and walk to the introductory text, four visitors walk along the left-hand wall and three visitors approach the

first case containing an object – the ship broach (fig. 7.2). It should be noted then, that visitors tend to look at an exhibition panel first, before attempting to look at objects in cases. Visitors describe this period of orientation in terms of trying to understand how the exhibition works. This can create uncertainty among certain visitor groups, as expressed by David:

When I first walked in there. I thought ohhh dunno... As I walked in it just seemed a bit sort of...you know. You didn't know whether it was going to start off too well. You thought I dunno, is this gonna be alright or not.

As well as anxiety created by the uncertainty of what the exhibition was actually going to be like, visitors described a sense of feeling overwhelmed by the multisensory elements of the exhibition's opening section: *I thought coming in was a bit overpowering. You have the Icelandic, or Old Norse going over the speaker phones and you're trying to listen to the audio guide and you're trying to read at the same time. It's quite a lot to take in, when you first come in... it was a bit overpowering.* (Kate)

Visitors also talked about being confronted by and having to negotiate the overcrowding in the introductory section of the exhibition. Five visitor groups were observed to queue for several minutes in the introductory area, before being able to get close enough to reach cases to view objects. Debbie talked about the difficulties presented by the overcrowding caused by the presence of other visitors, as they worked out how to negotiate moving through the exhibition: *There was a queue and we weren't aware of it at the beginning... It took us at least through this process here* [points at second section of the map], *before we figured it out, let's just follow this queue and they just took us around.* (Debbie)

After this initial period of adjustment and negotiating the crowding, visitors frequently talked about looking for a way into the subject matter of the exhibition. The morphing map, mentioned by eight groups and with four groups observed to spend over a minute in front of it, frequently provided this function. It introduced visitors to the extent of the Viking world and to the centrality of the ship in the Viking way of life: *Oh yeah and I really liked the map in the*

first room. You'll be able to see it in there because I stopped at these things for hours. That map showing the geography of them going through the rivers. Again, fascinating and this whole idea that they went everywhere by boat. (Paul)

The fact this introductory area was in the words of David 'very busy' and 'jammed' hindered visitor's ability to orientate themselves intellectually. Comparing *Vikings Life and legend* to the prior British Museum summer exhibition, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Ingrid would have liked the exhibition to contain a similar seating area with an introductory film at the beginning: *So you can get everything in one, so you can really concentrate on it. Now it's a little bit there and a little bit there. (Ingrid)*

This 'bittyness' of the exhibition, exasperated by the high density crowding in the first half, contributed to visitors preferring the second half of the exhibition to the first. It also made it difficult for the exhibition to function as the designer and interpretation officer had envisaged – 'arming' visitors about the reality of Viking life before introducing them to the more sensational aspects.

While the heavy crowding experienced in this initial section of the exhibition can be accounted for simply by the number of visitors in this section of the exhibition, there are other factors at play here. The type of objects on display, frequently coins which required close-up viewing, and the narrow single route through the exhibition also contributed to the creation of the slowly moving queue mentioned by Debbie. Rather than seeing this as simply the teething problems of the new exhibition space, we can also understand this as being a product of the museological philosophy that underpins the exhibition. This topic is explored in the next section.

As you come to end of the first half of the exhibition, there is a large photograph of a reconstructed Viking longhouse. It is unusual for a supplementary photograph to feature in an exhibition review, but it caught the attention of Mark Hudson in the *Telegraph*: *A photograph of a reconstructed Viking longhouse at Borg in Norway gives an idea of what this*

exhibition might have looked like 20 years ago. Nowadays, however, that kind of semi-imaginative approach doesn't sit with the desire for academic and political correctness expressed in the exhibition's texts. (Hudson 2014)

The above quote by Hudson, points at a perceived change in exhibitionary practices surrounding the Vikings over the last twenty years, which he identifies as a visual form of the '*political correctness expressed in the exhibition's texts.*' Political correctness here refers to the reinterpretation of the Vikings in the words of Hudson, as '*sea-borne businessmen whose principle interest was slave-trading.*' Here, again we see the fear expressed in the earlier *Daily Mail* article that the Vikings have been co-opted into the politically correct agenda. Hudson's (2014) article does help to highlight how exhibition design might also be connected to the reinterpretation narrative.

The 1980 *Vikings* exhibition at the British Museum is a prime example of the kind of reconstructive design approach Hudson is describing. Here, several reconstructions played an extensive part in the exhibition including the Hedeby House (fig. 7.10), a reconstructed loom (fig. 7.11), and a reconstructed boat and wagon (fig. 7.12). We might also see some of the '*semi-imaginative*' spirit of the reconstruction as present in the exhibition design. For example, in the displaying of objects on pebbles from a beach in order to evoke the maritime scenes they depicted (fig. 7.13). What has occurred since then is a movement towards the primacy of the object at the expense of the reconstruction, which Schulze (2014) connects to the material turn. Of course, museum exhibitions have always had objects as their focus, but this material-based approach brings with it an aesthetics that deems that anything non-object based is, in effect, to the detriment of the object and must be removed.



Fig. 7.11 The Hedeby House in the British Museum Vikings exhibition (1980)



Fig. 7.12 The reconstructed loom in the British Museum Vikings exhibition (1980)



Fig. 7.13 Reconstructed boat and wagon in the British Museum Vikings exhibition (1980).



Fig. 7.14 In the 1980s *Vikings* exhibition objects, such as this stele featuring a depiction of a Viking ship, were displayed on pebbles to evoke their maritime background.

An object-based approach manifests itself in a number of ways, but begins with the selection of objects for an exhibition and the number of objects on display. In the number of objects on display, the three Vikings exhibitions have a number of interesting differences. A key part of the exhibition-making process is the selection of objects, with the number of objects being a subject of debate within the individual exhibition teams. Typically, the curator wants more objects to be on display, while the designers and interpretation officers want less, as illustrated by this example regarding the number of swords in the Copenhagen exhibition given by the Danish curator: *Some of my colleagues thought that one sword is enough, but I said no one can ever have enough swords.*



Fig. 7.15 The swords display in the Berlin version of the *Vikings* exhibition.

For the Danish curator, a display of multiple examples of swords not only expressed the idea that similar items were found across the Viking world but also allowed the idea of a typology of swords to be illustrated. This typological mode of display was regarded by the curator to be self-explanatory; displaying multiple examples of similar objects meant that less exhibition text was required. This corresponds to what the graphic designer called a '*let the object speak for itself*' approach. In contrast the London exhibition had far fewer swords on display. This was partly because the lead curator's specialism lay elsewhere. The

interpretation officer recalls the focus of the '*thinning out process*' being around the '*coins, trade and payment section*' because this was '*the curator's pet subject*'. The introductory section was about culture and trade and so naturally this area featured the most coins in the exhibition and as a result was more dense than other sections.

In general, however, the British Museum version of the exhibition contained fewer objects than its counterparts in Copenhagen and Berlin. The Danish curator likening the Copenhagen exhibition to '*a richly packed treasure box*' compared to the much sparser London exhibition. For the London curator, the reduction in objects was one of the great problems in the exhibition. He argued that although they had set out to create the biggest Viking exhibition since *Vikings* in 1980, because of the number of objects that were allowed on display this was palpably untrue. As part of the object reduction process, it was argued more objects could be included if they were grouped together with a single label as object stops. For the curator this meant, '*you could say very little about anything*', and contributed to the danger that the exhibition would be '*dumbed down*'. This was seen as a cultural battle, and in the curator's view, '*many of our visitors are more intelligent than the people who write the text*'. This '*dumbing down*' was not solely laid at the feet of the interpretation officer, who the curator reported having developed a good working relationship with, once they had both '*got the measure of each other*'. Rather he attributed this to an approach in which the exhibition design dictated what was on display, and the aesthetic was privileged over the archaeological. He regarded this as potentially misleading approach, as everyday objects were displayed as isolated treasures giving a false impression of their rarity to visitors.

Experiencing the Vikings through objects was clearly an important motivation for visiting the exhibition, with the encounter with *Roskilde 6* being the highlight for the majority of visitor groups. However, it was not the only motivation and there were times when visitors talked about the limitations of the object-based approach, or where they preferred non-object-based approaches. Referring to learning about the formation of kingdoms, Andrea says, '*I don't know if this is the way I did the exhibition, but I don't think I learned about that*

stuff. It's hard to take that in when you're looking at objects. Maybe that's where museums struggle.' James refers to the British Museum as *'catered for showing as opposed to telling'* and would have liked the British Museum to have, *'maybe a bit more information, tell us as much as show us with a lot of these things.'* Karen is an undergraduate history student and talked about preferring the exhibition text to the objects themselves:

Yeah, I'm not really a fan of all the little artefacts, I think they're interesting but I'm a history student so I kind of prefer to read about it. I like the big kind of script on the wall that gives you more detail, rather than 'this was a pot that was discovered in the seventh century' kinda thing, that's a bit... come on. (Karen)

Although objects form much of the core of the museum visitor experience, they are not the only thing visitors are seeking when they come to the exhibition. Alongside the encounter with authentic objects, visitors are also coming to experience the story of a particular culture, which may, in certain situations, be better told without objects. This may take the form of a historical discourse told for example through a timeline, or quotes from Viking sagas placed high on the exhibition walls.



Fig. 7.16 The Berlin version of *Vikings* featured the live reconstruction of a Viking ship during the run of the exhibition.

The other major contributing factor to the overcrowding in this area of the exhibition was the design. Just as the curatorial team were keen that the themes of the exhibitions were reflective of new approaches to the Vikings within academic study, so the exhibition designers also wanted the design to differ from both previous Viking exhibitions, and the exhibitions held in the British Museum's previous large exhibition space – the Round Reading Room. The exhibition designer reported being inspired by the Scandinavian subject matter to adopt a '*clean and contemporary look*', drawing on examples, '*from Denmark, Sweden and Iceland*' when planning the design. This '*clean and contemporary look*' was also seen as appropriate for the '*brand new space*' of the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre, which was described by the designer as, '*open but very different, very new compared to the old-style museum.*' Describing the exhibition-making process, the designer talked about it in terms of reduction: *We often say as designers we should have shorter*

words and people want a certain amount of information, and the curator will always want a book on the wall.

The curator mentioned how he felt the design-led approach of the exhibition had resulted in the number of objects being reduced, but this is not only thing that a ‘*contemporary aesthetic*’ removes. Firstly, it reduces by minimising the number of objects or words in the exhibition, and secondly it also reduces the potential interpretative and design languages available. Reviews of the exhibition explicitly referenced the contemporary Scandinavian feel but not always positively. Mark Hudson, in *The Telegraph* (2014), likened experiencing the exhibition to ‘*listening to an episode of The Killing in an outbuilding of Stansted Airport, with a few unspectacular artefacts dotted about in glass cases.*’ Two visitor groups also mentioned the aesthetic of the space with Andrea saying that, ‘*the grey colour scheme was hard work.*’ Nora connected the greyness of the design with a difficulty in imagining ‘*what the people would have looked like...I was imagining warriors but almost in grey scale.*’ Nora’s comments hint at one of the limitations of coupling an object-based approach to interpretation with a clear and clean design aesthetic, that it may be difficult to imply the presence of the people who made the actual objects. In a Bakhtinian sense this combination of a materialist approach to interpretation might be likened to a particularly monological novel, in which only one perspective is present.

Vikings: Life and legend doesn’t contain a reconstructed Viking long house, as does the Berlin exhibition, or the opportunity to dress up as Vikings as does the Copenhagen version of the exhibition, it does have some interpretive elements of the exhibition that extend beyond the object or the textual into the tactile. Visitors encounter this tactile display, opposite a case showing objects the Vikings traded and the weights and measures they used in these exchanges.



Fig. 7.17 One of the two touch tables in the exhibition in the Cross-Cultural Trade section. Here visitors could touch examples of materials Vikings traded, including walrus ivory, antler, amber and fox fur.



Fig. 7.18 In the lower left-hand corner of *Roskilde 6* in the Copenhagen exhibition you can see the cases that show replica Viking clothing, shields and spears used by re-enactors.



Fig. 7.19 The Berlin version of the exhibition displays its feasting section with a design which, if not attempting to reconstruct a Viking long house, certainly evokes it.

Reconstruction was something that visitors closely associated with experiencing Viking heritage. Jorvik Viking centre was mentioned by five (A, C, F, J, P) visitor groups, where it was often associated with a childhood memory of encountering the Vikings as part of a school trip. Charles' response was typical:

I remember going to a Viking exhibition as a kid. I remember it in great detail. I remember being in Jorvik, where there was a big exhibition there. And it was, they had stands which they had kind of models and wax works. The smells, it was a very visceral experience perhaps more so than just seeing all the weaponry and all the old stuff, which probably as a kid you look at and go wow. But perhaps don't take all of that in. It was definitely something that I remember from childhood... (Charles).

Charles' response to the Jorvik Viking Centre stresses its sensory qualities – the smells and the visceral nature of the experience, which he contrasts with the experience of

seeing objects – *‘weaponry and old stuff’*. Four visitor groups specifically wanted to see more examples of reconstruction in the exhibition. Fred, in particular, would have liked to have seen a reconstruction of a Viking Longhouse: *Like the big hall, they always had a big hall. Everything was built with wooden beams. Perhaps, not a whole hall but as you were going through. A reconstruction as you were going through. Some of the items put in situ, where they would have been in that hall. But that's a big...probably you'd get children interested as well.* (Fred)

One of the interactive elements that did feature in the exhibition was the touch tables that were mentioned by seven of the visitor groups. These were always spoken about in positive terms, often as they provided an alternative to looking at objects through the barrier of glass: *It gives you a different perspective on it than just looking at things through glass.* (Karen)

Touching materials, such as the amber in the trade section, was also regarded as a particularly powerful way to evoke memories and allowed visitors to make connections with past experiences: *And I picked up some stuff on the beach, which I thought. It's soft. It's not so soft, it's light. And it looked like, some of those pieces of amber. And I thought, oh I'm going to go home and look at those again.* (Maria)

Describing the early stages of the exhibition planning process, the interpretation officer recalls how the inclusion of interactive elements had been an important factor ever since the family focus groups. During these sessions, the curator who is also, *‘involved in Viking re-enactments and has his own personal armoury’*, brought in replica weapons for the focus group attendees to handle, which proved extremely popular. However, although the initial plan had been to include more interactive and tactile elements in the exhibition they were, *‘something that set alarm bells ringing for the designers.’* Gradually, due to money and space issues, these interactive elements were squeezed out of the final design. The tactile tables were only included relatively late in the planning process, when the omission of a large object – a Viking barrel from Copenhagen – freed up space in the *Cross-cultural trade*

section. These touch tables can be likened to the examples Bakhtin (1981) uses for *heteroglossia* in the novel. Like vernacular speech or folk songs, they are regarded as a low genre, but they provide a potentially subversive presence that undermines the dominant narrative.

7.2 Narrative – Journey and Climax

As visitors pass beyond the photograph of the longhouse they encounter a ramp sloping upwards with individual objects on their left-hand side. This ramp is an extension of the power and status section, which is reflected in the orange and gold colour scheme which delineates that these are luxury objects meant for the elite. Yet the ramp is not simply an extension of this section but delineates a change in the pace of the exhibition's narrative. It allows visitors to ascend to a height where they can look out and see the Viking ship, *Roskilde 6*, at sea-level. At the same time, it also heightens the narrative tension as visitors anticipate what they are about to encounter. As visitors ascend the ramp, the soundtrack of crashing waves can be heard in the background alluding to the oncoming encounter with the sea. This section can be seen as the ascent of the narrative climax of *Vikings: Life and legend*.



Fig. 7.19 The ramp that signified the build towards the climax of the *Viking's Life and Legend* exhibition.

The narrative, or lack of it, in *Vikings: Life and legend* is a contentious issue. In his review of the exhibition, subtitled '*great ship but where's the story?*', Jonathan Jones (2014) critiques *Vikings: Life and legend* for being '*a pedantic exercise in pure archaeology that fails to shape its subject into a stimulating narrative.*' Jones' review '*begins at the end* [of the exhibition] *because that's where it finally comes alive*', and argues that, '*the journey is so badly staged* [that even] *the show's conclusion, [Roskilde 6] left me numb.*'

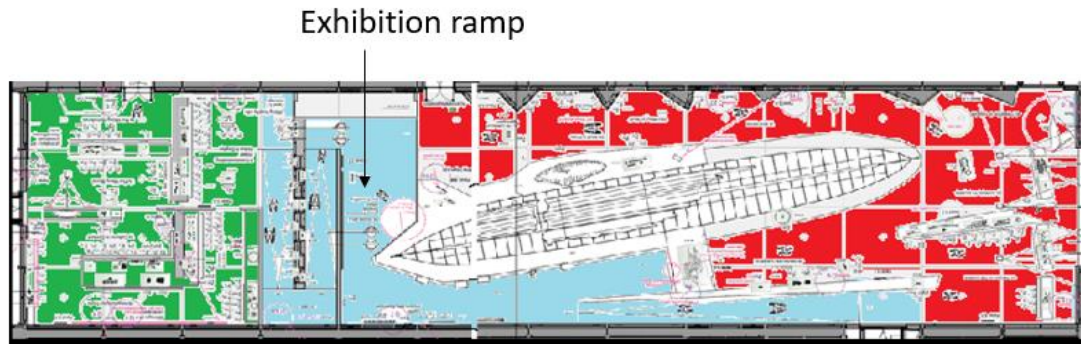


Fig. 7.20 Plan of the British Museum version of the Vikings: Life and legend exhibition, the green signifies the first act of the exhibition, the blue signifies the second act and the red signifies the third act.

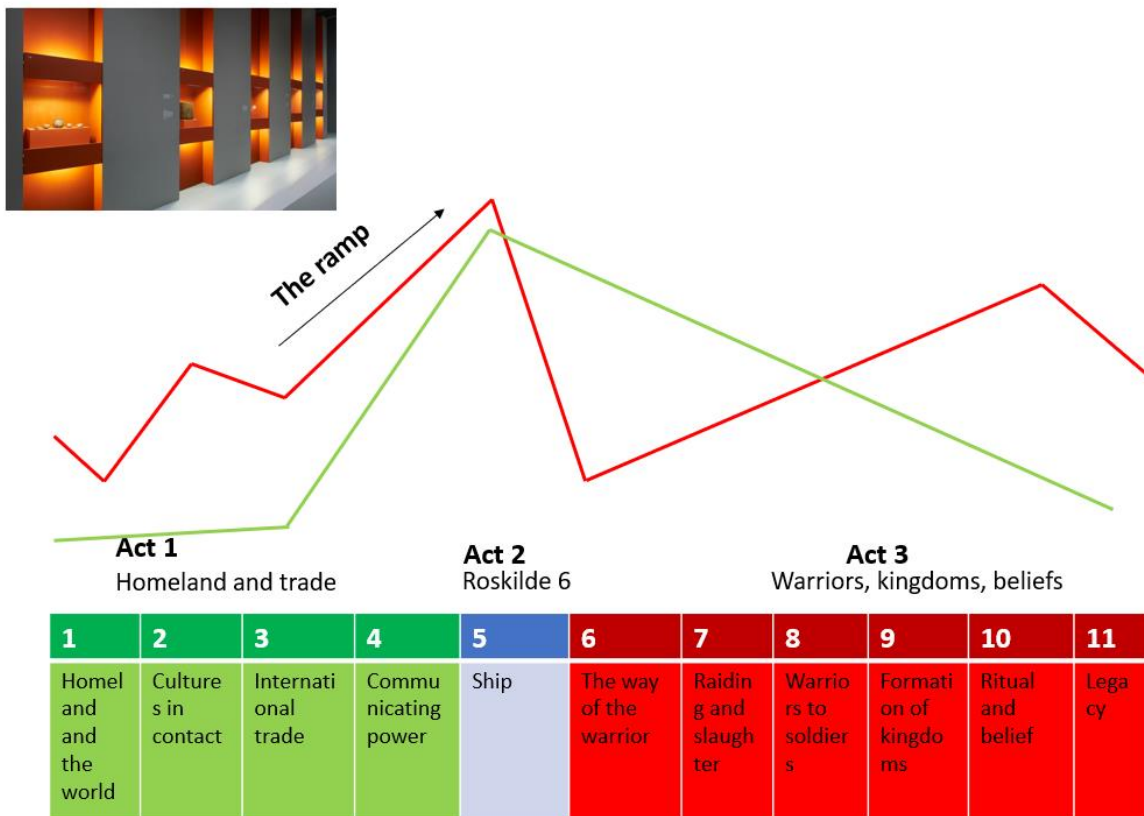


Fig. 7.21 The ramp built towards the climax of *Vikings: life and legend* – the ship *Roskilde 6*.

Jones' critique both suggests the extent to which a clear narrative is key to an exhibition's success and alludes to some of the key elements that make up an exhibition narrative, such as a sense of 'journey' and a 'conclusion'. Describing *Roskilde 6* as the show's 'conclusion' is somewhat misleading, however, given that visitors first encounter the ship at around the midway stage of the exhibition. This section of the chapter explores this

issue of climax, conclusion, and how techniques used within fiction and film are used, sometimes subconsciously, to construct narratives in exhibitions.

Jones uses the term '*journey*' here to describe and criticise the build-up to encountering *Roskilde 6* in *Vikings: Life and legend*. '*Journey*' is also used by three of the visitor groups and particularly associated with the ramp leading up to *Roskilde 6*. Andrea describing it as acting as a '*transition*' from one half of the exhibition to the other, while Liam talks about the rising of the ramp as giving him a sense of going on a '*journey*': *Then I went up here, up this hill. That was good. I like this sort of journey that you go through there, that was nice.* (Liam)

The exhibition was deliberately constructed to build this sense of anticipation in visitors, the interpretation officer describes: *We're starting to lead into the story with a ramp which would take you up to this viewing platform, where you would see the ship at sea level, so on the ramp we started to have sounds of the sea, to sort of build up the experience and start peaking people's interests. And along the ramp you had a high ceiling wall so you couldn't get that view to the ship.*

This sense of anticipation was stimulated by the sound of waves, but also by not being able to see what the next stage of the exhibition was. This was something visitors also commented on: *And what I did like was going up there and you could hear the sea, shhhh [makes the noise of crashing waves] all the way up, as you come round. So you knew you were coming into something a bit different.* (Fred)

Here, the actual physical build of the exhibition enacts the rising line of ascending action visualised in Freytag's (1997) plot pyramid. Alongside the exhibition design setting up the encounter with the ship, the interpretation officer describes the exhibition's marketing campaign as playing an important role. This was not only to set up the *reveal* but also to, '*manage expectations – that it was not a whole ship but twenty percent complete.*' The process of building anticipation for the encounter with *Roskilde 6* begins not simply when

visitors enter the exhibition or even the museum, but potentially months in advance.

Fourteen of the groups reported knowing about the ship before they entered the exhibition.

This prior knowledge came from a range of media, including the British Museum's website (three visitor groups), television programmes about the exhibition (three visitor groups) and newspaper reviews of the exhibition (three visitor groups).

Not knowing about the ship beforehand did not lessen its impact for the three visitor groups who encountered the ship '*cold*'. Carol describes the moment of realisation occurring when reading the exhibition panel and finding out '*how big it was*' and that the ship was, '*discovered in like 1997 or 1996, which is mad because it's so recent.*' And then realising, '*oh they've actually got parts of it!*' She experienced the build and reveal here not from media accounts, or from suggestions made by the exhibition design, but from reading a single panel and turning around to view the ship.

The title of Jones' review – '*great ship but where's the story?*' – is provocative because it leads us to ask the question, where does narrative actually reside in an exhibition? *Vikings: Life and legend* employs many of the same interpretative and design devices as *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* to create a sense of plot structure. It has a star object in the form of the ship, which it foreshadows hermeneutically through the positioning of ship-themed objects. The ramp itself builds towards this climax, physically resembling the ascending line that indicates building tension in the dramatic plot diagram of Freytag's pyramid. Not only is this something that the museum-makers tried to implement but it is something that the visitors themselves remarked on. Jones' comment points to the fact that a classic structure alone cannot make a compelling narrative and that problems may reside in the nuance of the weighting of the exhibition's binary of life and legend. The curator of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* wanted the exhibition to be a life show that featured death, and visitors commented that, as they left, it was the life they were taking with them. The binary of *Vikings: life and legend*, that the Vikings were both traders and raiders, was

subtler and perhaps not as compelling as one that veers to a definitive pronouncement on the subject.

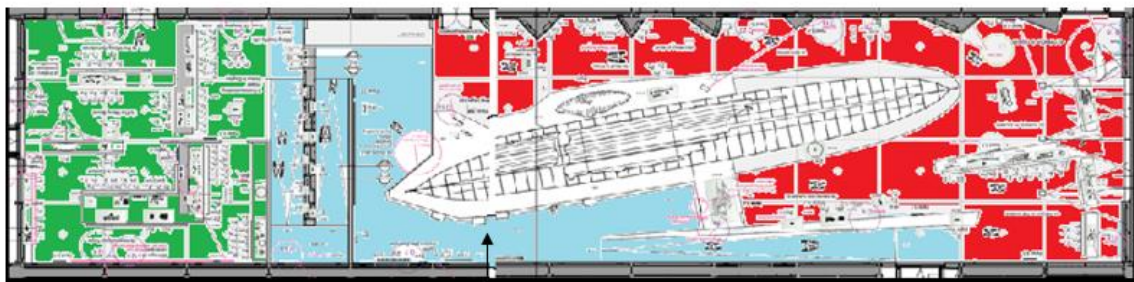
If the problem resides not in the structure of the exhibition, then we may now turn to examine the narratorial perspective. Jones' description of the exhibition as '*a pedantic exercise in pure archaeology*' would be at odds with what the curator regarded as the overly aestheticised design, which treated everyday objects as works of art. Nevertheless, the word 'pure' resonates with the designer's description of the exhibition as clean, while archaeology can be seen as a comment on the object-focused approach. As with many of the other commentators on the exhibition, it is a lack of the other associated messy semi-imaginative elements, which make up what Piehl (2016) would call the storyworld (which we find in the Berlin and Copenhagen versions of the exhibition), which leaves Jones feeling numb. Far from having not enough narrative then, as Jones might suggest, the problem for *Vikings: Life and legend*, at least in terms of visitor flow, was that it was overly constrained by trying to fit into a narrative format. Considering the object-based approach and pureness it is interesting that the exhibition's climax, *Roskilde 6*, contains both physical and digital reconstructive element. It is to the reception of this object and visitor notions of authenticity and empathy that I now turn.

7.2.1 The ship as narrative climax

As visitors reach the top of the ramp and turn the corner, they finally see *Roskilde 6* and the entirety of the rest of the exhibition stretching out before them. At the very back of the exhibition is a digital screen projection of a seascape, showing the sun slowly moving across the sky. One of the key aspects of the display of *Roskilde 6* is its hybridity, the contrast between the original wooden planks and the specially constructed steel frame that make it recognisable as a Viking ship.



Fig. 7.22 *Roskilde 6* and its steel frame. Visitors initially encounter the Ship at 'sea level' before descending down a ramp to the Warfare and Expansion section. In the background, a digital screen can be seen with a projection of a changing seascape.



The first moment visitors view *Roskilde 6*

Fig. 7.23 The moment when visitors first see *Roskilde 6*.

