



## Introduction

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The study of national narratives as a means of analysing the complexities and ambiguities of the national construct was established with the publication in 1990 of a collection of essays edited by Homi Bhabha as *Nation and Narration*. By framing the national narrative as an independent subject of inquiry, the product of *imagined communities*, to quote Benedict Anderson (1983), Bhabha's collection took the question beyond the spaces that memorial studies had provided for its examination in the now famous *Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992). These appeared as expressions of the *roman national*, and Pierre Nora had recognised a series of themes, buildings, events and traditions for their capacity to incarnate and naturalise the history of the nation. In the 1990s, disciplines themselves increasingly came under scrutiny; academic historiography, art history, ethnography and archaeology were examined and interpreted as discourses that participate in the constant construction and invention of what Bhabha called the “system of cultural signification” that makes up the nation and that is ambivalent precisely because it is in constant flux. At the same time, museum studies developed and adapted a Foucauldian frame of interpretation that focused on the role played by the museum in the exercise of power through knowledge. This frame has been greatly nuanced over the last two decades, and the history of museums has reverted again to a more positive tone, as museums themselves have responded to the accusation of representing the power house of the nation's elite by developing policies that reflect the desire to engage in a more open relationship with the public and promote their image as institutions “not of confinement but of exhibition” (Bennett 1998, 74). Just as the discourse of the nation itself was characterised by Bhabha as *Janus faced*, the museum too seems to pivot between perceptions of progress and conservatism, tradition and revision.

This collection, of course, reflects the combined heritage of these perspectives, examining the different narratives that museums have, since their inception and up until the present day, developed as monuments to and of national histories. Including work commissioned in the form of reports for the EuNaMus project and texts developed from conference proceedings<sup>1</sup>, the collection has attempted to examine how history has been narrated in the museum across Europe since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The aim has been to identify how narratives and their impact might have changed over time and more particularly how this can contribute to our understanding of how they might be changing today. The approach adopted by the EuNaMus project also needs to be considered in the context of other major projects that are currently dedicated to understanding the changes in narrative constructions introduced by the creation of new institutions, i.e., *Museums in an Age of Migration*, MeLA (Basso Peressut, Pozzi 2012) and *Exhibiting Europe* (Kaiser, Krankenhagen et al. 2012), focusing respectively on the relationship between museum narratives and multiculturalism and European integration in the last two decades. The long historical perspective adopted in the questioning of the museum's *Uses of past*,

the second chapter of the EuNaMus project, is dedicated and adapted to understanding the historically and administratively defined place that the national paradigm has occupied since the inception of the museum as a staple institution of the nation state (see also the first set of EuNaMus publications: Aronsson, Elgenius 2011). This allows us to consider different temporalities of institutional change that show that inclusion and negotiation with other paradigms is a constant factor of changing narratives in European museum history. Whilst one can clearly observe an acceleration of this phenomenon, a variability of the frames of references do not exclude current reinventions of specifically national narratives that are often, but not always, deconstructions of a certain tradition and that appear in parallel to new developing master narratives of, e.g., world cultures, migration and Europeanization.

In terms of disciplinary coverage, whilst a majority of these papers deal with what can clearly be defined as “history museums”, nearly equivalent attention has been given to narratives of art history, ethnography and archaeology. Despite the large chronological and geographical scope of this collection of texts, the overall structure places emphasis on the idea that narratives of the past are accounts based on the diversity of materials or factual sources used to illustrate them, constrained by conventions that bestow particular values or meaning upon them. Whilst history might appear as a limitless domain potentially capable of providing an infinity of accounts, Appadurai’s seminal article ‘The past as a scarce resource’ posits the existence of formal constraints that can be identified in the interpretation of how a society tells the story of its past. Just as a country or a society might possess a limited amount of natural resources, the past is exploited according to what Appadurai believes to be a set of universal constraints that all cultures use and establish according to an infinite set of variations, adapting them to their specific needs. It follows that one might consider these formal constraints as tools for structuring comparisons, formulating differences and analysing the narrative construction of the past in national museums across Europe. The four minimal dimensions listed by Appadurai—authority, continuity, depth and interdependence—have in a certain sense structured the organisation of texts that form this publication (Appadurai 1981, 203).

