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# MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AND SUSPENSE

THE USE OF SCREENWRITING TECHNIQUES  
IN CURATORIAL PRACTICE

Ariane Karbe



ROUTLEDGE



# Museum Exhibitions and Suspense

*Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* takes insights from screenwriting to revolutionise our understanding of exhibition curating.

Despite all genuine efforts to reach broader audiences, museums persistently fear risking their credibility by becoming ‘too popular’. Thus, the enormous potential to learn from other storytelling forms more experienced in the field of entertainment remains essentially unexploited. *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* unlocks this creative potential. A comparative in-depth analysis of three classical Hollywood films and three cultural historical exhibitions demonstrates how *dramatic* suspense techniques can be applied to exhibitions. These techniques must be adapted to the typical *epic* character of the exhibition medium. By differentiating between *mild* and *wild* suspense the book provides a new understanding of the nature of suspense itself.

*Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* addresses academics and students in the fields of museum studies, gallery studies and heritage studies interested in how exhibitions function and in how to achieve dramaturgical effects like suspense. It also appeals to scholars and students within film studies who want to gain a deeper understanding of suspense. It provides an important resource for curators and other museum practitioners and scriptwriters who intend to create stories with a wide audience appeal.

**Ariane Karbe** is an independent curator and museum consultant with over 20 years of experience in developing exhibitions. She holds a PhD in museum studies from University of Leicester and trained as a scriptwriter at the Filmschool Hamburg Berlin. Her passion is to use storytelling to make museums more inclusive places.

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# **Museum Exhibitions and Suspense**

The Use of Screenwriting Techniques in  
Curatorial Practice

**Ariane Karbe**

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**To my mother Gundula Karbe, née Komossa,  
who taught me to learn**



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# Introduction

The museum landscape is becoming increasingly lively and democratic in many respects. More and more exhibitions are developed with the involvement of the public, and creative educational programmes are aimed at various groups of visitors. Approaches like the *Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* place the visitors at the centre of all museum work, and concepts like that of the *Socially Inclusive Museum* focus on social groups that have been neglected in the museum for too long.<sup>1</sup> The power relations within the institution of the museum are being called into question by the decolonisation movement, and conservative patterns are being set in motion by digital transformation and Agile project management. Another lever that can be used to override authoritarian and exclusive structures is – and this is what *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* advocates – to take entertainment<sup>2</sup> more seriously than ever. Because despite all these positive developments, such long-standing structures that are shaped by and primarily orientated towards an educational elite are still effective. They play a major role in determining which cultural phenomena are worth exploring and presenting and how this should be done. Blockbuster exhibitions may suggest something else, but many people still associate ‘museum’ with being ‘boring’ (Wegner 2010, 131–133; Tyradellis 2014; Brasseur 2019, 129–131; Black 2021, 81). If the desire to address broader and more diverse population groups is really taken seriously and museums are actually to become more inclusive, it is necessary to ask which forms of communication are needed in order to be popular<sup>3</sup> with broad sections of the population. One answer is: It should be exciting (Vorderer 1997; Hastall 2013, 263; Bálint et al. 2017, 180).

Given the important role suspense plays in the choice and evaluation of entertaining media offerings by a broad audience, it is remarkable how little suspense has been examined in relation to exhibition making so far.<sup>4</sup> One reason could be the curators’ and museum scholars’ fears of manipulating museum visitors using emotions; another reason could be the fear to oversimplify complex science-based contexts. As Elaine Heumann Gurian (1991, 182) puts it: ‘Museum professionals do not want to be in show business; we want to be in academia’. But I, myself a curator, wish to reply: We are in ‘show business’. Heumann Gurian (ibid.) continues: ‘And yet, like it or not, exhibitions are in part public entertainment’. In my view, curating means, first and foremost, communication with the audience – this



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does not necessarily mean to lose sight of your scientific standards. It means to communicate contents in a way audiences best understand and engage with them. Doing this with the help of suspenseful stories seems to be a promising perspective. Suspense can keep audiences interested. Underlying the research presented in this book is the assumption that creating suspenseful exhibition narratives holds the potential to support museum visitors' hunger for learning.<sup>5</sup>

