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Narratives of Memory and Myth in the House of European History

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This article, co-authored by an international group of MA students, originates from a workshop which was part of the international blended learning seminar “Europe: Practices, Narratives, Spaces of Memory.” The seminar was comprised of 37 students from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Switzerland and was organized by Franziska Metzger (University of Teacher Education Lucerne), Katarzyna Bojarska (SWPS University, Warsaw/Jagiellonian University, Krakow), Christine Gundermann (University of Cologne), Marit Monteiro (Radboud University Nijmegen), Armin Owzar (University Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3), and Irmgard Zündorf (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam) with the support of the

two assistants, Gian Knoll (Lucerne) and Nellie Barner (Nijmegen).¹

Both conceptually and regarding specific thematic foci, the seminar dealt with narratives and practices of memory construction – its visualization, medialization, and materiality – and with uses of memory in past and present societies focusing on the analysis of museum exhibitions, websites, artworks, and literature. The innovative modes of collaboration in a blended learning setting concentrating on an online platform (Moodle) enabled transnational collaboration on conceptual, methodological, and concrete thematic issues. Conceptually, the seminar dealt with four aspects of the social and cultural academic concepts of memory approach: narratology, communication theory, and iconographic and media analysis. Current theoretical approaches and thematic foci in memory research were discussed and provided the framework for a concrete focus on the analysis of the usage and transformation – including the deconstruction – of narratives of memory by different agents in the public sphere as well as conflicts about the past; diverging, competing, and contested interpretations of history; and public debates about dominant or minority narratives of memory in the twentieth century and up to the present.

Mechanisms of mythicization and de-mythicization in Europe – under the title “Myths of Europe and Europe as Myth” – as well as questions regarding the influence and political use of such narratives were the central thematic perspective of the students’ group work, namely analyses of the exhibition “Liberation route Europe,” the “Europeana” website, the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the two museums that constitute the Historial of the Great War/Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, France, art exhibitions as a form of critical intervention, and narratives

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Figure 1: House of European History, Brussels, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.

of the Occident in art. In addition, an analysis of narratives of memory and mythicization formed the main framework for the seminar workshop at the House of European History in Brussels (HEH). The workshop was multi-faceted: it included a guided tour and several curatorial presentations; discussions with members of the Outreach and Learning Department of the HEH; students' group work; and two lectures by Pieter Lagrou (Free University of Brussels) and Chantal Kesteloot (Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society, Brussels) (See Figure 1).

We visited the HEH for three days in November 2019. At that time the House had already been open for two and a half years. The most heated debates about the House of European History, which was deliberately not called a museum, had taken place before it opened. Back in 2007, the then President of the European Parliament, German CDU politician Hans-Gert Pöttering, had called for the establishment of a House of European History. His idea was "to create a place where memories of our shared history and of the work of European unification could be nurtured."² But the question remained as to what "our shared history" was and who was meant by "us." After long public discussions, it was finally opened in May 2017 in the center of the European Quarter in Brussels as a "compromise."³

In preparation for the exhibition analysis, we read and discussed two articles about the HEH in addition to numerous reviews. The first criticized the HEH for not

paying much attention to the "global history of today's multicultural Europe,"⁴ while the other praised it for trying to write European history from a transnational perspective.⁵ The latter also pointed out the differences between the HEH and national museums of the nineteenth century. According to the author, Chantal Kesteloot, the HEH does not simply present a European success story, but primarily raises questions and stimulates discussions. In this process the visitors play a central role, and they are "expected to critique and participate."⁶ We took this as an invitation for critical exploration, asking initially how Europe and the memory of the European collective is constructed in the HEH. The students approached the exhibition from four vantage points, concentrating on the staging of the exhibition, objects, pictures and photos, as well as media usage. In each case, they asked questions about the selection and arrangement of the elements at the exhibition, the rationale behind it, what kind of reception might be expected, etc. In what follows, the results of the analytical approaches are briefly presented.

1 Staging

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When moving through a museum exhibition, a visitor is influenced not only by evident and noticeable elements of the exhibition, such as texts and objects. The staging and the subtle communication, that is established through exhibition design come together to form a symbolic communication level that affects the visitor.⁷ In this short analysis, we attempt to weigh and interpret the meaning found in the traditional elements of the exhibition strategies – the general layout, architecture, lighting, and color schemes, and the juxtaposition of themes of the House of European History's permanent exhibition. Secondly, we consider how these elements inform visitors' movements

² Hans-Gert Pöttering, "How the idea of a House of European History was born," in *Creating the House of European History*, eds. Andrea Mork, Perikles Christodoulou (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), 11.

