

Absence as Presence, Presence as Absence: Museological Storytelling in Berlin

Joshua Parker

Volume 3, Number 1, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062054ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062054ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative, St. Thomas University

ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Parker, J. (2013). Absence as Presence, Presence as Absence: Museological Storytelling in Berlin. *Narrative Works*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062054ar>

Article abstract

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Absence as Presence, Presence as Absence: Museological Storytelling in Berlin

Joshua Parker
University of Salzburg

This article examines a long history of objects' use in "telling stories," and speculates on how museums and other art forms might encourage "narrations" while leaving story-telling to visitors or viewers. David Chipperfield's 2009 "restoration" of Berlin's Neues Museum made great efforts to preserve traces not only of the objects displayed inside, but to present an open-ended "narrative" of the building's own history. Attempts at making historical sites "tell" stories have, meanwhile, also extended into other visual arts in Germany, of which the article examines several, discussing them in relation with the concept of "postmemory" and national narratives of identity.

Museum studies and museology have made increasing references to notions of narrative and narrative theory in recent decades. A perusal of university museum studies programs' literature quickly reveals the widespread popularity of the term "narrative" in the field, now an almost unavoidable catchword in a range of recently published textbooks, articles, conference calls for papers, and essay collections. The "narrative turn" would seem to have found a warm hearth in this branch of applied humanities. Yet museums and the ways their designers and curators "tell stories" for the most part remain a footnote to narrative theory itself. This article proposes that as museum studies has borrowed heavily from narratology's toolbox of terms in recent years, narrative theory might likewise look to museums to enrich its own approaches to a wide range of contemporary cultural phenomena employing narratives—including museums themselves.

In its early history, the *museum* as a concept was not necessarily a physical building for housing a collection of objects, but more abstractly a mental or printed text offering a space for the "cognitive contemplation" of "the disposition of things, the structural relationship that governs their

placement” (Ernst, 2000, p.18). As such, it held the potential for functioning much like a narrative structure and, as it took form in material buildings open to a wider public, such a structure made physical in space. One of the most popular recent textbooks in museum studies reviews a more contemporary “textual approach,” involving reading a museum’s “narrative structures and strategies.” This approach was introduced in the 1980s with a view toward analyzing “spatial narratives set up by the relationship of one gallery or object to another,” or “the narrative strategies and voices implicit in labeling, lighting, or sound” (Mason, 2011, p. 26). For Roger Silverstone (1989), “study of the narrativity of the museum or the heritage display” had involved “a study of an exhibition’s capacity to define a route (material, pedagogic, aesthetic) for the visitor” (p. 143), much as a narrator’s voice in linguistic texts guides readers through a plot. Yet since Silverstone’s work, a “New Museology” has been challenging museums’ “linear narrative structure,” if with often uncertain results (Witcomb, 2003, p. 130). Rhiannon Mason (2011), among others, remarks on a more recent move toward “audience-oriented approaches” in museum design (p. 27). If, as Mason writes, these types of approaches are often “unsettling to [museum] curators” (p. 28), this is perhaps because museology as a field attracts as many budding curators and exhibition designers as it does those who would study museums’ narrative structures in and for themselves. And while narratology, by contrast, is not traditionally a prerequisite field of study for budding novelists, filmmakers, or comic strip illustrators, it *is* one dedicated to the study of their work’s structure and effects as narratives, and should be, too, for studying museums as purveyors of narratives.

A somewhat rare example of direct dialogue between museum studies and narratology came in a recent response to “Voices in (and around) the Museum,” a British lecture series focused on “voices emanating from objects and subjects in the museum” (Centre for Museums, Heritage and Material Culture Studies, 2011). A blogger from the Centre for Narrative Research, having attended the series, asked readers the question, “Do objects tell stories?” The blogger admitted to being “troubled by the question of what kind of narratives objects are supposed to voice,” asking “Why are narratives displaced onto the object?” and pointedly underlining that “it’s not objects that tell stories,” but instead “*people* who *use* objects to tell stories.” So why, the frustrated blogger asked, “do we continue to submit to the idea that objects tell stories?” (Sandino, 2011; emphasis added). Decades ago, Mieke Bal (1992) had commented on the “voice” museum exhibitions use to

narratize the objects they display, suggesting curators could do more to increase visitors' awareness of the museum's own history of animating the "voices" of artefacts. Her call, the blogger's reaction suggests, would seem to have gone overlooked, if not by museums, then at least by some of the discussions their work generates.

