

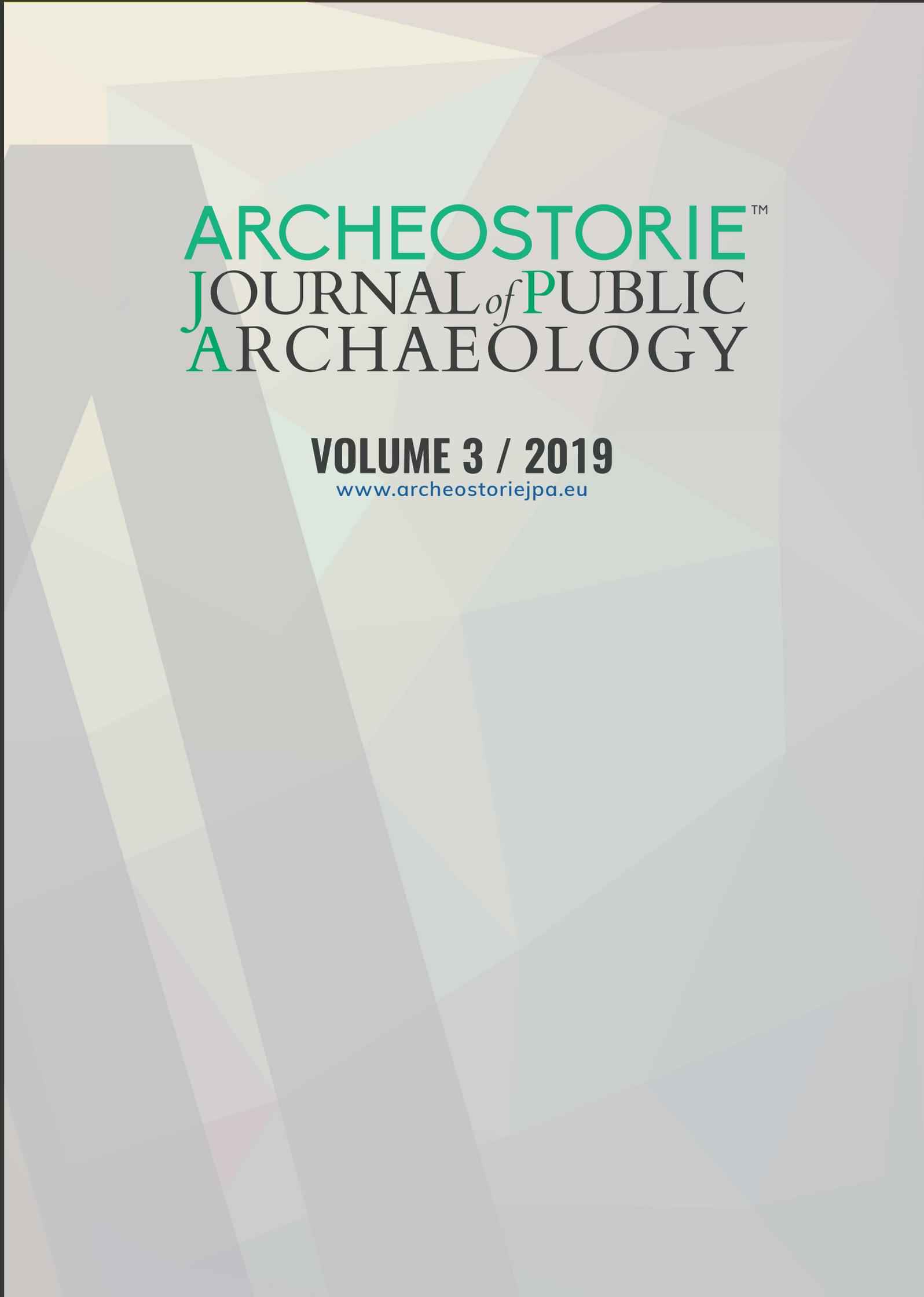


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**VOLUME 3 / 2019**

*Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology*





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# Perspectives in the first person. A questionnaire on museum semiotics