³ Andreas Fickers, "Kompromissgeschichte, serviert auf dem 'Tablet.' Das Haus der europäischen Geschichte in Brüssel," in *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Ausgabe, 15 (2018), H. 1, <https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/1-2018/5574>.

⁴ Elizabeth Buettner, "What – and who – is 'European' in the Post-colonial EU? Inclusions and Exclusions in the European Parliament's House of European History," *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 4 (Dec. 2018): 132–148.

⁵ Chantal Kesteloot, "Exhibiting European History in the Museum. The House of European History," *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 4 (Dec. 2018): 149–161.

⁶ Kesteloot, "Exhibiting European History," 151.

⁷ Jana Scholze, *Medium Ausstellung: Lektüren musealer Gestaltung in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 19.



Figure 2: People with tablets in the exhibition, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.

in conjunction with the tablets used as interactive guides for visitors, acting as the primary source of written and oral information in all 24 official EU languages. There are almost no text explanations in the exhibition itself (See Figure 2).

The permanent exhibition of HEH unfolds on six separate floors, flowing chronologically from bottom to top and is divided into the following themes: “Shaping Europe,” “Europe: A Global Power. Europe in Ruins,” “Rebuilding a Divided Continent,” “Shattering Certainties” and “Accolades and Criticism.”⁸ The fifth floor focuses primarily on the period from the 1970s until today. The last floor is about the reception by the public and Europe seen from outside⁹. This layout could symbolically suggest ascension out of a politically tumultuous, war-ridden, and later, ideologically divided Europe into a community of cooperation, democracy, and free markets. The division of the themes through the five exhibition floors suggests that each separate historical period builds upon those that came before it.

Further supporting the representation of the EU as a higher goal to aspire to is the symbolic use of columns on the last floor. These pillars present various objects related to the formation of the EU throughout the hallway which juxtapose the free West and the dictatorial Soviet Union, suggesting that the EU is a governing body with the structural integrity needed to unite the East and the West. Another aspect to consider is the open-view floor plan. Visitors can see elements from other exhibition floors as they move through the space, giving a sense of freedom of movement.

⁸ For a more detailed breakdown of the five themes presented in each story, see the HEH website: <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/permanent-exhibition/shaping-europe>.

⁹ *House of European History. Guidebook. Permanent Exhibition* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

Looking through the open space, one can see fragmented links from past events and themes. This “freedom,” which is best experienced near the stairwells, stands in contrast to the tight spacing of some of the displays, such as the aforementioned pillars depicting various events and decisions leading to the establishment of the EU. This contrast evokes a broad, sweeping sense of European cohesiveness and, at the same time, an intimacy with the details that compose this unity.

As a visitor walks through the exhibition, the subtle use of lighting and color schemes emphasizes the ascent into an increasingly enlightened Europe. While the first floors begin with somber, dim lighting, some stairs lead to an area much more brightly lit. Similarly, the coloring on each floor reflects the level of freedom, peace, and technological advancement of each postwar period: darker, earthier tones set the scene on the first floors, while vibrant and lighter colors – mainly white, blue, and yellow – usher in the era of peaceful democracy and the EU. On the top floor of the exhibition, in the “Accolades and Criticism” section, visitors can sit below a giant screen, which presents a series of short vignettes in a kaleidoscope format. Notably, it is the first point of rest in the exhibition, with a bench that traces the curve of the circular screen above. It is also the first place where visitors may participate in a shared audio-visual experience in the form of a questionnaire, the results of which are aggregated and displayed on large video screens. Questions focus on inclusive topics like “What is Europe for you? What makes you feel European? What is Europe to you?” Vivid colors and dramatic shifts in lighting in the film, alongside the visitor data screens, create a sense of being enveloped in a vision of European unity (See Figure 3).

A quintessential example of how the placement of specific themes might influence a visitor’s view of historical events becomes apparent in the placement of the



Figure 3: Accolades and Criticism, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.



Figure 4: Life vest, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.

showcases presenting victims of the Holocaust. Situating these showcases side by side with video material of the aerial bombing during World War II, including the German victims of the Allied aerial strikes and resulting firestorms could potentially be misinterpreted as an attempted equivalency of the two horrors and encourage competing victim narratives. Another example is the small reference to the 2015 refugee crisis on the “Shattering Certainties” floor. There is a life vest, which provokes our imagination to recall drowning migrants scattered across the Mediterranean. Underneath is a drawer containing a map that illustrates in which direction telephone calls are heading outside the EU, alongside a list of documented refugee deaths over the past few years. Symbolically, the meaning of this arrangement leans towards something which links “raw data” (something filed away in drawers) and the actual, risked lives of non-European migrants and refugees making their way to Europe (See Figure 4).