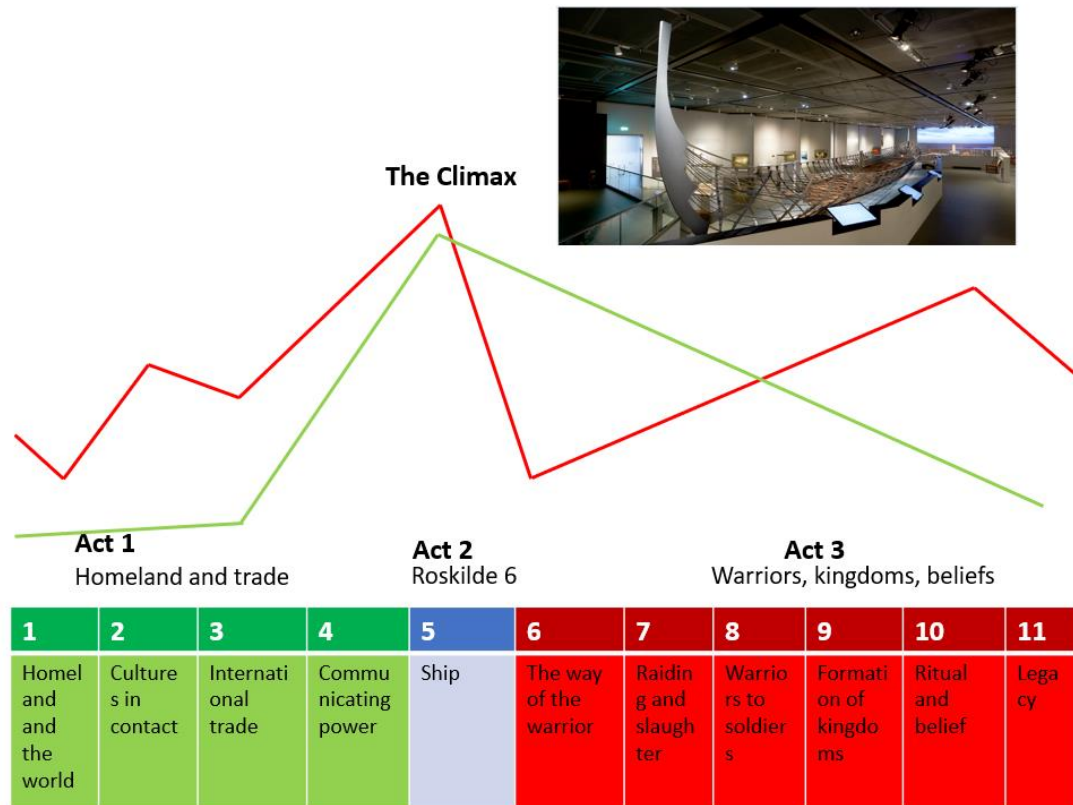


Fig. 7.24 *Roskilde 6* was the climax of the exhibition positioned in section 5.

How visitors would react to the metal frame was a key concern for the exhibition team. The kind of reaction expressed by artist and British Museum trustee Grayson Perry in his review of the cultural year was exactly the kind of response they wanted to avoid: *Biggest disappointment? As a devotee of the British Museum, it pains me to say it was the Viking show... [Vikings: Life and legend]... I have been to Oslo and seen the ships there, so I was very disappointed to encounter a huge tubular steel cradle like something from a roundabout in a new town with a few tatty planks in the bottom.* (Perry 2014)

Here, Perry's unflattering comparison of the ship's structure to that of a piece of contemporary art on a new-town roundabout is meant to convey an air of inauthenticity surrounding *Roskilde 6*. This is in contrast with the authentic Viking ships (themselves partly reconstructed) displayed in Oslo. Perry was not alone in making the comparison between *Roskilde 6* and other examples of Viking ships. Gregor was from Norway and talked about having seen 'better and more complete ships' in Norway.

In raising the issue of objects and authenticity, Perry's critique draws attention to the manner by which exhibitions tell stories and how we might conceive of the voice of a narrator as existing within an exhibition. If an exhibition has trained us to only value the authentic, what happens when an object is a hybrid, part original artefact, part reconstruction?

Eleven of the seventeen visitor groups brought up the topic of reconstruction and the authenticity of objects. Often this would be centred on the hybrid nature of the ship, which combined the original wooden planks with a steel reconstructed frame and a digital screen showing a changing ocean backdrop. Unlike Perry, who was disparaging of the steel frame, when it was mentioned the majority of visitors were accepting of it and interested in the reason for its reconstruction: *The steel structure looked quite good. I mean obviously there's not much in the way of additional stuff. Sorry I mean the wood. But what I was interested in hearing about was the reason they were using the metal. The fact, that if they use wood that would be reconstructing it. So, I thought that was interesting.* (Ella)

The majority of visitors, however, did not bring up the issue of reconstruction instead talking about encountering *Roskilde 6* in strongly affective terms, often related to its scale: *When you think about how big it is. I just sat down and stood beside it. I'm only five two now. And I put my hand up and I thought wow.* (Maria)

This idea of encountering the ship and being temporarily lost for words, 'mesmerised', as Brenda described it, and just having to stop and look, suggests the affective power of *Roskilde 6*. Liam and Maria were both observed on the video footage to sit down when they came to this section, and Maria describes how they needed to sit down and simply 'look' when encountering the ship:

Maria: *The ship itself. When I came here, there's a bench here. I just sat down...it's incredible.*

Interviewer: *You sat down and just took in...*

Maria: *I just looked. When you think about how big it is.*

Three visitor groups talked about the imaginative potential of the ship, in terms of its capacity to transport them to a different time and empathetically connect them with the people who would have encountered *Roskilde 6* during the Viking age: *And thinking if you were here and you saw that boat coming in. I think you'd be really scared or mesmerised. Or terrified. You'd have never seen anything like that before. Yeah...that was the best bit.* (Brenda)

Brenda's comments here about taking the perspective of someone seeing a Viking ship resonate with what visitors to *Pompeii and Herculaneum* describe in relation to some of the smaller objects – such as the doctor's kit – helping them empathise with the inhabitants of the cities and transport them through time. What is interesting here, is the change in scale: *Roskilde 6* is a huge object not an intimate everyday one. Also, interesting is the perspective Brenda adopts. Just as Kenneth Clark begins *Civilisation* by focussing on the perspective of those who encountered the Vikings on raids, Brenda here empathises with the people who are in the words of the Danish curator, '*at the business end of the Vikings.*' In contrast, the Danish exhibition approaching the Vikings from a Scandinavian perspective, sought to make visitors empathise with the Vikings themselves. It did this through an animated film, which depicted the voyage out and the anxious Viking families waiting for the sailors' return. Liam also describes his encounter with the *Roskilde 6* vista in vivid, imaginative terms: *I liked that vision you had, that moving image in the big room. I liked that. Well it was just like you sort of had this, view of a...for a moment you kind of thought I could be travelling now. I could be a Viking on the sea. Because you could see this big ship with birds flying off into the distance. So that was totally fascinating. But also, if you were, you know part of my family in the middle of the Derbyshire flats in the Trent valley. Then, all of a sudden, this giant dragonesque thing came through, you would shit your pants.* (Liam)

Unlike Brenda however, Liam imagines both the perspective of being a Viking sailing on the ship, as well as his own ancestors living in the Derbyshire flats in the Trent valley. Liam's response also points to the role other elements beyond the ship play in eliciting the

emotional response. Here, the digital screen contributes to him making this imaginative leap. The role space plays in how visitors experience the exhibition's climax is an interesting one. The designer talked about how the design of the space of the two halves of the exhibition contributed to the exhibition's climax: *Area one [containing the sections on Cross Cultural Trade and Power and Status]...had a much more old-fashioned museum look...more like a room with compartments. You're slightly guided, the objects had a definite story...It had a lower ceiling, it was darker and you looked at objects, purely as a part of a story, so you learnt about the Vikings in the first part. The second half of area was described as 'opening up' and being 'clearer and containing less graphic panels' than the exhibition's first half.*

As well as the material qualities of the ship, visitors also talked about how the space of the exhibition itself contributed to this moment of transportation. Liam for example said: *It was great to have that winding introduction to the culture and then to find yourself in that wider expanse maybe. And that lent itself to a sort of physical, it sounds a bit corny but you almost have this physical awakening into a bigger space. It opens your mind to what you're doing. And actually having said that, in that larger room, I felt that I had been immersed in that historical narrative.* (Liam)

Nora also made the analogy between the opening-up of the exhibition in terms of space and crowding, and her own ability to let her mind become open and wander: *I guess because certain things set off peoples' imaginations that's the nice thing about it. When I got to that spacious bit, after taking in such a lot of information and reading a lot, and seeing lots of tiny little artefacts, coming into this large space gave my mind a little time to wander as well. Perhaps, that's reflected in the way I walked, I was just sort of flowing slowly with everyone, and there was more space as well.* (Nora)

As the designer comments this was unusual: *'usually you don't want to let visitors see the whole of the exhibition, in order to create suspense.'* This was something that the visitors were also aware of and relates more broadly to Jones' perception of *Roskilde 6* being the exhibition's conclusion, despite it being first encountered halfway through the

exhibition. Both Andrea and Petra knew about the ship beforehand and, aware of exhibitionary conventions, thought it would appear at the end. For Petra, this initial encounter with the ship gave her the impression that the exhibition was smaller than it was: *So I think that I was expecting it [...Roskilde 6...] to be right at the end, so when you came up the ramp you were like 'Oh the ship – this is quite a small exhibition', but then you walked around it and there were all things to look at and stuff, so it doesn't feel like it was two halves.* [Petra]

For Andrea, seeing the ship and then seeing how much of the exhibition was left was not entirely positive: *I wasn't sure how I feel about seeing how much of the exhibition is left. I quite liked how in the Round Reading Room you're going on a journey and you don't know what is coming next. I don't know if that is a very positive feel, because you can see everything that is coming...And you can see the end, and it made it feel shorter than it actually probably was. Because I was in there for a while, but it felt kind of short.*

In both Liam and Nora's account, we have a connection between the opening of space and the expansion of mind and imagination. At the same time, there is also a sense of a loss of self: Liam describes himself as being '*immersed*', while Nora describes herself as '*just sort of flowing slowly with everyone.*'

The idea of the *reveal* was specifically associated with the London version of the exhibition. The Danish exhibition team talk about, '*the suggestion from London that the whole ship should not be visible from the opening but rather the view begin later.*' As we have seen from the introduction, in the Berlin version of the exhibition the ship was immediately revealed to the visitors as soon as they entered the space. In the Copenhagen exhibition, the ship was partly revealed through the windows embedded in the wall containing the intermediary objects. In the London exhibition, the ship was only revealed once visitors had entered what the designer termed '*the second half*' of the exhibition. Although spatial constraints obviously played a part in this decision – the long, narrow rectangular shape of the London exhibition space lent itself to delaying the *reveal* of

Roskilde 6, while the square floorplan of the nineteenth-century *Martin-Gropius-Bau* exhibition hall in Berlin did not – ultimately it came down to respective exhibition dramaturgical philosophies.

7.3 The Vikings and identity

As visitors move into the final section of the exhibition they take a turn and walk along the side of the *Roskilde 6*. The introduction of a timeline suggests a shift in the exhibition narrative structure. The exhibition now proceeds chronologically from the Vikings transition from raiders to the builders of kingdoms and then the end of the Viking age as brought about with their adoption Christianity. The end of this section features objects and information that both sit at the end of this timeline and stretch beyond it. In this final section, as well the exhibition alluding to the end of the Viking age in Britain, we see a map showing Britain and the distribution of Viking DNA. We also see many of the place names that have Viking origins. The Lewis Chessmen, among the most iconic objects in the British Museum's collections, are used here in a new way to suggest that end date of the Vikings progresses far beyond the traditional end date of AD 1066.

The London version of the exhibition has a very different ending than that of the Berlin version of the exhibition. In the Martin Gropius Bau the exhibition ends with the power and status theme, which *Vikings: Life and Legend* used for section two. In ending with some of the most valuable and glitzy objects the Berlin-version of Vikings is essentially ending with a traditional treasures ending. However, as the Berlin curator reveals this ending is necessitated by the fact that ending with the Viking legacy in Germany would be extremely problematic because of the appropriation of the Vikings by the Far Right.



Fig. 6.30 The final section of the Vikings exhibition in Berlin, which focuses on the power and status theme, called here Die Shätze des Königs (the King's Treasures)



Fig. 6.31 The final section in *Vikings: Life and legend* which focussed on the coming of Christianity and the Viking's legacy in the UK.

As mentioned earlier, the Vikings are more likely to elicit a response of identity than either the Romans or the Ancient Greeks, and in this final section I look at how visitors respond to the Vikings in terms of identity. This is firstly in terms of how British people respond to the Vikings. This is then contrasted with Scandinavian visitors and finally with a

Russian visitor. While most people respond to the ending of *Vikings Life and legend* in positive terms, the Russian visitor is the only one who responds negatively due to the perception that in adopting Christianity the Vikings were losing their identity.

Ten visitor groups talk about their relationship to the Vikings beginning in primary school. Older visitors tend to associate this with, '*a British school system interpretation*', being centred on '*violence, conquest and expansionism*', and report that this is where their opinions surrounding the Vikings is initially formed. A visit to the exhibition is seen as a means of dispelling some of what they regard as prior misconceptions, and far from resisting their opinions being changed, visitors come to the exhibition seeking a reinterpretation of the subject matter.

Six visitor groups specifically related the idea of the Vikings to their own local identity and connection to local heritage in the UK. For example, Fiona and Fred were from Chippenham, and lived near a site of a famous battle between the Saxons and the Vikings in AD 878. Spotting a place a visitor group came from – Charles and Carol recognised Chester on the moving map – or a place with a Viking name, was one of the ways that groups connected the exhibition subject matter to their own identities: *It was quite exciting to me as my grandparents come from Waltham, which was one of the areas under the Danelaw and has a Viking name* (Karen).

This connection with a place was often linked with a visitor's own capacity to imagine being a Viking, or encountering the Vikings. The exhibition therefore serves a function for visitors of placing local history, over which they feel ownership, within a wider UK and international narrative. Conversely those visitor groups from outside of Europe reported that the Vikings did not feature so strongly in their education or local heritage. However, two non-European visitors reported feeling an affinity with the Vikings through having a connection to Scandinavia – '*We're pretty sure there's Viking blood in our family. My surname is Redfern, I'm pretty tall and blonde*' (James). Maria from Seattle talked about how Viking expansion and the quest for new land reminded them of their own grandfather's emigration from

Norway to America: *I've got Norwegian heritage. My grandfather came, he was pretty young at the time. He had eleven brothers and sisters and his mum and dad. Because their property in Norway was too small to divide any further. It was the same as Ragnar that Viking earl. He was really looking for more land to develop and farm and they made a point of that somewhere in there. They have only so much arable land.*

As well as being closely connected with a sense of place and home, the Vikings were also associated with travel particularly to Scandinavia, but also more broadly to Morocco and Turkey and other places that were touched by the Vikings' trading networks. In the words of Brenda:

I just think everywhere I go on holiday the Vikings have been there. I've been to Iceland, I'm going to Turkey in a couple of weeks, that's why I came to get my passport. They've been there before, I'm following in their footsteps.

Brenda talked about how her visit to Iceland sparked her interest in the Vikings and that how afterwards she began watching videos on youtube about them, which ultimately inspired her to come to the exhibition. For those visitors who have been to Scandinavia, visiting the exhibition can be seen an attempt to revisit past holiday destinations.

For the two visitor groups who were from Scandinavia, Sweden and Norway respectively, this association with Vikings and a sense of place ran much deeper and was closely entwined with their own national identity and sense of self. Both groups professed to having a high level of prior knowledge about the Vikings. Their main motivation for coming to the exhibition was less about seeing objects, than about finding out more about the history of contact between the UK and Scandinavia from a specifically UK perspective. Ingar speculates that as Norwegians, *'I suppose we know more than most people who go to the exhibition'*, to which his daughter Ingrid modifies, *'or perhaps know other things.'*

Coming to the exhibition with this existing Scandinavian perspective, both groups expressed a desire to encounter the Vikings from an unfamiliar UK-based perspective, and

find commonalities between the UK and Scandinavia through a shared Viking heritage. This connection with the Vikings is something the groups recognise in contemporary Scandinavian culture. For example, Ingar talks about his own experience of sailing in Norway and describe feeling a strong connection with the sea as an important part of his Norwegian national identity. Describing their encounters with Viking ships, Ingar talks about them in terms of giving him '*a real kick*' – a description that suggests the visceral response seeing the actual object provokes. Another aspect of the exhibition that generated a similarly affective response, and was described by Ingrid as having, '*a special feel to it*', was the audio of the Skaldic poetry played at the entrance of the exhibition.

Six visitor groups talk about the Vikings in terms of reading literature which they associate with the Vikings. Three visitor groups relate their experiences of reading *Beowulf* to the Viking exhibition, connecting their experience of magic and shape-shifting with the *Ritual and Belief* section. From a more pop-cultural perspective, three visitor groups also related the exhibition to the Discovery channel drama *Vikings*. One particular scene, in which a priest is captured by Viking raiders but is kept alive for his language skills, '*the head guy takes him back so that he would be forced to teach him English*' (Debbie), was talked about by two of the groups in reference to relationship between slavery and the Vikings' adoption of other religions.

Unlike *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, where visitors talked about the exhibition in strongly emotional terms, the ending of *Vikings: Life and legend* did not provoke such strong emotional responses. This is partly because the design of the exhibition meant that many visitors, in the words of David, '*were done*' by the time they reached the final section. The positioning of the *reveal* early at the halfway point of the exhibition, may also have contributed to this feeling of '*being done*' and illustrates the potential dangers of locating the exhibition climax at the halfway stage of the exhibition.

Helga, a thirty-two-year-old Russian woman who worked in advertising, however, did talk about how she felt strongly moved by the exhibition's ending. Upon leaving the

exhibition, she commented that, '*it made her very sad*', and that this response was brought about by the Viking's adoption of Christianity. She argued that with their religious conversion, the Vikings '*lost their core, their skeleton*', and with that '*the spirit of the Vikings is finished*'. This was for her encapsulated in the Lewis Chessman display in the exhibition's final section, '*in that period, the person who is standing there at the top, is head of the church...the Bishop. I was very sad.*'

Throughout my analysis chapter, I have focussed on how the different exhibitions in three different countries present the Vikings through different means and techniques. It therefore feels appropriate that my chapter on the Vikings should end with a consideration of how visitors of different nationalities decode the exhibition's narrative. Although the exhibition ending was the most UK focussed part of the show, it was conversely a woman from Russia who was the most emotionally moved by it.

7.4 Conclusion

The Vikings are a familiar subject matter for British Museum audiences to the point where many were aware of the issues of reinterpretation that are associated with them, and come to the exhibition expecting their initial views to be challenged. Compared to the Romans featured in *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, or the Ancient Greeks featured in *Defining Beauty*, visitors feel a closer affinity with the Vikings related to locality and their own Scandinavian connections. This sense of closeness perhaps explains why visitors are keener to experience a more multisensory exhibition in relation to the Vikings than other museum subject matter.

An exhibition narrative is neither solely created by the museum professionals who make the exhibition nor the visitors who experience it, but exists in a dialogue between the two. This is exemplified by the issue of overcrowding in *Vikings: Life and legend*. Not only did this affect how visitors access the exhibition narrative, causing some to queue and others to browse, but the experience of overcrowding also became one of the key aspects of the stories visitors told about the exhibition. Ironically, it was the museum makers' rigid adherence to a narrative structure, building an exhibition around the *reveal of Roskilde 6*, which was one of the principal causes of this overcrowding issue that made the narrative difficult to follow.

Sitting literally at the centre of the exhibition, the size of *Roskilde 6* dictated its format. However, for the visitors, unlike the critics, its hybrid combination of object, mount and digital screen proved popular. More broadly it illustrates the possibilities of combining objects, interpretation and media to encourage a more imaginative and accessible form of engagement than is currently the prevailing fashion in the aestheticised, object-centric design of blockbuster exhibitions.

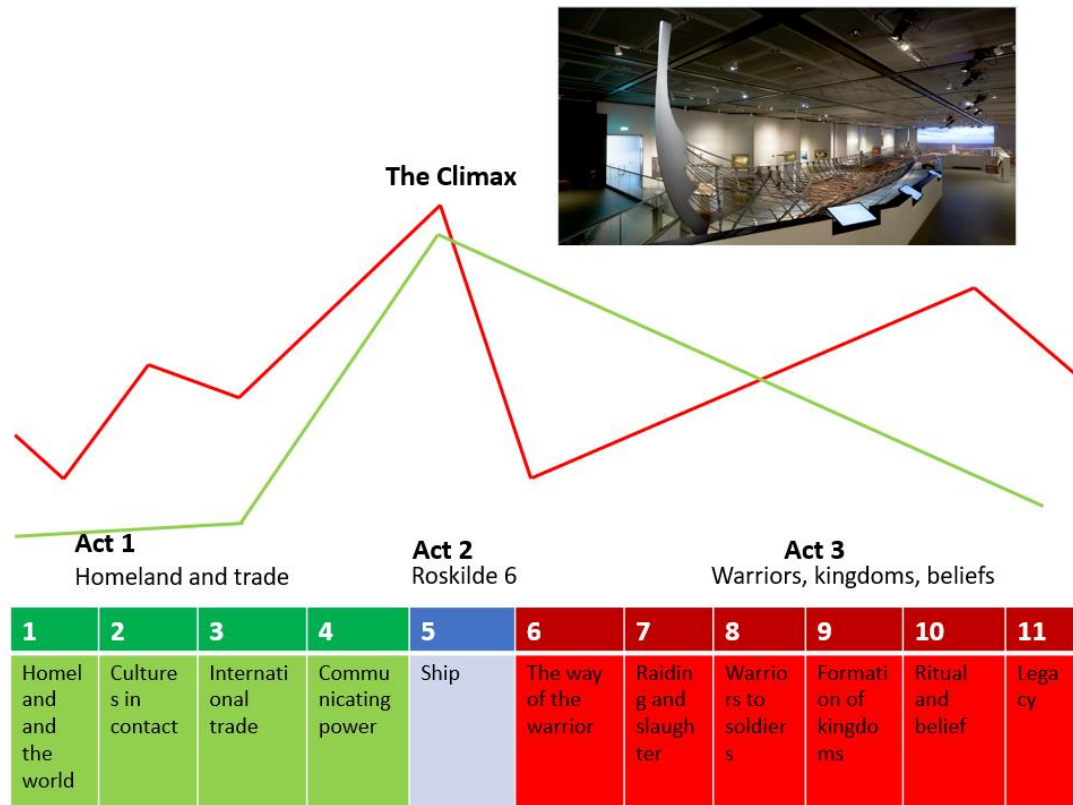


Fig. 7.32 A plot diagram showing the narrative arc of *Vikings: Life and legend*. The first climax occurs halfway through the exhibition when visitors encounter *Roskilde 6*. The second climax occurs when visitors read about the Vikings' adoption of Christianity and the end of the Viking age.

With the star object *revealed* in the exhibition's first half, the exhibition project team were faced with the challenge of how to bring the narrative to a conclusion. The different versions of the exhibition adopted different approaches to deal with this challenge. The London version chose to switch to a chronological narrative part way through the section on *Warfare and Expansion*, charting the formation of Viking kingdoms and the adoption of Christianity. This created a second mini-climax (see fig. 7.32), labelled in the diagram, not based around a particularly key object but based around the narrative of the end of the Viking age. The exhibition then concluded with the legacy of the Vikings in Britain today, linking it to place names and contemporary Viking festivals, such as *Up Helly Aa* in Shetland. This was in direct contrast to the approach adopted in Berlin, where the curator stressed the exhibition tried to avoid making any connections between the Vikings and contemporary Germany. This was deliberately done because of perceived appropriations of the Vikings by far-right groups, and the curator talked about how several people had to be asked to leave

the exhibition because they had attended wearing Nazi memorabilia. The Berlin exhibition instead ended with the *Power and Status* section, effectively giving the exhibition a glitzy treasure's ending.

Vikings was the first exhibition held in the new exhibition space at the British Museum, built as part of the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre development, and the exhibition deliberately adopted a more minimalistic '*contemporary*' aesthetic in order to differentiate itself from previous exhibitions in the Round Reading Room. At the same time, issues associated with overcrowding in the exhibition were accounted for by unfamiliarity with the new space. The problems encountered in *Vikings: Life and legend* would see different design and interpretive approaches adopted for future exhibitions, including my next case study: *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek Art* explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Anti-narrative and *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek art*

Introduction

My two previous chapter have investigated two key issues of structure and perspective in relation to narrative and museums. I have investigated how exhibition-makers encode narrative into museum exhibitions. In chapter seven, which focuses on the temporary exhibition *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek art*, I want to explore research question 4) How can museum exhibitions adopt an anti-narrative approach? Two sub-questions come out of this larger research question: What techniques do museum makers employ when adopting an anti-narrative approach? And, how do visitors experience an anti-narrative approach? In the exhibition *Defining Beauty*, I outline how the curatorial approach and the exhibition interpretation focusses on the engagement with the exhibition object rather than presenting a traditional chronological narrative about the development of Greek sculpture. I also explore how the exhibition design combined a non-linear layout with a refined design aesthetic to encourage visitors to encounter the sculptures as artworks. Finally, I look at how this anti-narrative strategy in the exhibition is deployed in the service of the 'grand narrative' of the universality of the encyclopaedic museum. The decision to present these sculptures as works of independent works of art in their own right can be regarded as a counternarrative, which is deliberately constructed by the British Museum in the face of increasing calls for the repatriation of objects, in particular the Parthenon Sculptures.

8.1 What might an anti-narrative approach look like?

The first question that we might ask regarding anti-narrative and the museum exhibition is: is it possible to escape totally from narrative? From my own ontological position, which borrows from Bruner to conceive of the human subject as narrative-making machines, I would argue this is very difficult. Even a single object displayed in a contextless

void provides a narrative in the juxtaposition of object and its space, which can be read by those inclined to do so. A narrative that resists narrative is still a narrative, albeit one that adopts an anti-narrative perspective. Rather than thinking of exhibitions or events as either being a narrative or not, I think it is helpful to conceive, as Austin (2012) does, of the qualities of narrative as existing on a spectrum. It is therefore possible to think of some exhibitions as having a higher degree of narrativity than others. Film provides a useful parallel here, where McKee (2006) contrasts the classical plot or arch plot of the Hollywood film with what he regards as minimalistic or anti-narrative approaches of American Indy and European New Wave films. Minimalistic plots are typically open-ended, containing internal conflict and made up of multiple and frequently passive protagonists. Anti-narratives are typically non-chronological, non-causal, and reality itself is in transition.

Turning back to museum exhibitions we may try and look at the similar strategies of those exhibitions that wish to resist the classic narrative arch of the blockbuster. An interesting historical approach is the white cube, whose white walls attempt to remove the contextual setting of the art gallery. Such an approach would be unlikely to be adopted in a museum of world cultures like the British Museum. However, the Tate Britain rehang undertaken by Penelope Curtis from around this period can be seen as attempting to achieve a similar effect. Here, labels were removed to encourage visitors to engage in an unmediated encounter with the art. The artworks were also arranged chronologically, which Curtis regarded as the most neutral way of ordering the paintings that had been selected for display.

Defining Beauty is an exhibition that illustrates to use McKee's (2006) minimalistic and, at times, anti-narrative approach, which is uncharacteristic of the British Museum's usual model of display. Firstly, the designers of the exhibition, Caruso St John, were also the designers of the Tate Britain rehang. In their non-linear arrangement of the exhibition's central section and their removal of photographs or shading of maps we can see some of the anti-narrative techniques used in the exhibition. Beyond the design approach, however,

many of the elements the curator desired to focus on, such as the ekphrastic encounter, prioritised the narrative of the individual object over the exhibition narrative. In *Defining Beauty*, the chronological narrative of Greek sculpture is secondary to the thematic narrative, which attempts to introduce visitors to Greek art.

In this chapter, I seek to untangle the different discursive threads that are woven together to create the final exhibition narrative of *Defining Beauty*. While the development of previous museum exhibitions may be likened to writing a novel, the genesis of *Defining Beauty* is more akin to the rehearsal, previews and touring schedule that continues to shape and reshape a theatrical production. Developing originally out of a travelling exhibition about the ancient Greek Olympic Games, which in varying forms travelled to fourteen different venues, the touring process itself can be seen as a dialogic conversation. It provided the opportunity to experiment with how the sculpture and vases could be displayed to maximise their aesthetic effect in a variety of settings, which would help to shape the distinctive lighting and design of *Defining Beauty*. Placing objects such as the Townley *Discobolus* in a different cultural context, would also be influential in shaping *Defining Beauty*'s narrative about how philosophical thought could be expressed in the form of sculpture. As well as the various dialogues accumulated on the touring exhibition's travels, the decision to include sculptures from the Parthenon added its own discursive baggage to the exhibition. The exhibition also became one part of a global conversation about repatriation and cultural heritage, with museum directors, international lawyers and Hollywood actors adding their voices to the debate. These discourses were physically manifested in the construction of multimillion pound museums built by 'starchitects', and secret loans undertaken between the UK and Russia during a time of political uncertainty. In *Defining Beauty* we find many of the ideas which Neil MacGregor outlined in his vision for the British Museum when he began his tenure as director. These include the role objects can play in cultural diplomacy and the museum as an enlightenment institution situated outside of, or above the idea of the nation state – acted out in physical space.

