

MUSEUM NARRATIVES AND EMPATHY: INVESTIGATING VISITORS' EXPERIENCES AT A MULTILINGUAL WORLD WAR II MUSEUM

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Background

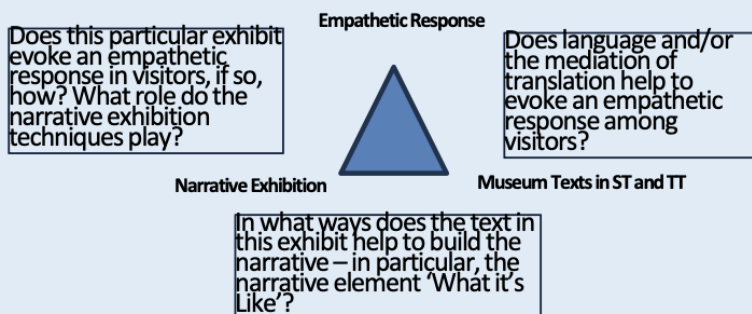
- World War II museums attract international audiences because the events they commemorate are multilingual and their impact crosses national boundaries.
- The Airborne Museum in Sainte-Mère-Église, France commemorates American paratroopers who played a vital role in the liberation of Normandy, France, during World War II.



- Narrative exhibition (Wong, 2025) is often adopted to immerse visitors in representations of the past in memorial museums.
- Narrative Exhibition can encourage empathic engagement in visitors (Landsberg, 2004; Wong, 2025).
- While existing literature links narrative exhibition practices in memorial museums with empathy (Sodaro, 2018; Kim, 2020), there is little empirical based visitor research (Mason et al., 2018).

Aims and Methodology

- Aims:** to explore how narratives are constructed using diverse semiotic resources, how these narratives influence visitors' empathetic response, and how responses may differ when exhibitions are experienced through the mediation of translation.
- How the research questions are addressed in relation to each other:



- Walking interviews (French and English-speaking visitors) captured responses to narratives and media.
- Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from the interviews. The results of the analysis were then triangulated.
- Experience maps were created (Temkin, 2010) to track visitors' interactions with the exhibit.
- This helped to identify behavior patterns and responses.

Initial Analysis

Multilingual Exhibit

- Exhibits use objects which reflect different cultural origins.
- E.g. A French person's diary kept during the Occupation (pictured on right) or an American paratrooper's map.



Narrative Construction

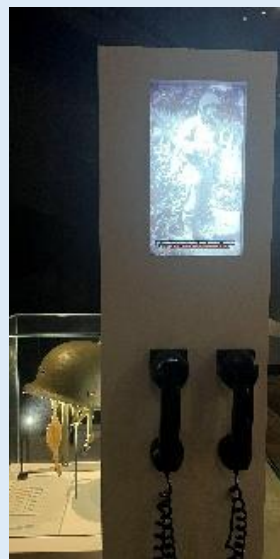
- What It's Like (narrative exhibition component) built through multiple semiotic resources:
- Objects
- Text
- Dioramas
- Video (pictured on left)
- Sound and Vibrations

Visitor Response

- Visitors of all cultural backgrounds respond strongly to personal stories throughout the exhibit:

"We have stories, well their stories, their bibliographies and I find that touching".

"Smallest stories make the strongest impact"



- Text is an essential part of communicating these stories.
- In the cases of the quotes above, narrative is constructed using text and semiotic resources such as objects (wedding dress, pictured right) and image and sound (telephones, pictured left).



Initial Conclusions

- Visitors from American, English and French-speaking backgrounds engaged with narratives of civilian lives and that of the paratroopers in distinct ways.
- Despite differing cultural and personal perspectives, visitors consistently demonstrated signs of empathetic responses to these narratives.
- Interpretations of the exhibition were shaped by both cultural background and family heritage.
- The exhibition fosters empathy for the past across national and cultural boundaries, as well as supporting and encouraging visitors to engage in continued commemorations in the future.

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- Images pictured are all this author's own.