Digital interfaces have become more prevalent in museum didactic strategies over the past decade. At the HEH, tablets provide the bulk of information on the content of the displayed exhibit. This intervention greatly influences how visitors engage with the museum space. The tablets provide details about the items on display as well as context and interpretation of these materials. Unlike traditional displays where audiences read words adjacent to their objects and navigate through museum space in specific patterns, at HEH visitors alternate between looking down at their devices and up to the objects on display.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Helen Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016) and Tony Bennett, “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Macdonald, Sharon, (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 263–281.

This alternation and habit of retrieving information on one’s own, at one’s own pace, in the EU language that is best suited to their needs, gives many visitors a sense of agency to come to an understanding of the exhibition.¹¹

Ultimately, the curators’ exhibition strategies – choices in lighting, use of architectural features, layout, and juxtaposition make it apparent that their intent was to communicate how Europe has transitioned from darkness to light and from a plurality of conflicting perspectives to open visions for a cohesive future. The tablets augment this master narrative by making it possible to present the exhibition in the 24 official EU languages and allowing for interaction with the objects and texts presented on the tablet, thus creating a more inclusive experience.

2 Objects

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In its mission statement, the House of European History declares itself committed to the presentation of European history in “all its complexity” and in “a way that raises awareness about the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations.”¹² In the making of the HEH, objects were envisioned as being crucial for designing such an explicitly European museum and can thus be considered central for realizing its stated mission objective.¹³ And indeed, the exhibit relies heavily on a lot of objects. But did the HEH, according to its normative framework, make appropriate use of them? And, if not, what alternative presentation strategies could be applied instead? A brief analysis of the HEH’s approach to object presentation needs to be established before such possible alternative strategies can be discussed. As this juxtaposition of questions already suggests, the HEH does not realize the full potential of its

¹¹ Visitors with hearing and visual impairments, mobility issues, and those who are less technologically inclined may find this agency diminished in comparison to the traditional model. This point was frequently brought up in our discussions about the HEH during the seminar.

¹² House of European History, “Mission & Vision,” <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/mission-vision>.

¹³ See Taja Vovk van Gaal and Christine Dupont, “The House of European History,” in *Entering the Minefields of New History Museums. Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels 25 January 2012*, eds. Axelsson, Bodil, Christine Dupont and Chantal Kesteloot (Linköping 2012), 43–54, 51.

objects by presenting them predominantly as *exemplars* when much more could be achieved by displaying them as *epistemic things* instead.¹⁴

The term “exemplar” derives from a heuristic model introduced by Thomas Thiemeyer, according to which things in a museum can either be presented as works of art, witnesses, or, as aforementioned, exemplars. While presenting an object as artwork draws attention to its originality and the genius of its creator, presenting the same thing as a witness makes it an attestor of a historical event or a historical figure. In both cases, the objects’ materiality serves as a guarantor of authenticity and can evoke a historical aura.¹⁵ Exemplars, on the contrary, are characterized by a more functional relationship between their materiality and their purpose as exhibition objects. Exemplary objects, as “placeholders in a scientific system,” serve as information media and specimen to illustrate or represent features of a style, an epoch, etc.¹⁶ As such, they are monosemic semophores; that is, they are prescribed a fixed meaning and function within an exhibition.¹⁷ Most objects within the HEH can be regarded as precisely that. This can be traced back to structural challenges faced by the curators prior to the actual design process, namely the lack of a preexisting collection, and the House’s origin as a political initiative undertaken by the European Parliament (EP).¹⁸

Without an on-site collection, the curators had to rely on loans and thus adapt to the fact that their exhibits were to be treated as immanently interchangeable from the very start of the project.¹⁹ In addition to that, considering the HEH’s political origins and the subsequent strivings to bring about narratological consensus between the different political groups inside the EP, the development of a



Figure 5: French Revolution, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.

clear-cut, thesis-focused narrative was unlikely at best.²⁰ Hence, the HEH’s permanent exhibition was eventually realized as a chronology. As such, it demarcates the EP’s smallest possible common narratological denominator as a timeline starting with the French Revolution, whereas pre-eighteenth century history is condensed and subsumed under labels such as “myths,” “heritage,” and “memory.”²¹