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## Abstract

*This paper is a preliminary step towards a large-scale analysis of the perspective(s) through which museums communicate their contents. In order to do so, the following article relies on the principles of semiotics and studies the current use of first-person narrators in museum communication. A qualitative-quantitative approach has been used to conduct this research. The author presents a questionnaire on the use of first-person narrative in museum communication. The questionnaire has been sent to a sample of 55 museum operators. The response rate was 12.7% and the percentage of questions answered 93%. Thus, the questionnaire was validated with minor revisions. This first round of replies provided data on 13 Italian museums, allowing the presentation of preliminary results, which will help establishing the direction of future research.*

Open Access Peer Reviewed Keywords: questionnaire, semiotics, museum, first person, narrative  
Supplementary material: [https://archeostoriejpa.eu/2019\\_3e-splm](https://archeostoriejpa.eu/2019_3e-splm)

## Introduction

« Une troisième catégorie de narration historique, irréductible aux deux précédentes, c'est le musée dont l'exposition temporaire est un cas particulier. La narration consiste ici en l'organisation d'un parcours au long duquel parlent à la fois des objets et des textes : des commentaires, désignations et explications, dont sont assortis les objets. Les textes orientent le regard du spectateur vers les caractères des objets exposés qu'il doit retenir comme pertinents. Et ils apportent par ailleurs une foule de renseignements que les objets à eux seuls ne sauraient donner : sur les lieux où ils furent trouvés, leur datation, l'origine de leurs matériaux, les techniques utilisées pour les fabriquer, leur appartenance à tel ou tel groupe, à tel ou tel individu, et sur d'autres caractères qui, bien qu'invisibles, n'en doivent pas moins être pris en compte pour que le sens conféré à chaque objet ne soit pas arbitraire. » (Pomian 1989, pp. 5-6)

Museums have been defined in several ways: in relation to their institutional authority (Karp & Lavine 1991 is still a reference publication on the topic), to their collections/heritage (on this topic see the collected papers in Part

II of Pearce 1994), to their purpose in society (most recently Brown & Mairesse 2018). The ICOM definition of museum addresses all these concerns (the 2018 adjustments are discussed in Sandahl 2019). However, for the purpose of this paper, in accordance with Pomian (1989), I chose to look at museums as a particular kind of historical/scientific narrative, whose meaning and plot depends on the correlation of texts, images and objects in space. While this does not entail a relativistic nor constructivist stance towards history or science (*contra* Shanks and Tilley 1987), it recognises the necessary presence of a narrator in discourses generated by museums, thus requiring a semiotic approach to museography.

## From semiotics to narratology: a theoretical framework

Museum narratives have been the object of several theoretical methodological contributions (Bedford 2001 and 2004; Allen 2004; Sitzia 2016) and case-studies (MacLeod, Hanks & Hale 2012; Frykman 2009; Dal Maso 2018a). However, when considering museums as narratives, a different theoretical approach is required, involving both semiotics and narratology.

Several dissertations (Horta 1992), volumes (Pearce 1990, 1992, 1994), chapters (Mason 2006) and articles (Noy 2016) have been written on the semiotics of museums and galleries. These studies, however, have mostly been concerned with museum objects and collections, following the path drawn by material culture studies (Appadurai 1986, Hodder 1986, Shanks & Tilley 1987). If we want to pursue a semiotic analysis of museums as narratives, an accurate analysis of their constitutive elements is needed.

Narratology provides the theoretical tools to isolate and investigate such elements: the distinction between *fabula* (i.e. the list of events) and *syuzhet* (i.e. the peculiar organization and expression of facts in a specific text) introduced by Russian Formalism (Propp 1968) can be of assistance. In museums, the *fabula* can be conceptualised as the raw material of the display: the historical and scientific data, events and/or objects; the *syuzhet* as the way in which this material is organised and expressed through texts, images and objects and their arrangement in space.