8.1.1 Interpretation approach – the *ekphrastic* encounter

As visitors walk through the exhibition door of *Defining Beauty* they are greeted by the first object in the exhibition, described in the accompanying label as the Crouching Aphrodite. This sculpture is also known in the British Museum as Lely's Venus, after one of her former owners, the 16th-century painter and connoisseur, Sir Peter Lely. Usually the Crouching Aphrodite is displayed in the centre of gallery 23 (see fig. 8.1). There she greets visitors front on as the first Hellenistic object they encountered, after they have moved through the Egyptian and Assyrian sculpture galleries



Fig. 8.1 The Crouching Aphrodite (Lely's Venus) as the sculpture is displayed in the British Museum's permanent collections. Behind the sculpture can be seen the door leading to the Parthenon sculpture gallery.

On entering *Defining Beauty*, however, we see the crouching Venus from a very different angle, from behind. This has not been the original intention, as the curator commented: *Actually, the opening onto Lely's Venus wasn't actually intended, we were supposed to enter from the door to the right, but the door to the right failed and so were we confronted immediately by Venus.* (Curator)



Fig. 8.2 Crouching Aphrodite seen from behind as visitors entered *Defining Beauty*

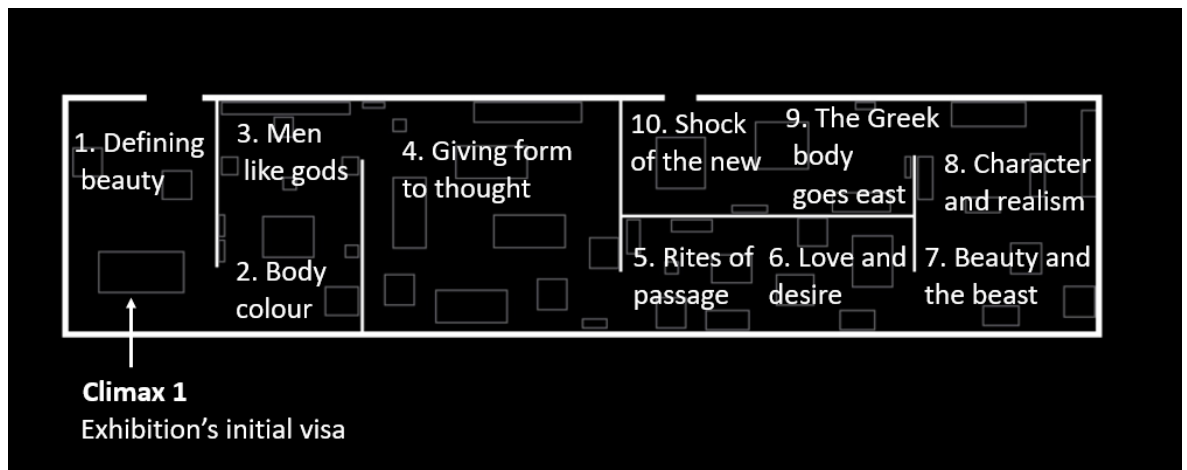


Fig. 8.3 A floor plan showing the ten sections of *Defining Beauty*.

The failing of the door proved to be fortuitous, however, as it led to the curator reframing the object as an *ekphrastic* encounter, in which ‘*the meaning of a figure is enacted by the visitor’s movement*’ (Curator) Key to this idea of enacting the meaning of the figure was the idea that visitors would circle the object: ‘*visitors were sent clockwise around the figure, and each quarter turn provides a different aspect of the goddess in a different degree of engagement*’ (Curator). Also, key to the enactment of meaning was that, as visitors’ perspective changed so the narrative of the object built towards a reveal. Visitors began by thinking they were, ‘*being given a coy come on, and when you come to the final quarter turn,*

you discover you are being stared at slowly and the hand that seems to invite you at the beginning, looks like it is being raised to strike you' (Curator).

The label for the text addressed the visitor directly, the use of 'Our' and 'us' seeking to draw the visitors in, to see the object from the curator's perspective:

Approached from behind, Aphrodite glances over one shoulder, while her fingers appearing over the other seem to beckon us to view her from all sides. Our curiosity leads us around her body to confront finally her divine and dangerous stare. (*Defining Beauty*, 2015, label text, 'Aphrodite' exhibit)



Fig. 8.4 Label text was positioned both to the front and to the side of the Crouching Aphrodite to encourage visitors to move around the piece and encounter it from different angles.

This idea of confrontation or encounter fed into the idea of seeing the sculptures anew, '*as they were in antiquity – the living embodiment of the goddess or god.*' This was a technique that the interpretation officer hoped to use to, '*make the sculptures less safe*', and in turn convey the sense that this was, '*a terrifying encounter with the living flesh of the goddess.*' Rather than positioning them within the context of being an artwork in a museum

exhibition to be aesthetically appreciated, this approach sought to encourage visitors to see the objects according to the perspective of the ancient Greeks who worshipped them.

Furthermore, it was hoped that by explaining this encounter in the initial room, visitors would repeat these experiences throughout the exhibition: *We hoped visitors would feel more empowered with a new syntax to look at Greek works and see whether that kind of experience, that the ekphrastic experience would repeat.* (Interpretation officer)

Of the sixteen visitor groups, six specifically talked about circling the objects. Many of the visitors talked about it in similar terms to the interpretation officer and the curator. Jane for example described it terms of a 'reveal', or a 'slow realise': *It was cool to have it be this reveal thing, because I circled around from the right for no particular reason. Probably because that's where the people were. So, I got her back where I could only see her fingers, and I got her profile, and then I got her hand, and then her bathing pot at the end. So, I can't really say how that affected it, but I liked the slow realise of what that was.* (Jane)

Similarly, Kevin describes how the text encouraged him to circle around the statue: *'Because they pointed out the fingers over her shoulder which made people walk around, and you looked at the whole, every aspect of her, which I thought was a really good opening for the exhibition. It encouraged you to walk around.'* (Kevin)

Of the sixteen visitor groups, eleven were observed circling around two sides of the Crouching Aphrodite and five did not.

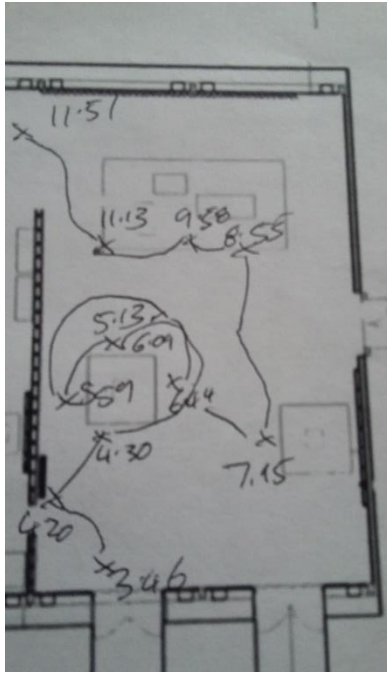


Fig. 8.5 A tracking map showing Jane circling the Crouching Venus sculpture.

As the interpretation officer had hoped, the Aphrodite sculpture was not the only sculpture that visitors described in terms of how their bodily movement led them to draw out an object's meaning. Kevin also describes how the rhythm of walking allowed him to read the Parthenon sculptures. Initially worried he'd be '*bored by them*', he describes '*how I walked so slowly along and every single figure was different. I think they really exceeded my expectations.*' In his description, of '*walking slowly*' and the progression this creates – '*every single figure was different*', we come close to the physical movement metaphorically present in the '*unfolding*' of the *proairetic* code, which according to Barthes (1974, 75) '*moves the story along*'.

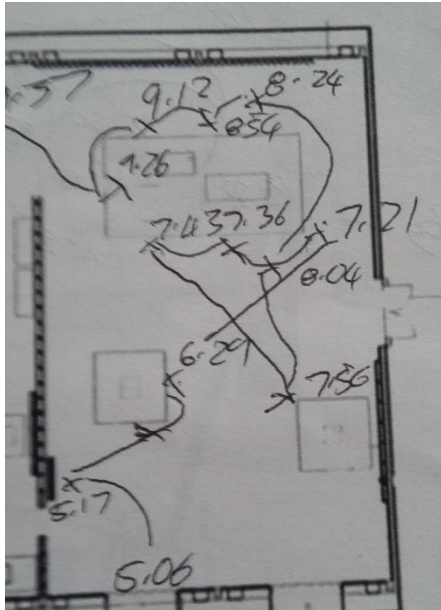


Fig. 8.6 A tracking map showing Gary going behind the back of the exhibition's initial vista of the Ilissos from the Parthenon, Myron's Discobolus and Polykleitos' Doryphoros

Conversely if the walking pace of the *proairetic* code is present in the rhythm of Parthenon frieze, then an encounter with the Borghese Hermaphrodite resembles Barthes notion of the hermeneutic code in the reveal of an enigma. For example, Fiona contrasts the Capitoline Venus, '*which is beautiful but it's quite traditional. Everyone has seen the whole covering herself up thing*', with the *Hermaphrodite*: '*There's the one with her reclining and looking over her shoulder is more secretive and I think that's why people like statues like that. Everybody wants to know about something that looks like it's concealing a secret.*' (Frances)

To the right of the Crouching Venus is a bronze youth from Croatia and at the back of the room are a cluster of three sculptures: Myron's Discobolus, the river god Ilissos by Phidias and Polykleitos's Doryphoros. The impression of combining these five sculptures together to create an initial vista was commented on positively by the press. Jonathan Jones (2015) likened it to entering a dream or a Terry Gilliam animation: '*It's like looking at a collage cut from a giant encyclopaedia. I half-expect Gilliam's scissors to appear from above and snip off the discus-thrower's head.*'

The curator also spoke about the visitor reaction to it being akin to Stendhal Syndrome: *'Some of them reported the equivalent of Stendhal Syndrome – overwhelmed by the beauty of what they saw and the palate of colours and lights, it was superb...'* (Curator)

The term 'Stendhal's syndrome' was named after the reaction of Marie-Henri Beyle (1783–1842), better known by his pen name Stendhal, to being in Florence in the presence of art and artists he had read about all his life. One of the first things that comes to the fore with visitor responses towards the sculptures as artworks involves their authenticity. Many of the objects such as the Parthenon sculptures (recognised by 16 visitor groups), the Belvedere torso (recognised by 11 visitor groups), or Discobolus (recognised by 10 visitor groups) in the exhibition are iconic. Visitors have seen them before in film, books, reproductions and in the advertising for the exhibition. Visitors reported the impact of encountering these objects in person, as opposed to seeing them in a book or on television. Fiona reports this in relation to the Discobolus. For Fiona, the accompanying lighting adds to the hyper-reality of seeing the object in person: *'I just remember that Discus thrower...ahhhh. It's just come to me that I saw this lit up and it was just wonderful to see it. It was as if he was in mid-flight or mid-gesture. I mean we've seen pictures of him before but to see him lit up and just starred, it was just wonderful.'*

The Parthenon sculptures were objects that visitors knew about beforehand, *'it was my first time here, although I'd read a tonne about them'* (Alex). Two visitor groups had actually come to the British Museum in the previous weeks to see the Parthenon sculptures in the permanent collections, which then led to them revisiting the British Museum to attend *Defining Beauty*. The Belvedere torso displayed in the exhibition's final section was also recognised by visitors from previous visits to the Vatican, who emphasised the significance of it being on loan to the British Museum: *'Yeah, it must have been something for them to get it from the Vatican to persuade them to bring it over.'* (Laura)

The authenticity of an object could also be related to the fact it was associated with a particular artist, as was the case with the Belvedere torso and Michelangelo, *'that it was*

something that Michelangelo used to talk about quite a lot, that he apparently really admired (Daria).



Fig. 8.7 The initial vista that greeted visitors as they entered the exhibition featured the Crouching Venus and a cluster of three sculptures: Myron's Discobolus, the river god Ilissos by Phidias and Polykleitos's Doryphoros

Beyond the recognition of sculptures that visitors had seen before and the sensation of encountering the authentic object in person, appreciating sculptures outside of their original context required a specific way of looking, or reading. This was present in the curator's enthusiasm for linking form and thought, emphasising how in the development of Greek sculpture we can see manifest the arguments of Greek philosophy: *'I didn't see any reason to dumb down the show, and to leave out Greek philosophy and I put it in wherever it was relevant.'* (Curator)

The curator describes how following Socrates' rejection of art in Plato's *Republic* some sculptors fought back and engaged with the philosophers and created philosophical sculptures, *'not a representation of living flesh but a construction, a synthetic recomposition of the idea of the male body that employed the balance and rhythm of composition'*. (Curator)

The curator uses the example of the Discobolus to illustrate that the statue was not a nameless athlete, a reading he regards as '*intellectually lazy*', but rather a figure embodying '*a philosophical set of polar opposites that would have been the stuff of sixth century Ionian natural philosophy.*' These philosophical oppositions can be read, by those with the skills to do so, in the positioning of the various body parts of the statue: '*One arm extends behind, while other hangs free...the torso faces you, whereas the legs are seen in profile. One set of toes arch out, while the other set of toes curl under.*' (Curator)

Furthermore, the curator emphasised how the Discobolus can be read as a metaphorical interpretation of the philosopher Heraclitus' concept of *bios* – that life is a bow: '*pull and push, the active and the passive, the reaching out and drawing back*'. Understandably, not all of the visitors to *Defining Beauty* made this philosophical connection. However, some visitors did talk about reading the sculptures in terms of them being, in Gloria's words, 'bodies in movement', which suggested a way of viewing a sculpture as a thing or an artwork in itself: '*Even with the arms and heads chopped off, I could tell what movement they were doing, just from the position of the torso, and the way the clothing flowed, or where the creases were. It showed, kind of the body in movement.*' (Dora)

Alongside those visitors who described the pleasure they felt in letting their eye drift over the sculpture were those who made the link between the sculpture's shape and Greek philosophy as the curator hoped visitors would. Karen and Ollie both mentioned the '*comparison between the ideal male figure and the perfect ratios*' (Karen). Michael made a contemporary analogy with the connection between morality and the perfect body implied within the exhibition: '*I thought that the section where it said that having a fantastic body not only made it appealing, it also made you a good man. And that's when I mentioned to my aunt we see a footballer who is doing very successfully and he's a good man, and when he's not a good man we're all surprised and I'm sure if that's the way it was thought of, you automatically maintain a great body, you're thought of as a good human being, and that is kind of how it is today.*' (Bob)

This concept of a sculpture embodying *bios* was one of the ideas that the curator felt connected with Chinese Confucian philosophy, which developed in roughly the same period. It came out of Discobolus' tour of Shanghai and Hong Kong as part of the ancient Olympic games exhibition. The curator remarked that, '*the Chinese audiences instantaneously got the Discobolus as an idea of balancing opposites turned into art.*' (Curator)

Defining Beauty: the body in ancient Greek art has a different origin story than my two previous case studies. Most temporary exhibitions begin as an idea, often that of the lead curator or the museum director, and the exhibition process then takes the form of a lengthy negotiation to bring in loans from other collections to illustrate that idea. This was the case with *Pompeii and Herculaneum* and *Vikings: Life and legend*. *Defining Beauty*, however, began life as an exhibition about the ancient Olympic games, composed of objects from the British Museum's permanent collections travelling out to China. The exhibition travelled to the Shanghai Museum and the Hong Kong Heritage Museum (2 August 2008 – 24 November 2008), where, in the words of the curator, it was '*extremely popular, and became an instant blockbuster with queues literally around the block*' (Curator). The exhibition provided the opportunity for objects to come into dialogue with Chinese culture. In the words of the curator: '*the coincidences of ideas between the Greeks and traditional Chinese thought proved to be extremely fruitful.*' In particular, the curator saw a synchronicity in terms of both cultures focussing on the '*balancing opposites*'. He found that this was present in both the '*Ionian philosophers' view of the universe and the Hippocratic approach to medicine*', and is also, '*very much present in Chinese traditional medicine with Qi and the idea of Ying and Yang*' (Curator). As well as being an important influence on one of the exhibition's key display techniques, the juxtaposition of opposites, this cultural dialogue would have a material output in the form of the British Museum acquiring the 1998 work by Sui Jianguo, *Mao Discobolus*, which was displayed in room 3. Here, Myron's statue was clothed in the iconic Mao Jacket, which in the words of Asia Society Museum Director

Melissa Chin (2002), 'symbolises Mao's legacy and may be viewed as both nostalgic and critical mirroring the views of the artist and many Chinese of his generation.'

Reflecting on the ancient Olympic games exhibition, the curator said, '*he was proud to be the first person into south-east China with the Greeks.*' This is indicative of a period around the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when there was increasing cultural contact between Europe and China, a sense of the economic benefits that this might bring, and an urgent feeling in the media about the sense of missing out (Lebrecht 2007, 39). This took the form of blockbuster exhibitions, which saw *the First Emperor, China's Terracotta Army* become the most successful British Museum exhibition in terms of visitor numbers since Tutankhamun, come to Britain. In exchange, the British Museum sent an exhibition titled *Britain Meets the World, 1714–1830* (2007), which was framed by the exhibition's catalogue as a passing of the torch from a former super power to an emerging one, as emphasised by Qian Chengdan, the chief Chinese adviser to the exhibition:

'The British Empire, which used to be all-mighty, has become history; China on the other hand, is now joining the ranks of the world stage' (quoted in Lebrecht 2007, 39).

These exhibitions though had grander ambitions than soft power to orchestrate trade deals. Neil MacGregor argued it was the obligation of an encyclopaedic museum like the British Museum, 'to send exhibitions around the world, to allow the whole world to have access to a world's collection' (MacGregor 2009, 54). China, in particular, was seen as a key country to extend these loans to because although it had great museums of Asian objects it had no universal or encyclopaedic museums (MacGregor 2009, 50).

Defining Beauty, which was the last summer blockbuster of Neil MacGregor's tenure, actually began in this febrile atmosphere of cultural exchange with China some six years earlier. In the words of the curator, '*We coincided with the burgeoning department of touring exhibitions...and it was suggested that we might tour it as the Olympic games.*' (Curator)

The creation of a department of international engagement, as well as trying to get objects from different cultures out to different institutions in line with MacGregor's vision of a touring enlightenment ideal, was also part of the Museum's attempts to explore other sources of funding. This was a particularly important focus during the period as the museum's government grant was cut following the financial crisis of 2008. The drive to create a regular summer and winter blockbuster exhibition and the British Museum acting as a consultancy for the development of the Shaykh Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi can also be seen as part of this exploration of alternative revenue streams to government funding.

Thinking the exhibition '*rather lame*' in a non-Olympic year, the curator changed the focus, '*stripping out fifty percent of it, keeping some major pieces and then backfilling it with a much bigger, richer view on the male and female Greek body in Greek art and thought*'. The exhibition was renamed *The Body Beautiful in Ancient Greece* and it was during this touring process that the thrust of the exhibition came to focus on the concept of *Kalokagathia* – '*the art of being both fair of face and sound of heart*' (Curator). This conjoining of the mental and material – '*that the Greek body was a metaphor for a moral being*' – that lies at the heart of ancient Greek culture would be a key idea that informed *Defining Beauty's* narrative.

In the words of the curator, the *Body Beautiful* exhibition proved '*tremendously popular... It sold instantly to venues in the Far East, to venues in North America, and eventually in twelve different places*.' Each treatment was different and provided the curator with the opportunity to hone and develop his ideas. It was also while the exhibition was on tour in the Fine Art Museum in Dallas, Texas (5 May 2013 – 6 October 2013) that the moment happened, that would lead to the exhibition coming to the British Museum and also be instrumental in establishing its final design aesthetic:

'Neil MacGregor was simultaneously touring the Cyrus cylinder around North America – and the Director of the Dallas Fine Art Museum persuaded Neil to come to Dallas and open the last instalment of the Greek body beautiful. It was a particularly

beautiful exhibition, it was dark with white marble sculpture glowing and Neil was very taken with it, and when we got back to London, there was a gap in the programme and he shoehorned it in to the Sainsbury's exhibition gallery' (Curator).

This gap in the programme was brought about by the cancellation of an exhibition about Sicily, because key pieces had been loaned to a Sicilian exhibition. The exhibition *Sicily: culture and conquest* was later held, in reduced form, in Room 35 in 2016.

Although based around the principle of *Kalokagathia*, the British Museum version of *the Body Beautiful* exhibition differed from the touring version in some fundamental ways. Firstly, it was given a new title, *Defining Beauty: the body in ancient Greek Art*. This title was finalised late in the exhibition development process and would have an important impact on how visitors approached and reacted to the exhibition narrative. Secondly, *Defining Beauty* would include some '*extremely glamorous and important loans*' (Curator), including, the Hermaphrodite from the Borghese gallery in Rome, the Amazon from the Capitoline Museum in Rome, the so-called 'Baker Dancer' from the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and, most importantly, because it had never been exhibited before in the UK, the Belvedere Torso from the Vatican Museum.

Not all the requested loans arrived however: originally the exhibition team had hoped to include the Riace Warriors, two bronze Greek warriors from the Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia in Reggio Calabria, Italy, but this loan fell through. The Apoxyomenos, a bronze athlete from off the coast of Croatia, was acquired late in the exhibition planning process as a substitute to illustrate how original Greek sculpture appeared in its bronze form. High-profile loans were seen as an important addition to justify the exhibition's summer blockbuster status and accompanying entrance charge. The inclusion of objects from the British Museum's collections did not diminish the exhibition for most visitors, but some visitors reported wanting to see more objects on loan from other collections such as Berlin (John). Others felt a slight disappointment that objects were missing that they hoped to see,

such as the Riace bronzes that although initially planned for the exhibition, did not end up coming on loan (Irene).

Defining Beauty differs from my two other case studies in that the exhibition climax – its most spectacular vista – is positioned as the first thing visitors see. In the words of the curator: 'If we only exhibited that one room, I mean we could have done, it would have been a new and thrilling experience.' In narrative terms, placing your most impactful moment at the beginning of the exhibition creates the problem of where do you go from there? However, it can also be seen as one part of *Defining Beauty*'s anti-narrative strategy by which the typical rules of narrative are subverted. Over the course of the next sections, I explore this strategy in relation to the exhibition's interpretation, design and curation.

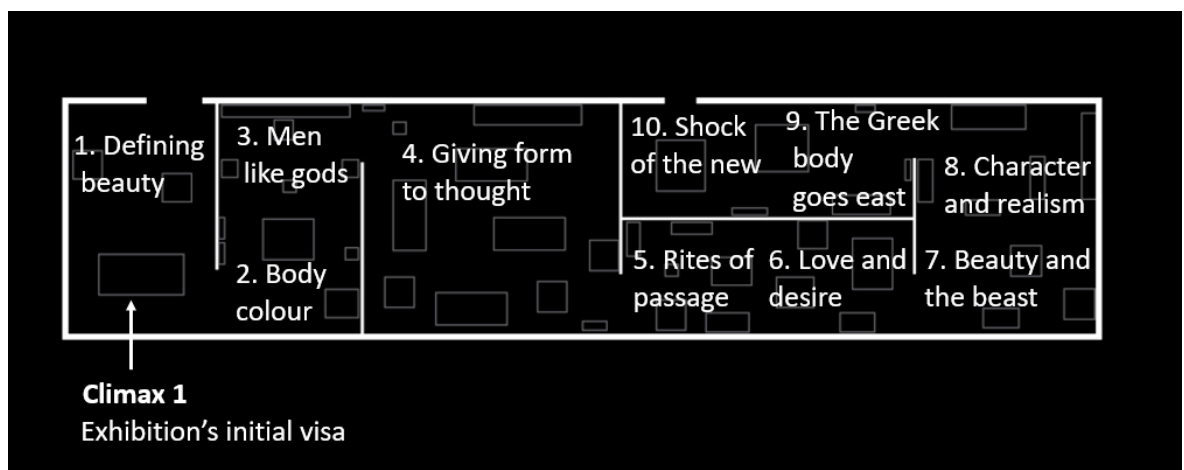


Fig. 8.8 *Defining Beauty*'s initial climax occurred in section 1.



Fig. 8.9 A diagram representing the narrative arc of *Defining Beauty*. The red line represents the view of the narrative arc taken from interviews with the museum makers, the green line represents the view of the narrative arc. *Defining Beauty*'s initial climax occurred in its opening section. Visitors had a strong response to the beginning of the exhibition but this declined as the exhibition moved into its second act.

8.2 Exposition

As visitors turn the corner into the second room of the exhibition, the colour palette changes. In this section titled *Body in colour* the previous refined aesthetics and high philosophy of the previous section are contrasted with a series of painted colour casts and non-sculptural objects, including vases and miniatures.



Fig. 8.10 Section 2 in Act 1: Body in colour: in which visitors are introduced to the idea that Greek sculpture was originally painted.

In a similar way to how seeing an iconic work of classical sculpture previously only experienced in books provides a strong affective reaction in visitors, so visitors were generally *au fait* with the idea that Greek sculptures were painted but had never previously experienced it before in person. Rather than awe and wonder, the affect visitors felt here was often one of revulsion. Eight visitor groups reported being aesthetically repelled by the painted casts with Collette and Colin response being typical:

Colin: *Seeing the colour on some of them was striking but not in a good way but just because I'm not used to it.*

Collette: *Well because, I'm used to seeing white marble and that's what I'm looking for...*

Colin: *We thought it was a step down from what you would consider beauty, it was schlocky...*

The miniatures and the vases also divided opinion with several visitors describing vases as the most difficult of objects to read:

Lauren: *I have to admit that I don't naturally look at vases.*

Laura: Jars are for me always the hardest things to look at.

As well as being a difficult medium to appreciate, Kelly reported feeling a disconnect between the sculptures in the exhibition and the vases: *I would have liked to have seen a bit more of a connection between the pottery and the sculpture, because so much of it [the exhibition] was about form, form especially as you come in. And you just become really attuned to form, and it was also really flat...I don't understand how it relates compositionally or to do with form.* (Kelly)

Other visitors specifically cited some of the non-sculptural objects as their favourite pieces: *I think I'm always drawn to miniatures actually, I'm always drawn to miniaturisation and that's just a personal kind of thing... just having the little figurines in cabinets made me think of a more natural art I suppose. And I thought that gave you an insight into how people actually lived, rather than just the official forms of representation.* (Ian)

In looking at objects as artworks, we see two major concepts taking place. One is visitors talking about objects in terms of their authenticity. The other is visitors applying a particular way of looking at objects and reading them to define their meaning. Both of these ways of approaching objects require some prior knowledge, a familiarity with the artistic cannon and a training in how to appreciate things aesthetically. These two initial rooms are described by the interpretation officer as a means of introducing visitors to the key concepts required to read Greek Sculpture: *So, the opening [rooms 1 & 2] was meant to be the sort of exposition, so before you encountered the really iconic works in section four, which includes the Parthenon sculptures.* (Interpretation Officer)

The idea to begin the exhibition with a series of thematic rooms that answered key questions about ancient Greek sculpture was strongly influenced by the formative evaluation undertaken at the start of the project. The interpretation officer reported that the focus groups had shown that, while the exhibition proposal would attract large numbers of art lovers, that many non-specialist visitors were by contrast '*turned off*' from it quite strongly:

They were turned off because they didn't have any emotional connections to it. They feel it was familiar but they felt alienated from it. They had a lack of understanding of it, about how to engage with it. (Interpretation officer)

A series of key questions arose in these focus groups, including, '*why is it all men? Why are they all white? Why are they all naked?*' The first three rooms of the exhibition therefore tried to address these questions and misconceptions, and also took on the challenge of getting visitors to look at familiar objects in a new light. Section one used some of the most iconic works of Greek sculpture in the exhibition, including Myron's Discobolus to introduce visitors to the facts that most of the Greek sculptures that survive today are known to us through Roman copies, and the originals would have been made of bronze.