But what exactly is suspense? And what is suspense in relation to exhibitions? Can exhibitions be told as excitingly as films? How precisely can suspense be created in them? To answer these questions I used classical Hollywood films<sup>6</sup> for comparison. Not only are classical Hollywood films some of the most popular media, but suspense plays an outstandingly important role in them. Specifically, I analysed the films *All About Eve* (1950), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Chinatown* (1974) in comparison to three exhibitions: *Zersägt. Ein Krimi um barocke Theaterkulissen* [Sawn: A Crime Featuring Baroque Backdrops], *Berge, eine unverständliche Leidenschaft* [Mountains, a Mysterious Passion] and *Die Leidenschaften. Ein Drama in fünf Akten* [The Passions: A Drama in Five Acts]. There was another reason why I chose classical Hollywood films for comparison. While there are many guides on how to organise an exhibition, there are none on how to write an exhibition script.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there are many manuals for writing popular films. My intention was to use these manuals to understand as precisely as possible how suspense is created in films and to derive concrete guidelines for curating from them.

The book shows that this literature is helpful in understanding how to build suspense and does contain concrete advice for museum work. However, it also shows that these screenwriting tools, introduced in Chapter 4, need to be modified for exhibition making. Firstly, the comparison with popular films reveals how fundamentally they differ from exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> While classical Hollywood films, in their pure form, are thoroughly dramatic, exhibitions can be understood as fundamentally epic, a difference Chapter 8 will discuss in detail. For this reason, I included non-classical films in the analysis via Dagmar Benke's *Freistil* [Freestyle] (2002), which is one of the rare manuals addressing such films. Secondly, the film and exhibition analyses illustrate that the function of the individual technique is not fixed but constituted in the context of the overall story and all other dramaturgical means applied, depending as well on the respective medium. Narratologist Meir Sternberg named this phenomenon the 'Proteus Principle' after the sea god of Greek mythology who could assume all sorts of shapes. Sternberg (1982, 148) explains that this 'law of communication' means that 'in different contexts . . . the same form may fulfil different functions and different forms the same function'. So to be able to create suspense in exhibitions, it is not enough to know the techniques; you also must understand how suspense and how the exhibition medium works. This knowledge is what *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* makes available to its readers. Please note that suspense is understood in the scope of this book always as narrative suspense, i.e. suspense triggered by textual features.<sup>9</sup>

What is essential here is that the book departs from the equation of suspense and dramatic suspense, which has dominated suspense research to date, and instead

brings the whole range of the phenomenon into focus. Although literary and film studies are increasingly paying attention to non-dramatic suspense, this has so far only marginally touched the general discourse. I will elaborate on this point in Chapter 1. This is important because the exhibition medium is only conditionally suitable for dramatic suspense, namely the anticipation of the outcome of a story accompanied by feelings like hope and fear but all the better for milder forms. This is a result of the exhibition analyses presented in Chapter 6 and the thought experiment that follows in Chapter 7. To highlight the diversity of suspense, I introduce the distinction between ‘mild’ and ‘wild’ suspense.

It is useful, as the book shows, for comprehending how suspense works in the exhibition medium to consistently understand exhibitions as stories. But wait, what is a story anyway? What makes an exhibition a narrative? Unlike films or books, exhibitions cannot be told in a strictly linear fashion since visitors move autonomously through the space. What does that mean when stories have been understood since Aristotle as something that has a beginning, middle and end (see Baroni 2016b, 1)?<sup>10</sup> Just as the concept of ‘narrative’ helps to understand the build-up of suspense in exhibitions, the phenomenon of suspense helps to understand the narrative character of exhibitions and to answer these questions. Sternberg considers suspense, curiosity and surprise, which he summarises with the term ‘narrative interest’, as master forces strongly affecting all other aspects of a story. He argues that ‘there is no narrative sequence without narrative interest to propel and channel our movement (complete with all sense-making operations) through the discourse’ (1992, 534). This is the reason Raphaël Baroni (2007, 17) speaks of suspense as ‘the vital heart of narrativity’.<sup>11</sup>