Following Genette (1983) one could argue that every narrative expresses a point of view – or more than one (Bakhtin 1981) – and that certain categories (i.e. narrative voice and narrative perspective) are tools to be studied and used with self-awareness in the construction of (museological) narrative. The point(s) of view expressed in museums usually concern historical and/or scientific knowledge. As they are expressed by an institution, these narratives have often a normative role on the public, strongly influencing the very concepts of ‘general culture’ and ‘common knowledge’ (see the papers collected in Crane 2000; for a review of recent trends of research on collective memory see French 2012).

While semiotic and narratological studies prompted my interest towards the study of ‘the narrator’ in museums, it is the debate on etic/emic approaches in anthropology (Pike 1954) that led me to focus on the use of the first person as a primary way of highlighting the perspective from which knowledge is both acquired and transmitted.

In conclusion, the set of notions and theories underpinning this work can be summarised as follows: museums might be understood as historical and/or scientific narratives expressed through the relation of different media (object – text – image) in institutionalised space(s).

Borrowing Saussure’s terminology, they are *paroles* and, as such, obey to the rules and possibilities afforded by the *langue* they live in. In this sense, a semiotic analysis of museums is useful to find ideological elements hidden in curatorial practices and make self-conscious choices in the construction of such narratives. In order to pursue a semiotic analysis of narratives (not only of objects or collections) one should proceed to break down the narrative in its basic components and this can be done through the instruments of narratology.

My research aims at being a small step in this direction. It examines the use of the first-person narrator in museum communication through a quali-quantitative analysis involving the largest possible number of museums, so to provide useful generalisations for museum professionals and testable and interoperable results for scholars in the field. Here I am presenting and validating the questionnaire used for this purpose and the preliminary results of the study.

### **The narrator: from third to first person**

Postmodern/poststructuralist scholarship has pointed out that museums were born – and largely still behave – as the expression of a heteronormative perspective, the institutionalisation of the western upper class’ perspective on history, art and science (Karpe & Lavine 1991; Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Bennet 1995), often excluding minorities (Blackwood & Purcell 2014) and women (Levin 2010, Zuckerberg 2018) from the narrative.

Since the 1960s, one of the main criticisms towards traditional curatorship (especially of contemporary art) has been that it hides curatorial choices, presenting the events in such an ‘impersonal’ way that it’s hard to imagine how things could have gone differently (O’Neill 2012 with previous bibliography). Consequently, the narrative proposed by the exhibition seems unavoidable to the oblivious visitor (see Lubar 2013 on timelines).

These concerns have been largely analysed in their historical, theoretical and political roots. And, in some cases, measures have been taken to address them in the everyday practice of museum communication. In the context of evident conflicts of representation – e.g. South African archaeology (Barnabas 2016),

indigenous archaeology in the Americas (Atalay 2008) – multivocal approaches have been proposed and widely integrated in museum displays, allowing for ‘otherness’ to be part of the museum experience, bringing visitors to see historical circumstances from multiple points of view. Well-known examples, published as reference best practice, include displays where curatorial choices and scholarship biases are made evident, e.g. the 1990 *Mining the Museum* exhibition of the Museum of Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore included some empty cases for the histories of forgotten women and African Americans (Corrin 1993); a more recent example is given by the three post-apartheid museum displays analysed by Coetzer (2012); the permanent exhibition of MUDEC in Milan, with the self-aware emphasis on the way collections were created, displayed, destroyed and re-displayed over time (the ambitious project is discussed in several papers in the collective volume edited by Masoero 2004).