Chronology itself can, if put to work as an exhibition strategy, exert severe restraints on the objects in question. Reduced to mere illustrations for predefined meanings they, as material things, fade to the background all together.²² Herein lies the obstructionist nature of the exemplary thing: fixed as monosemic semaphore, it is deprived of its properties as an epistemic thing – that is a “thing that prompts questions,” remains open for interpretation, and that can be displayed as an omnipotent mnemonic signifier.²³ Exemplifying remarks on how these dynamics limit the House’s object presentation and how

¹⁴ For “exemplar,” see Thomas Thiemeyer, *Das Depot als Versprechen. Warum unsere Museen die Lagerräume ihrer Dinge wiederentdecken* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2018); for “epistemic things,” see Gottfried Korff, “Vom Verlangen, Bedeutung zu sehen,” in *Die Aneignung der Vergangenheit. Musealisierung und Geschichte*, eds. Ulrich Borsdorf, Heinrich T. Grütter and Jörn Rüsen (Bielefeld: transcript, 2004), 98; as well as Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Historische Epistemologie* (Hamburg: Junius, 2007).

¹⁵ Thiemeyer, *Das Depot*, 224–231; also see Thomas Thiemeyer, *Geschichte im Museum. Theorie – Praxis – Berufsfelder* (Tübingen: Narr Franke Attempto, 2018), 129–136.

¹⁶ Thiemeyer, *Das Depot*, 223, translated by the author.

¹⁷ Cf. Korff, “Vom Verlangen, Bedeutung zu sehen,” 96–97, for “semophores” as coined by Krzysztof Pomian.

¹⁸ Andrea Mork and Perikles Christodoulou, eds., *Creating the House of European History* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

¹⁹ Cf. Vovk van Gaal et al., “Exhibiting European History,” 46.

²⁰ Cf. van Gaal, 48, for the HEH as a political initiative and the curators’ implicit fears of this circumstance resulting in an “impoverished” narrative or even in a “boring museum.”

²¹ House of European History, “Permanent Exhibition,” <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/permanent-exhibition>.

²² Cf. Thiemeyer, *Das Depot*, 198; also Sharon Madconald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 93–94; and Stephen Bann, “The Return to Curiosity: Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Museum Display,” in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, Andrew McClellan, ed., (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 117–130.

²³ For an approximation of epistemic things, see Korff, “Vom Verlangen, Bedeutung zu sehen,” 98; also compare Gregor Feindt, Félix Krawatzek, Daniela Mehler, Friedemann Pestel and Rieke Trimçev, “Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies,” in: *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (February 2014): 24–44, 31–33, doi.org/10.1111/hith.10693, for mnemonic signifiers as “any socially relevant figurations of memory” and their counterparts, the mnemonic signified.

these limitations could be overcome will close this section on objects (See Figure 5).

The dimly lit section titled “Shaping Europe” opening the House’s permanent exhibition offers various examples for the dynamics described above, such as a carved wooden figurine of a pope dating back to the fifteenth century and a clay ballot from fifth century Greece.²⁴ As is suggested by their accompanying texts and presentation as “flattened,” that is objects enclosed in dark showcases visible from a single angle only, which does not single them out but subsumes them and other objects under the label of “European heritage,” their presence in the exhibition is not about the objects as unique material things. Rather, they are presented as exemplars of what their curators considered central elements of pre-modern European history and are thus reduced to their curators’ interpretations as symbols for such abstract things as “Christianity” or “democracy.” This discourages any further reflection or perspectives on them. Consequently, the visitor can only either embrace or reject their prefabricated signification.

Many other objects in different sections are presented in a similar way. Take, for instance, the object “Pistol as used in Sarajevo assassination plot” that introduces the section “Europe in Ruins.” The description marks the object as an exemplar illustrating an event on a timeline and deflects from any further debate concerning the actual significance of that event or, by extending the scope of possible topics by relying on the weapon’s materiality, the industrial structures that formed the backdrop of World War I.