Firstly, the question of authority, which cuts across all of the papers, has been addressed in a specifically explicit manner in the first section, as contributions have tried to relate the notion of the individual curator or museum director to the notion of the author in general and how he/she develops a disciplinary language that is recognised as authoritative when presented in the museum (Bann, Hillström, Lerario, Catapoti). The exception to these examples appears with the case of museums under communism, where the national museum indeed did appear to represent directly the voice of the state (Petkova-Campbell). The eclipse of the individual voice behind that of the authoritative institution appears as a specificity of the museum’s way of constructing national narratives. Another aspect of authority is “place” and the force it bestows on the story being told; Versailles (Cordier), the house where Goethe died (Breur, Kahl) or the Acropolis (Ntaflou) are examined as the major sites of history; however, one might add that these places may also be recreations of sites, as for example the reconstitution of torture chambers in the Budapest House of Terror (Apor).

Continuity and depth can be related to the expression of historical temporalities as translated into the language of the museum. They contribute to defining what precisely constitutes the “traditional” narrative and help to characterise a potential break with tradition, as examined in the

second and fourth sections. What makes a national history appear as a seamless whole? Are there ruptures and how and when have they been expressed? What depth is given to the historical narratives by privileging specific periods, by considering some more fundamental or characteristic of the nation than others? Some of these questions are directly addressed in most of the papers, but they appear most particularly in terms of depth in Watson's work on the current representation of "origins" or in Pettersson's discussion of the case of Swedish archaeology and racial theory, whilst the instrumentalisation of collections to establish a sense of continuity is perhaps best exemplified by the use of national ethnography in Central Europe over the past 150 years (Vukov, Pohrib). Such exceptional historic breaks as the French Revolution or the fall of Communism have challenged the need for continuity; the latter is considered by Peter Apor in his examination of what he terms as *Mystical Nationalism*, defined as a means of overcoming the divide that now separates former communist countries from their most recent past.

The interdependence of different pasts and how these help construct or provide alternatives to the national is explored in the third section, *Intersecting authorities, territories and narratives*. How are the necessary relations that the national entertains with other authorities and territories expressed? What narrative space is given to those cultural and geographical areas that intersect with the national: the regional, universal and the transnational? How does the space of the museum contain and mirror the vast geographical spaces that its collections metonymically represent? Case studies dealing with issues such as the presentation of the heritage of the Catholic church in Spain (Cerezales) or the intersection between the national narrative and a regionalised gender narrative of contemporary art in Sweden (Sundberg) consider interdependency of authority. Meanwhile, universal or cosmopolitan values in national museums have been considered in the context of nineteenth century Hungary (Ebli, Szekely) and its bid for national independence, the colonial past discussed in relation to Spain's nostalgia for its former Empire (Lanzarote-Guiral), and finally the resolutely post-colonial context of twenty-first century Britain (Jenkins). The question of transfers of museographical traditions, such as the relationship between Turkey and the European museum tradition (Savino), is also closely linked to that of the existence of transnational narratives and dialogues. These were considered in a study on the representation of Napoleon across Europe (Bodenstein), through the international exchange of national narratives in contemporary exhibitions (Passini) or as a comparison of histories told across such borders as those separating the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland (Cauvin). Lastly, the idea of a connecting narrative, such as that of national maritime enterprises, was also examined (Sawyer). Though an analysis of how these different narratives work may lead to the identification of master narratives, nevertheless these "constraints" have the advantage of not reducing these tales to myths.