In other cases, when the subject matter does not pose an obvious conflict of representation – e.g. in classical archaeology, natural sciences, technology, Renaissance art, etc. – the effort towards the adoption of unorthodox (or simply unusual) perspectives has been less pressing. For example, most museums in Italy do not present an obvious problem of point of view and. As Flavia Zisa pointed out in his article on Sicilian museums published in the latest issue of *Archeostorie*, only a limited number of institutions are interested in multiculturalism and multivocality (Zisa 2018). Some efforts, however, have been made towards inclusion, especially giving voice to women, lower social classes and disabled people in the museum experience. It is interesting to note that some of these attempts at including or adding ‘different’ points of view entail adopting the perspective of an identifiable ‘narrator’, sometimes using the first person: this is the case for the female slave, who describes the archaic metopes in the audio-guide currently under construction for the National Archaeological Museum of Paestum (Boracchi & Dal Maso 2019); similarly, the first-person grass root perspective of youth narrates museums through web communication in the initiatives promoted by the ‘Invasioni Digitali’ (Dal Maso 2018b); finally a very peculiar narrator (though not in the first person) emerges in the ‘easy to read’ guidebook written by relationally and intellectually impaired

people (through Anffas association) for two temporary exhibitions in the Civic Museum in Cremona (Anffas Cremona Onlus 2019) and addressed to general public.

Indeed, it is this narrative element – the identity of the ‘narrator’ and the use of the first person in museum communication – the focus of my research. The narrator ‘guides’ the visitor and, especially in the first person, (s)he creates the mindset from which the museum will be experienced. An heterodiegetic omniscient narrator gives the ‘impersonal’ impression of objectivity to the contents transmitted by the institution in order to educate the public. An homodiegetic first-person narrator admittedly presents a partial and personal view of facts, denouncing the possibility of multiple views on the same topic. In the mildest scenario, it transforms ‘the museum’ into ‘the people who work in the museum’.

This paper does not aim at arguing for one narrative solution to be better than the other, as they both present strengths and weaknesses (if anything, one should recommend the combined use of both). It aims at investigating the current use of first-person narratives in Italian museums through an extensive survey: eventually it will provide a snapshot of the points of view that are currently represented in museum communication and the audiences they are proposed to, as well as the channels they use, relating them to the collections they have and the kind of institution they represent.

## Methods

This research in museum narrative aims at investigating the use of the first person in museum communication. The methodology used, however, will not rely on *exempla*, as is often the case in museum studies. I intend to conduct a qualitative-quantitative survey through a questionnaire. While questionnaires are usually quantitative data collection instruments, I introduced questions that allow for non-numerical and open-ended answers, or discursive specifications to numerical answers. The data collected through the questionnaire will be used to build a database that can be queried both statistically and by semantic analysis. Moreover, the analysis can be enriched and deepened through the opinions and specifications of single curators.

In this venue I present the construction and

validation of the questionnaire, through its submission to a first sample of museums. I also provide some preliminary results. In the near future it will be possible to spread it in a more capillary way, through the collaboration with central cultural institutions and international associations. The data thus obtained can then be processed with percentages and statistics, but also processed visually through semantic analysis, extrapolating the most appropriate methodologies from the social sciences.

Via this paper a small step is taken towards the systematization of museum research, following a principle of repeatability and interoperability of results. This will hopefully be of help for scholars and professionals who are faced with the daily problems of communicating museum collections, expanding museographical recommendations: instead of relying on individual case studies available in the literature, it will eventually be possible to use a large amount of data and produce generalizations, which further studies might confirm, revise and enhance.

The questionnaire was drafted in two parts: the first one was designed to obtain data on the institutions, the collections, the public and the media used by museums for communication; the second part revolves around the use of the first person in online and offline media.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 55 Italian museums, very heterogeneous in terms of geographical location, type of exposure, fruition. Similarly, the people to whom it has been addressed reflect this variability: curators, directors, private associations, volunteers (who are in charge of museum management and communication), educators, etc. This choice was determined by the desire to verify the validity of the questionnaire for different kinds of museums, which in turn imply a variety of activities and contents and a great heterogeneity.