A counterpoint might be found in the history—and in the present-day incarnation—of Berlin's newly re-opened Neues Museum. Designed in 1855 by Friedrich August Stüler, the museum was originally conceived as a complex of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, Byzantine, Renaissance, and "modern" areas, each a self-contained environment with walls and ceilings frescoed, carved, or painted to reproduce the style of the objects on display in it. These period-decorated galleries were meant to enhance visitors' experience by allowing them to seemingly enter history, which was not just on display behind glass, but surrounded them on all sides, as if they had been transported to another time and another place themselves. Visitors' movement was meanwhile guided through the ground floor's Egyptian rooms, up a grand staircase toward Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and classicist galleries on the first floor above, and finally further up along the grand staircase to rooms of early Prussian artifacts and contemporary works on the museum's top floor. The museum's unfolding "story" thus provided an inherent cultural and political message. Inspired by Hegelian philosophy, Stüler's layout of exhibition space presented history as a linear, progressive development, slowly mounting toward and culminating with the then-present Prussian state.

Perhaps there is nothing inherently wrong with guiding a visitor chronologically through history, or even a story, in a museum. It is certainly currently done elsewhere, often to great and popular effect. The path for visitors moving through Daniel Libeskind's 2001 Jewish Museum in Berlin is marked with arrows, so none can stray from its architecturalized narrative of Jewish history in Berlin, leading through galleries of artifacts reflecting Jewish cultural life in the city over progressive centuries, only to culminate with a staircase leading pointedly to a blank wall. Munich's Neue Pinakothek offers a more traditional arrangement of chronological narrative. Like many art museums with collections spanning vast swaths of time, the Neue Pinakothek arranges its paintings in chronological order by date. A circuit tour "begins" with a gallery of eighteenth century portraits off the main hall, then circles clockwise through the nineteenth-century collection toward its "conclusion" with German expressionism, from which one exits back into

the main hall. When I first visited to see the expressionist collections, a guard blocked my path. “The museum starts on the other side of the hall,” he said, pointing toward the eighteenth century gallery. “This is the exit.” It was only with protest that I was allowed to begin my visit in reverse order, reminded of P.T. Barnum’s “This way to the egress” signs, the carnivalist’s ploy to move lingering visitors through from entrance to exit more quickly. But if museums are obliged to have entrances and exits, do they really require the beginnings and endings we expect of a narrative in order to “tell stories?” And do such beginnings and endings make the stories they allow us to tell more satisfying? If, as Lefebvre (1991) wrote, “time is known and actualized in space, becoming a social reality by virtue of a spatial practice” (p. 219), Stüler’s original arrangement of the Neues Museum’s collections, and the narrative such an arrangement implied, was not only a question of historical accuracy, but of a narrative spatialization of time.

Stüler’s museum was itself dramatically called into the pages of history when it underwent heavy bombing and shelling in 1945, then was left on history’s sidelines for sixty years, abandoned, overgrown, and decaying in Berlin’s center. It was the marks of this physical history of the museum that British architect David Chipperfield hoped to preserve in his 2009 reconstruction, reopening the museum after decades of nearly complete neglect and exposure to the elements. If any Hegelian unity is to be found in its current incarnation, it is a unity of destruction and time. Like Stüler’s design, Chipperfield’s museum focuses the visitor’s attention not only on the items in display cases, but on the history outlined on the surfaces of the building itself, and on the ambient resonance between them. In preserving Stüler’s half-crumbled frescos, left largely as he found them, Chipperfield left the scars of the building’s history clearly visible. Traces of nineteenth-century decoration adhere to what appear to be still crumbling brick and cement. Outside, columns supporting the museum’s arcade still bear clear traces of Soviet artillery fire. Just as the original structure’s remains call attention to the architectural gaps of what no longer remains, the “absence” of the museum’s original “story” seems to call for a story in itself. According to a German newspaper article celebrating its opening, the museum, with the elevation of its very ruin to the status of container, is now finally “in the service of truth.” No longer “interested in staging magic, it wants the true story, with nothing hidden” (Geschunden schön, 2009; my translation). The true story: a narrative, then, but with all facts and angles presented in an equal light, unmediated by any guiding perspective or bias of point of

view. Is such a thing possible? In any case, it is clear that ancient history and more recent German history, seemingly disparate, are on display here side by side, leaving the visitor to somehow accord or narratize them.