Indeed, the narratives of the museum, of history, archaeology, art history and ethnography all seek to establish and display facts, the specific status of which also needs to be recognised and analysed in its own right. The recent tendency has been to place the emphasis on the "imagined" nature of these narratives as fictions, perhaps as the result of an unconscious misunderstanding of Benedict Anderson's so often quoted title. In the introduction to a collection of essays analysing the narratives of human sciences, Jeannie Moser defines the dual characteristic of these "stories", likened to objects that are both naturally determined and the product of a cultural context, that can be attributed with symbolic meaning without losing their factuality (Höcker,

Moser et al. 2006). This means that to explicate the narrative structure in the museum's representation of a particular episode of the past does not necessarily imply that the material content of the narrative is demonstrated to be mere invention. The invention is in the structuring of the narrative itself and can contribute to its "imagination" even in the case of what was as yet a non-existent nation state, as shown with the establishment of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Kammel), where the unification of the German-speaking community was staged before it officially existed and came to provide the idea of a cultural memory *without national borders*, alternatively mobilised for more or less positive ends throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The recognition of this duality is all the more important as narrative itself is of course a notion whose study is essentially related to literary disciplines dealing with the textual analysis of fiction; by adopting narrative as a central notion for the analysis of the museum, the project intended to encourage an interdisciplinary approach that can be related to the "expansionism" (Kindt, 2009) of narratology towards other disciplines in recent years. The historian's relationship to narratology can be traced back to the 1970s and the seminal studies of historical writing published by Hayden White as *Metahistory* (1973). In 1978, art historian Stephen Bann for the first time applied instruments of textual analysis to the museum by considering how France's first history museums dealt with the representation of the past in the first half of the nineteenth century (Bann, 1978). Over thirty years later he returned to the question in the first EuNaMus "Great Narratives" conference, recalling his method; adopting concepts developed in structuralist narratology to the analysis of museum display, he "read" display as a rhetorical strategy that he described using the same figures of speech habitually identified in text analysis: metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche.

The second narrative approach to the museum can be related to the interpretation by James Clifford of the museum as a contact zone expressing a set of power relationships that place the nation in a larger context or that relate it to its constitutive internal entities. This perspective is due in particular to the emergence of post-colonial studies (Loumpet-Galetzine; Lien & Nielssen), but also to the development of gender studies (Sundberg). Whilst Bann analysed the visual aspect of the museum narrative, in this perspective attention is given to narration as the expression of conflicts often related to the museum's past, to the constitution of its collection, as described first and foremost in those narratives related to the provenance of objects, which will receive more in-depth development in the second WP3 EuNaMus volume but which provides the background of certain themes dealt with here (Jenkins, Ébli, Lanzarote-Guiral).

In effect, the historiographical threads represented in the work of the aforementioned authors consider the two main kinds of narrative produced by the museum, which can loosely be termed as external and internal: firstly those narratives that are intentionally constructed as outward, public expressions of the museum's mission, using the collections; they can be "read" mainly through the act of display and are in a sense performed during the museum visit. They may also find expressions in texts related to the museum's display activity, such as guides, catalogues etc.; they produce accounts of the past as defined by the different materials present in the museum's collection. Secondly, there are those narratives that are produced by the practices related to the establishment of the museum and the development of its activities; these are in a sense part of the story of the museum itself and may be defined as narratives of discovery, salvation,

preservation, and provenance. They are, historically speaking, often relatively invisible in the museum's display itself but important in structuring accounts of museum practice that help the institution to define its mission and justify its pedagogical, social, and in some cases political role. However, and thirdly, it may be observed that in the context of the recent reflexive turn in museum display, the separation between these internal and external narratives has been challenged, with displays and exhibitions that document the history of archaeology, ethnography, and collecting, and that critically consider (their own) display traditions. They make museum practice an object of the exhibition itself by paying greater attention to the story/the history of the object as a collectable, or by attempting to deconstruct the myth-making role of former museum narratives. The identification and analysis of this third category shows that the museum has become more aware of the question of its own voice (Malama, Meyer). As an institution that tells a story, its choices, its orientations and programme, in short its voice has in some cases become more identifiable and thus its great narratives more critically balanced.