The difference between ‘discourse’ and ‘story’ plays a prominent role in the definition of narrative and will be explained in detail in Chapter 2. Here it can be briefly described as the difference between the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of a narrative. The ‘what’ is the ‘story’ or ‘fabula’, what happened. The ‘how’ is the ‘discourse’ or ‘plot’, hence how the story is told and specifically which events are selected and in which order they are arranged. The plot level will be of particular interest throughout the book, comparable, for instance, to the film analyses conducted by Michaela Krützen (2006, 2010). An interpretation, discussion or enquiry of the events represented in the films and exhibitions is not intended. There are two reasons for this. First, suspense is aroused in the audience by the creation of informational gaps (Segal 2011, 302) and can be thus understood as a ‘game with structure’ (Barthes 1977, 119). Simply put, only if first a question is raised and then answered can suspense be evoked. Second, narrative structure has been a central theme for designers and architects (Hagebölling 2004; Psarra 2005; Greenberg 2005; Basu 2007; MacLeod et al. 2015; den Oudsten 2016; Piehl and Francis 2018; Duncan 2017, 2018; Austin 2020) but has received too little attention from curators. Likewise, the general narrative quality of exhibitions has already been described from the design side (MacLeod 2005; MacLeod et al. 2012; MacLeod et al. 2018; Austin 2020; Piehl 2021) but remains somewhat under-researched from the curatorial side.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the book considers style, which Eric S. Rabkin (1973) identifies as one of four levels of narration being important for

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narrative suspense, only marginally and focuses instead on the other three levels: plot, character and theme. Nevertheless, the exhibition analyses show the importance of scenography for creating suspense in exhibitions. By demonstrating how strongly attractive objects and spaces can support the forward movement of the visitors despite their static and consequently low narrative nature, *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* contributes to transmedial narratology. This is one strand of postclassical narratology that the book draws on; the other is cognitive narratology. Transmedial narratology helps to explore the medium-specificity of exhibitions, while cognitive narratology explores the role of the audience in the process of meaning making.

All in all, the book foregrounds the curator's perspective. Consistently conceiving exhibitions as narratives assigns them a role as storytellers. Such an understanding is not intended to give them more authority in the sense of control, a point I will return to, but to make it clear that their task, in close collaboration with educators and designers, is to enable visitors to make sense. Stories can help make museums less intimidating places; they can be inspiring, educational and, yes, thrilling. To achieve this goal in the best possible way it is necessary to question one's own position, as the book also shows. Although I wanted to purposely exclude the position of the authors or curators for reasons I will explain hereafter, it became apparent during my research that this was not reasonable. Their convictions and intentions shape stories to such a high degree that they must be considered if dramaturgical means are to be able to unfold the desired effects. The attitudes of the authors, in this case the curators, are consciously or unconsciously strongly influenced by the discourses they share. Therefore, in the following chapter I will discuss the two main concepts of suspense and narrative in the context of these discourses and show which values and approaches were and are effective here.

Before that, I would like to clarify one point. Even if I am in favour of diversity within the museum landscape and also consider exhibitions that solely pursue the purpose of being entertaining to be legitimate and valuable in their own right, my personal interest is directed towards exhibitions that support learning in the broadest sense.<sup>13</sup> I consider it one of the most precious potentials of cultural historical exhibitions (and it is on these where this book focuses) that they enable visitors to put their point of view into perspective and to get their thinking going.<sup>14</sup> By making the history of cultural phenomena vivid, it becomes clear that they are created and shaped ultimately by individual people – and thus that they can be changed. In the best case, the visitors look at their own creative power with new eyes and ask themselves: How do I want to live? They are enabled to realise that their individual answer is not the only real one (see Hochmuth 2020, 63–64). This insight is a crucial prerequisite for respectful dialogue between individuals and groups with different beliefs and especially valuable in challenging times. *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense* intends therefore to open possibilities up to support exhibitions' educational effectiveness by integrating entertaining elements. I hope that this book will contribute to create – to adapt Benke's (2002, 9) statement about unconventional films – exhibitions 'for the heart and for the mind'.

## The structure of the book

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework for the study and introduces the key concepts of suspense and narrative. The following four chapters explore the phenomenon of suspense from different angles and establish thus the basis for the analysis of the exhibitions. Chapter 2 defines ways of telling an exciting story regardless of the medium. The focus is on how authors select and arrange events in order to create audience suspense. Chapter 3 explains how dramatic suspense functions in classical Hollywood films and focuses on the perspective of the viewers. Using cognitive film theory, it unfolds how films must be structured so that viewers are motivated to comprehend the story and experience this activity as entertaining. Chapter 4 introduces dramaturgical tools that manuals suggest to screenwriters to create suspense. The film analyses in Chapter 5 illustrate how the suspense techniques are applied in the specific case. It also explores if other means are used and if other types of suspense are created apart from dramatic suspense. In fact, the analyses show that besides dramatic suspense, a suspense of a milder kind is also effective.