In the second room, section 2: *Body colour* addressed the issue of colour through modern reproductions. Section 3: *Men like gods*, containing vases and busts depicting Hercules and his twelve labours was, '*trying to answer this question about why nude men, and so it addresses the social history and militaristic reality of life in Greek society*' (Interpretation officer).

The interpretation officer comments that, '*all that is trying to be background, so that when you then encountered all the iconic works that we talked about in the formative, that people didn't feel very connected to them, and you had some tools, which you didn't have at the beginning to enjoy these works.*'

After the initial impact of the first room, the narrative of sections two and three can be said to function more as exposition for the next big climax to be found in room four.

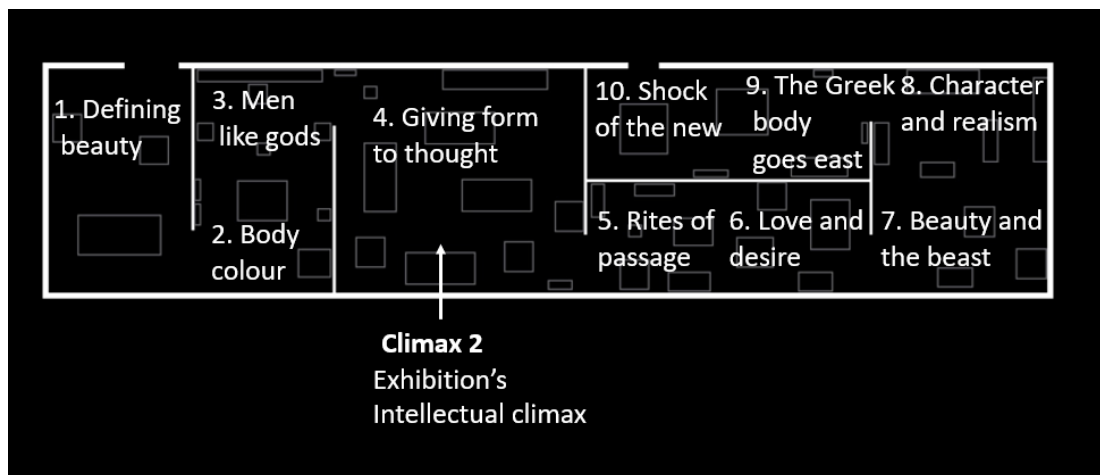


Fig. 8.11 The exhibition's second climax occurs in section four – Giving form to thought.

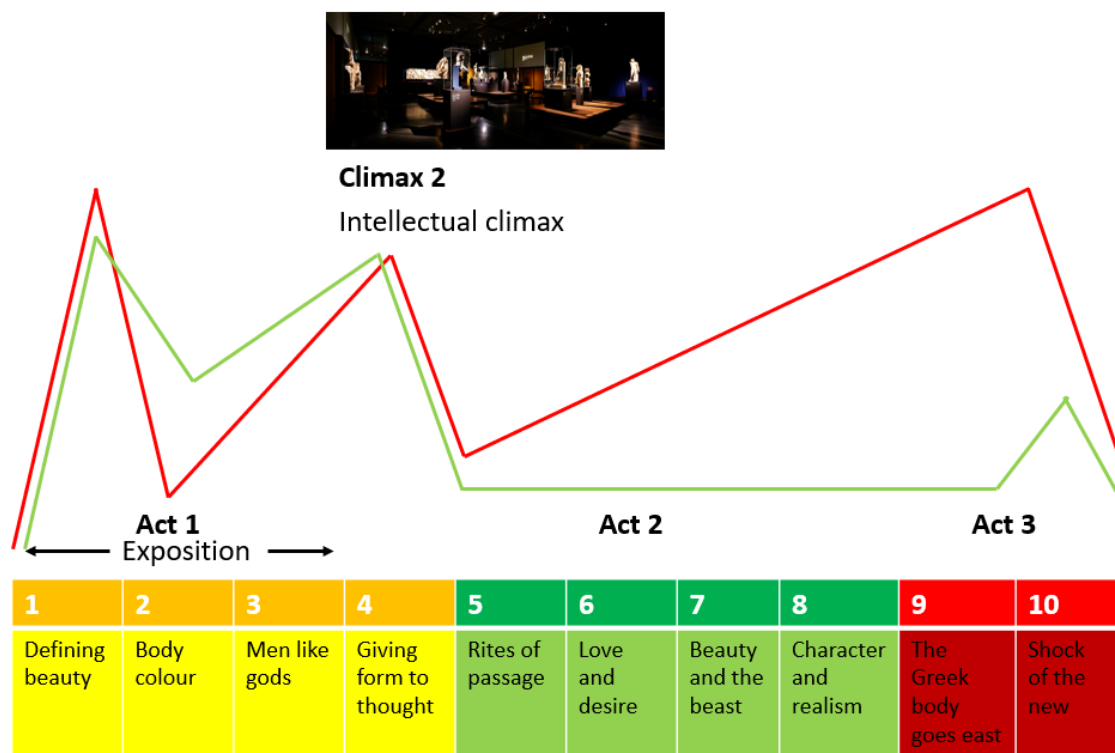


Fig. 8.12 The exhibition's second climax occurs in section four – Giving form to thought.

We can therefore see these four sections as functioning as a collective dramatic whole, which might be regarded as the first act of the exhibition. Also, the decision to begin the exhibition with an expository introduction that prepares visitors with how to

understand Greek sculpture also prevents the exhibition from adopting a chronological narrative. This is how many displays of Greek Sculpture are arranged for an example the Cast galleries in Cambridge, which allow the sequential development of Greek sculpture to be traced over time. The exhibition's decision to avoid this conventional means of ordering Greek sculpture can be seen as one of its anti- or alternative narrative strategies.

8.2.1. Form into thought and non-linearity

Act one of the exhibition concludes with section 4: *Giving form to thought* in room 3. Whereas the other rooms are fairly self-contained, Room 4 is described as, '*a huge room with lots of works*' (Interpretation officer). The centre point of room four was another juxtaposition of a key piece of sculpture from the pediment of Parthenon, Iris, and another iconic Greek sculpture, one of the Nereid sea nymphs from the Nereid monument. Unlike the climaxes in sections 1 and 10, these objects were not displayed in isolation but were in a room filled with other clusters of sculptures, pottery and figurines.



Fig. 8.13 Section four of the exhibition *Giving form to thought* had a non-linear layout.

The interpretation officer describes section four as '*a kind of concentration, it's a climax, but it's also a hub of ideas, and a big encounter in dealing with these bigger ideas.*' The introductory panel also makes reference to this coming together of ideas, framed in the terms of encounter and dialogue: *The works in this room present a series of encounters with*

the ideas that shaped the body in Greek art. They also reveal how the extraordinary achievements of Greek artists were part of a rich creative dialogue between the major civilisations of the ancient world. (Exhibition wall text, section 4, *Defining Beauty*)

As the interpretation officer has stated, sections one to three effectively functioned as exposition, leading up to section four in which visitors then encountered the '*bigger ideas*'. These ideas continue the link between philosophy and Greek sculpture that the curator had been developing in the various forerunner exhibitions of *Defining Beauty*, which toured China and North America. The fact that this room was object dense, with twenty-nine labelled objects, compared to the previous sections, which contained no more than eleven labelled objects, is testament to the number of ideas that were being explored in this section. It is also a feature of one of the exhibition's design strategies, which was to place objects in section four without a prescribed linear route.

The tension in exhibitionary design between a design approach that emphasises the aesthetic and an interpretive approach that emphasises the contextual, between the language of the text and the material object is longstanding. It was played out in the original sculpture galleries of the British Museum in the nineteenth century with the sculptor Richard Westmacott, advocating an arrangement of sculptures according to the 'picturesque method' (Jenkins 1991, 58). This was in contrast to the curator and archaeologist Charles Newton (Jenkins 1991, 139) who favoured a chronological approach.

Both the design and interpretation of *Defining Beauty* were attempting to get visitors to do the same thing, to see these potentially familiar works of art anew and to encounter them as works of art in themselves. At the same time, there was a potential tension between how the design attempted to get visitors to see the objects anew and how the interpretive text attempted to do this. The exhibition's interpretation spoke directly to the visitor, giving them instructions on how to view the objects. In several cases, this was linked to encouraging visitors to move around the object to experience what the curator described as an *ekphrastic* encounter. This was manifested in both the voice of the exhibition text, but

also by placing labels with different content on different sides of the sculpture. Conversely, the designers wanted to keep text away from objects so that the presence of the label did not detract from the aesthetic experience of viewing the objects.

Similarly, there was a strict design language that restricted wider contextual information such as photographs or maps being included with the label. Indeed, the only maps allowed in the exhibition were placed in the introductory section and had to be in greyscale in order not to interfere with the aesthetic of the opening vista, meaning that '*it was difficult to differentiate between the land and the sea*' (Interpretation officer). The aesthetic-led design versus context-led design approach is linked to a wider debate within museum exhibitions about how much the interpretation of an object is the responsibility of the museum to provide, and how much is left to the visitor to interpret for themselves. This manifested itself most strongly in section four, '*the intellectual climax of the exhibition*' (Interpretation officer) where the designers wanted to create a non-linear space where sculptures were encountered individually with no prescribed order. Conversely, the interpretation officer was keen to group objects together into a series of themes. Eventually a compromise was reached merging the two approaches.

The design company *Caruso St John* had previously worked on an exhibition of eighteenth and nineteenth century sculptures at Tate Britain called *Return of the Gods*. With its 'spot lit' works, 'making them appear brilliant white within the darkened interior' (Caruso St John 2008), it can be seen as a precursor for *Defining Beauty*. The interpretation officer describes the design aesthetic as follows: *There was this focus on a display of the sculptures in a, very literally, different light. In the round and just spotless, and I think that was something people probably talked about. They looked so different compared to in the Parthenon galleries...*

As part of keeping these objects in the round and spotless, the designers also wanted the exhibition to have minimal labelling and no predetermined route. The idea that in section four '*there is no kind of definite route round*' (Interpretation officer) was one the

designers wanted to utilise to empower visitors to 'allow the visitor to experience each masterpiece on its own, as a powerful artwork that remains affecting today' (Caruso St John 2015). This idea of non-linearity in exhibitions is closely linked to the idea of not prescribing a route as a way of empowering visitors to make their own choices. In space syntax theory, it is those exhibitions that offer visitors the greatest freedom of routes and options that are seen as most progressive (Choi 1999). The application of constructivist learning theory has also emphasised the importance of giving visitors choice, with their ability to explore space likened to learning in a constructivist manner (MacDonald 2002, 231). Bourdieu (1991, 54) connects this desire to wander, to be unencumbered by a linear narrative space, to the visitor's cultural capital, with those visitors who carry with them a knowledge to interpret art for themselves more inclined to want open spaces to let themselves and their minds wander than those visitors with less museum experience.

The non-linear approach also goes hand in hand with a minimal labelling, leaving the job of the navigating both the space and the object to the visitor. The interpretation officer specifically makes this link with the curation style of Tate Britain Director Penelope Curtis, exemplified by the Modern British Sculpture exhibition at the Royal Academy: *Just thinking about the modern British Art, or modern British sculpture show at the RA. I don't know if you saw it? It got some really mixed reviews, but the one thing I did like about it. The interpretation was pretty impenetrable, but it was just really playing on juxtapositions. And Penelope Curtis who curated it, who was also at Tate Britain. She was very much into using just great curation, just presenting objects together in order to interpret them. Which you can argue wasn't enough for a lot of people, but there's a lot in that I think. I think it said a lot without any words. So, I think that shows do that to an extent.*

This juxtaposition of objects with minimal text was felt by the interpretation officer to have worked well. However, when it came to creating an open approach without a linear route, the interpretation officer felt there was a tension between the design and the interpretation: *Initially, there was no kind of definitive route around the room (room four), just*

lots and lots of individual pieces and as you'll appreciate, that to me was a nightmare because there was no way of telling stories. It was in room four, in particular, where the interpretation officer felt there was a tension: originally, although the entirety of the exhibition had been planned along these lines and room 4 was the space where it really showed that this really doesn't work. Because I would just walk into that room and think what do I do? It was just literally dotted all over.

Initially wall panels were planned to introduce the exhibition's key themes, but these were felt to be too far removed from the rest of the objects. Instead objects were grouped together onto plinths, and a modified version of the British Museum's system of gateway panels – placing contextual information that would usually be placed on the wall with objects was used. This approach, in the words of the interpretation officer, '*became the system throughout.*'

8.2.2 Visitor responses to the non-linear space

Of the sixteen visitor groups that were interviewed, no-one talked about section four being confusing or there being a difficulty in navigating the space. Visitors were positive about the space with several commenting on the impact of seeing it. Looking at how visitors negotiated room four, we can see that visitors did not follow a set linear route but adopted a series of different strategies. Six initially turn right, while seven turn left, and three walk diagonally through the space often skipping objects as they do so.

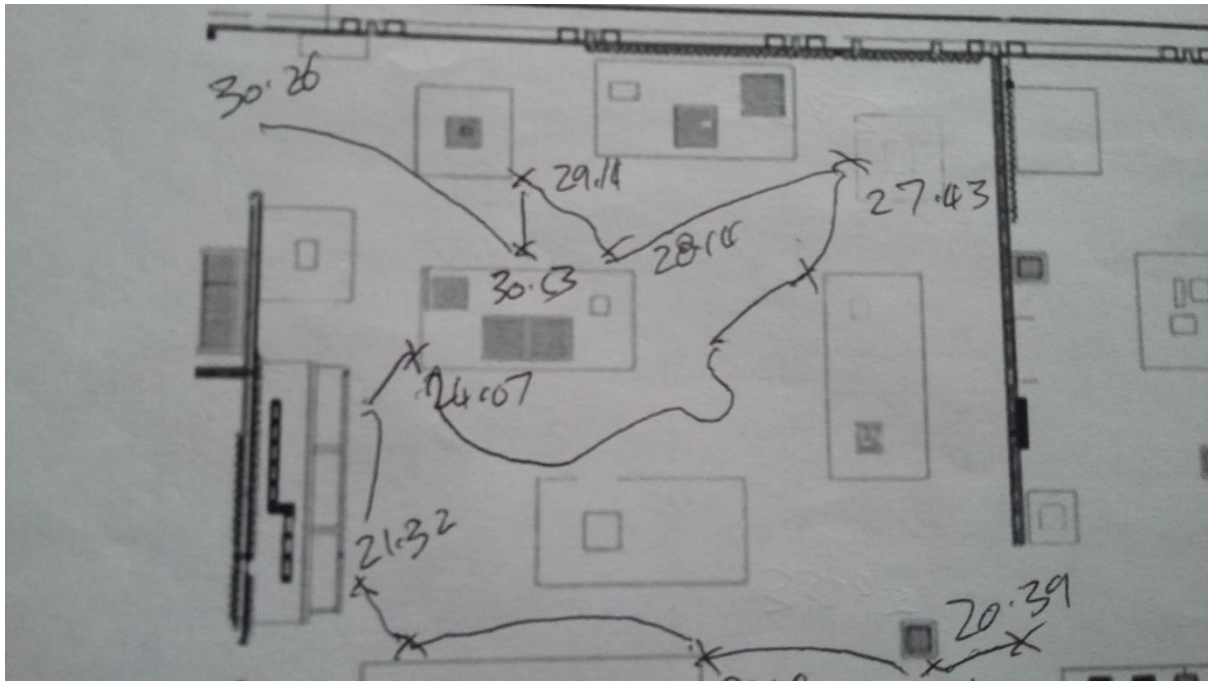


Fig. 8.14 Seven visitors initially turn left when entering section four. Here, Colin enters room 3 and turns left. He spends 9 minutes and 57 seconds in section 3 and misses several objects on the righthand side of the room.

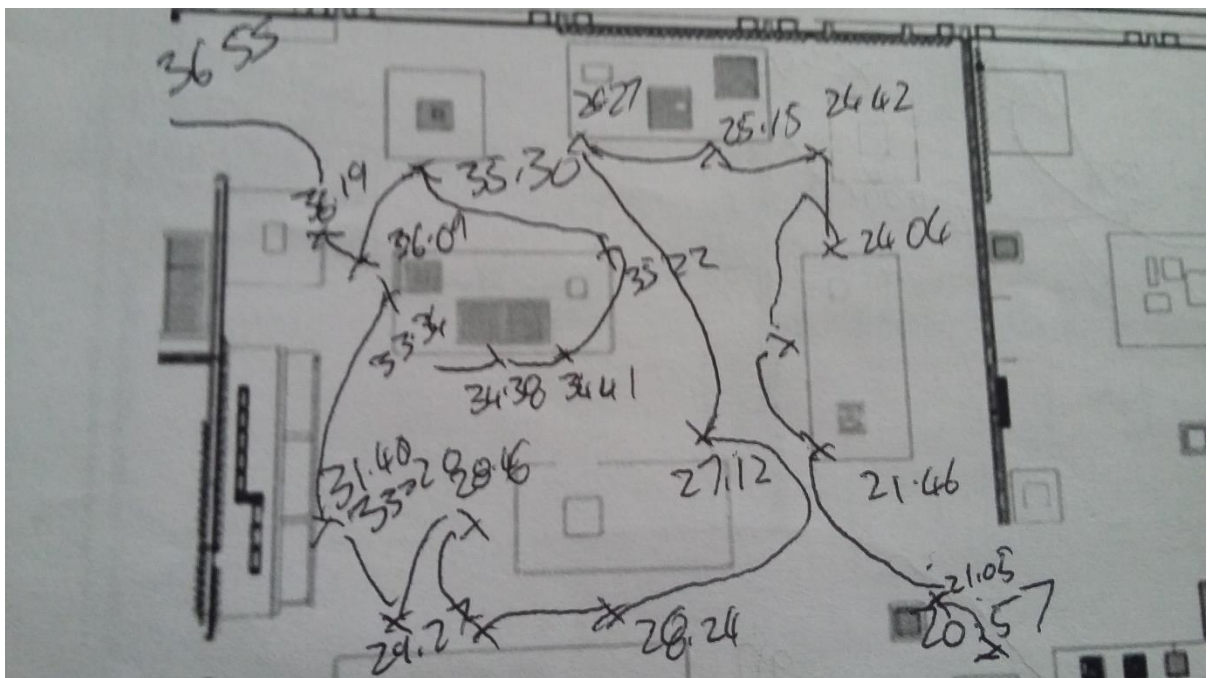


Fig. 8.15 Six visitors turn right when they enter the section 4. Here, Laura initially turns right before turning back on herself to look at the south wall in room four. She spends 15 minutes 58 seconds in room 3.

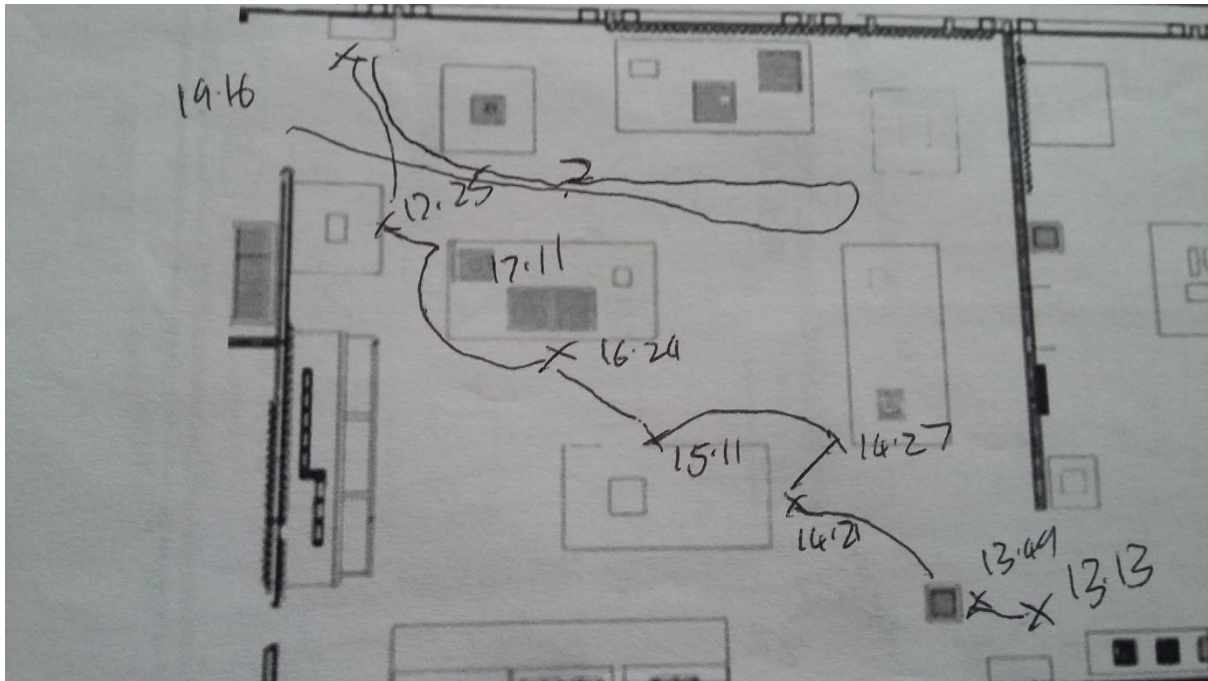


Fig. 8.16 Three visitors adopt a diagonal route through space. Here Monica quickly moves through the section. She spends 6 minutes and 3 seconds in this room in total, missing the majority of the displays.

Visitor behaviour is felt to differ in free permanent galleries than special exhibitions. Visitors to permanent collections are more likely to wander through, stopping at objects that catch their eye. In contrast visitors to temporary exhibitions work their way through the display more diligently. This is both a product of the different motivations of visitors to permanent collections and special exhibitions, but also a reflection of the spaces themselves. It is possible to see all the objects in a visit to a blockbuster exhibition, whereas in a permanent exhibition it is not: visitors invariably have to be selective. Tracking people in the non-linear space of *Defining Beauty* illustrates, however, that not all visitors are so diligent with some missing several stops within the space. This space came relatively early in the visit, so this cannot be accounted for by the phenomenon of museum fatigue. It might be suggested instead that a combination of providing a non-linear space with an art-based subject matter resulted in visitors drifting and contemplating within the space. Although this resulted in some visitors skipping some objects, this should not necessarily be seen as a negative thing. Many of the visitors spoke in quite sophisticated terms about reading sculptures in room four and it may be that a more open space, one that encourages visitors to drift, is more conducive to contemplation of artistic works than the kind of enforced

linearity, and the queues of visitors this can lead to, that characterised the first section of *Vikings: Life and legend*.

8.3 The 'turn'

After these first four sections, the exhibition takes what Jonathan Jones described in his review of the exhibition as, 'a brilliant and unexpected turn away from high art towards ordinary lives' (Jones 2015). This turn takes place over the next four sections, which comprises act two, and in the words of the interpretation officer, '*they're really meant to be filling in that story, the iconic works you encounter those in this section [section four] and then rest, it became much more realistic.*' These themes focussed on everyday life, and how religion and mythology were used in everyday life to understand birth, death and marriage. These four sections also had a similar design aesthetic, featuring many small objects in small cases. Effectively act two formed a counter or retort to act one, it was less about philosophical ideas, form into thought, and more about what life was like for everyday ancient Greeks. If the first act was, as one visitor, Frances, commented, '*largely filled with sculptures of naked men*', then the second act put more of a focus on women, children and the non-Greek other. This was represented through figures like the statue of Demeter but also in the mythological Other, represented by centaurs and Amazons. This representation of everyday realism was not only a counterbalance to the idealised beauty of the first act, it represented a chronological development from idealism to realism in Greek art into the Hellenistic period, which was one of the key messages listed in the scope paper.



Fig. 8.17: Room 4 containing the sections 5) Rites of passage and 6) Love and desire. Here thematically the exhibition shifts to some of the key moments in the lives of everyday ancient Greeks, including birth, marriage and death. The colour scheme has also changed in this section to a burgundy.

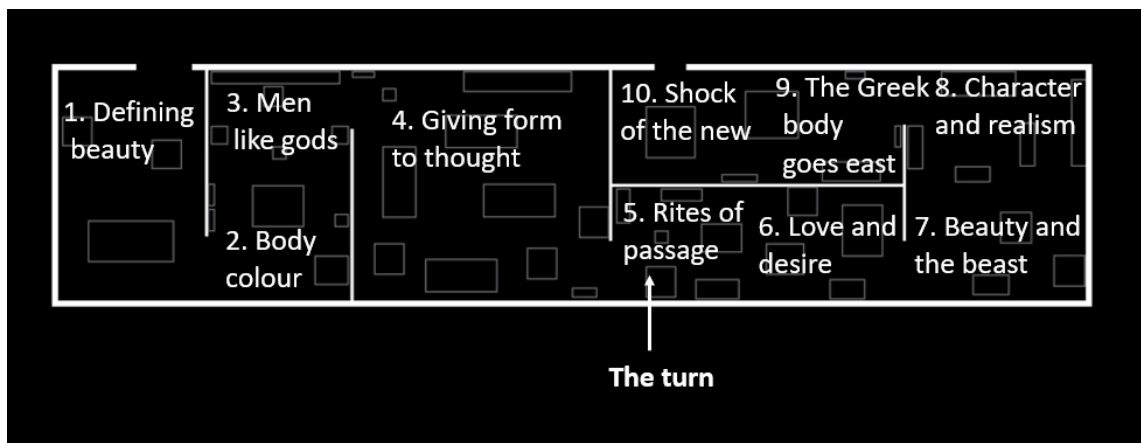


Fig. 8.18: The turn occurred after section 4: Giving form to thought.

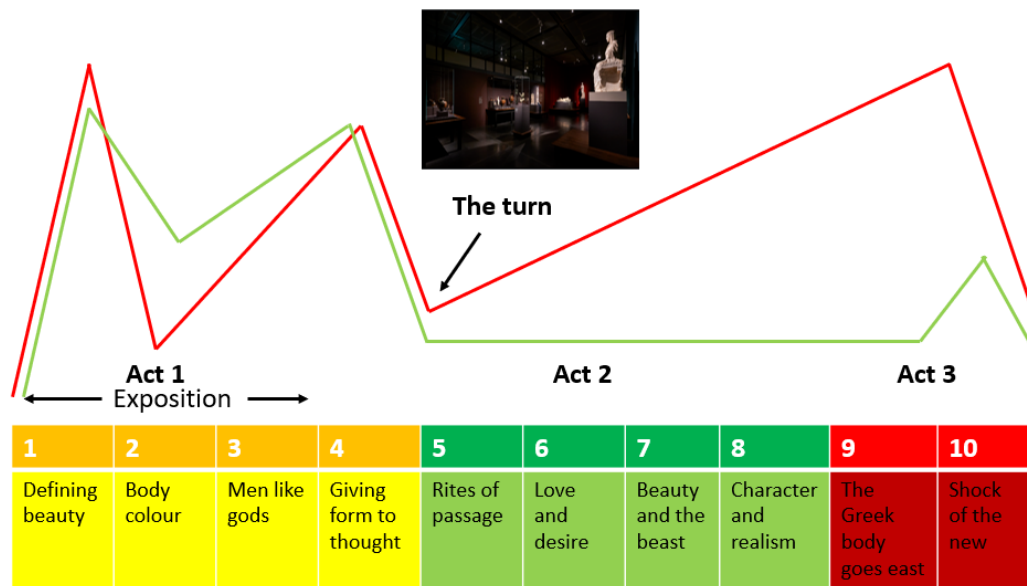


Fig. 8.19: The turn occurred after section 4: Giving form to thought.