“Space,” Lefebvre (1991) wrote, “is the envelope of time” (p. 339). As spatial codes are “*produced* along with the space corresponding to them,” he suggested, “the job of theory is to elucidate their rise, their role, and their demise” (p. 17), and as such perhaps to present them as a narrative: that cultural form par excellence for giving shape and meaning to events through their arrangement in time and causality. Slavoj Žižek (1998) once proposed that any narrative is always designed “to resolve some (binary) antagonism by way of rearranging its terms into a temporal succession.” Any narrative’s very existence “thus bears witness to some repressed antagonism” (p. 197). Similarly, for Lacan (cited in Biberman, 2006) narrative is “a kind of package deal in which one gains meaning at the price of accepting temporal order, coherence and unification. The very existence of such a package deal testifies that it strives to cover something repressed” (p. 244). If this is so, a museum that refuses to narrate might simply be laying all history’s antagonisms out in the light, unobscured on a single plane, randomly, without implying categories, hierarchies, or temporal evolutions, in some impossible one-dimensional space.

Chipperfield’s remodeling of the Neues Museum expressly attempts to avoid any comfortable resolution (or repression) of historical antagonisms, any narrative of absolute knowledge. Yet one might argue it still provides the museum—and the visitor’s experience—an ambience that resonates strikingly with the objects presented inside. Many if not almost all of the items on display—from bleached Egyptian tablets to battered Roman busts, blackened Celtic relics, faded Amarna flooring and armless torsos of beaten copper—bear the traces of time nearly as baldly as the museum itself does. Which is to say they bear, in their very presence, clear traces of loss. In a sense, the objects on display seem to “voice” the reconstituted museum’s own message of loss and absence. A striking example is a papyrus scroll transcription of Homer’s *Iliad*, gaping with missing sections in its center, words fading at its edges into wormholes.

“In Greek,” wrote Michel de Certeau (1984), “narration is called ‘diegesis’: it establishes an itinerary (it ‘guides’) and it passes through.” Narrative structures, like museums, “regulate changes in space . . . in the form of places put in linear or interlaced series.” A *place*, meanwhile, “is the order . . . in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence,” excluding “the possibility of two things

being in the same location . . . the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines,” thus implying “an indication of stability” (p. 117). Yet the museum today also does just the opposite, allowing more than one “element” to coexist in the same space by making the building not only a container but an artefact itself. The museum’s present incarnation may thus underline instability, but also makes spatially concrete what many Germans might prefer to see as a fleeting period of their own history. The objects on display within are as much “ruins” of past civilizations as the space containing them, allowing its own destruction to resonate as a reminder of the destruction of the civilizations whose relics it holds. If narrative is a form of socially shared cognition, not only is ancient history contextualized by a German history and perspective, but German history is contextualized by the objects on display, cast in the light of their history. Volker Wehdeking (cited in Gerstenberger, 2008) has remarked on “Berlin’s importance for the connection between collective memory and the search for individual identity,” and identified “cultural reintegration and identity preservation in cultural memory . . . as *the* central concern in Berlin literature” (p. 14; emphasis added). The same might be said of the museum today itself.

A closer critique of Stüler’s original organization of works within the Neues Museum, or of Chipperfield’s remodeled arrangement, might look to Julia Lippert’s (2009) interesting analysis of a recent form of representation of British history, following Dorrit Cohn’s (1990) notion of a “historiographic narratology” (p. 777) to provide a narrative analysis of curated space. Or to Daniel Fulda’s (2005) study of a German exhibition in the nearby Deutsches Historisches Museum, whose narrative Fulda claims is “a scheme which a recipient brings with him or her to organize historical experience” (p. 187). But, at least on the surface, today’s Neues Museum bears an eerie resemblance to Berlin’s surrounding central Mitte district as it was itself twenty years ago, still visible in increasingly popular German photography collections like that of Irina Liebmann (2002). Comparing such photos with the present museum might leave one with the impression that Chipperfield’s narrative of German history, using a central monumental space in Berlin itself as material, is telling visitors the same narrative Soviets and the GDR seemed to be telling Berliners for forty-five years. The past’s distance is perhaps made clearest by its ruined traces being left yet ever-present. Is Chipperfield’s message finally so very different?