In contrast to that, unlocking the epistemic potential of a given object could reverse the confined relationship between concept and material thing and make the object itself the “nexus of meaning.” This would leave the process of mnemonic signifying to the observers, enabling them to contribute their individual views.²⁵ In the case of the Pope figurine, if presented as an epistemic thing with no a priori meanings attached, it could appear as a true “social object”: for different European or global visitors, it could either evoke memories of religious-memorabilia-filled living rooms, prompt questions about the history and historical merging of European craftsmanship, or spark discussions about the Christian conquest of Europe beyond the river Elbe in the Middle Ages. These perspectives could then, by

employing the permanent exhibition’s accompanying tablet, be recorded and add on to the mnemonic properties of the original object through visitor participation.²⁶

These examples show to what extent the HEH’s presentation of objects as exemplars may obstruct its original mission. As illustrating monosemes, they do not only hinder the evocation of a true multiplicity of perspectives, but also the implementation of object-centered participation strategies, because their epistemic potential is veiled by prefabricated significations. If the HEH in the upcoming years wants to live up to its self-prescribed values, it should pay more attention to the material objects themselves.

3 Pictures and Photographs

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Among various representative mediums of collective European history on display, pictures and photographs are essential components for each and every room of the HEH. They serve a number of different purposes from floor to floor. According to historian Susan Crane, there are two main purposes of photography in museums, as art objects on display and as documentary evidence. She underlines that pictures “in the background” also serve as documentary evidence in the museum, “establishing a historical context for other objects or staging a visual argument.”²⁷ In the HEH, one can easily recognize a functional duality – visual materials are used simultaneously as background illustration or contextual supplement for collective memories and as documentary evidence. However, the function of an “art object on display” was not the main curatorial interest as unique artworks are substituted with copies and photographic blow-ups are displayed (See Figure 6).

Interestingly, the functionalization of image and photography happens throughout the exhibit. Pictures are shown together with other objects to support a certain argument or are used as decoration to create a specific atmosphere. Later we observe how photography functions as a work of art itself and, further on, even as a medium with which the audience can physically interact. On the sixth floor, one finds four reproduced blow-ups to be used by the

²⁴ House of European History, “Shaping Europe: European Heritage,” <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/permanent-exhibition/shaping-europe>.

²⁵ For the phrase “nexus of meaning,” see Stephen Bann, “The Return to Curiosity: Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Museum Display” in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), (quoted in Thiemeyer, *Das Depot*, 198).

²⁶ For the term “social object,” see Nina Simon: *The Participatory Museum*, <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter4/>.

²⁷ Susan A. Crane, “The pictures at the background: history, memory and photography in the museum,” in *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject* edited by Joan Tumblety, (London: Routledge, 2013), 123–139.



Figure 6: Pictures and Objects, © House of European History/ European Union, 2020 – EP.

audience as response sheets. The public is provided with a familiar image from a Beatles concert (1965), an image of a man with tears in his eyes (Romania, 1989), an image of the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp (Hanover, 1945), and an image of a migrant family (the 2010s). Visitors are given the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings in written form and attach them to a wall. In perusing the responses, we discovered that most of the attached responses conveyed a global message with a strongly represented national character. For example, “Fear no one. Never give up fighting for. We love E.U. Italy,” or “Europe is my home. It is where I belong. Romanian.” On the one hand, it means that despite globalization and unification, an individualization continues to exist. On the other hand, we see that people do not feel bound to their national borders and define themselves as being a part of Europe. Thus, the museum manages to achieve its goal of being an institution of transnational memory, which promotes a feeling of unity among people that further confronts racism and anti-immigration tendencies within society.

The choice of a photograph depicting the liberation of a concentration camp is particularly interesting. We tend to associate the event of the liberation with photographs from Auschwitz. However, the curators of the HEH decided to use an “unknown” picture from Hanover. Is it essential to know who took the picture? The curatorial choice could be purely pragmatic, motivated by possible complications with copyrights, or it could have had to do with the fact that Auschwitz, like most of the Nazi camps located within Poland, was liberated by the Soviets, which might complicate the European narrative.

Another interesting aspect of the exhibition with regard to photography and pictorial material is the HEH’s photography policy. By now digital cameras and the content we produce have become an integral part of our everyday desire

to document our lives. According to James Banks, “most of the learning takes place in informal environments and communities, and is deeply affected by the social, physical, and technological environment around us.”²⁸ Education is one of the main goals for the HEH as it is supposed to be “a forum for learning, reflection and debate.”²⁹ However, since the museum does not have a permanent collection, certain restrictions have been imposed by the institutions authorizing the loans of individual artifacts. As a result, it is forbidden to take pictures of the exhibited objects. This restriction changes the visitor’s experience by limiting knowledge construction and entertainment as they cannot produce and share the content. For instance, one of the issues the HEH could address in the future is how to “encourage students to think and act with objects.”³⁰

It will be compelling for everybody to visit the House of European History, a building of six storeys, five of which are devoted to a permanent exhibition organized around “shared and dividing memories”³¹ among European countries. The memory is visually transmitted to the audience and mediated through the photographs. In the HEH, the representativeness of the photograph tends to be the dominating quality for a display rather than its uniqueness or personal genius. As a result, the value that a visitor assigns to the object decreases due to its mere historical assessment and the visitor’s inability to engage with a primary source.³² Nevertheless, this widely used approach successfully imbues the sense of context in the HEH. Despite certain limitations, the exhibition corresponds to the aim of the museum. It encourages the viewers to respond to the pictures and allows them to gain desired knowledge.