Because of its quali-quantitative nature, it has been – and further will be – circulated via email, to the institutional addresses of museums. It will not circulate through social media and Facebook groups, in order to control that it is addressed only to professionals directly involved in curatorial choices. It will be built in Google Forms to facilitate the analytical process.

Data will be anonymised and analysed in accordance with European laws on statistical

data protection (EU Regulations 2009/223 and 2013/557). The questionnaire does not entail the collection of personal data. However, a database of institutional email addresses of museum professionals could be built for circulating the questionnaire. The latter will be hosted in a personal password-protected device and will not be shared with third parties, in observance of European laws on personal data protection (EU Regulation 2016/679).

## **Validation of the questionnaire**

Of the 55 museum professionals to whom the questionnaire was submitted, 7 completed it. One replied by email that in his museum the first person is not used and that it would be pointless to fill in the questionnaire. Consequently, the percentage of response is 12.7%. One of the completed questionnaires, however, provides data on a network of seven museums and each one of those can be considered individually in the database. For this reason, the preliminary results will be given on a sample of 13 museums.

In the questionnaire 29 questions are asked. On average, I received 27 answers per questionnaire, which is equivalent to a 93% response rate.

Through an analytical review of the answers, difficulties emerged in the understanding of some questions. This leads to minor modifications – clarification or further specification of existing questions – to be applied to the questionnaire before submitting it to more museums (in red in Figure 1). Let us delve into such revisions.

In one case question 15 was not understood, but in all other cases it was answered with extreme accuracy and it is not necessary to change it.

One museum professional showed incertitude in responding due to the peculiar nature of their institute, which does not have a permanent exhibition, but hosts a rotation of temporary ludic-didactic exhibitions. Therefore, questions 10 and 23, concerning the communication instruments used in the museum display, would require different answers for each exhibition. This problem could extend to any museum that has a wide range of temporary exhibitions. This raises the question whether temporary exhibitions should be included in this study. It has often been pointed out that temporary exhibitions are often the place for more

unorthodox and experimental museum choices, making their inclusion rather interesting. A phrase will be added to define a time frame for questions 10 and 23 and to include temporary exhibitions. The questionnaire will ask to specify whether the display is permanent or temporary.

In three cases, when the answer to questions 18 and 24 is “Real”, questions 19-22 and 23-27 are not filled in (or they are only partially answered). The questionnaire will be integrated asking to answer those questions in detail regardless of the answer given to questions 18 and 24.

In one case question 23 is given a negative answer, but questions 24-29 are filled in, which should not happen. Because of these difficulties, it was decided to make minor changes to the questionnaire before submitting it to more museums. All modifications are shown in red in Figure 1.

Questions 10, 12, 14, 15 and 16 underwent minor modifications, following the suggestions of the reviewers who revised this paper. They exclusively entail rephrasing for enhancing clarity and to avoid misunderstandings.

Since only minor revisions were required, the questionnaire can be validated.

## Preliminary results

The collected data allows formulating preliminary results on a sample of 13 museums. The number is clearly too small to obtain statistically relevant observations, but these data shall be useful to devise the direction of future queries.

The results can be summarised as follows.

Only two museums use fictional characters in the first person. In one case the character accompanies the visitor in the museum display, and in the other case it appears in online communication. In the first case it is a Roman child, who talks to young visitors and families through paper cards given at the entrance of the museum for individual use: their purpose is involving young public. The second fictional character is the Museum, which turns into a personalised narrator and is mainly used on Facebook.