8.3.1 The overall narrative: a non-chronological approach

In his review of *Defining Beauty*, Alistair Smart (2015) argues that it is with the adoption of a thematic structure, ‘with sections dedicated to death, marriage, and also the gender divide that, things unravel – and a potentially five-star show falls apart’. He goes on to say that: By tackling a thematic, rather than a chronological approach, it feels as if the organisers have bottled it. That it takes the easy way out, presenting a set of superb sculptures without tackling the fundamental question about them. (Smart 2015)

The question raised by the exhibition for Smart is, ‘judging by the Kouroi and other sculptures in the decades/centuries, running up to it, you’re left wondering where on earth did this surge of genius come from? ...How did artists become so good, so suddenly?’ On this matter he argues, the exhibition is: Deafeningly silent. The non-chronological approach allows this tricky question to be dodged, but surely it’s disingenuous to do so. (Smart 2015)

Responding to these comments about the lack of chronology in the exhibition, the interpretation officer acknowledges Smart's point: *I mean he's right, it's not a chronological approach and that's one of the things we had to think about, because that is another way to do it.*

However, she did argue that chronology was more strongly present in the exhibition from room 4 onwards: *And from here it is chronological, in the way it moves into more realistic sculptures...and it gives the reason for that, which is because Alexander the Great was encountering people and the population becomes more diverse.*

The interpretation officer also points to the conclusion of the impact of classical sculpture on Renaissance Italy and London, and section four, which had the chronology of Greek sculpture as one of the sub-themes. However, she acknowledges that this theme was *subtle and I can understand that it's definitely not a straight chronological show.*

Part of the reason for not adopting a chronological approach was the need for a lengthy exposition section to explain some of the key features of Greek sculpture. It can also be seen as part of a strategy to avoid being drawn into retelling the 'chain of art' narrative, which brings with its own problematic narrative of sculptural art reaching its pinnacle with ancient Greece and the Parthenon.

Although the exhibition was criticised in the press due to its lack of narrative, visitors were generally positive about the exhibition narrative for *Defining Beauty*. Of the sixteen visitors, twelve commented positively about the narrative, with Fiona's comment being typical:

Fiona: *A good curatorial concept should bring everything together in an effortless way.*

Interviewer: *And how did you feel Defining Beauty...?*

Fiona: *It did that*

Not all visitors shared this positive view of the exhibition narrative. Five visitors from the sixteen groups commented negatively about the narrative. This tended to revolve around the exhibition narrative starting off strongly but then beginning to become more difficult to follow: *'I thought the exhibition itself started to jump around a little bit right, I've just been introduced to the forms here, I expected that to be reinforced.'* (Ian)

For two visitors this was due to not finding a connection between these rooms: *'I was kind of wondering what they were going for with how it was organised room to room. There didn't seem to be like, you could have done it like chronologically or alphabetically but I didn't see any of that, I think they just put it wherever they thought it would look interesting... I kind of thought maybe it would have a flow in some way.'* (Darren)

Olive also felt that the exhibition lacked a clear structure: *I quite like exhibitions that have some sort of clear format. Even if it's chronological or it's stylistic, something like that, I couldn't really pick up anything in either of these exhibitions* [Olive also went to the Indigenous Australia exhibition]...*I couldn't see anything in the Defining Beauty, other than it had been relatively well-organised. Starting off with something quite impressive. Ending with something impressive.* (Olive)

Not all visitors felt the exhibition lacked sequentiality. Some visitors did recognise the shift from idealism to realism that the interpretation officer talked about: *It did that...well I will tell you something about part of the exhibition that was not so idealistic* (laughs), *and that was the penultimate room because they resorted to realistic forms, and Socrates I think it was.* (Beatriz)

Two visitors however, still wanted, like Alex Smart (2015), for the exhibition to adopt a traditional chronological structure for the exhibition narrative: *I mean I think it would have been interesting if they'd started with the earliest statues first. Like the Egyptians ones, sort of a timeline. You could see that with the Egyptian sculpture and the Kouros acting as an in-*

between. For people like me who don't know much about Greek art, I think that would have made it easier. (Laura)

The main problem that occurred in relation to the exhibition narrative, however, was in relation to the proposition suggested by the title – *Defining Beauty: The body in ancient Greek art* - that the exhibition would indeed define what beauty was. Commenting on the exhibition, the interpretation officer remarked: *'The title was an interesting one because it came really late in the day, and there were all sorts of reasons for that, but as you know putting together an exhibition knowing the title is really helpful. Because I think the curator and myself were a bit thrown by it, because it just had a slightly different... I think if we'd known it was called Defining Beauty you'd want to directly start with something around: how do we define beauty? That whole discussion that's not quite how we'd approached it.'*

Although it may not have fitted with the original curatorial and interpretative intentions of the exhibition, the title was successful in getting visitors to attend the exhibition. Monica, a fashion designer from Brazil said it was specifically the exhibition title that drew her to come to the exhibition: *I'm always looking for inspiration, but Defining Beauty this name, I think it is really strong... I think Beauty is undefinable. But I like to know how people used to think, so... (Monica)*

Bertha also contrasted the title to the exhibition, and its ability to add intrigue, or in her words *'already putting the viewers on alert'* in contrast with an exhibition she and her partner had recently visited at Tate Britain:

Bertha: Yes, Defining Beauty! I thought the title was already putting the viewer on alert and that's very important in an exhibition to have the right title. As opposed to one that I saw just last week at Tate Britain - Fighting History.

Bob: We did not like that.

The title therefore had the possibility of creating what Barthes calls the *hermeneutic* mystery. However, it was a *hermeneutic* mystery that not all the visitors felt the exhibition could deliver on, as Colin and Colette express:

Colin: *They sort of kicked it off but they didn't take it anywhere after that point, after the initial treatment of beauty, I thought was well done, but then it kind of fragmented.*

Colette: *After say room three, it wasn't so much about beauty it was about form and expression and parts of it had to do with the human body with the eroticism, but not the body itself.*

Colin: *The exhibition was fascinating but they lost the theme immediately. There was something interesting all the way along, and I sort of want to make, like a puzzle where it will fit together starting off with beauty, don't abandon your theme.*

This point was also made, although less vehemently, by Normai:

I would say that one of the things that it wasn't, which I thought it would be – was sort of more what is beauty? Because I thought that the story about what the art and the body was very much there, but I didn't really get the beauty part of it.

This idea of the narrative losing the theme of the exhibition was particularly associated with the start of act 2, or 'the turn': *Yeah, I felt a lot of the other rooms had a really solid theme and I felt that one [section 4] there were really several themes they were going for at once, and I didn't really understand why it'd all been brought together there.*
(Alex)

Colin and Collette located the moment the theme was lost in room 5:

Colin: *And I think here there were some sections from the Elgin Marbles, especially the Centaur and the Lapith was there and again the story, where's the beauty here.*

Collette: *Yeah, I think they lost that theme.*

Colin: *No, they had really lost that theme.*

Although some visitors did feel that the exhibition did return to this issue of what is Beauty with the final room:

And then yeah, I thought that the end kind of brought it back around to the beauty, or to the form. I don't like the word beauty because that's not quite what it was, the form or the figure, or the humanity maybe of the figure, and how these forms have inspired people, and everything like that for thousands of years. (Naomi)

It is to the final room of exhibition and the return to aesthetic of the vista established in section one that I now turn.

8.4 Act three – The shock of the new

Act three can be seen as separated from acts one and two by a geographical and chronological shift. This section explored the legacy of classical sculpture, initially through the influence of Hellenistic art on the Buddha from Gandhara in central Asia, the European Renaissance and finally with the impact of the arrival of original Greek sculptures in London. The interpretation officer describes how room one connects with room ten: the opening room, *'raises the issue of Roman copies, and this kind of ties up with the conclusion, you know the impact of the original Greek marble.'* This idea of a return to the first room was not only expressed textually, the design language of section ten also mirrored section one, with its isolation of a few iconic sculptures, effectively signalling that the exhibition had come full circle and visitors had reached the end of the exhibition. It is to the issue of how exhibition design combines space, objects and vistas to create narrative climaxes that I now turn.



Fig. 8.20: Section 10 (act 3) showing a view of the Parthenon Dionysus juxtaposed with the Belvedere torso. In a return to the design aesthetic of space 1, the space is sparsely populated with objects, and painted in the same aquamarine colour as the first room. After encountering the Belvedere Torso visitors would exit through the glowing blue door into the gift shop.

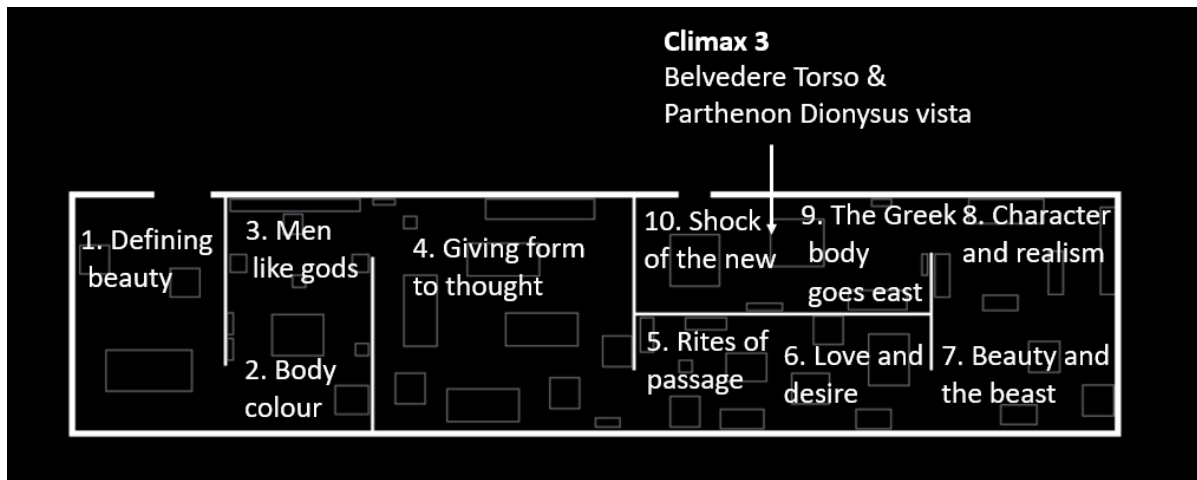


Fig. 8.21: The third climax of the exhibition was positioned in the final section: shock of the new.

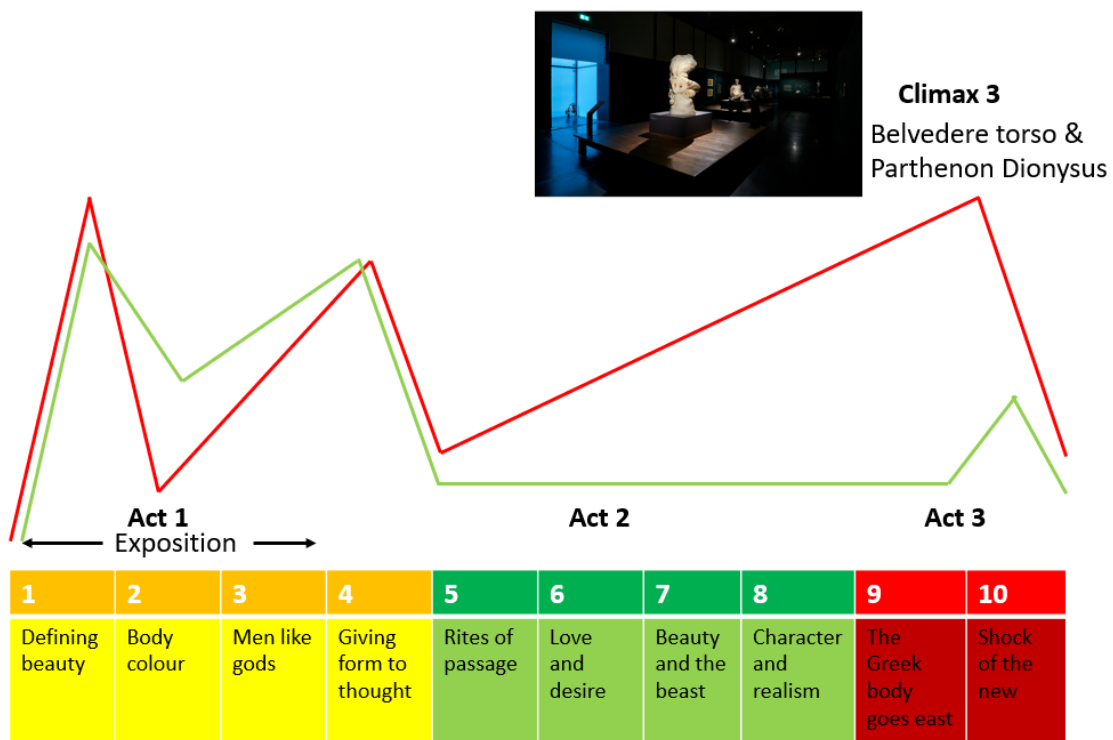


Fig. 8.22: The third climax of the exhibition was positioned in the final section: shock of the new.

The exhibition's ending, placing the Parthenon Dionysus in conversation with the Belvedere torso was effectively intended to mirror the exhibition's initial vista of the Ilissos from the Parthenon, Myron's Discobolus and Polykleitos' Doryphoros that visitors had encountered in the first room. This connection between space one and space six was

emphasised by both the spatial arrangement of the objects, but also through the exhibition colour scheme.

The other reason why visitors might have got the impression that the exhibition started to fade was that the exhibition climax, the pairing of the Parthenon Dionysus and the Belvedere torso did not have the same impact as say *Roskilde 6* or the *casts of the bodies*. This was not universally, felt some visitors, such as Lauren and Laura did report on the final room as having that sense of climactic specialness: *I remember the ones here...but what they did was they closed with the Belvedere torso that must have been the biggest coup for them to get that. So they actually opened and closed with really strong things.* (Laura)

Colin and Collette, despite feeling the exhibition narrative lost its way, also talked about the impact the last room made on them:

Colin: *Well they saved some of the big ones for sure.*

Collette: *I loved the last room.*

Colin: *Those were blockbusters.*

Edith also talked about being impressed by the final room, both because of recognising the sculptures but also within the context of the particular interpretation of placing them within the context of their later European influences: *Because I did notice that, that one of the figures in the main room and one of the figures at the end. I've seen them before here. They were really great, and the way that they were being discussed was really interesting as part of sort of the male form and later European influences*

Some visitors, however, didn't feel the narrative linked with the final section. Darren for example remarked: *I'm not sure why they decided to finish the exhibit with these two... I think these were like the most well-known things but I mean if you don't know the historical context of these things, there's no real reason that they would finish off with these I guess. But they were still interesting.*

Alex also remarked that the ending of the exhibition felt abrupt to him: *Although I didn't realise until I was halfway circling round it [the Belvedere torso] that I was at the end of the exhibition, which was a disappointment at that point because I kind of hoped we were going to move into more stuff like that.*

After this final climax, *Defining Beauty* visitors immediately exited into the gift shop, and for Alex this jarred, and didn't provide the opportunity for the impact of the final room to sink in. This may be because unlike *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, which placed a final small section after the exhibition climax of the casts, to act in the words of the curator of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* as a, 'decompression chamber'. The lack of impact of the Belvedere torso, may have also been affected by its position as the last object in the exhibition, when visitors were experiencing museum fatigue, as Justin reports: *I was a bit tired I also actually think. I haven't seen it in the flesh or the stone before, but I don't particularly like the Belvedere Heracles or Ajax, and the other the Phidias of Dionysus it was okay, I liked the size and the power of it. But I think by this stage I was tired, I wanted to get to the shop.*

As well as the title of the exhibition providing visitors with false expectations the interpretation officer also felt that the marketing did not necessarily flag up the importance of the Belvedere torso loan: *I suppose we did say this is the first time it's been loaned but that wasn't in the marketing, it came in really late. But you're right, even in the focus groups, you were still getting some people saying 'oh it's all BM works', but you know you had to point out that well there's also the Belvedere torso and an incredibly rare original bronze, but the fact was that people had not come away thinking that.*

This is in contrast with both *Pompeii and Herculaneum* and *Vikings: Life and legend* when many visitors came to the exhibition with prior knowledge of what the star object in the exhibition was – the casts of the bodies and the ship *Roskilde 6* – and built up a sense of anticipation in relation to them as they moved through the space.

The wall text also sought to highlight the importance of these two moments. In the first room, it emphasised the uniqueness of bringing these three objects together, describing Myron, Polykleitos and Phidias as, '*the greatest sculptors of their day*', the text goes on to emphasise the importance of the moment by telling the viewer, '*three sculptures are shown here together for the first time.*' (Exhibition wall text, section 1, *Defining Beauty*)

The wall text in space six, similarly emphasised the important of these two sculptures being placed together in an exhibitionary context:

Presented in this room, for the first time, are two sculptures that at different times have been considered to be perfection in ancient art. (Exhibition wall text, section 10, *Defining Beauty*)

The interpretation officer commented that making a direct reference to an object being displayed in an exhibition in the text was unusual, '*it's not something we usually do.*' She reveals that this particular text was added relatively late in the exhibition planning process at the request of Neil MacGregor and was influenced by the presentation of the Ilissos in the Hermitage:

Neil came in very strongly having seen the work [in the Hermitage] in the round, the lighting, isolated. He came back with some very strong ideas about the presentation, so that did affect things quite strongly, and I think he adjusted the final room slightly in how it was presented. There was some extra text that he added about these pairs. He came back, I think, really wanting to reinforce that experience, there was some text here to say, this is amazing we brought these together, and it was the same here....

Both the text and the exhibition design can be seen as part of the strategy of positioning these objects as artworks in their own right, rather than part of the wider architectural context. These two pieces of text stand out in the text hierarchy, they are not labels in the conventional sense for they contain none of the traditional tombstone

information that gives dates, provenance or object registration numbers. They also are not panel text, having no titles and the content also addresses group of objects rather than the theme of the room. Like a piece of speech creeping into the language of novel, this text can be seen, in Bakhtinian terms, as a discursive trace of the director's presence in the exhibition-making process, and the wider debates about the role of the museum and the relationship between the Parthenon sculptures, and the story they tell, that were occurring in the media at the time.

The scope paper, a document outlining the exhibition's key messages and narratives, can be seen as the means by which the discourses surrounding the exhibition are encoded into its fabric. Written some two years before the exhibition is finalised, it also leaves visible traces of the exhibition makers' thinking as the exhibition process unfolds. In the key messages outlined in the scope paper for *Defining Beauty* we can trace both the wider geopolitical discourses of the exhibition, and the creative tension between object and text, between material and narrative, that characterise museum exhibitions as a medium.

Since Neil MacGregor's appointment in 2002, the question of the Parthenon sculptures and their repatriation to Athens had been frequently asked during his directorship. In a debate about the future of museums in 2009, when pressed on the question MacGregor responded that, 'the real question is about how the Greek and British governments can work together so that the sculptures can be seen in China and Africa' (MacGregor 2009). The argument about the universality of the enlightenment museum, as both preceding and going beyond the idea of the nation state can be seen as a response to deal with this constant questioning. While this attempt to loan the collections to a variety of institutions was a hallmark of MacGregor's tenure as director (the British Museum became during this period the largest lender of objects internationally in the world (British Museum 2013)) it was in the build-up to *Defining Beauty* that this approach was actually applied to the Parthenon Sculptures themselves.

Before I explore the controversy surrounding the loan of the river god Ilissos to the Hermitage, it is important to provide some background to the Parthenon sculptures, or as they are known in the popular press, the Elgin marbles – after Thomas Bruce, the Earl of Elgin, who in his role as emissary to the Ottoman Empire had them removed from the Parthenon and shipped to England between 1801 to 1807. They were initially put on public display in London, before Elgin sold them to the British government for 35,000 pounds, a price lower than his own costs, having turned down offers from others, including Napoleon. The British government passed them onto the British Museum in 1816, where they served to act as the apex of the sculpture galleries, which were at the time designed to reflect the concept of the chain of art. The displays were organised to illustrate a narrative of artistic progress, beginning with the primitive static art of ancient Egypt, then passing via the missing link of the Assyrians, to reach its height in the temple sculpture of ancient Greece, its pinnacle being the Parthenon sculptures (Jenkins 1992, 65). This hierarchical narrative placing one culture above another has been discredited with the advent of cultural relativism in art history and archaeology in the twentieth century (Jenkins 1992, 74). Amongst others, Goethe hoped that their acquisition and public display would trigger, 'the beginning of a new age of Great Art' (Beard 2010, 16). Although this did not materialise, the sculptures certainly did cause a sensation when they arrived in London, changing perceptions of what classical sculpture looked like (Jenkins 1992, 24), and this was a topic *Defining Beauty* sought to explore in its final section.

From the beginning, the removal of the sculptures from the Parthenon was controversial. with Byron famously exclaiming, '*Dull is the eye that will not weep to see thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed, By British hands.*' (Byron 1913, 2, XV). Calls for their return to Greece intensified, after the collapse of the military junta in Greece in 1974. These were repatriation claims were led by Melina Mercouri, the then Greek minister of culture. However, they were met with little sympathy by the then Director of the British

Museum David Wilson, who accused Mercouri of 'cultural fascism' (Hitchens, Browning and Binns 1997, 85).

One of the key debates surrounding the question of the repatriation of the sculptures was where they would be housed if they returned to Greece? This was answered with the opening in 2009 of the new Acropolis Museum, designed by the Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi. As well as providing a facility in which the Parthenon sculptures could be displayed safely in environmentally-controlled conditions, the building itself was constructed to make an argument for the sculpture's return. This was centred around the narrative that only within the context of a location overlooked by the Acropolis could they be properly understood. In the words of the cultural critic Peter Aspden (2008), this was 'architecture as propaganda'.

The new Acropolis museum held thirty percent of the original sculptures, while another thirty percent are in the British Museum. Outside of a few individual pieces scattered across other European collections, with the remaining forty percent destroyed. Originally, it was proposed that blank space be left in place of the missing panels, as an emotive protest against their absence, but this was thought to be, "too dramatic" by the Museum Director Dimitrios Pandermalis, and the missing pieces were instead replaced by plaster casts (Aspden 2008). Rather than being displayed inwards, as they are in the Duveen Gallery in the British Museum, they were displayed facing outwards as they would have been on the Parthenon. They are supported by concrete columns that again, echo the architectural features of the ancient monument. Most significantly, large windows allowed the sculptures to be viewed under natural light, while at the same time allowing visitors and the sculpture to look out, and create a dialogue, with the vista of the Acropolis. To further emphasise the call for the Parthenon Sculptures return, the first temporary exhibition in the ground floor of museum was of objects recently repatriated to Italian and Greek museums after they had been found to be illegally exported (Aspden 2008).

The inclusion of the Parthenon sculptures in *Defining Beauty* was always going to rekindle the question of repatriation in the media. In the exhibition development process, the

media debate was shaped however, by two important moments, one triggered by the release of a Hollywood blockbuster and one manufactured by the British Museum itself in the form of a controversial loan. Since October 2014, the reek lawyer Amal Clooney had been leading the case for UNESCO to intervene and act a mediator in discussions about the return of the Parthenon sculptures between the Greek and British governments. She had recently married the actor George Clooney, who was himself starring in a film, *The Monuments Men* (2014), about the rescue and return to their owners of millions of artworks stolen by the Nazis during World War II. In a press conference promoting the film Clooney was asked by a Greek journalist whether he supported calls for the return of the Parthenon sculptures to Greece, to which he replied positively. In a later press conference (Brown & Smith, 2014) Clooney clarified his point: I did a little research just to make sure I wasn't completely out of my mind...even in England the polling is in favour of returning the marbles from the Pantheon [sic] marbles.

Co-star Bill Murray went onto add: It seems like it's a problem all over the world. Who owns this art? Where it came from? Do they have the right to give it back? I think it has had a very nice stay here, certainly, London's gotten crowded, there's plenty of room back there in Greece, plenty of Room. England can take a lead with this kind of thing...letting art go back to where it came from.

Despite the confusion regarding the Parthenon and the Pantheon, Clooney and Murray's comments reignited the debate surrounding the sculptures, with British politicians like Mark Williams calling for the sculptures to be returned.

The other key moment in the build-up to the exhibition that generated further debate about the repatriation of the Parthenon sculptures was the decision to loan them to the Hermitage museum in Russia on the 6 December 2014. This loan was extremely controversial. *The New York Times* even described it as triggering a 'geopolitical tempest' (Erlanger 2014). This occurred primarily for two reasons. Firstly, apart from being evacuated from London during World War II, the objects had never left the British Museum in the past

two hundred years. The Greek prime minister Antonios Barnaras argued the loan deliberately ‘demolishes one of the British arguments for keeping the marbles, that they were too fragile to be moved’ (Holden and Maltezou 2014). To this MacGregor had responded that the Greeks had always made it clear that the objects intended not to be returned as if loaned to Greece, and ‘that rather puts the conversation on pause’ (Perry 2014).

To add to the controversy, at the time of the loan Anglo-Russian relations were in the words of Neil MacGregor “chilly”, following Russia’s annexing of Crimea on the 18 March 2014 and the conflict in the Ukraine (Perry 2014). Indeed, there was talk of a new cold war with prime minister David Cameron describing Russia as, ‘being faced with a fork in the road’ (Sands 2014). Although the loan had been planned for two years to mark the 250th anniversary of the opening of the Hermitage Museum and was part of a wider year of cultural events taking place both in Russia and the UK (Perry 2014), the actual loan was only approved fifteen days before the sculpture was put on display. It was announced through an article written by Neil MacGregor on 5 December 2014 when the sculpture was already in Moscow.

Although controversial, the loan of the Ilissos followed the model of the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder to Iran the previous year. Macgregor argued that “culture was the last bridge to burn” (Martinez 2014) and that, “both institutions believe it is precisely at moments like this that museums have to keep speaking.” MacGregor argued that the British Museum and Hermitage, founded one year apart, were sister institutions, the first two museums of the Enlightenment. The loan of the Ilissos was regarded as particularly appropriate as, ‘he represents the stream where Plato and Socrates walked to talk of beauty, love and a good society. It fitted into the world of sculpture and Greek philosophy. It wrote itself as an expression of friendship between the two institutions’ (Sands 2014).

Furthermore, the loan of the Ilissos made the case that the values of the enlightenment transcended nationality, just as the British Museum trustees were independent of government and custodians of the sculptures for the whole world. Similarly,

the loan to the Hermitage essentially recreated the experience when the sculptures were first shown in London. MacGregor's argument for retaining the Parthenon sculptures was that in Greece they were part of the Parthenon. In the British Museum they became sculptures in their own light:

'When they were in Athens no one in the ancient world talked of them, just of the building. It is only when they could be seen at eye level they become the stars. In Athens they were architectural decoration. In London they became great sculptures.'
(Sands 2014)

The loan of the Ilissos to the Hermitage was significant, not only because it was the first time that the Parthenon sculptures had left London since the Second World War, but because it acted as a precursor and a testing ground for the arguments made in the exhibition. Just as new narratives had arisen around Discobolus when it was placed in the context of a Chinese museum, so by placing Ilissos in the context of another encyclopaedic museum, the Hermitage, the connotations of the object's narrative had changed. The reasoning behind the loan, that the Hermitage was a fellow encyclopaedic museum, helped to emphasise that the Ilissos not only had a history connected to Ancient Greece, but also that the rediscovery and appreciation of Ancient Greek sculpture was intimately connected with the grand Enlightenment project of understanding the world. Other encyclopaedic collections, the Louvre or the Met, could have also provided this function, but the loan to Russia, a country with which the UK had strained diplomatic ties at the time, made the case that the encyclopaedic museum both preceded, and rose above, the political arguments of nation states. This was used in the argument that the British Museum collaborates with other museums and not governments, which would be used as in the response to decline Amal Clooney's request of UNESCO acting as an intermediary in their repatriation (Lambert 2015). Furthermore, the isolation of the Ilissos from the rest of the sculptures on the pediment would help to influence the design aesthetic of *Defining Beauty*, it was remarked

that the sculpture of the river god, '*had never looked so good*' (Curator) as when brilliantly lit in splendid isolation.