4 Media Usage

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²⁸ Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, (Chicago IL: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 2008), 3.

²⁹ House of European History, “Mission & Vision.”

³⁰ Henriikka Vartiainen and Jorma Enkenberg, “Participant-led photography as a mediating tool in object-oriented learning in the museum,” *Visitor Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 2014): 66–88.

³¹ House of European History, “Mission & Vision.”

³² George E. Newman and Paul Bloom, “Art and Authenticity: The Importance of Originals in Judgments of Value,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141, no. 3 (August 2012 558–569. doi.org/10.1037/a0026035

Analyzing the medialization strategy of an exhibition means exploring the manner in which media³³ are integrated in the process of communicating the exhibit, including questions of exhibition technology, remediation, media choices, design, and spatial planning. That leads to a central question: How do media affect the visitor experience? Through a brief overview of the different media and the main discernable functions in the permanent exhibition, and a detailed analysis of the video *An Age of Dynamism* (an example of media used on a content as well as on a design level), we aim to reflect on the function the HEH assigns to media, questioning the way this serves the exhibition's purposes.

Some media are displayed as originals while others are embedded in a remediated construct serving the purpose of visualization. The HEH undoubtedly works on a multimedia basis including a variety of original material like film, music, radio, posters, and newspapers. Remediated media appear to be just as diverse: among them are edited sound and video clips, interactive visualizations such as maps and statistics (fourth floor), and some rare participatory experiences (sixth floor). Since these “processed media” are designed to serve specific communication concepts, they allow us to roughly outline the operating mode of different media usage.

Media can be used to engage the visitor's attention. Sound for example is used to favor a theme-based atmosphere and guides the visitors' emotional perception.³⁴ On the second floor, the looped playback of excerpts of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 accompanies the section on nation-building revolutions in mid-nineteenth century Europe, creating a euphoric aura. The sound of machines, providing an immersive entrance to the section dealing with industrialization (second floor), is another example. Images can serve the same purpose; in the section “Europe in Ruins,” for instance, visitors face impressively large backdrops in black and white, showing a soldier and later bombers – conveying ambiance as well as meaning, yet without preempting our main attentional focus. As a result of their spatiotemporal experience, visitors' attention on different media is meant to be unevenly focused. This implies dramaturgical choices underlining the exhibition's narration (See Figure 7).

³³ Media as a category of analysis are not easy to confine and we will stick to a wide definition of it, including different exhibited original media (what sources are exhibited) as well as multimedial arrangement (how media is integrated in the exhibition, meaning the medialization concept of the museum).

³⁴ For an overview on the challenges and possibilities of using sound in exhibitions, see Nikos Bubaris, “Sound in museums – museums in sound,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 29, no. 4 (July 2014), 391–402, doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2014.934049.



Figure 7: World War II, © House of European History/European Union, 2020 – EP.

In other places, media are used to pursue the opposite aim: the direct conveyance of information. This educational function can be defined as another type of media usage in the HEH. The most telling examples for this are the short documentary *Building Europe* (fourth floor), a chronological history of the origins of the European Union, or the video montage on the cultural and antique origins of Europe (first floor). These documentaries are constructed audio-visual narratives, communicating knowledge on cultural, political, and economic matters, providing at least a piecewise narrative in a more classical sense of the term. At some point, as we will see with *An Age of Dynamism*,³⁵ film clips of footage and film montages are employed without explanatory audio commentary. If the intention here is less directly educational, the arrangement still conveys information and meaning.

The role of media in the HEH cannot be discussed without mentioning the core function of the tablets. In order to avoid a selective approach, it is the HEH's firm principle not to provide a grand narrative but to continuously enable multidimensional access to the content; tablets can be seen as the central concept of medialization since they form its virtual pillar. While this individual guidance platform aims to improve the quality of the visitors' experiences, its handling can still be a major technical challenge, which in some situations can result in fragmenting visitors' experiences, detaching them from the physical flow of the exhibition.