If drawing a narrative out of absence without being overtly didactic seems part of the project here, allowing viewers to feel they themselves have constructed some sort of narrative from the play of present and absent antagonisms seems the aim of others working on visual “reconstructions” of historical Berlin. Indeed, Berlin and German history seem haunted by such attempts across the arts. Shimon Attie (1993), an American artist focusing on history’s absence and presence in Berlin, in his project *The Writing on the Wall*, projected slides of Weimar-era European Jews directly onto the ruined contemporary facades of buildings in Berlin’s former Jewish quarter just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The images of the figures, from historical archives, are shown in spaces where they might actually have once stood, sat, walked, or played. Attie’s experience of Berlin inspired the project when, arriving in 1991 and “walking the streets of the city,” he explains, he felt himself repeatedly asking “Where are all the missing people? What has become of the Jewish culture and community which had once been at home here?” He could feel “the presence of this lost community very strongly, even though so few visible traces of it remained” (p. 5). *The Writing on the Wall*, he writes, “grew out of [a] response to the discrepancy” between what was felt, yet was invisible (p. 9), as an attempt to “peel back the wallpaper of today and reveal the history buried underneath” (p. 16). Here, something intangible sensed beneath the city’s surface is “recovered” and projected onto its contemporary veneers, as individual portraits of what is “missing” or latent. Photographed against the radiant midnight blue of Berlin’s evening sky, these glowing black and white projections seem all the more ghost-like, yet almost more real—and certainly more life-like—than the seemingly abandoned contemporary cityscape against which they take shape. Against these ruined backdrops, they are much like the objects preserved in Chipperfield’s museum, contextualized and contextualizing. If work like Chipperfield’s and Attie’s involves collective memory in its representation of Berlin, this representation is indeed of a “vicarious past” (Young, 2002, pp. 71-87), or of “postmemory” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22). According to Jan Assmann (1996), while individual memories are conditioned by personal perceptions, they are contextualized by collective memory’s framework of discourse (p. 36), or by what John Clarke (1979) called cultural “Landkarten der Bedeutung” or “maps of meaning” (p. 41), something perhaps not quite a concise narrative in itself, but with the potential of generating narrative—history “as the sum of the synchronic discourse about the past in a specific society” (Lippert, 2009, p. 231). In Attie’s

(1993) projections as in Chipperfield's museum, perceptions of the past seek to express themselves both on a personal level, and to situate themselves within a larger discourse of political, social, and cultural memory. They betray a drive not only toward personal contact with the "ghosts" of Berlin's past, but toward their own assimilation into the contemporary city by making them visible, even when this very visibility draws attention to their physical absence.

Much as in Chipperfield's project, this struggle to portray hugely antagonistic features both present and absent in space through what might be called an "audience-oriented approach," encouraging narration while complicating easy narratives, presents itself in other recent artistic approaches to German history. Photographer Julian Rosefeldt's (2000) "Hidden City," for example, presents a series of life-sized photographs of Hitler's "Führerbau" headquarters, currently housing Munich's University of Music and Performing Arts. Until recently, specific information on the original use of the campus's classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and the bunker beneath the building was not public. Rosefeldt shows viewers National Socialist-designed workspaces as they are in use today. Aside from the glimpses they allow into the lives of the students and teachers using them, the photos seem at first glance perfectly banal. It is only after reading about their former history from small corresponding plaques that the spaces in the photos seem to change before one's eyes. The conservatory's sunny, walnut-paneled harp studio with its smiling harpist busy at her strings was originally, one learns, Hitler's breakfast room. A piano concert room with scattered chairs and desks and a blackboard on one wall, is the same chamber in which Chamberlain, Hitler, and Mussolini signed the Munich Agreement. One steps back for a second look with an eerie sensation of simultaneously seeing the space as it is now and also as it was. With the aid of short, non-narrative texts bearing statements of fact, Rosefeldt's photos "show" two wildly antagonistic situations sharing a single space, and any narration that might resolve this state of affairs is not immediately clear. The mind struggles to create it, to somehow separate these spaces by imposing time and causality, but can only do so by first imagining a historical space which is, in a sense, both visually absent *and* present. A tendency similar to Rosefeldt's appears in Cynthia Beatt's (Schlaich & Beatt, 2009) film production, *The Invisible Frame*, in which actress Tilda Swinton is shown bicycling the line of the former Berlin Wall almost two decades after its removal (and after having made a similar film in which she followed the Wall itself in 1988). As Swinton muses to herself in voice-over, moving