8.6 Summary

Defining Beauty was an exhibition that aimed to get visitors to look at classical sculpture differently. There were a variety of motivations for doing this. For the Director, the exhibition aimed to recreate the shock of when they were first seen in London and make the case for the objects as artworks in their own right, rather than as appendages to their original architectural context. The curator and the interpretation officer wanted visitors to see them as they were seen by the Ancient Greeks, '*as cold marble containing the presence of the living god*' (Interpretation Officer), as embodying philosophical thought made into a physical form. Various strategies were employed to get visitors to see these sculptures in a new light. The labels spoke directly to the visitors in the curator's voice and made direct reference to them being viewed in an exhibition context. The design attempted to maximise the aesthetic impact of the objects and minimise the interference of interpretive devices and, at certain points, a prescribed route. Despite all of this emphasis on the object, the star loan for the exhibition *The Belvedere Torso*, was only mentioned by eleven of the sixteen visitor groups.

That is not to say that visitors didn't engage with objects. Certainly, many of the visitors read objects on a sophisticated level. But it does illustrate what may occur when a narrative is made secondary to the materiality of the object, or the aesthetics of the design, that key moments in the exhibition story can be missed. It would be wrong to declare *Defining Beauty* as anti-narrative, in fact the broader chronological narrative was skilfully interwoven as a secondary narrative that underlay the principle thematic approach. Similarly, although *Defining Beauty* did adopt some of the forms of what might be deemed the aesthetic approach to design – a certain amount of non-linearity in section four, restrictions on the placement and design of exhibition text – it could not be seen as doing this to the extent of, for example, Penelope Curtis' *Tate Britain* rehang. Nevertheless, it can be seen as one element of a trend in museum display in the UK of a creeping aestheticisation that was

also manifest in the minimisation of the digital reconstruction in *Pompeii and Herculaneum* and the lack of interactives, or re-enactment, in *Vikings: life and legend*. All of this is done in the name of the authenticity of the object, and yet it is interpretive elements like the labels that give visitors the tools they need to undertake complex modes of engagement, such as the *ekphrastic* encounter, where we see visitors engaging directly with the object in the manner envisaged by the aesthetic approach. Of course, although the ability to engage with the material can be scaffolded by interpretation it is not innate. Bourdieu (1991), Carey (2005) and others have noted that this aesthetic ability to appreciate objects, to read exhibition narratives and navigate their spaces is intrinsically tied with visitor's social class, their education, their *habitus* and their cultural capital. It is this issue, who these visitors are and how the entrance narratives that they bring with them to an exhibition narrative is related to their social backgrounds and museum exhibition visiting experience, which my final comparative chapter (9.1) seeks to address.

Chapter 9 Narrative and the museum visitor: A comparative perspective

Introduction – a shift in perspective

Each of my analysis chapters has used a special exhibition held at the British Museum to explore how we might think about the role narrative plays in museum exhibitions from a different perspective. Chapter five focussed on the issue of plot and structure in the exhibition *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* and used Barthes theories of the five codes of narrative to explore how the desire to encounter the bodies drew visitors through the space. Chapter six looked at how the perspective of a narrator can be thought of as existing within *Vikings: Life and legend* and explored the material-focussed interpretation and minimalistic design through the theoretical lens of Bakhtin's theory of *heteroglossia*. Chapter seven considered how *Defining Beauty* used anti-narrative strategies, which can be related to the material turn, to prioritise the aesthetic encounter with individual objects over the wider contextual story of the origins of the sculpture. These three exhibitions are not unconnected however, as the summer blockbusters at the British Museum from 2013 to 2015, each has been, in a Bakhtinian sense, in dialogue with its immediate predecessor.

In order to understand how narrative functions in exhibitions, each of my analysis chapters has necessarily contained a comparative element. To avoid repetition in this chapter, which seeks to draw comparisons from across all three mini-cases, I therefore shift focus. The previous three chapters have all begun from the perspective of the museum makers – the curators, the designers, the interpretation officers, the project managers – and then explored how the visitors respond to how they encode narratives in the objects, design and texts of an exhibition. In this chapter, I switch perspectives and explore the issue of exhibition narratives from the visitor's point of view. The subject matter of my interviews was ostensibly the narrative of the exhibition, yet at the same time as the respondents were telling me about their experiences they were also revealing much about their own identities.

As they outlined their own motivation for visiting and relationship to the exhibition subject matter, they were also narrating their own lives and, in effect, performing a version of themselves.

In each of the analysis chapters, I looked at the visitor's collective responses to objects and narratives. The comparative chapter provides an opportunity to meet these visitors and understand them as individuals. Going in depth into their lifelong relationship to visiting exhibitions reveals that their accounts are just as intellectually sophisticated, aesthetically rich and, at times, idiosyncratically eccentric as those of the museum professionals. In providing the context for their habit of visiting exhibitions, chapter 8 also allows me to locate their readings of exhibition narratives in relation to their social and cultural backgrounds. This brings my analysis into dialogue with the work of Bourdieu, and all who have been influenced by him. As outlined in chapter 3, in *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu (1991, 112) repudiates the notion that the appreciation of art is innate but instead argues it is strongly related to a person's social background, including their level of education, social class, and the regularity with which their family exposed them to art. The museum and art gallery is therefore a prime site to study how a person's ability to read and appreciate art manifests itself. Although there has been much criticism and updating of Bourdieu's theories to allow for a more visitor-focused approach to art championed by many museums, his theories still provide a powerful means by which to understand how social class affects and determines how visitors read exhibitions and objects. In this chapter, I explore two particular ideas expressed by Bourdieu in relation to how social class affects visitors' responses to exhibition narratives. One is the idea that those visitors who possess a higher level of cultural capital are the least in need of interpretive tools and also the most resistant to the presence of interpretation and narrative in an exhibition (Bourdieu 1991, 53). I explore this both in terms of how visitors resist or deviate from the exhibition narrative, but also how they try and escape the physical narrative by taking alternate paths through the exhibition space. The other is Bourdieu's (1991, 41) notion that behind the almost spiritual appreciation of an

artwork lies the mastery of a classification system, which allows the initiated to define and situate art work in a taxonomy and effectively to read and critique it.

Bourdieu (1991, 47) argues that it is only those visitors with a high level of cultural capital who possess the required frame to access high art. Those visitors with lower social capital can only access everyday objects that are familiar to them. While the data I present in this chapter does reinforce Bourdieu's idea that those exhibitions that adopt, a 'high art' approach, tend to attract visitors with a higher level of cultural capital, it also shows that this framework is not the only way by which visitors can relate to high art objects. Just as narratives can provide the red thread to guide visitors through an unfamiliar subject matter, so the personal narratives visitors bring with them can also provide an alternative framework to read and understand objects. In particular, several visitors regardless of their level of cultural capital engage with everyday objects through the prism of how they are made. This manner of understanding an object, through embracing its materiality and understanding its 'thingness', can be just as complex as responding to objects aesthetically.

9.1 Comparing the demographics of the exhibitions

The summative evaluations conducted by the research consultancy Morris Hargreaves McIntyre on behalf of the British Museum are a useful resource for highlighting the demographic differences in visitors to my three case study exhibitions. Whereas my own data might hint at differences in respect to the type of people that attend, the summative evaluations confirm if these trends are true across the broader exhibition population. While all three exhibitions share some similarities in the types of people that are attending, the key differences the summative evaluation reveals are related to visitor numbers, level of knowledge and also where the visitors live.

These figures shown in table 5 suggest a kind of spectrum with *Pompeii and Herculaneum* located at one end, *Defining Beauty* at the other and *Vikings* situated in between. To summarise the general trends, *Pompeii and Herculaneum* was an extremely popular exhibition in terms of visitor numbers, making it the third most visited in British Museum history. A reasonably small percentage of those visitors to *Pompeii and Herculaneum* self-defined as having a specialist knowledge of the subject (9%), the percentage of international visitors was low (14%) and the percentage of visitors from the UK was high (56%). In contrast the overall number of visitors to *Defining Beauty* was low (111,130); the expected number of visitors to a British Museum summer blockbuster would be around 200,000. The percentage of visitors self-defining as having a specialist level of knowledge of the exhibition subject matter was higher than other special exhibitions (19%), the percentage of international visitors was also high (33%) and the percentage of UK visitors from outside London was also low (28%).

Table 5: A table using the summative evaluation data to compare the number of visitors to the exhibition, the percentage of visitors with specialist knowledge, the percentage of international visitors and the percentage of UK visitors who live outside London (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2013).

	Number of visitors	Visitors with a specialist knowledge of the exhibition subject	Percentage of international visitors	Percentage of UK visitors who live outside London	Percentage of UK visitors who live in London
Pompeii and Herculaneum	465,994	9%	14%	56%	30%
Vikings	279,257	12%	21%	47%	32%
Defining Beauty	111,130	19%	33%	28%	39%

Looking at the visitor groups that I interviewed, we can see that they show similar characteristics to the exit interviews. For *Pompeii and Herculaneum* (11 groups) and *Vikings: Life and legend* (10 groups) the majority of visitor groups came from the UK , while for *Defining Beauty* the majority of visitor groups (9 groups) came from outside of the UK (see table 6). I did not ask visitors to define their own expertise in relation to the subject, but I did ask how frequently they visited museums and galleries. Those visitors who visited museums and art galleries three times a year or more were classed as frequent, while those who visited less than three times a year were classed as occasional. As table 7 shows *Defining Beauty* had the highest number of frequent visitor groups (14 groups), while *Pompeii and Herculaneum* had the least (9 groups).

Table 6: A table showing where the number of visitor groups who came from the UK and outside of the UK

	<i>Pompeii and Herculaneum</i>	<i>Vikings: Life and legend</i>	<i>Defining Beauty</i>
UK based visitor group	11	10	6
Non-UK based visitor group	3	7	9
Mixed visitor group	2	0	1

Table 7: A table showing those visitors who described themselves as frequent visitors to museum exhibitions and those who are occasional. Frequent here is described as three visits to a museum or art gallery in a year.

	<i>Pompeii and Herculaneum</i>	<i>Vikings: Life and legend</i>	<i>Defining Beauty</i>
Frequent visitors	9	11	14
Occasional visitors	7	6	2

These differences in figures provoke the question: as to what are the differences in demographics related to the exhibition's different design and interpretation approaches? For example, *Pompeii and Herculaneum* sought to make visitors empathetically relate to the lives of ordinary Romans through everyday objects. Its narrative arc, which built-up to the encounter with the bodies sought to elicit visitor sympathy. Using the example of the Garden Room (see chapter 3), the curator wanted the objects to be understood in relation to their original context rather than as artworks. In contrast, *Defining Beauty* adopted a perspective that wanted visitors to see Greek sculpture not in the context of where they came from, but as artworks. As a result, it adopted a display-style that prioritised the individual encounter with object over the narrative arc of the exhibition.

In exploring the relationship between a visitor's social and cultural background and the exhibition's approach to narrative, I would like also to situate this debate within wider cultural debates that were occurring in Britain at the time. In *Vikings: Life and legend* I made the argument for the British Museum's version of the exhibition reflecting the debates that led up to the Scottish Referendum and the social conditions that resulted in Brexit. We might also see the debate of museum exhibitions and cultural elitism as running along similar lines. During the build-up to Brexit, the political narrative saw the UK divided between the provinces and a metropolitan elite. London in particular was seen as a world apart, an international city whose values and tastes were different from that of the rest of the UK. There were even campaigns for London to register as its own city state after the Brexit vote (Mance 2017). At the 2016 Tory Party Conference, British Prime Minister Theresa May (2016) famously labelled those who are citizens of the world as citizens of nowhere. If applied to Neil MacGregor's (2006, 11) famous mantra that the British Museum is 'a museum of the world for the world', the British Museum might also be regarded as not a museum of the world but a museum of nowhere. Museum exhibitions are often described as elitist. The former Director of the Metropolitan Museum, Phillipe de Montebello (1997), made the argument that elitism is a good thing and that others should rise to it.

I now turn to the theories of Bourdieu to better understand the link between an exhibition's narrative content, its form and its audiences. One of Bourdieu's key contributions to museology was to challenge the notion that an interest in art was in anyway an innate quality, which certain aesthetically-refined people are born with. Instead, he argued that key factors in developing this passion were a familiarity with art, which begins in the family, is developed through education but is also related to nationality (Bourdieu 1991, 63). Bourdieu argues that people, once imbued with a love of art, are equipped with a certain set of tools with which to interpret it. These tools enable an individual to engage differently with art. It provides them with a classification system in which each element of the (artistic) universe can be situated in a class (Bourdieu 1991, 39). This system is masked, however, with a

belief that an ability to appreciate art is innate and that the experience of an encounter with an art work is described as possessing an almost religious quality (Bourdieu 1991, 87).

Bourdieu (1991, 56) also argues that those visitors with a familiarity with the rules of art typically are drawn to the fine arts – painting and sculpture.

Visitors who lack this system of classification are limited in both the type of objects they appreciate and how they engage with them. Bourdieu (1991, 56) argues that those visitors with limited cultural capital are more interested in so-called ‘minor works’, such as furniture, ceramics, or folk and historical objects. Bourdieu (1991, 56) argues that these objects are accessible to visitors with limited cultural capital because they can relate to them according to their function, or consider them as valuable because of their historic age.

Bourdieu (1991, 53) also observed that a visitor’s attitude towards mediation and interpretation was closely related to their level of cultural capital. It is those visitors that possess these hierarchical classification systems already, who know how to look, who are most likely to reject guidebooks, labels and linear routes through an exhibition. Conversely, Bourdieu (1993) argues that working class visitors will benefit from a ‘verbal or written explanation’, which provides ‘the code in which the artwork is encoded.’

Over the course of this chapter, I explore how Bourdieu’s theories about how an interest in art is created might explain how visitors decode and understand exhibition narratives. Firstly, I look at how key factors such as family, education and the familiarity with museums are manifested in the narratives visitors tell me about the exhibitions. These interviews rarely focussed on just the exhibition itself but instead expanded as visitors explained to me the role museums played in their lives. In doing so they reveal not only the origins of this relationship, but also the role it still plays for them. I then go on to explore some of Bourdieu’s ideas, including the link Bourdieu makes between how visitors interpret art and how they behave in relation to it. Rather than seeing relating to objects on a material level as somehow inferior to that of the fine art and classification system approach, I argue that an approach that relies on alternative discourses, such as in the case of the Vikings personal

experience of building boats, can provide just as rich an insight into an object as the academy-approved discourses of art-history and archaeology. Finally, I look at how visitors themselves reflect on the relationship between museums and social class and particularly the tension between the commerciality of the blockbuster and the free-entry model adopted by the British Museum's permanent galleries.

9.2.1 The relationship between family and education

Rather than an interest in art being innate, Bourdieu describes cultural devotion as being 'inculcated from earliest infancy by the encouragements and sanctions of family tradition' (1991, 36). As the primary audience for British Museum temporary exhibitions is adults, none of my participants were under the age of sixteen. Nevertheless, the reverberations of a childhood relationship with art were still to be found in my interviews. It was present in visitors' own recollections about their education, or in the interactions between an adult and their now grown-up offspring. An example of this is the relationship between Jackie and John a daughter and father group who live in Oxfordshire and who visited the *Defining Beauty* exhibition. Jackie and John regularly attend exhibitions together and Jackie's motivations for doing so is '*to spend time with my dad.*' The fact that this going to an exhibition is something you do as part of a parent-offspring relationship is a family tradition for them. This is reflected in the fact that John recalls being taken to the British Museum by his own parents: *Oh yes, I was brought up in London, my parents took me. And it's my favourite museum in London* (John).

The lasting legacy of these early visits is apparent in the fact that John recalls objects featured in the exhibition from his own youth. For example, he describes having '*fond memories of it [the Lely Venus] from my childhood.*' The importance of the visit taking place in a family context is reflected by that John had already visited the exhibition once, but wanted to go again, as '*it was a chance to go out with my daughter as well.*' It is through the prism of a visit with his daughter that John encounters the exhibition. When asked about what his

highlight of the exhibition was, John chooses '*the two girls playing knuckles*', an object which was mentioned by no other participant. When asked why it stood out to him he relates it directly to his relationship with his daughter: *It was a lovely piece, and I'd dearly like to have that. Urrm the skill was stunning, and perhaps because I have a daughter, but that sort of location and environment, of girls on the cusp of independence. And it was beautifully done. So delicate.* (John)

In the responses of Jackie and John to *Defining Beauty*, we see how the museum forms the backdrop for their social relationship. Museum visiting is also a habit that is formed from experience: John takes his daughter to the museum just as his parents had taken him as a child. Here, we see how a familiarity with art and the familial become entangled. However, the presence of both family members may not be necessary for this relationship to be enacted. Just as Bakhtin argues that any discourse is always written with an intended reader or listener in mind, so a museum visit may also be conducted as part of an imagined, or intended, future dialogue with another person. An example of this is Andrew, a 27-year-old student from Kansas, who had previously visited the British Museum with his brother-in-law to view the 'Elgin Marbles'. At the time of his visit to *Defining Beauty*, Andrew's brother-in-law had travelled onwards to visit the Acropolis in Greece: '*Yeah he wanted to see the actual marbles before he went to see the Parthenon.*'

As Andrew traces his route around the exhibition, he recalls information he had learned with his brother-in-law on his previous visit. This included the transition from black figure painting to red figure in Greek ceramics, which he now sees everywhere, and upon leaving he buys a postcard to send to him: '*And I'm going to go tell me brother-in-law, I actually brought a postcard that I could send him...I'm going to send it to his American address.*'

This dialogue with an absent companion is not always with a family member, Lenny originally intended to see the exhibition with '*a really good friend of mine, Liz*', who he knew from his days at Birmingham University. Liz has '*a great interest in sculpture and*

representation of the body and things like that'. Lenny professes no interest in sculpture himself, *'it's my mate Liz, she drags me round'*. However, they couldn't find a time that they could mutually make, so Lenny goes on his own before the run of the exhibition closes. He reflects that Liz is still *'dragging him around'* even in her absence and the exhibition is framed in terms of viewing it to discuss it with Liz at a later date.

Henrietta – a 62-year old Russian typist – provides an interesting example of how even when you are visiting an exhibition with a family member you are still experiencing it with an absent family member in mind. Although she visited *Defining Beauty* with her daughter Hattie (27, copy editor for travel website, USA) much of the exhibition is framed in terms of a dialogue with her son Harry, who did not accompany them on their trip to Europe. Harry has an interest in Greek mythology through the *Percy Jackson* novels. Even though both Henrietta and Hattie don't think Harry would come to the exhibition *'museums aren't his thing'*, Henrietta wanted to learn about Greek mythology on his behalf.

Henrietta has an unusual strategy for visiting the exhibition, choosing to go to the end to see how long it is. In contrast to those visitors who want to enjoy the hermeneutic mystery of the reveal, Henrietta wanted there to be no surprises. She connects this to her habit of fast forwarding to the end of films, *'I prefer to know that everything will be okay, or this guy will die, and this guy will be saved.'* She relates this to her familial role as a mother and her impulse to make sure that the content of a movie won't upset her children:

Henrietta: *Have you seen Chocolate? My children wanted to see it but they were young, and they were home alone, they were not even home. And I watched it, and I worried so much because there was a fire, and I worried so much and I thought no way my children should watch it, they will feel so bad.*

Harriet: *Awwwh.*

Harriet had never heard this story before and was visibly moved, and somewhat surprised, by the lengths her mother would go to ensure that she and her brother were not

upset by the contents of the film. As well as the exhibition being a place for visitors to enter into a dialogue with each other, the subsequent interview with the researcher can also act as a moment of revelation and bonding.

Museum exhibitions are not only places to be close to other people, they also function as an opportunity for solitude for people who want to be by themselves. Marissa describes her visit to *Defining Beauty* as providing, '*relaxation and time to recuperate*', after a period of intense study for her fashion degree. While Emma has her first day off from work, and a museum exhibition provides an opportunity not to talk to people:

Emma: *So, this is my first day off, and so I wanted to come to a place that I really love, and I find relaxing but I don't have to talk to so many people, see what I mean.*

Interviewer: *I'm sorry.*

Emma: *It's okay, but when you're working you have to be so on. I just wanted to do something completely different, which is what this is.*

Just as an exhibition is dialogic in terms of the curator responding to past exhibitions, and through the multi-modal interplay of the various exhibition-makers, so we might think of how museum visitors experience exhibition narratives as dialogic. This is present in Stuart Hall's communication model in which visitors decode what museums encode. But it is also manifest here in the form of both present and absent family members. In turn, we can see how, rather than a formal process, the practice of museum visiting becomes entangled and engrained as a backdrop to everyday family experience. Even in the case of the absent Harry who does not like visiting museums, the museum visit has a presence through conversations his mother Henrietta will have with him when she returns back to America.

9.2.2 Cultural capital and education

If the family is where the habit of museum visiting begins for Bourdieu, then education is the next stage that cultivates this interest. One of the key aspects of the role of education is

that it is 'at once obvious and hidden', in order for the accumulation of cultural capital to appear innate. For Bourdieu (1991, 111) culture attempts 'to sanction the attribution of all abilities to the unfathomable fates of grace or to the arbitrary of "talent", whereas in reality they are always the product of unequal education.' Although initially hidden, a visitor's education becomes apparent in various guises. Firstly, education provides the opportunity to reflect on topics that were covered during a participant's school days. An example might be found in *Vikings: Life and Legend* and the reinterpretation narrative, where several visitor groups contrasted what they had been taught about the Vikings in school with what they knew about them now. For example, Edgar commented that:

I grew up with the British school system interpretation of the Vikings, and at some point, decades ago, I knew that wasn't all there was to it. Cause it was essentially centred on the violence, the conquest and the expansionism. And clearly there had to be more to it than that.

Defining Beauty, and to a lesser extent *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, both had an interesting relationship to cultural capital in that those visitors who had been to schools that taught classics typically had a different relationship with the subject than others. Here, what Bourdieu called the 'product of unequal education' was manifest in the range of references visitors had to the subject matter. This was perhaps most notable in those visitors who had some knowledge of how to read Latin or Greek. One of the ways this was manifest this was recognising the bust of Caecilius Iucundus featured in the Cambridge Latin Course.

For those visitors who did not possess a background in the classics, Greek mythology was often used as an access point. This was related to what they had been taught in primary school:

Ollie: I think it's funny because it's the thing that gets taught to you in primary school, everyone is so excited to get taught about them and then they don't get taught anything beyond that. But it's so interesting, and the gods and stuff stick with you and

the myths, it's brilliant, so everyone learns about them and then it gets forgotten about.

The other aspect of education that Bourdieu focuses on was the relationship with university. Bourdieu describes students experiencing a kind 'cultural bulimia' when they move from school to university:

This is because it marks (among other things) entry into the cultivated world, in other words, access to the right and duty (which amounts to the same thing) to appropriate culture, and it is also because in this case cultural practice is particularly strongly encouraged by reference groups. (Bourdieu 1992, 62)

Several groups contained members who were studying at university in some capacity when they visited, and often the exhibition was an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and also dissect the exhibition narrative. For Karen and Keith, *Vikings: Life and legend* provided an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and familiarity with Viking objects:

Karen: I got very excited: on the audio guide, they started talking about Nunnaminster in Winchester, which is part of an abbey that I studied.

Keith: Actually, we'd just come from the British Library and they'd had the foundation deeds of Nunnaminster there when it was refounded in the nine seventies as an all-male monastery. That was really exciting. Seeing them both today. [laughs]

Groups who had this university background were typically the ones who would call into question the exhibition narrative. Karen for example regarded the exhibition's presentation of the factors that caused the Vikings to go raiding as simplistic:

Yeah, this wall of text over here explaining the Viking reasons for going raiding. They said the primary one is about wealth, so I had a little disagreement here about the reasons they...it's a big reason but it's not just wealth. They could... Well there's one idea about population pressure, a bit debateable. And also, the idea of exiled kings.

So, you have so many royal families, that when you have a king who's exiled he gets all his men and goes out raiding, and it is the accumulation of wealthy, but it's to back up his social status at home, rather than for raiding for raiding's sake. I suppose it's a problem with exhibitions like this, it can be a bit simplistic.

Education then is a lens which visitors use to decode the exhibition narrative, and obviously closely linked to social class. However, what was mentioned more frequently by visitors in relation to understanding museum exhibitions was their previous experience of going to museum exhibitions.

9.3.1 Cultural capital and narrative

As well as exploring how people with different levels of cultural capital consume objects, Bourdieu also looks at how cultural capital influences a person's response to exhibition narratives and the accompanying interpretation. In relation to making an artwork more accessible, Bourdieu (1992, 93) argues that the only way to 'lower the level of transmission of a work is to provide, along with the work, the code in which it is encoded, in a verbal or written explanation, or which continuously provides the key to its own decipherment.' Bourdieu (1992, 52) states, however, that members of the cultivated classes are loathe to use the more academic aids and guidebooks are 'scoffed at with a refined irony'. In contrast, Bourdieu (1992, 52) states that working-class visitors are 'not put off by the clearly scholarly aspect of a possible course of training.' This idea of members of the cultivated classes rejecting interpretive mediation extends also to visitors preferring to follow their own route through an exhibition. Bourdieu (1992, 54) gives the example of a student who describes the idea of imposing a fixed direction as 'pointless', instead preferring to go 'along the by-road wherever the winds take me':

I think it's pointless to want to impose a fixed direction to a museum visit. Personally, I like being free, alone in my choice and inspiration. Without wishing to go too far, I'd compare a visit to a museum to a journey, a journey Montaigne-style, going along the

by-roads wherever the winds take me, enjoying the present moment, away from the crowds, without a guidebook, dreaming of the past. (student, Louviers)

Just as narrative in exhibitions takes multiple forms, so visitor response to narrative in museum exhibitions also operates on a variety of levels. For example, very few visitors are expecting to simply encounter works in a random order, which they are left to make sense of unaided. Instead, as George expresses in relation to *Defining Beauty*, they expect a special exhibition to have an argument:

Urrm better...but why was it better. I think the information and the narrative and the joining together of all the threads was excellent. But then I'm a bit of a nerd for narrative, and the camera will probably show me spending too much time reading the plates as it does looking at the pieces. (George)

Similarly, Nina also expresses the opinion that 'a real exhibition' should have a 'story to it and a narrative', which she can connect to:

You're like 'I don't want to do it wrong.' I mean maybe that's just me, because I want to follow the story. Yeah because otherwise when I'm just walking around I'm just going to look at random things that interest me, but it's a real exhibition. And that's why I like exhibitions, is that there's a story to it and a narrative and it's really nice to be able connect with that. (Nina)

As a result, when an exhibition lacks a narrative, or loses its thread, then visitors feel unhappy. This range from Emma, the High School Headmistress interested in Roman houses who felt *Pompeii 'did seem to lack the end chapter'*, to Charles and Carol who felt that *Defining Beauty* stopped attempting to define beauty after section four, '*somewhere around here they really lost the theme of beauty*'. Just because visitors express a preference for narrative does not mean they have to follow it religiously. Escaping the tyranny of narrative can take the form of critiquing the factual accuracy of the text, such as Karen and Karen who disagree with *Vikings: Life and legends*' interpretation of why Vikings left their

homelands to settle elsewhere. It can also take the form of visitors attempting to escape the linearity of the exhibition's prescribed route and abandon the narrative, which I will explore in a moment.

If the structural element of an exhibition narrative is something that visitors expect, then the focalisation element is more controversial. We have seen this reflected in visitor attitudes to other non-object elements that contribute to forming the exhibition perspective. In *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Fredrich and Frieda wanted to '*cut out all that emotional stuff*'. This included both moments in the exhibition text where it tells you how to feel, but also those design elements that tried to elicit an emotional response, such as the soundtrack of horse and hooves and bird songs, which were deemed by Fredrich '*a bit kind of fake*.' Conversely, in *Vikings life and legend* it is the prioritisation of the authentic objects and a neutral design which causes visitors to feel that the exhibition lacked the imaginative element they were seeking: '*I don't like the grey colour scheme... I thought the grey was hard work*' (Andrea). As a result, several visitors yearned for the inclusion of these more imaginative elements, such as a reconstruction of a Viking longhouse, which had been present in the previous generation of Viking exhibitions.

Within museum literature, this binary between object and reconstruction, between the authentic and the inauthentic, can often be positioned as a binary in which one must choose one or other. However, I think a more productive way of understanding it is through the Bakhtinian lens of monoglossia and heteroglossia, that is between a division of many voices and one voice. Those visitors to the exhibition who are asking for reconstruction are not saying that they would not like to see objects in the exhibition, but rather they would like objects in the exhibition complimented with other elements. Conversely, those visitors who do not like the interruption of design or multimedia are seeking a single perspective for the exhibition.