The use of media directly relates to conceptual considerations in the organization of the exhibition as the

³⁵ In the curator's notes provided by the HEH, the video collage is called *Dynamism of the Time*. However, we will use the title that is used in the tablets, namely *An Age of Dynamism*.

example of *An Age of Dynamism* illustrates well. *An Age of Dynamism* is a video montage projected right behind the *crystal palace* on the second floor. It focuses on the nineteenth century in the light of industrialization, inventions, and imperialism, showing the first major movie attempts in Europe. Concepts such as remediation can help to analyze this video collage. According to Ann Rigney, remediation becomes essential in memory studies in the sense that specific stories considered crucial are being remediated several times.³⁶ Remediation focuses on the context in which media are re-used with several purposes. Also, it is convenient to consider Erll's traveling memory concept to examine the video *An Age of Dynamism*. According to Erll, memory does not have to be site- and place-bound but can and most likely will travel, and what is important is "how memory is doing this movement." Erll claims that memory has five different dimensions: people, media, forms, contents, and practices. Media, administered mostly by means of a portable tool, (i. e., via tablets), can make stories and images travel among themselves.³⁷

An Age of Dynamism contains footage from the first years of filmmaking. While a part of the audience will probably think of this footage as simply "old movies," a different, perhaps more educated audience might recognize the well-known pioneers of cinema such as the Lumière Brothers and Georges Méliès.³⁸ This inevitably results in an unequal museum experience, depending on parameters such as educational level or socioeconomic background. This experience can be considered as unequal because museum experience can only be an equal experience when people are given the same educational opportunities and equal access to information.

An Age of Dynamism is shown in the HEH's exhibition part on the era of technological improvements and the birth

of a dynamic life. When the video is examined in regard to its location and the surrounding exhibition area, it can be said that it cherishes the history of cinema as a European achievement. It is a reliable and natural conclusion given that the Lumière Brothers created the technological inventions that started cinema in France.³⁹ Companies such as Lumière and Pathé chose to send their operators to various parts of the world to capture short-term footage to show to audiences in Europe and to present to them a world they could not travel to. In this way, not only did footage from many parts of the world reach Europe, but the regions where the operators went were introduced to cinema technology. One of the films that *An Age of Dynamism* presents, *Istanbul or Constantinople, Turkey 1890s*, can be considered a solid example. The Lumière operator, who went to Istanbul in the 1890s not only carried the images he made of Istanbul back to Europe but also introduced this technological development to the Ottoman Empire. As a result of this exchange, the first public screenings in Ottoman Turkey started in 1899.⁴⁰ Both in Europe and in the Ottoman Empire, these so-called public screenings only appealed to a mostly male audience with financial means. This demographic trend applies to other regions as well, where cinema technology was available. It is possible to see how this elite cinema culture in Europe came into being if one considers that palace screenings started before public screenings in the Ottoman Empire, and public screenings were presented to an elite group.

An Age of Dynamism shows people and objects moving very fast, in contrast to what today's audiences are used to. This situation, which emerged due to the technology of the period, successfully contributes to the purpose of this part of the exhibition. The audience encounters an accelerated, dynamically flowing view of life. While the development of an elitist understanding contradicts the teaching-oriented aspect of the HEH, it is also the main evidence that the museum follows more than one approach. To understand the content, the audience needs additional information about the films in the collage. Yet the only information provided by the tablet are the names of the films: it does not provide contextualization. Although the HEH has an educational approaches by not providing basic information, the institution risks creating inequality among the audience. In this perspective, a parallel can be drawn between the elitism of the first filmgoers and the HEH's audience: knowledge strongly depends on social and

³⁶ Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," NIMTES (Network in Transnational Memory Studies), Goethe University, Frankfurt, online video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psV9D09Swho>.

³⁷ Erll, "Travelling Memory."

³⁸ *An Age of Dynamism* is a collage of the following films: *Film header countdown* (Huntley Film Archives), *Panorama pris d'un train pris en marche – 1898/Panorama from top of a moving train* (BFI National Archive), *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899) (BFI), *View from an Engine Front - Barnstaple* (1898) (BFI), *View from the Front of a Suspended Monorail, 1890s* (Huntley), *Vienna 1900 Pictures of a Metropolis Vienna Tramway Ride* (Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna), *The Motorist* (1906) R.W. Paul (BFI), *Early Traffic 1890–1899* (British Pathé), *The Conquest of the Pole* (1912) – Georges Méliès (BFI), *Launch of a Liner* (Huntley), *Launch of a Ship Hull* (Huntley), *A Trip to the Moon* – Georges Méliès 1902 (BFI), *Istanbul or Constantinople, Turkey 1890s* (Huntley), *Man Walking* – E. J. Marey (Huntley), *Horse Jumping* (Huntley), *Dog* – E. J. Marey (Huntley), *Man Does a High Jump* – E. J. Marey (Huntley), *Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Institut Lumière).