through the empty spaces left by its disappearance, “When this wall . . . was here it felt so much more invisible than it is now. It has [in its physical absence] my attention in a way that it never did before.” Much as in Chipperfield’s structure, what is missing from space is highlighted as potentially even more potent than what is present, and perhaps all the more potent *for* its absence. In such cases, narration becomes a task of constant of mental jumping back and forth between these binary antagonistic landscapes in an attempt to somehow resolve their difference. One is reminded of the earliest childhood “proto-narration” Freud recorded: *fort* and *da* (gone and here), a game of peek-a-boo. To add a linking event that might make sense of the antagonism between the situation of absence and that of presence, to organize them by chronology, would be to favor one, to make the two terms play either comedy or tragedy, which here the museum refuses to stage. It is for us, in effect, to place them in these roles—the choice, this space infers, is ours.

“Linear time,” Julia Kristeva (1981) has written, “is that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending)” (p. 17)—yet space exists without language, while verbal descriptions are, in a sense, a means of chronologizing space. Thomas Bender (2002) has observed that narrative history “in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures has always been linear, always beginning with a beginning” (p. 8). Yet its linearity screens much out, narrows history, and reduces “the plenitude of stories” (p. 8). Bender suggests we might allow “a greater spatialization of historical narrative,” promoting “a respatialization of historical narrative in a way that will liberate us from the enclosure of the nation” (p. 8). “Preparing ourselves for such a history,” he writes, “demands that we explore more than we have the relations of time and space, and our relation to them” (p. 9).

Forcing the visitor to take on the task of narration him- or herself seems to be the project of Chipperfield’s museum, which more recently fittingly claimed unexpected additions to its collection. A year after the museum’s reopening, between January and October 2010, work on a nearby subway station unearthed a curious collection of sculptures. These were eventually found to be the remnants of lost Cubist and late Expressionist pieces: Otto Baum’s 1930 *Girl Standing*, Karl Ehlers’s 1933 *A standing robed figure with a bunch of grapes*, Otto Freundlich’s 1925 *Head*, Karl Knappe’s 1923 *Hagar*, Marg Moll’s 1930’s *Dancer*, Emy Roeder’s 1918 *Pregnant Woman*, Edwin Scharff’s 1917/1921 *Portrait of the Actress Anni Mewes*, Gustav Heinrich Wolff’s 1925 *Robed*

Figure Standing and Naum Slutzky's *Female Bust*—all, incidentally, shown together in the famous exhibit of “Degenerate Art,” staged in 1937 by Hitler's *Reichspropagandaministerium* in Munich's Haus der Kunst. Evidently, the sculptures came to be buried at the foot of Berlin's City Hall because a tenant of the building across the street had hidden the sculptures in an office there. Indeed, at least one of the building's tenants had already hidden an employee, funded a persecuted historian's flight to America, preserved a small library, and risked death writing a letter of recommendation for Wolfgang Abendroth, a leftist Nazi subversive. After having been made the property of the Reich, the entire building was consumed by fire from an air raid in 1944. The hidden sculptures appear to have fallen from their hiding place on some upper floor through the burning floors, to be buried as rubble collapsed above them, filling the building's foundations, themselves razed low during the period of the GDR to build the Marx-Engels Forum park and the open parade ground and square before the Fernsehturm. “They're like the dead, these sculptures, ever coming back to us, radiant ghosts,” wrote one highly moved reviewer when the unearthed objects were first set on display in the Neues Museum (Kimmelman, 2010). At the end of four months the original 1937 Degenerate Art show had attracted over two million visitors (Spotts 151). The present exhibit of these once-banned objects received half as many in its first year: 1,142,000 (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2010). The recovered pieces are exhibited on the museum's ground floor with photos and film clips focused on the 1937 Degenerate Art show to relate what is known of their history. Like the museum's other artifacts, cleaned but scarred, and in some cases clearly battered, they most clearly “voice” not their own stories, but the story of those who have already told stories about them. In their presence here, much like the museum itself, they evoke an absence only partially reclaimed, partially completing a narrative that still remains filled with gaps, a history that cannot be entirely contextualized, half recounted through absence. “Narrativizing” them is a requirement for making “sense” of their presence, but is a complex task that first requires imagining and coming to terms with what is unseen.