The results of this part of the EuNaMus project will try to establish the specificity of the museum's authority in recounting the past as a material performance opposed to the written narratives produced by professional historians or academics. And although museums often directly employ academics and express in many cases the opinions of professional historians, their strong official, social and political role still means that they tend to seek out a consensual presentation often gained through absences or silence rather than critical confrontation. In order to consider the difficulties that face the curator and to consider his voice from inside the institution as well as from the outside, this collection has called on the contribution of several museum professionals (Kammel, Meyer and Malama). The history told by the museum is considered here as an expression not only of professional historiography but also of the nation's *Geschichtskultur*, to use the concept formulated by Jörn Rüsen to express a larger more public relationship to historical matters. Corollary to this difference of *genre* is a different kind of experience, an assertion made by Mieke Bal when she writes that: "a visit to a museum is an event that takes place in space and in time, and that it therefore produces a narrative" (Bal 2000, 149). The examination of the experience of these narratives is attempted in several of these papers, such as the relation of the exhibition of religious art to the stations of the cross (Cerezales), the immersive character of the museum complex (Arena) or the narrative power of the visitor's path through the museum (Meyer).

In theoretical terms, the specificity of the museum narrative can be considered by focusing on the historiographical notions of "great narratives" employed in the title and the corollary notion of "master narrative," which leads us back to the notion of authority by introducing the metaphor of the *master* in relation to typically anonymous but institutionally legitimated museum narratives. As a pioneering figure in the questioning of the structure of museum narratives, Mieke Bal described her use of narratology as the effort to establish connections "between a narratological perspective and ideological issues" (Bal 1990, 750). Most of these papers have sought to bring ideological questions to the forefront of the analysis of narratives. The notion of the master-narrative helps the analysis of the museum appear as explicitly interpretative and contributes to the elaboration of a real comparative overview of how, for better or for worse, the representations of the past in museums are related to the construction of national identities. This appears as a necessary effort, though to be pursued with care, in the context of a project that

proposes to deal with such a large chronological and geographical frame as 200 years of European museum history.

Indeed, beyond the notion of narrative itself, understood as the modalities of story telling, these papers seek to deal with the creation of great national narratives in the particular context of the museum, relating them to the general ideas or principles about the nation that are being expressed. The question of the master narrative has been considered in relation to the work of historians; in Stefan Berger's introduction to the collective volume, *Narrating the Nation*, he states that historiographical studies have become increasingly aware of how historians have contributed to the shaping of a national myth or a "variety of national master narratives that were situated within and were themselves part of cultural and political power relationships" (Berger, 2011:5). The notion of the master narrative can easily be metaphorically related to that of the author/master identified by Krijn 'Thijs' article dedicated to the "Metaphor of the Master". It proves to be particularly fruitful in the case of institutional narratives produced by state-run museums (Thijs 2011, 74). In this case the master narrative appears as the "*big story* told by the dominant group in a given society." This point of view is interesting to the objectives of this project, as we ask whether the national museum enjoys a particular status in terms of who is allowed to tell stories. With 'Thijs, one might ask whether national museums are part of an "historical culture that is marked by a specific hierarchy, at the top of which stands the 'master'" (Thijs 2011, 65). Is the national museum's narrative of history always a master narrative because it stands as a generally uncontested account that, by its power to include and exclude certain stories, necessarily provides a master narrative? Is it also a master narrative in the sense that 'Thijs suggests, as provider of a narrative framework that is the master copy for other narratives – developed again in other museums (Petkova-Campbell, Ébli and Vukov)?

The notion of the master narrative has become central to the study of cultural identity and historiography since it was imported from literary studies and applied to historical writing by post-modern authors such as Hayden White. It has since become a widely employed term, by historians but also by a wider public, and has come to be used in relation to nearly all kinds of social and cultural phenomena (Sabrow, Jarausch, 2002). The *master narrative* may be defined as the overreaching ideological message about the past that motivates the museum's general programme and structures its display(s), it is "intended to enable mastery of the messy and complicated real world" (Greenhill 2000: 24). Underlying ideas or principles, it brings together stories, great and small, general and particular, to make them intelligible and in the most explicit cases to allow for the identification of a national artistic "specific" (Vukov) or that of a national psyche, as suggested by Eilertsen's identification of the "freedom loving" northerners.