Eleven of the thirteen analysed museums claim to use real-life first-person characters (i.e. museum operators). Ten out of eleven declared to use the first person in online

communication, particularly on Facebook. All ten museums, however, use at least two other social media platforms. While seven of those museums did not provide social media performance data, the other three show that Facebook reaches the largest number of people (in terms of followers/like to the page) on the museum’s social media channels. This is well in line with the aims pursued when using first-person narrative: only one museum does not indicate a clear goal, the others declare to pursue the engagement of a community and/or the need to reach as many people as possible. It is interesting to note that one museum admittedly does not use first-person communication with a clear purpose in mind. Those who do provide an explanation for using the first person – community engagement, reaching as many people as possible – seem to generally refer to effects they want to obtain from the use of social media, rather than goals they want to pursue using the first person. Thus, in these cases the first person appears to have an ancillary role, which responds to the medium rather than the narrative.

It should be noted that large statistical surveys on the use of social media by museums have also been provided by Civita (De Biase & Valentino 2016), by the Observatory for Digital Innovation in Heritage and Culture of the Politecnico di Milano (Innovazione Digitale nei Beni e Attività Culturali 2019), and by ICOM Italia (2019). Therefore, data on social media collected through the questionnaire discussed in this article can be compared with the national average and can be used for correlation analysis between variables.

In two cases a real-life first-person character is used for communication inside the museum, in one case during guided tours and in the other one in a guidebook.

Who are these real-life characters? How old are they, are they men or women, what is their role in the museum? A detailed answer to this question is provided for seven museums. The person ‘behind the screen’, using the first person in Facebook communication is a woman in her 40s, who lives in the vicinity of the museum and is in charge of the PR and Press Office for all seven museums. However, in online communication, while using the first person, her sex is not apparent. One could argue that she impersonates the museum.

In this case, as well as in others, I am under

the impression that, both in the answer to the questionnaire and in everyday practice, there is a conflation of the author (who could also write in the third person) with the 'narrator in the first person'. Having the possibility to check the answers against the content published in the social media platforms of museums, this 'confusion' becomes valuable information. It allows to investigate the notions and strategies (or lack thereof) involved in the adoption of a 'point of view' in social media communication.

In total, three museums report the use of first-person narrative in the display and ten declare to use it online. Only one museum uses a first-person narrator both online and in the exhibition.

Twelve museums use either fictional or real-life characters, and only in one case they use both. Only one museum does not use any first-person narrative.

It should be noted that in the only two cases when a specific target is identified, it refers to young visitors. In both cases, school-age visitors are a very relevant part of the public: 100% in one museum and 47% in the other. In one case, although not intentionally, the guidebook with the first-person narrator is mostly used by foreigners. Other museums indicated a generic target, literally 'as wide as possible'.

The main character in museum communication is 'The Museum' either personalized (i.e. 'the people who work in the museum') or depersonalized (i.e. 'the institution'). Choosing to present the museum as an impersonal institution with a strong principle of authority and an educational mission is, obviously, a legitimate choice. It should be noted that, out of the 13 analysed museums, the only one that does not use first-

person narrative is part of the Italian Ministry of Culture and it has over 400,000 visitors a year. While the data at our disposal do not allow for generalisations, it should be noted that in 2015 the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiBACT) issued a handbook of guidelines for museum communication (Da Milano, Sciacchitano 2015): the definition of narrators is not a part of it and examples are always given in the third person.

Summarising the preliminary results of this investigation, one could say that museums seem to rely more and more on the conscious expression of point(s) of view, getting closer to their public: the institution becomes the people who work there and for the most part they address their visitors directly. The point of view of the museum narrative, however, in most cases seems to stay the same, while only the register (also known as the diatype or style) of the narrative has been changed.

## Conclusions

Following its validation, the questionnaire can be submitted extensively, first to Italian museums and then to international ones. It will be necessary to devise a strategy to improve the response rate. This can be achieved both by acquiring the support of large institutions and networks (Poli Museali and Reti Museali) and by addressing the questionnaires directly to professionals/curators instead than to institutional addresses. Finally, emails should be supported by phone calls and reminders. The results, which will be published in one year, will present a rather rare example of a qualitative-quantitative study of museum semiotics.

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