This single versus multiple voice debate is encapsulated in visitor responses to the multimedia guide for *Defining Beauty*. Firstly, the multimedia guide is an interesting object to

think about in Bourdieu's terms because it represents a form of mediation of the objects. Even though visitors were offered the multimedia guide for free – it would usually cost £3.50 – many refused it. For example, Monica, a Brazilian fashion designer remarked: *I don't like to use the audio guide, I like to see what catches my attention. Sometimes I don't want to know the story.* Although not a trained art historian, as a fashion designer Monica, is a highly aesthetic individual and she wants to have an unmediated experience with the objects. This chimes with Bourdieu's remarks that it is those with the highest cultural capital that are the most resistant to academic aids.

Defining Beauty was an interesting example of how the diversity of perspectives varies across the multiple levels of mediation in an exhibition. The exhibition design could be defined as a monoglossia, actively limiting the colour palette of maps, the inclusion of photography and the positioning of interpretation. Conversely, the multimedia guide contained many more voices than previous multimedia guides and was done in a different style. In the words of Gwenda, it felt 'chatty and conversational', with the curator conversing with fellow experts in Ancient Greek sculpture, but also with people from other fields who you might not expect to feature in a multimedia guide about Greek art. An example of this was the Editor of men's health, as remarked upon by Edith: *I also thought the audio guide was really interesting, there was a woman from men's health magazine, which you would not have thought to be someone who has any right to be commenting on these things. But what she said was really interesting about, oh well, this is the figure you would take into a gym and go "oh well I want to be this person."*

Three visitor groups talked about this aspect of the guide in positive terms. Edith stated that the comparison, made by the multimedia guide, between the Twelve Labours of Heracles and cross-fit made her reflect that *'these are still ideals that we have to strive for.'* As well as the inclusion of perspectives that you wouldn't necessarily expect, visitors also liked moments of disagreement where the subjective nature of interpretation was revealed: *And I really liked the relief of the boy being murdered, and the suggestive draping, and I*

loved how these two historians were like arguing on the recording, 'oh that's too hyper sexualised, I don't agree with that', I thought that was great because it's all just interpretation, you can't go back and ask anybody. The conversational disagreement also added to the carnivalesque nature of the multimedia guide: And we both laughed when he said, "I stand chastised, when somebody, I don't remember his name, half way through, "somebody said well I think this" and the expert said, "well, no."

However, while some visitors regarded the inclusion of these contemporary comparisons as *'amusing'* others regarded it as *'inane'*: *I have to say the one thing that kind of annoyed me in the whole exhibition was the audio commentary, it was, I found, there were points where I found it inane...with these audio commentaries they kind of had a podcasty vloggy feel when they kind of just like set people up in front of a recording studio and just kind of asked them questions and then recorded what they answered.*

Criticism around the conversational element of the multimedia guide was made in relation to it drawing attention away from the object: *I wished it had gone into more depth about the objects themselves, I mean a lot of times it was like somebody saying they had a visceral response to this object. It kind of went on and on, so I would start looking at other things while they were talking. So if they had just gone into more depth about the facts it would have been useful.*

Here, the inclusion of multiple different voices can be seen as coming at the expense of narrative coherence as Lilith remarks: *I liked that idea, but I think it works almost better as a radio programme than audio, because maybe there could have been a stronger narrative really. Sometimes it meant that you've got all these themes going on within the exhibition and then the audio is a little bit at odds with that.*

In visitor response to the multimedia guide, we see the same issues repeated again as with the criticism levelled against the emotive tone in the text or reconstruction. Some visitors prefer the monoglossia of an object-based approach, while others prefer the

heteroglossia of the inclusion of other perspectives. Accompanying this is the idea of narrative coherence, with a single voice being easier to follow and multiple perspectives providing narrative richness. Creating a coherent yet rich exhibition narrative can therefore be seen as a balancing act between the two. In terms of the role cultural capital plays in visitor responses to these elements of narrative, the most productive line of inquiry seems to follow those visitors who attempt to reject narratives. Monica's response to the multimedia guide – '*I like to see what catches my attention. Sometimes I don't want to know the story*' – is reminiscent of Bourdieu's student who wants to go along the by-roads of the exhibition where ever it takes them. In the next section, I look in more depth at those visitors who choose to abandon the linear route of an exhibition and explore the role cultural capital plays in this decision.

9.3.2 Abandoning the narrative

Alongside his by-road wandering student, Bourdieu (1991, 37–38) also makes the link between dwell-time and social class, finding that on average working-class visitors spend 22 minutes, middle-class visitors 35 minutes, and upper-class visitors 47 minutes in the museum. Based on Bourdieu's findings we might then expect that those visitors with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to veer away from the prescribed exhibition route and also to spend longer in an exhibition space. However, my results suggest the relationship between time and non-linearity is a complicated. In this section, I want to look at the notion of freedom and the decision to divert away from the intended exhibition route the example of three specific visitor groups. Two of these visitor groups chose to abandon their exhibition visit early, while a third chose to visit the exhibition *Vikings: life and legend* in a completely different order to everyone else. These three visitor groups are the outliers, exhibiting the most unusual behaviour that I encounter in visitor groups. Yet each in their own way sheds light on the relationship between the role cultural capital plays in how visitors respond to exhibition narratives. The three visitor groups are Charles and Carol from *Vikings*, Penelope and Paula from *Vikings* and Monica from *Defining Beauty*.

Neither Charles or Carol describe themselves as regular museum goers and this is the first time they have been to a museum together: *I'm not a massive museum goer to be fair. But I do it if I come to London, I have done it as a child. You go to natural history museum, there's a good science museum in Manchester. That I've been to a few times.*

(Charles) Carol and Charles both knew about the Vikings from school. Charles had been to Jorvik Viking centre and Carol had recently been watching *the Vikings* television series on Netflix and described going around the exhibition looking for the names of Vikings featured in the show:

'I mean it's quite an interesting period of history. Obviously, there's been bits that are not entirely historically accurate, but they're making the best of it in this TV show. And it's quite well acted and there's some good scenes and stuff in it.'

The video footage reveals Charles and Carol, after beginning to queue in the first section of the exhibition, quickly browse through the exhibition stopping only at the ship, noticeably looking at the vista of the bodies and then going down the ramp, spend some time looking at the bodies and then browse through the rest of the exhibition, stopping occasionally, before leaving. They spend 27 minutes 52 seconds in the exhibition, the shortest amount of time spent by any group and some 46 minutes below the median dwell time of one hour 13 minutes.

Charles describes leaving the exhibition as *'Getting away to freedom. There were too many people. We couldn't even look at anything, we couldn't read anything. Yeah it was overwhelming.'* Many other groups had also expressed their disappointment with the overcrowded nature of the exhibition, but they were willing to tolerate it. For example, Debbie, an American, puts it down to cultural differences, *'maybe it's the British way of doing exhibitions.'* But Charles and Carol were unwilling to stand in a line and queue. They described themselves as extremely frustrated and said that if they had had to pay for the exhibition they would be really angry. Part of the reason for this was that they felt the museum was *'deliberately trying to cram too many people in there.'* They also felt the

exhibition design didn't provide an option for those who didn't want to queue up to see objects: *I think it was the way it was set-up. With those ramps, people queued up. And because there was only something on one wall, they're like all lining up and so you can't even look at, what they're looking at. I think that was the problem, whereas with the others if there were people there. You can still kind of look at something different when they're look at that. You just didn't have the option.* (Carol)

Charles and Carol's behaviour can be looked at in one of two ways. They didn't frequently visit museums and so were unfamiliar with how exhibitions worked. Lacking the cultural capital to experience the exhibition, they had a short dwell time as Bourdieu might expect. However, Charles and Carol did have a prior knowledge and an interest in the Vikings cultivated by popular culture. Rather than conforming as other visitors did to what the museum was asking them to do, as other visitors did, they rebelled and abandoned the narrative, because they were not willing tolerate how the museum was treating them.

I now turn to another example of a visitor who abandons the exhibition narrative, Monica who is a 27-year old Brazilian fashion designer. We have already met Monica once, as a visitor who doesn't use the audio guide, because she prefers to '*see what catches my attention. Sometimes I don't want to know the story.*' Monica came to London a year ago to study a course on drapery, which was cancelled upon her arrival. She is currently spending a couple of months '*relaxing and recuperating*' in preparation for starting her own fashion label. She has come to the exhibition seeking inspiration and was particularly attracted by its title: '*I am always looking for inspiration but Defining Beauty this name...I think it is really strong.*' Monica takes a highly aestheticised approach to the exhibition. Certain objects attract her attention because of their aesthetic: *The form of the gods in the corners. It reminds me of the patterns of Indians – like the scales of a fish – I don't know if Indian is the word.*

She ignores other objects because they clash with the aesthetic she is seeking from the exhibition: *And I think there was a contrast here with a golden figure, and it was a big*

contrast – this with this. So, I didn't want to look at this. Monica has no training in Greek history and sculpture and yet, through her knowledge of the fashion and the human form, she has a highly aestheticised approach to museum objects, which most resembles what Bourdieu describes in terms of those with high cultural capital. However, Monica only remains in the exhibition for 21 minutes before abandoning it and walking out. She gives the reason for this as: *'A lot of older people, sometimes they bother me. In the first room, it's really ugly to say this, but I stopped right next to an old lady and she farted – like loud – and maybe this killed the mood!?'*

When questioned whether she'd abandoned the exhibition only because she was taking part in a research study, and thus she got free access to the exhibition, she responded that this was not the first time she'd done this:

Monica: *'When I saw the last show in Paris too, it was too full of people. I didn't care for it. I paid and walked in and walked away.'*

Interviewer: *'Ohh if you're not feeling the exhibition then out you go.'*

Monica: *'I don't want to waste time with people around me pushing. I don't care.'*

Monica represents perhaps the most extreme example of an aesthetically-inclined visitor, rejecting all additions of story, or framing devices. Certain objects are also rejected on purely aesthetic grounds. If the exhibition's rarefied atmosphere is shattered, in this case by the audible fart of an elderly visitor, then she abandons the exhibition. Monica is a much more frequent exhibition visitor than Charles and Carol and yet this does not result in her having a longer dwell time. Rather her extreme aestheticised approach causes her to abandon the exhibition and can be seen as another example of rebelling against the narrative imposed on her.

Finally, we turn to Penelope, whereas Charles and Carol leave the exhibition because of the queuing, she adopts an alternative approach. Penelope is an Egyptian textile curator in a museum in the north of England and has a high-level of experience visiting

museum exhibition. Although she initially joined the queue like other visitors, the video footage at 14 minutes 44 seconds shows her skipping ahead, bypassing the *culture and status* section and reaching the Ship. She studies the ship intently, spending 14% of her visit there, before proceeding to the end of the exhibition spending a further 19% of her time in the Ritual and Belief section. Penelope knew about *Roskilde 6* beforehand from watching a documentary on television and so she adopted a unique strategy to navigate the exhibition, skipping straight to the climax: *As we came to this room it was so crowded and I read some wall panels and I started to round and look, but it was just, I've never been in one so crowded. So, what I decided to do was walk all the way through quick and go to the boat itself the ship and then backtrack and see it the other way around.* (Penelope)

Just as Melissa has walked out of previous exhibitions that have not interested her, so this is a strategy Penelope has also employed before: *This is something I do. I go right to the end of the exhibition, either because the crowds have thinned out or else people are fed up and are walking quicker and there is such a bottle neck all round here. I've done this at the Royal Academy Summer exhibition, you go in but you go in the exit and the Grayson Perry Room was in this exhibition and we wanted to see that fresh rather than troll all the way round, so that's how we did that.*

Once Penelope had looked at the ship she returns to look at some of the other sections of the exhibition going as far back as the *Power and Status* sections: *So, then I came to the end and I went over and I was looking at the boat, all different angles, so I walked all the way back and I started to look at this ramp and we looked at the cases with the stirrups, and so I came back down here and started to look at the rest of the exhibition.*

Penelope also displays many of the characteristics Bourdieu regards as typical of is someone who has a high level of cultural capital. For example, she does not like the audioguides because she doesn't want her route to be dictated to her: *I don't normally take a guide because I was kind of zig zagging backwards and forward.* She also is very object-focussed and professes to dislike digital interpretation: *We came round and I saw the*

screens. And then we were having a discussion about as soon as I see a screen it turns me off completely. Usually, I think just oh my god not an interactive exhibition and I know that it's very popular especially with young people as well.

However, Penelope is also someone who looks at things not in terms of their aesthetics, or for the historical information but for how they are made: *I was very drawn to the material culture and the technology of how things were made, rather than the history, so I was reading the panels with the history on it and the dating but in fact I was more drawn to the technology and how things were made.*

As a result, despite her instincts, Penelope finds the touch tables in Vikings a very valuable part of the exhibition: *We walked over and had a look at the display where you could actually touch the objects and so then we saw the horse hair rope and how amazingly strong that was and then we had a great discussion about horse hair rope, and also about the sail, the linen because that's what I'm interested in is textiles, so we liked that. We were going wow they did what with horse hair? And we were discussing how do you make a rope from horse hair, how impractical it'd be better to use a flax. And so, I was very taken by the touch displays.*

Penelope then is a good example of someone with a high cultural capital, who actively avoids exhibition narratives, but then does not respond to objects aesthetically in the same manner as Monica does. Rather she is reading objects on the level of how they are made: *I'm interested in making and also I make jewellery. As I was walking around, I was thinking what am I actually looking at and Paula also, we make costume again together as well for the national theatre, so we often go to great discussion about how things are made. So, I'm reading the information but I'm not really taking the history in, if you were to ask me questions about dates and things, but more I like to see how material culture manifests itself.*

Penelope does all she can to avoid the exhibition narrative in order to read objects for how they are made. However, rather than a rejection of narrative altogether we might see

this as a rejection of a specific narrative – the historical one. Penelope is interested in those modes of interpretation that provide her with access to an object's materiality, despite her anti-interactive prejudices. Again, the means by which Penelope interacts with an object's materiality serves to flatten the hierarchy proposed by Bourdieu between the noble arts and the minor arts. Here, is an individual with a high cultural capital responding to objects through prism of how they are made. This chapter has functioned to raise awareness between the role cultural capital plays in how visitors respond to narrative and museums exhibitions. This is not something that the visitors themselves are unaware of and, to conclude, I now look at how the visitors themselves discuss the connection between museum exhibitions and social class.

9.4 Visitors' own reflections on social class

Throughout my thesis, we have seen the important role other visitors play in shaping an individual visitor's experience. This might be on a collective level in the case of *Vikings* where the queue of the exhibition effectively dictates the pace of exhibition narrative. It can also operate on an individual level, as in the case of Monica where the bodily functions of another visitor shatters her moment of aesthetic contemplation and causes her to abandon the exhibition. Other visitors in an exhibition can prove just as important as the objects, or the exhibition design. This is present not only in the practical value of negotiating the exhibition space, but in visitor's own considerations regarding what the function of a museum exhibition is. It is in observing who else is an exhibition, who it is for, that visitors are most likely to critique the societal role of museums and discuss its relationship to social class.

One of the most frequent comments about the other visitors in the exhibition is in relation to their age. For example, Charles commented that: *The real irony for me was that the people in the museum were old. They were grandads. They were over 50. There were hardly any young people. I can understand children going. I don't know if there's been many school visits but you can see it being very useful for sixth formers but it's very surprising that there's nobody.* (Charles)

Visitors also commented on the perceived social class of their fellow visitors. For example, Lenny felt that *Defining Beauty* was made up of the middle-class and tourists: 'Urrm there's an interesting mixture of middle class and tourists...there's an awful lot of people who really did look like eccentric classicists.'

Olivia and Ollie are a visitor group in *Defining Beauty* who make a connection between the age of the visitors and their social class. Like Monica, this discussion is triggered by an olfactory encounter with one of the other visitors:

Olivia: *And then we were taken out of it a bit when an old man with this audio guide on farted incredibly loudly, so we lost it a bit. And we moved away from the statue we were going to look at and waited for that to subside.*

Ollie: *And it was brilliant because he farted and then just walked off. He had no idea.*

Interviewer: *It's funny you say that because you're not the first person to say that to me?*

Ollie: *The tranquillity of the exhibition was shattered.*

Olivia: *I think it's all the people with headphones in.*

Ollie: *Apparently a woman did it later on who didn't have her headphones on.*

Olivia: *Yeah, there was, it's the demographic potentially.*

Referring to the demographic, Ollie and Olivia made the comparison with the British Museum audience to the National theatre where they both work. Olivia had a particular problem with this group of visitors based around their perceived privilege: Olivia: *'It was like it was at the theatre, it was a lot of older, middle-class, white people walking around, which made the atmosphere very different as well.'*

For Olivia, these issues of power, status and privilege are demonstrated by a code of behaviour of what you are allowed and what you are not allowed to do in the space: *'But*

yeah, you've got this similar thing, oh you mustn't talk or laugh...I've got a really loud laugh, so I absolutely felt I had to hold in any personality, while walking around with these middle-class people.'

The collective will of the visitors was demonstrated when a mobile phone went off in the exhibition and Olivia likened the collective tuts to the sound of fake laughter in a theatre: *'You are sat in an audience of people going 'mwahahaha' at the right time, like laugh now...it's a whole thing of like laughing at something because you understand the historical reference.*

For Ollie and Olivia, the audience is this way partly because of the price of the exhibition: *Ollie: I agree, and I suppose there being a price on the entry it also makes the atmosphere, I mean yes it was quite middle class and tutty but it also was dark in there, it's quiet. Whereas if you're going round the museum usually it rattles. I think it could be a little bit cheaper, yeah, it is a shame about the demographic...I think that quite a few people may have looked at it and gone sixteen fifty, I can't do that.'*

At a cost of sixteen pounds fifty per ticket, *Defining Beauty* was viewed as expensive by three of the visitor groups (G, H, O), although all had been given free admittance in exchange for taking part in the research. As discussed earlier Olivia and Ollie felt the exhibition's demographic was in part because of price, and Olivia talked about how the cost had nearly put her off from attending: *'I saw a poster on the tube it....and then I realised it was sixteen fifty, which is a lot of money so I thought I can't afford it because I'm very, very poor...and any way then I thought about it a bit more, and I told Ollie about it, and said do you want to go, and then I thought actually it's fine, I'll just eat beans and we'll go and see it.'*

This issue of the museum and price of entry fits into a wider issue of the museum and commercialism, which was present in discussions brought up by visitors about the issue of free entry to museums. For example, Ellie discussed this relationship between charging for admission and visitor demographics, comparing the museum scene with that of the

United States: Ellie: *'I love the idea that what these museums represent is that they're an accessible place for normal people to go, people of all kinds of go in an area, to see these things that they would not normally be able to see – and levelling that playing field of knowledge, and then knowledge can be accessible to everyone not just an elite group.'*

She relates her own regular habit of visiting museums to her own social class and familiarisation with museums from an early age: Ellie: *'I grew up in a very museum family and knowledge is power. I had the advantage of obviously a middle-class upbringing, and people who really cared enough to take you there.'* She regards the entrance fee as one of the barriers to this accessibility is, citing the suggested donation fee at the Met in New York as a specific example: Ellie: *'It does sort of upset me because the Met is in New York with its extreme poverty. Even though it is a suggested donation you know I do feel, I could never not pay twenty-five dollars...'*

She also makes the distinction between large institutions like the Met and the British Museum and smaller institutions in need of funding: *'You have so many wealthy donors, and benefactors. You have the Met ball, which is the only ball people know about related to a museum, it is attended by every famous person on the planet. Some of the smaller museums outside of New York are really struggling. I will give you my money one hundred per cent, you're doing a good deed. You need it. And family going to the Met, I'm spending like eighty dollars. I dunno I just have a really big issue with it.'*

The other aspect of the museum exhibition which provoked conversations around the museum and commercialisation was the gift shop. Dating back to the original blockbuster, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* every exhibition finishes by exiting via the gift shop. It therefore seems appropriate that this discussion of culture and capital and, the thesis as a whole, should also come to an end via the gift shop. This is where visitors literally consume objects and frequently the choice of objects provoked a discussion about the commercial nature of the museum exhibition. For example, the proliferation of owls was mentioned by two visitor groups to *Defining Beauty*:

Daniel: *And also the gift shop had a bunch of owls.*

Dana: *I noticed the owls and I wasn't sure why they had the owls?*

Daniel: *Well I think they had something do with Athena or something, but I think they just wanted to dump all owl stock out there.*

The proliferation of Athenian owls was also mentioned by Ollie:

Ollie: *'Yeah I had a problem with that literally two thirds of the gift shop is the Athenian owl...I didn't see the Athenian owl in the exhibition...it was only there because that's what they could make toys out of. You can see the owl, it's Greek. Yeah they sold the owl a lot.'*

Here, the gift shop serves as emblematic of the empty commercialism of the special exhibition. The gift shop using the motif of Athena's owl, even though there is no actual owl featured prominently in the exhibition. Here the replica lacks authenticity as it represents no particular authentic object that the visitor can relate back to their own experience. However, as the curator of Pompeii states the exhibition shop has more than a commercial function, for example he argues it is also used as a 'decompression zone'. After the stilted atmosphere of the exhibition the gift shop provides an opportunity to misbehave. Olivia declares, *'I'm a dick in the gift shop, and I like to get the postcards, which are my favourite.'*

For Carol and Charles some of the longest amount of time was spent in the gift shop. Although the exhibition did not provide the opportunity for them to dress up as Vikings, as it did in Berlin, they found this opportunity in the gift shop.

Carol: *I dunno we were like messing about with things like that...*

Charles: *Oh yeah in the shop afterwards.*

Interviewer: *Were you thinking about items to buy there.*

Charles: *I was dressing up it was great.*

Carol: *There was a good shot of you actually.*

Charles: *You've got it on your camera. The shield and the helmet.*

For those visitors who are visiting with absent friends, the gift shop provides an opportunity to share with them. Adam buys a post card of the Parthenon sculptures to send to his brother in law. Maggie contemplates buying a replica Lewis Chessman in Vikings. Monica did not particularly like *Defining Beauty* emphasised by the fact she didn't purchase the catalogue: *Sometimes when I leave an exhibition, I can talk about it right away, I really like it. But today, I didn't buy the book, I always buy the book.*

The gift shop then provides a coda to the entire exhibition where many of the issues of 'consumption' of the museum experience are played out on an actual commercial basis. Cultural is being consumed here by purchasing it in replica form. Like the special exhibition, what makes it unique in narrative terms is that this cultural purchase can be made material. Equally that commerciality of an exhibition leads in some ways to a freedom for the individual. At the same time this selection like the exhibition is curated. For Emily, the lack of postcards depicting the hermaphrodite and vase depicting the Amazonian warriors is emblematic of the *Defining Beauty's* mishandling of women.

In the postcard area, I would have loved to have seen more of that. Because I think that is interesting. Okay yeah, young boys, young men male figures yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what you kind of think but then as the exhibition kind of got on those are the interesting bits, I didn't think I was going to see that. It's going to sound very consumerist and I don't mean to say that but it was just funny what they chose to...

The shop is where cultural capital and economic capital come together. At the end of the exhibition it features as a coda, repeating motifs in microcosm, which are featured in the main exhibition.

Chapter 10: Conclusion – The end of the thread?

Introduction

In thinking about how narrative is materialised in the museum, this thesis has itself attempted to visualise narrative through the metaphor of the line. In doing so, it has drawn on the rise and fall of the German dramatist Gustav Freytag's pyramid and the myth of Ariadne's ball of thread, which allows Theseus to find an exit from the Cretan labyrinth. The conclusion of this thesis might then be seen in Freytagian terms as the denouement in which the main points of the story's action are summarised and its loose threads are tied up. Indeed, I will be using this chapter to provide an overview of what my exhibition case studies can tell us about my key critical concepts – structure and perspective – and the idea of dialogue that links my two key groups of interlocutors, museum visitors and museum staff, together. At the same time, it is important to stress that not all loose threads can be neatly tied and in thinking about how we might escape from narrative's labyrinth, this chapter concludes by highlighting the routes this thesis has not taken, in order to foreground potential lines of inquiry to be unravelled in the future.

10.1 Structure

Narrative structure within museum exhibitions can be seen as being constructed around the binary of linearity and non-linearity. The qualities of linearity and non-linearity are imbued with meaning in relation to the ontological position of the museum and its audiences in contrasting ways by different theorists. From a constructivist learning perspective, Hein (1998, 29) argues that a linear path is conflated with a *didactic, expository* approach, which conceives of visitors as passive consumers of knowledge, rather than an open space with no beginning or end, which allows visitors to construct their own meanings. For Hein (1998, 29) the linear exhibition is the propaganda tool of the dictatorial regime using the museum to spread ideology. Conversely, Bourdieu (1990, 71) argues that only those visitors that have the requisite level of cultural capital can navigate a non-linear museum space unaided. A

linear route is therefore one of the interpretative devices that can be used to decode the systems and symbols of meaning in a museum and thereby make them less elitist.

Adapting Austin's (2012) notion of the spectrum of narrativity to focus on structure, we might say in relation to our three case study exhibitions that linearity also exists on a sliding scale. Sitting on the linear end of the spectrum would be the exhibition *Vikings: Life and legend*, which saw visitors queuing along narrow corridors in the first half of the exhibition to encounter the climax of the encounter with the Viking ship *Roskilde 6*. With its second act based around the structure of a Roman home, *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* had moments of non-linearity, in which visitors had to turn back on themselves and retrace their steps. Yet it was still an exhibition that positioned its climax in the form of the casts of the bodies from Pompeii in its final act. *Defining Body: The Body in Ancient Greece* can be conceived of as structurally the exhibition that contained the most non-linear qualities. This reached its zenith in section four: *giving form to thought* in which visitors were encouraged to wander through the space without prescribing an order for visitors to encounter the individual sculptures. This non-linearity was also present in how the exhibition's climactic assemblage of sculptures was placed in the exhibition's first section and, for some visitors, how the question posed by the title – how do we define beauty? – remained at the exhibition's conclusion unresolved.

Out of that brief summary, two key points in relation to linearity and non-linearity become apparent. Firstly, that the linearity of an exhibition fluctuates within the exhibition itself. Although *Vikings Life and Legend* was the exhibition that was the most linear, after visitors had encountered the Viking ship *Roskilde 6*, the exhibition opened up adopting a more open, non-linear space to contrast its third act with its first. Although *Defining Beauty* was non-linear by British Museum blockbuster exhibition standards compared to a contemporary 'white-cube' style exhibition, or even the British Museum's own permanent galleries it was decidedly linear. Secondly, that linearity is not simply a matter of the spatial arrangement of the exhibition's visitor routes but rather the direction it is moving in relation to

its climax, or, however, we might label the value assigned to the Y-axis of the exhibition. If that climax is foreshadowed, as it is in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, then linearity is not simply a matter of movement through space but a matter of the ordering of the sequence of events. In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* visitors walk around the exhibition ‘*thinking where are the bodies? where are the bodies?*’ (Heathcliffe) and the linearity of the exhibition becomes a matter of events and plot rather than simply the arrangement of space. Conversely, if the exhibition shifts away from the idea of a climactic encounter with key objects, or a resolution to the *hermeneutic code* by which it is defined, as it does in *Defining Beauty*, then for the visitor it will be imbued with that feeling of non-linearity even if the route through the exhibition has a largely linear flow.

Having developed a more nuanced understanding of what linearity in the museum exhibition entails we can now return back to the positions set out by Hein (1998) and Bourdieu (1990) in relation to narrative structure. Firstly, we can complicate an instrumentalist idea of the adoption of a high level of linearity being always positive by the example of *Vikings: Life and Legend* in which several visitors felt constrained by the first exhibition’s overly linear first half. This sense of oppression several of them expressed corresponds to Hein’s (1998, 29) equation of linearity with the figure of the dictator. As talked about in more depth in Chapter 9, there were several examples of visitors either choosing to abandon the visit halfway through, or undertake it in a manner opposite to that planned by the curators and the designers. Usually these were visitors who frequently went to exhibitions and had a high-level of cultural capital. Yet there were also examples of visitors (like Carol and Charles in *Vikings: Life and Legend*) who rarely went to exhibitions and found the experience of queuing around *Vikings: Life and Legend*’s linear route constraining. In relation to my three case studies, Bourdieu’s (1990) hypothesis that it is those visitors with a high level of cultural capital who are the most likely to abandon linear routes holds true. But it is also the case, that those visitors who have little familiarity with visiting exhibitions can find the ritual of slowly proceeding along the cases in a linear fashion stifling and oppressive.