The Neues Museum itself, at least, in its physical appearance as an object on its edge of the city's Museums Island, does seem to invite storytelling, as much as stories can be read from stone, brick, and plaster. As it plays with the cracks and fissures in the building's walls, so it plays with the cracks in Stüler's original narrative of socially shared cognition and cultural and technological advancement, encouraging us to find

alternative narratives within this story, both on levels of the architecture and of the exhibits. The museum's arrangement of displays shows a tendency to invite resonance between individual artefacts. Unmissable on the basement level at the foot of the stairs, sits a medieval tombstone, deeply inscribed with Hebrew lettering, unearthed from the Berlin's suburbs. A plaque in a bomb-shattered courtyard notes the remains of Hermann Schievelbein's nineteenth-century narrative frieze depicting the destruction of Pompeii, while upstairs a cabinet displays a warped vinyl record and bits of twisted metal from 1940s Berlin, found near the museum's ruins. Uncovered in a Brandenburg field, a blackened fifth-century wooden German human figure beaded with rough iron nails faces a pedestaled row of glowing marble Roman portrait busts from the same era, set face to face in a dialogue we are left to imagine. But also set in contrast—fifth-century Romans were master sculptors, while Brandenburger tribes were hacking half-human forms from unending wood, then nailing iron into their bodies as fertility offerings. Along with the Roman portrait busts is one of a Germanic "barbarian." On the second floor, scattered bits of pottery and ironware from early German longhouses are juxtaposed with contemporaneous sculptures of Roman gladiators. Still, such attractions remain footnotes. Despite its "open" central staircase, perhaps encouraging multi-directional wandering, the museum's levels and main halls are finally arranged in much the same way Stüler intended. Most Egyptian sculpture and artifacts are on the ground floor, Greek and Roman ones a floor above, and German archeological findings further up, though in an area less grandly ornamented and accessible than the lower galleries. As Rebecca Clare Dolgoy (2011) has written, as visitors trail past exhibits showing the "development of . . . technological and aesthetic consciousness," they must simultaneously see the bullet-scarred walls invoking that "the very progress being depicted in the exhibition is ultimately responsible for the scars in the architecture" (p. 35). Yet this inference of narrative causality can only be made by the visitor him- or herself—and is not offered easily.

Yet if the Neues Museum's floor plan varies little from Stüler's original designs, its reconstruction adds a "narrative tone" (Witcomb, 2003, p. 130), a whisper not of "truth" or of an easy hermeneutics, but of interpretations still waiting to be grasped—indeed narrated—not by the museum itself, but by its visitors. As architecture, it performs this in ways that still strain even the most postmodern or "unnatural" of written narratives, with their dependence on and reference to time and causality, however reluctant. History (and museums themselves), the museum

seems to whisper, *are* unnatural narratives, full of presences and the uncannily “radiant ghosts” of absences, beckoning us down paths both taken and not taken, perhaps shot through with holes of gunfire, but still open and waiting.

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Joshua Parker, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Salzburg, where he teaches American literature and creative writing. His doctoral thesis at the University of Paris VII explored second-person fiction and metalepsis, and his translations include texts on cultural heritage and museums. He is currently working on a book on space, place and Berlin in American fiction, and has interests in narrative theory, transatlantic studies, and expatriate fiction.