Based on the profound understanding of suspense developed in the previous chapters, Chapter 6 examines if and how suspense is created in three cultural historical exhibitions and if the dramaturgical means described are used for this purpose. The results show that some of the techniques are used to create mild suspense, but no dramatic suspense is created with their help. Since the objective of the three selected exhibitions was not to create dramatic suspense throughout, as is the aim for classical Hollywood films, Chapter 7 undertakes a thought experiment: Would it be possible to apply the techniques in such a way that dramatic suspense could actually be created? This, it is concluded, would indeed be possible but only to a certain extent. The reason for this is the fundamentally epic nature of the exhibition medium that has become apparent through the in-depth comparison with the three popular films which are identified as profoundly dramatic. Chapter 8 therefore explains how dramaturgical suspense techniques can be applied in epic narratives, specifically in epic films and therewith also in exhibitions. The Conclusion summarises the major findings of the book. Finally, the Outlook shows possible solutions to the dilemmas that can arise when trying to use the techniques for (critical) curating. This opens perspectives to how suspense can become seminal for inclusive museum activities.

## Notes

- 1 Franklin Vagnone and Deborah Ryan present their approach in their *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (2015). The concept of the 'socially inclusive museum' was first introduced by Richard Sandell (1998).
- 2 Following Vorderer (2021, 131), I understand entertainment experiences as 'those that serve media users' hedonic interests and motivations and lead to (or are at least intended to lead to) the positive affective states that these media users prefer over noxious ones'.
- 3 For a discussion of the problematic use of the term popular versus non-popular see Hollows and Jancovich (1995).

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- 4 A rare exception, and an important reference for my research, is Werner Hanak-Lettner's *Die Ausstellung als Drama. Wie das Museum aus dem Theater entstand* [The Exhibition as Drama: How the Museum Originated from the Theatre] (2011).
- 5 Research on learning motivation has so far focused on interest and curiosity which are both closely related to suspense; see for instance Shin et al. (2019).
- 6 Throughout the book, the terms 'classical Hollywood film' and 'popular film' are used synonymously to refer to the type of film not necessarily produced in Hollywood but written to reach broad audiences and characterised by narrative closure and other distinctive features (see Eder 2007). These features will be described in detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.
- 7 For example, although Dean (1996, 103–106) discusses the development of a storyline, his explanations remain vague as to the exact elaboration of the exhibition concept.
- 8 I will not go into the difference that classical Hollywood films are fictional works whereas cultural historical exhibitions are based on facts. It is true that the fact that recipients expect a higher degree of coherence and meaningfulness from fictional texts (Wolf 2003, 187) also plays a role in the perception of suspense. By treating them equally, however, I wanted to emphasise the fictional parts of exhibitions (see Parry 2013, 18) and thus their potential changeability.
- 9 I thus exclude suspense that can be created through life events. In addition, I focus on suspense created by content, even if, for example, the use of music or stylistic elements are closely interwoven with it and can also be considered as narrative.
- 10 This means that a story starts by giving the information necessary for the readers to follow the ensuing developments, proceeds with a conflict and ends with closure, as Carroll explains (2016, 286–288).
- 11 I have translated all foreign-language quotation.
- 12 The concept of narrative is firmly anchored in museum literature in general, exemplified by the work of Mieke Bal, as the Chapter 1 will unfold. However, from a curatorial point of view, narrative was mainly discussed as a perspective that potentially excludes other perspectives (e.g. Witcomb 2003; Martinz-Turek and Sommer 2009). Collections of essays or monographs that comprehensively examine exhibitions from a narratological perspective or in terms of creative storytelling and not focussing on design have been largely lacking. One exception is the book by Stephan Jaeger (2020), who makes the concept of experientiality, borrowed from narratology, fruitful for the analysis of how exhibitions emotionalise visitors.
- 13 Following the definition introduced by Hooper-Greenhill (2007, 31) which she adopted from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), I understand learning as follows: 'It may involve increase in or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes and the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more'.
- 14 Smith (2021, 77) rightly points out that visiting museums and heritage sites does not automatically lead to learning but can just as easily reinforce the status quo.

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