Formally, the master narrative does not necessarily imply the identification of a specific narrative structure as related to its beginning, middle or end; however, we have already shown that chronological organisation and depth are essential factors to describing and understanding the master narrative. Historically, Megill situates the master narrative in the context of the rise of nations in the nineteenth century: "In each case there was a master narrative that was seen as running through the nation's history – the master narrative of the nation's movement from its early beginnings, through the rise of national self-consciousness, to its current struggle for recognition and success" (Megill, Allan et al. 2007, 33). In this sense, of course, its construction has accompanied the coming of age of the museum as a public institution.

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill provides us with another useful set of factors that condition the specificity of constructing master narratives in the museums and that recall the notions of authority and interdependence suggested by Appadurai. According to Greenhill, they “depend on a number of techniques of inclusion or exclusion. These include hierarchies of value (which relate to the intentions of the museum), authenticity (object is both there to be observed and is presented as ‘the real thing’), and verifiable knowledge (the provenance of the object demonstrated through documentation). These combinations produce apparently reliable and trustworthy material evidence” (Greenhill 2000, 24). All of these have been taken into account by considering how the collection itself is conceived of and used, in the question of racial theory in Sweden’s national museum of archaeology (Pettersson) or also in Lerario’s description of the creation of the *Museo Pigorini* in Rome. As factors that are generally implicit to the workings of the museum, these considerations allow us to relate the case of the museum to another major characteristic of the master narrative defined by Allan Megill: “because it is a master narrative, it is often partly hidden, lying in the background, to be deployed selectively by the historian”. Indeed as shown in the case of the museum of Neolithic archaeology in Greece (Catapoti), the absence of all explicative texts can in fact be the manifestation of an implicit master narrative and reinforce the sense of authenticity (Cox, Stromquist 1998, 15). Thus one needs to be attentive to the fact that whilst historical narratives are told through the means of texts, objects, images and other media, the master narrative that guides them may not be underlined in any such an explicit manner but is rather more expressed through their combined effect. Care should be taken to examine the extent to which the museum is indeed presenting such a thing as a truly coherent master narrative and to what extent other factors related to the constraints and contingencies of museums and collections, as noted by Hooper-Greenhill and as opposed to history texts, influence their presentation of the past. In fact, in some cases there is even a veritable refusal to express anything like a coherent national narrative, not related to contingent factors but rather more symptomatic of the absence of consensus and of an on-going negotiation about how the establishing nation should represent itself (Bergvelt, Loumpet-Galetzine).

In order to avoid any misunderstanding concerning the expressions of “great”, “grand” and “master” narratives, it is useful at this point to consider Megill’s differentiation: “A ‘grand narrative’ is an account that purports to be the authoritative account of history in general; to this notion we can add the closely allied notion of a ‘master narrative’, which is an account that purports to the authoritative account of some particular segment of history – say the history of a nation”. In the case of national master narratives, Megill states that “behind the master narratives, there lay a larger ‘grand narrative’ – a secularized version of the Christian narrative of pristine origin, struggle, and ultimate salvation” (Megill, Allan et al. 2007, 33). This grand narrative, for example, appears to have been recovered by the Spanish church in order to compete with the national one in the case of the *Edades del Hombre* exhibitions (Cerezales). Catapoti has also shown the importance of the grand narrative of scientific and progressive modernity in structuring Greece’s national story.