³⁹ The Lumière Brothers called their invention a cinematograph.

⁴⁰ Nijat Özön, *Türk Sineması Tarihi* (İstanbul: Doruk Yayıncılık, 2010).

financial conditions. Because of the visitors' differing levels of knowledge, both the original films and *An Age of Dynamism* as a remediation, cannot be perceived in the same way by different visitors. In this way the medium takes on an elitist position, and the remediation concept of this collage and accepting cinema as a purely European achievement, silences the links between other regions, reifying the colonial interpretation.

The media usage of the HEH is part of a contemporary approach to a multimedia meaning-creation throughout the exhibition. Media are a basic design element of the museum, in many ways supporting and enhancing the experience. The tablet in particular provides concrete solutions to the museum's multilingual context. Due to the absence of texts, supplementary media becomes an important means of conveying meaning to visitors. However, the absence of references creates an exhibition that relies on knowledge visitors already have, thereby perpetuating pre-existing visions and shared memory of Europe by a (probably) elite public. It is becoming clear that besides the choice of media itself, its editing and content, the spatial arrangement within the exhibition is a further crucial component of the multimedia concept within a museum. This close examination of *An Age of Dynamism* shows possible challenges, but it also highlights the great potential that lies within the multimedia setting of this European project. It is to be hoped that in the future medialization will be further developed to realize a more participatory and inclusive approach.

5 Coda

Our perspectives and approaches have been genuinely transdisciplinary and transnational; the students have been trained in public history, cultural studies, visual culture, and memory studies. Our numerous discussions have thus been inspired by various readings and methodologies and have been informed by our activities and engagements within and outside of academia as cultural critics and practitioners (including museum workers), as citizens, migrants, teachers, journalists, activists, etc. To consciously engage all of these subject-positions became a precondition for this undertaking: to de-construct the "house" which has been constructed for us (the mechanism of inclusion/exclusion in the museum's narrative and performance has been carefully examined). This collaboration has been challenging as well as extremely creative in the sense that we came together to discuss the matters which included and implicated all of us in many ways, but

also to confront our own expectations and limitations as to what we are and what we are becoming as participants of the shared public sphere. To experience and discuss the exhibition of the HEH meant to be critical and self-critical, reflective and self-reflective, respectful and suspicious, devoted and distanced, and also ready to negotiate one's own position vis-à-vis the expectations and constraints of institutions such as museums or schools, and of comradeship. The support that we received from the staff helped us in forming these positions.⁴¹ We followed the public debates accompanying the opening of the HEH and we acknowledge the complex political and economic factors, and yet we have allowed ourselves to remain "naïve" and sincere in approaching the premise and promise of this non-museum. Entering the building in Parc Léopold – the former charity dental clinic for children funded by George Eastman (the owner of Kodak) – we could not help but feel and welcome the palimpsestic nature of this site of history, a kind of historical witness in itself, which has now been offered to us as "our own," a site where not only the content of our collective identity and memory is being put on display, but where the very form of it is supposed to be reworked or worked through with us as active participants in the process.

The framework within which we have operated was that of hospitality, a demanding affective relationship – an act of receiving and being received which seems to be of concern to people (us), museums, and Europe alike. And it is between the law and the laws – as Jacques Derrida distinguished them – that we keep negotiating our epistemological, moral, and political positions:

The law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional, as they are defined by the Greco-Roman tradition and even the Judaeo-Christian one, by all of law and all philosophy of law up to Kant and Hegel in particular, across the family, civil society, and the State.⁴²

⁴¹ Our cordial thanks go to the staff of the House of European History who hosted our workshop, above all Ewa Goodman, Head of Learning and Outreach Department; the two educators, Laurence Bragard and Blandine Smilansk; Christian Url, responsible for strategic outreach and audience engagement; and the two curators, Simin Badica and Kieran Burns. They supplied us with interesting insights into the development of the permanent exhibition and the projects of the Outreach Department and candidly discussed our perceptions and assessments of the HEH.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.