Finally, in thinking about the question of structure in relation to Freytag's pyramid if the x-axis, across all three of the exhibitions remains consistent, the visitor's movement through the exhibition's space over time, then what value does the y-axis represents? This seems to differ in each of the exhibitions but is bound to the inseparable relationship between the material and non-material qualities of the exhibition's subject matter. In *Pompeii and Herculaneum* for the majority of visitors the climatic encounter with the bodies is related to their attempts to empathetically connect with the people who lived and died in the Roman towns. Here, the idea of museum narrative as tragedy closely corresponds to the original function of Freytag's pyramid in which the visitor feels empathy and therefore catharsis for the actors on the museums stage. In the case of *Viking's: Life and Legend* the climactic encounter with *Roskilde 6* is also manifested by some visitors empathetically encountering the ship being seen off the shores of the UK. Here, the identification is not with the Vikings as self, apart from the two Scandinavian visitors, but as other. At the same time, the 'reinterpretation' narrative is one that many visitors bring with them to the exhibition, placing the ship as a physical demonstration of the technological sophistication of the Vikings being previously undervalued and now in need of reinterpretation. *Defining Beauty* was the exhibition whose approach tried to encourage an encounter with individual objects rather than an overall narrative with a single climax. At the same time, *Defining Beauty* was also the title that evoked the most non-material *hermeneutic* code of all three exhibitions, encouraging visitors to seek an answer to the question, which the exhibition resisted giving a concrete answer to.

In thinking about these three climaxes what is striking about museum exhibitions as a genre is the involvement of the material: the star objects that sit at its core. At the same time, in each of these examples, the authenticity of the material climax is not as simple as it might first appear. In the case of *Pompeii and Herculaneum* the casts of the bodies are in fact casts of the voids, more accurately the body's absence, left in the pumice and ash deposited by Vesuvius. Of all the material objects in the exhibition they are in fact the most recently

created. Similarly, *Roskilde 6* is a hybrid object containing original wood from the 11th century but whose overall shape, essential for encouraging visitors to empathetically time travel, is contemporary steel. Finally, *Defining Beauty* self-consciously deconstructs the idea of the authentic object illustrating how many of the Greek marble statues are copies of the bronze originals. Furthermore, many of these are known to us through Roman copies or later 18th-century hybrid compositions. In an exhibition which contained sculptures from the Parthenon and the Belvedere Torso, an extremely rare loan from the Vatican, it was notable how few visitors spoke about these authentic objects in the emotional and empathetic terms they talked about the casts of the voids in *Pompeii and Herculaneum* or the Viking ship *Roskilde 6*.

In attempting to move beyond the material/non-material divide regarding the climax of the exhibition we might turn to the theory of Czech museologist Zbyněk Z. Stránský, who argued that museology and the process of musealisation was the process of attributing value to things (Brulon Soares 2016, 6). We might then answer the question that the value of the y-axis is value itself. Upon making this leap, we can then say that the different forms of climax each exhibition exhibits is due to its narrative constructing a different sense of value. Indeed, returning back to the work of the screenwriter Robert McKee (2006, 41) who argues that the climax of a narrative is 'a major reversal in the value-charged condition of the character's life', we can see that the construction and unfolding of narrative in the museum is principally about the construction of value. To now answer the question of who creates this value we need to address the question of how narratorial perspective is created in the museum and to the dialogue nature of museum narratives.

10.2 Perspective

The question of narratorial perspective in museum exhibitions can be looked at from a number of perspectives. Firstly, let us approach it from the idea of the third and first person narrator, which forms the base for how Genette (1980) categorises narrative and also how Piehl (2016) has looked at the function of exhibition graphic design. The omniscient and

anonymous narrator can be seen as the expected perspective within museum text and, as a consequence of this, the museum visitor remains oblivious to an exhibition having an author. Those moments in which the text shifts to a more first-person perspective deliberately try to cultivate a closeness between visitor and object. For example, in *Pompeii and Herculaneum* when Fredrick notes: *There's the odd place but not too many where they tell you what you should think. Like 'we all live in fear of natural events.'* Equally in *Defining Beauty*, the first object visitor's encounter, the Crouching Aphrodite, deliberately addresses the visitor as if they and the exhibition visitor are looking at it together: 'Our curiosity leads us around her body to confront finally her divine and dangerous stare.'

Moving beyond the text, we can see this third-person and first-person dynamic reflected in the spatial characteristics and physical design of the exhibition. This shift in design is most obvious when the exhibition space, like the label text, attempts to elicit a highly-personal response from the visitor. This is most explicit in the cramped spaces in which visitors encounter the casts of the bodies in *Pompeii and Herculaneum*. While at the climatic moment most museum exhibition spaces are designed to allow visitors to stand back and encounter the object, these spaces are designed to be deliberately claustrophobic and encourage visitors to hurry through. This in turn echoing the inhabitants of the Roman towns hurried evacuation from their homes in the wake of the eruption. While in the exhibition text, the third person perspective might be seen as the norm in the exhibition design it is less overt. However, it can be seen at the climax of *Vikings: Life and Legend* where visitors not only see the entire of *Viking* ship but the whole of the exhibition including its exit. For some visitors, like Liam, this had an effect of seeing the whole, the sublime '*you almost have this physical awakening into a bigger space*'. For others like Andrea, this omniscient point of view robbed the rest of the exhibition of its suspense: '*I don't know if that if is a very positive feel, because you can see everything that is coming...And you can see the end.*' Referencing this expansive distant pan in relation to Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Zizek (2016) calls this 'the God-shot.' When reaching for language and terminology to describe the

perspective in exhibitions when referring to label and panel text one inevitably reaches to literary theory, while when talking about physical design the parallels are always drawn from film (Bal 2007). This brings us to how perspective is shaped by the discourses used to construct it and conversely the perspectives in the exhibition can be fragmented, using the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1984), into a collection of discourses. This idea of the museum exhibition as a constellation made up of the various discourses associated with its multiple authors and actors, including those that are non-human, allows the museum to be simultaneously a tool for the propagation of ideology and riotously carnivalesque.

Within the museum the curator is conventionally regarded as the principal author of an exhibition, although in reality they may not hold the power that authorship suggests. The moments when the exhibition as *heteroglossia* becomes most apparent is when one of the other actor's contributions differs from that of the curator. These moments tend to be in relation to the three-dimensional design of the exhibition with an external 3D designer being a figure who also assumes considerable status and adopts their own discourse of expertise. Rather than direct conflict between the curator and the external 3D designer, this conflict is usually mitigated by the figure of the Head of Exhibitions. This manifests itself most directly in the non-material, but high budget areas of the exhibition, such as the introductory film in *Pompeii and Herculaneum* or the digital backdrop of the sun setting over the sea of *Vikings: Life and Legend*. Here the absence of what would be deemed as curatorial material – museum objects – means that other actors can exert their claims of expertise.

Within the exhibition my focus has focussed on three key archetypal actors involved in the creation of exhibitions: the curator, the designer and the interpretation officer. While broadly the perspective of the curator might be surmised as focused on disciplinary expertise, the designer on aesthetics and the interpretation officer on audience accessibility, in practice all three actors necessarily have interests and opinions regarding each of these domains. At the same time, tensions necessarily arise between their respective interests.

The curator values the material authenticity of the objects and to maximise this value seeks to increase the quantity of material in the exhibition, while at the same time needing to reinterpret the objects to differentiate themselves from their curatorial predecessors. The designer values the aesthetics of the objects and, to accentuate this, seeks to reduce the amount of material, while at the same time tries to differentiate themselves from their design predecessors. The interpretation officer values the accessibility of the objects to the visitors, their principal means of achieving this is through the writing of text in the exhibition and the positioning the objects. In both of these activities they are subordinate in terms of authority to the curator and the designer respectively. Yet in their role as mediator they also possess power, especially in situations when divergences between the curator and the designer take place.

The most prominent example in relation to this would be *Defining Beauty* where because of the designer's aesthetic preferences to include no maps (making differentiating between sea and maps difficult) and no photographs could be included in the labels because they could detract from the appreciation of objects. Although it would be conspiratorial to assume the designers had any political motivations for doing this, the aesthetic appreciation of objects is often a palatable justification to avoid addressing difficult issues. For example, including photographs of the original contexts in which the objects were displayed inevitably suggests questions about their repatriation. At the same time, in an exhibition that privileged aesthetics above the desires of the curator, this was also an exhibition that included a multimedia guide featuring the editor of *Men's Health* magazine talking about Hercules and the contemporary male desire for the perfect body. The title *Defining Beauty*, which formed the hermeneutic code for several visitor journeys, was decided by the marketing department. Finally, texts related to the opening and final vista of the exhibition were added by Neil MacGregor to emphasise the importance of these objects being displayed together within the British Museum. In this account of the heteroglossia of the museum we see the normal authority of the curator displaced, although not by the community as we might hope but by

the increasing bureaucratisation and professionalism of the museum. At the same time, the carnivalesque can still exist within this highly politicised field. This might exist within the *Men's Health* journalist relating Ancient Greek Bodies to contemporary gym culture. Equally it might exist in the rapport between the curator Ian Jenkins and guest contributor Jeremy Tanner. Remarked on by one visitor group:

And we both laughed when he said, "I stand corrected." When Ian Jenkins said, "somebody said well I think this" and Jeremy Tanner said, "well, no."

The voices and discourses of an exhibition would be extremely limited if it were only limited to those people who were employed in its construction. In the penultimate section of this conclusion, I explore the dialogue that exists between the exhibition and its visitors and the wider world.

10.3 Dialogue

'In the beginning is the relation', states Martin Buber (1970), in pursuing the answer to what is narrative in the museum we might argue that it is created in the relationship between the museum visitor and the museum maker. To return to the myth of the labyrinth, a narrative requires an Ariadne to make the thread and a Theseus to unravel and retrace it. Conceiving of narrative as relational allows us to move beyond the concept of the visitor as passive consumer of the narrative encoded by the museum maker. It also helps us move beyond the concept of the objectified visitor, classified according to demographics, motivation or identity. Instead, we might think of the relationship between museum maker and museum visitor as connecting between these affective resonances. Not only resonating because there are disruptions as well, as indicated by those moments in my Freytagian plot diagrams in which the line of the museum maker and the line of the visitor diverge. This is perhaps most obvious in *Vikings: Life and Legend* when in the second half of the exhibition, the visitor dwell time falls off, a result of the museum fatigue brought about by those visitors who diligently queued for *Roskilde 6*. Similarly, in *Defining Beauty* several visitors felt that

after section Four the exhibition 'lost its way' a combination of some visitors feeling that the exhibition was no longer following the theme of 'defining beauty', but also by those visitors who felt distanced from the ancient Greeks, and in some cases the museum makers, in the role of women in society. Considering, this in relation to Hall's (1980) concept of encoding and decoding we might regard these moments as where the visitor reads against the grain of the established narrative. Thinking of narrative as relational we might now again think about the exhibition climax as those moments where those visitors feel closest to the imagined actors of the exhibition's subject matter. For example, the moments when visitors imagine the suffering of the people in Pompeii, or allow their eyes to read the Greek sculptures in the same manner as the curatorial eye in *Defining Beauty*. This might correspond with those moments as designed by the exhibition makers. Equally visitors might resist the feeling of control exerted by the constructed narrative, echoing Hein's (1998) concerns about the dictatorial nature of linear narrative. This is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Deborah in *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* who cannot relate to the bodies because of their familiarity, but finds this relational connection with the past through the doctor's toolkit. This unexpectedness of this points to the role the *hermeneutic* code that mystery plays in the feeling of cathartic empathetic connection.

In conceptualising narrative as the relationship between the museum-maker and the museum visitor, I open myself up to criticism regarding the absence of the material object in this relationship and the anthropocentric nature of my thesis as a whole. Indeed, Harrison (2013, 31) uses the term dialogical as a means to move beyond the human to consider the non-human in heritage studies in relation to the material turn. Within my three exhibition case studies there are certainly moments in which the objects can be seen as exerting an agency upon the human actors. For example, the reason that visitors are forced to queue in the narrow first half of *Vikings: Life and Legend* is because the Viking ship *Roskilde 6* takes up so much space in the exhibition's second half and because its prominence requires it to be the climax of the exhibition and thus cannot be revealed to the visitors immediately. No

photographs can be used in the labels of *Defining Beauty* because it will compete with the objects. While I have written about this in terms of the human actors considering this in terms of their aesthetic preferences, from another perspective it could be seen as the objects exerting their influence on the human actors. If 'let the objects speak for themselves' is a common curatorial and museum design mantra, then similarly we might extend this to implore the critical researcher into museums to 'let the objects act for themselves.'

The perspective of the object remains a road unexplored by this thesis and is one of its principle limitations. However, I would also argue that a New Materialist critique of the applicability of narratology to conceptualise the material elements of an exhibition itself ignores the materiality that has been inherent within attempts to define narrative since their inception. While Latour (1996) might rally against the tools of Structuralism developed to analyse language being applied to the material, theories of narrative have always contained an element of the non-material. The ur-text of the Euro-American tradition, Aristotle's (2012) *Poetics* was developed to understand how Greek Tragedy unfolded in three dimensional time and space. Furthermore, narrative theory frequently attempts to trace narrative by visualising it in material form of the line (Barthes 1990; Freytag 1997). This is a trait shared by several of the key proponents of the material turn, including Latour (1996) with his visualisation of the network and Deleuze and Guattari (1988) with their visual metaphor of the rhizome.

In thinking about how the idea of the museum exhibition might be visualised as a network, we can turn to Whitehead's (2009, 38) use of the map as a means of understanding museum representations, rather than writing or utterances. This concept of the museum as a map works on a literal level as a 'multi-dimensional and multi-media map of the cultural and natural world' (Whitehead 2009, 48). In institutions like the British Museum, where the galleries are organised geographically the map literally shows the relationship between cultures in time and history. At an art and design museum like the V&A, the map functions to differentiate and relate bodies of material culture, attributing different values to them and

physically separating them from one another. What differentiates the visualisation of the map from Freytagian plot arch is the issue of how we represent value. As Graeber (2002, 16) says in relation to structuralism, while it can account for the relation between things it struggles to account for how value is represented. Similarly, the flat ontology of the network, the rhizome and the map fails to account for different moments of value within the exhibition space. For the purpose of my thesis, which focussed on blockbuster exhibitions the rise and fall of Freytag's pyramid felt more appropriate to visualise the unfolding of the exhibition's narrative. But even if we move to the non-linear spaces of the British Museum's permanent galleries hierarchies and climaxes based on value are still apparent. As Jenkins (1992) has shown, the British Museum's sculpture galleries in the nineteenth century were organised to hierarchically illustrate the development of sculpture according to an assumed aesthetic criteria. In mapping the networks of relationships in the museum exhibition to take into account Zbyněk Zbyslav Stránský's (Brulon Soares 2016) assertion that the subject of museality is value, what is needed is a map with contours.

3.4 The agency of narrative

If we are to extend the idea of agency to the material elements of an exhibition, the objects, we might also proceed further and suggest that non-material narratives have an agency and a life beyond their human encoders and decoders. This concept of narrative agency manifests itself in my two case studies in two forms. Firstly, there is the idea of the museum exhibition as not simply a dialogue between museum maker and visitor but with a series of narratives around the exhibition subject matter that are transmitted via the media. This is most obviously the case in *Defining Beauty* where the narrative surrounding the repatriation of the Parthenon sculpture is materialised in the physical building of the Acropolis Museum, which argues for the sculptures return to their original context. In turn, *Defining Beauty* can be seen as an exhibitionary riposte arguing the case for why the benefits of being viewed in the encyclopaedic setting the British Museum. So many actors are involved in this dialogue that it would be impossible to attribute it to a single human

author. Indeed, given calls for the return of the Parthenon Sculptures have been going on since the early nineteenth-century it can be said that the human actors are subservient and acting on behalf of the dialogue itself. Moments like the loan of the Ilissos subject to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg act as events within this narrative and in effect give it life – they feed the narrative. This narrative is noticeable by its absence in the exhibition where the argument for the retention of the Parthenon sculptures at the British Museum is not overtly addressed. Instead, the narrative is played out in the associated media reports and reviews of the exhibition. Traces of these narratives can, however, be found in the directorial interventions within the exhibition, most notably in the text that accompanies the vistas at the start and the end of the exhibition. Their presence as a different form of discourse in the heteroglossia of the exhibition is subtly indicated by a change in font and that they fit outside of the normal textual hierarchy of panel and label.

We can consider narratives as having an agency of their own in the form of how contemporary media stories exert a presence in and an influence over exhibitions. But we can also see how narratives from the past exert an influence over exhibitions as well. This is perhaps most obvious in how the shadow of past exhibitions, the deceased ancestor, hangs over the curator's head. In *Vikings: Life and Legend* for example both the curators of the Copenhagen and the London version of the exhibition talk about the impossibility of achieving an exhibition on the scale of its 1980s predecessors. What is interesting is often the curators speak about seeing these particularly exhibitions, or the archetypal blockbuster exhibition *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, as acting as part of the origin story for why they became curators. To return to the labyrinth myth, the element of curation can be seen as an act of the retracing of steps and the retelling of a story from one's own childhood. At the same time, for the both curators and the designers there is a need to reinterpret and redesign these exhibitions. It is through reinterpretation, the creation of new narratives that the curators are able to create some distance from their ancestors and in turn free their creative potential.

Tracing the lineage of exhibitions back even further, there are also those narratives which once informed the layout of the museum, such as the Chain of Art (Jenkins 1992), which are now discredited but whose invisible presence still haunts the museum like a spectre. These ghost stories are no longer overtly referenced in the museum texts but still assert an influence over the displays. For example, the decision to organise *Defining Beauty* primarily by theme and, secondly by chronology, can be seen as an attempt to escape the problematic narrative thread of civilisation's rise and fall that was used to guide the nineteenth-century visitor through the museum's permanent galleries. Just as the pediment of the British Museum still contains Westmacott's series of sculptures illustrating the *Progress of Civilisation*, these spectral narratives can be still conjured up by the viewer if they know how and where to look. The final juxtaposition of the Reclining Dionysus from the Parthenon and the Belvedere Torso in *Defining Beauty* invites visitors to make this artistic comparison and judgement between Classical Greek and Hellenistic art. In effect they are invited to step into Archibald Archer's 1819 print (fig. 1.2) and become one the group of connoisseurs assessing the sculptures on their artistic merits. While the idea that Britain might be the inheritor of this classical tradition and that itself might face the dangers of imperial decline is not as overt, those Enlightenment narratives of cosmopolitanism, universalism and the encyclopaedic are still deployed in the British Museum today. Whether these are used as an escape from nationalism or as a fig leaf to avoid calls for repatriation can be seen as a result of the dialogue with the individual visitor. My focus is instead on how these narratives exert an influence over the museum-maker and visitor, which sometimes we might wish to deploy, but often we wish to escape.

How to escape from these ghosts and the tyranny of narrative? One pathway not taken by this thesis is to see narrative not as a universal concept shared by all humans, but as localised within regional perspectives. I selected my exhibitions based on the criteria that they were each summer blockbusters held at the British Museum from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. The subject matter for each of these exhibitions was primarily European, perhaps

reflecting the bias of the institution, despite Neil MacGregor (2012) claiming in *A History of the World in 100 objects*, to shift the focus away from the Mediterranean being the centre of the world. As a result, my thesis lacks an engagement with the theoretical writings grouped together under the categories of post-colonialism and orientalism, which have provided such a fruitful way of critiquing the function of museums as sites of encounter between Europeans and the 'non-European other.' In my own borrowings from narrative theory, I must also acknowledge a European bias. All of my key theoretical figures: Barthes, Bakhtin, McKee, Freytag are European, each tracing their lineage of their research back to the classical world of ancient Greece and Aristotle. Another avenue for future research, would be to explore exhibitions that display a non-European subject matter, or exhibitions that are staged in a non-European context and apply non-European models of narrative to understand them.

For example, a wide body of literature exists both on the development of museums in China and how Chinese approaches to narrative differ to those of European and North America. Such approaches help to destabilise any notion that either museums or narratives are in any way universal, although claims for this particularly in relation to narrative are often made. Plaks (1977) argues that the primary characteristic of Chinese narrative is not structure, as is the case in Euro-American narrative, since Aristotle described plot as the 'soul of narrative', but rather texture. As a result, for a Euro-American reader early Chinese narratives can appear flat, episodic and anticlimactic, as they do not create suspense by building towards a climax, or feature significant character development. Instead, these narratives focus on what Plaks (1977, 315) describes as the non-event, which includes static descriptions, the recounting of set speeches and discursive asides.

The difference in narrative approaches is reflected in the fact that in China, the red thread has a very different meaning, it refers to the red string of fate (*Yīnyuán hóngxiàn*), which binds two people together. One story dating back to the Tang dynasty about *Yīnyuán hóngxiàn* features a young boy who sees an old man bathed in moonlight. This figure is actually the moon god Yue Xia Lao, who shows the boy a young girl who is destined to be

his wife. Being a young boy and uninterested in girls he throws a rock in her direction and runs away. Later when he meets his wife on the night of their arranged marriage, she removes her veil to reveal a small scar on her eyebrow, caused by a stone thrown at her by a boy in her childhood. The red thread here isn't being used to illustrate the structure of narrative, but instead to indicate an invisible connection between two people and a distinctive Chinese idea about the nature of fate.

In the Chinese museum we see this different tradition reflected in a different approach to narrative in exhibitions. Permanent displays are characterised by adopting a linear, rather than a non-linear narrative format. This is related both to the specific history of the early Chinese Museum as adopting educating the public as their primary mission from their very inception Shao (2011). Although the museum was a Euro-American import brought into China by the French, the British and later the Japanese, China had its own exhibitionary tradition in the form of the traditional Chinese garden (Chang and Gao 2018). Built around the binaries of Yin and Yang and with a winding linear layout that is opposed to the traditional geometric layout of the European botanic garden, this exhibitionary format is currently undergoing a resurgence in contemporary Chinese museums (Chang and Gao 2018).

In using narrative as a means of critiquing the museum due to its privileging of a Euro-American perspective the next step is to critique narrative theory as heavily leaning on a European cannon of writers and thinkers. In order to answer Winter's (2013) call for a post-Western perspective for heritage studies we need to find a new selection of ways of thinking, talking and visualising narrative. New pyramids need to be excavated. The idea of the line is present in Chinese ideas about narrative in the word 主线 (*zhuxian*), in which *zhu* means *master* and *xian* – *line* or *thread*. It can also be seen in metaphors used to conceptualise about the past such as 'the river of history' (Wang & Rowlands 2017, 259). On a familial level linearity is present in the form of ancestral lineage, which the anthropologist Liu Xin

(2002, 141) imagines as 'a unity, a rope which began somewhere back in the remote past, and which stretches on to the infinite future.' Only when we find these alternative paths, threads made of different materials, can I, as a UK-based researcher and practitioner, find a way of escaping from the Eurocentricism of narrative's labyrinth.

Appendix 1

List of staff interviewed for each exhibition

Case study exhibition	Staff members interviewed
<i>Pompeii and Herculaneum</i>	Lead curator Assistant curator Interpretation officer 3D designer 2D designer
<i>Vikings: Life and legend</i>	Lead curator (London) Three D designer Graphic designer Interpretation officer Lead curator (Berlin) Lead curator (Copenhagen) Project manager (Copenhagen)
<i>Defining Beauty: The body in Ancient Greece</i>	Lead curator Assistant curator Interpretation officer Graphic designer Project manager

Appendix 2

Pompeii and Herculaneum: Visitor group demographic information

Group ID	Names	Composition	Country of origin	Age range	Frequency of visiting museums
A	Amy, Agatha, Andrew, Arthur	2 x female, 2 x male	UK/Australia	60-70	Occasional
B	Beatrice, Bobbi, Burt, Barry	2 x female, 2 x male	UK	20-30	Frequent
C	Clara, Christine, Charles	2 female, 1 x male	UK/Germany	50-60	Occasional
D	Devorah	1 x female	UK	20-30	Frequent
E	Emma	1 x female	UK	50-60	Frequent
F	Fiona, Fred	1 x female x male	UK	50-60	Frequent
G	Gustav	1 x male	UK	60-70	Frequent
H	Hilda, Hester, Hazel, Holly	4 x female	UK	60-70, 70, 80	Occasional
I	Isabella, Ivan	1 x female, 1 x male	UK	40-50 16-20	Occasional
J	Jerry	1 x male	Spain	20-30	Occasional
K	Kerry	1 x male	UK	30-40	Frequent
L	Larry, Lucy	1 x male, 1 x female	UK	40-50	Occasional
M	Martha, Michael	1 x male, 1 x female	UK	30-40	Frequent
N	Nelly, Natasha, Norbert	2 x female, 1 x male	UK	20-30	Frequent
O	Olav	1 x female	USA	60-70	Occasional

P	Prudence, Pablo	1 x female, 1 x male	Germany	50-60	Frequent
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Appendix 3

Vikings: Visitor group demographic information

Group id	Names	Composition	Age range	Country of origin	Frequency of visiting museums
A	Andrea	1 x female	30-40	UK	Frequent
B	Brenda	1 x female	20-30	UK	Occasional
C	Carol, Charles	1 x female, 1 x male	20-30, 30-40	UK	Occasional
D	Debbie, David	1 x female, 1 x male	50-40, 60 -70	USA	Frequent
E	Ella, Evan	1 x female, 1 x male	40-50	Australia	Occasional
F	Fiona, Fred	1 x female, 1 x male	60-70	UK	Occasional
G	Greta, Gundula	2 x female	40-50	Sweden	Occasional
H	Helga	1 x female	30-40	Russia	Frequent
I	Ingrid, Ingar	1 x female, 1 x male	20-30, 40-50	Norway	Frequent
J	James	1 x male	30-40	UK	Frequent
K	Karen, Keith	1 x female, 1 x male	20-30	UK	Frequent
L	Liam	1 x male	30-40	UK	Frequent
M	Maria	1 x female	60-70	Canada	Occasional
N	Nora	1 x female	20-30	UK (Wales)	Frequent
O	Olga, Opal	2 x female	40-50	UK	Frequent
P	Paul, Petra	1 x female	30-40	UK	Frequent
Q	Queenie , Quinn	1 x female, 1 x male	50-60	USA	Frequent

Appendix 4

Defining Beauty: Visitor group demographic information

Group ID	Names	Composition	Country of origin	Age range	Frequency of visiting museums
A	Alex	1 x male	USA	20-30	Frequent
B	Bertha, Bob	1 x female, 1 x male	UK (Now live in Malaysia)	60-70	Occasional
C	Colin, Colette	1 x female, 1 x male	USA	60-70	Frequent
D	Darren, Daria, Dora, Donald	2 x female, 2 x male	USA	40-50 x 2, 10-20 x 2	Frequent
E	Edith	1 x female	USA	30-40	Frequent
F	Frances	1 x female	UK	60-70	Frequent
G	Gary	1 x male	UK	60-70	Frequent
H	Henrietta, Hattie	2 x female	USA, Russia	40-50, 20-30	Occasional
I	Ivy, Ian	1 x female, 1 x male	UK	60-70	Frequent
J	Jane, Justin	1 x female, 1 x male	UK	60-70, 20-30	Frequent
K	Kevin	1 x male	USA	30-40	Frequent
L	Laura, Lauren	2 x female	UK	40-50, 10-20	Frequent
M	Monica	1 x female	Brazil	20-30	Frequent
N	Norma	1 x female	USA	30-40	Frequent
O	Olive, Ollie	1 x female, 1 x male	UK	20-30	Frequent
P	Percy	1 x male	Australia	30-40	Frequent

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