The expression “great historical narratives” was chosen to avoid being tied down to the more ideologically specific defined notions “grand” and “master” narratives. Indeed, the perspective of these conferences was to consider the principles that have allowed the national museum since its creation to coherently present great histories in a literal sense – vast and spanning major

chronological and geographical subjects. As a more neutral term, “great narrative” allows us to consider the present state and evolution of the *master narrative* in relation to the telling of great stories. However, one should add that this predominance of “great narratives” in the context of the museum is in itself not ideologically neutral. The museum does indeed tend towards a representation of what John Brewer (2010) has termed as “prospect history”, those great overviews that sum up vast frames of time and represent large territories. Though, one should add that there are also some exceptional examples of *micro-narrative* type national museums – such as the Goethe National Museum in Weimar (Breuer & Kahl), the first biographical museum to receive the label of ‘national’.

By trying to represent vast overviews of history, the museum often makes an implicit claim to completeness –Lerario’s discussion of the case of Luigi Pigorini and his role in the creation of the Museo Preistorico Etnografico in Rome in 1875 shows that the newly united Italy was clearly represented through the remains of physical anthropology – however, when the first visitors entered the museum they were confronted with still empty yet already labelled showcases for the yet-to-be collected objects (see also Bertolino for the Italian case). This anecdote illustrates the museum’s ambition for completeness, perhaps “the most exclusionary version of historical narrative. It supposes one true history rather than competing histories” (Brewer 2010, 97) — though one might add that the great narrative is not necessarily more exclusionary than micro-history. The explicit or implicit elements that express the museum’s claim to the production of an authoritative narrative are more important than any specific type of content or history. A contemporary approach that can be found in national history museums that have attempted, in many cases, a revision of their traditional narrative (Poulot, Clarke) appears to be related to the historiographical duality of the use of the term master-narrative, as considered by Jarausch and Sabrow (2002). In fact, it refers to the extensive overview, the great synthetic historical tradition that presents the spectator with a rather monolithic vision of how things were; but at the same time, the term was developed to analyse the construction of history itself and immediately introduces a critical approach towards the idea of a “unique history”. This is the conundrum that the recent reinstallation of the main gallery in the Swiss national museum tried to solve by establishing a wheel of myths, as described here by one of the exhibition’s curators: “Within the wheel, Swiss myths and stereotypes are presented: crossbows, cowbells and Heidi. It is the wheel of history, the wheel of constantly recurring historical images, familiar to – and made use of by – every nation” (Meyer).

Once this kind of myth identification has taken place, one might ask to what extent contemporary museums express the need, ever more pressingly felt within the discipline of history, to write a post-modern history that “opposes the historic monism of the twentieth century and that seeks to embrace the plurality of views that could characterize the narrative of the twenty-first century” (Jarausch, Sabrow 2002, 12). From a narratological perspective, a general remark can be made about story-telling in the museum – that is the absence of the first person narrative and the predominance of a third person narrative, whose identity is perceived to be the “voice” of the institution itself. The national museum represents an authoritative voice that speaks for the state, which it appears to represent. As emphasized by Mieke Bal, “the ‘first person’ remains invisible”. This fact greatly reinforces the museum’s capacity to establish a narrative that can be felt by the visitor to be representative of the collective, in as much as it is



anonymous. The possibility to tell stories from multiple points of view appears as an essential challenge for museums today, one that can be partially taken up by the increased importance of temporary exhibitions that allow for a new diversity of narratives (Hegaradt, Malama, Bodenstein). However, opening up the museum to narratives that are inclusive of multicultural communities and of ethnic diversity inside of nations remains difficult. How to reinvent universalism, the traditional narrative of the other, by globalising it, as in the ideological transformation currently being undertaken by the British Museum (Jenkins), so that the museum truly speaks to the world? How to go beyond the deconstruction of the national narrative towards something new? These questions appear as the major challenge faced by museums today.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These proceedings are based on the presentations made by researchers that came together from across Europe during two separate events organised by EuNaMus work package 3, “Uses of the Past”, directed by Dominique Poulot at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne : *Great historical narratives in European museums (1750–2010): Building National, Looking across Borders and Remembering the Past*, Paris, Institut national d’histoire de l’art, 29<sup>th</sup> of June to the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2011; *Great historical narratives in Europe’s National Museums*, CRRMF, Louvre and Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Paris, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2011.

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