“Alltagsmenschen”: Inside and Outside the Storyworld of The American Way

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Storytelling through objects, narrative spaces, “locations or [...] situations dominated by stories”?: Museum exhibitions are often conceptualised as narratives that employ a range of different elements, objects, exhibition architecture, lighting, soundscapes, media elements and, not least, exhibition graphic design. While exhibition design is increasingly part of the discourses of museum studies and exhibition-making practice, exhibition graphic design in exhibitions and museums remains underexplored. In this paper, I analyse the exhibition graphics of one temporary exhibition, The American Way – The USA in Germany at the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn, to examine how exhibition graphic design can be understood as part of the visual dimension of the exhibition narrative, part of the story on display and part of its telling in the gallery space. In particular, I focus on the participants in the narrative, namely the characters and the narrator, their visual articulation and their relationship to each other. I show how photographs are used to construct the characters of the exhibition narrative and, further, how the constellations of texts and images in the exhibition space draw both the museum as author-narrator and the visitors as readers of the exhibition into the narrative. Underlining the ways in which the exhibition graphics shape the narration and thus the interpretation of the exhibition, my analysis raises

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1 Kossmann et al. 2012, 6.
2 The paper is based on my doctoral research undertaken at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, in which I explore the multiple roles of exhibition graphic design in a case study of three temporary museum exhibitions in Germany and the UK.
questions concerning the interplay of visual and verbal narration, the thresholds between graphic object and historical artefact and the ways in which institutions are positioned towards the exhibition narratives they put on display.

When the discussion turns to graphic design in exhibitions or museums, object labels and text panels are typically what come to mind alongside other items such as the banners promoting a current exhibition, the logo on the bag from the museum shop, the sign that directs the visitors to the café or the floor plan showing the different galleries of the museum. ‘Graphic design in exhibitions’ may also refer to artefacts on display, for example, in exhibits of printed matter such as posters or books. This chapter focuses on those graphic objects that are related to the exhibition itself, described in the following as ‘exhibition graphics’. These include items such as text panels or object labels but also larger graphic objects such as photographic wallpaper prints, typographic treatments or information graphics. In contrast to other fields of graphic design, for example, advertising graphic design that aims to persuade or wayfinding design whose primary purpose is to enable the orientation and navigation through a physical space, exhibition graphic design is directly concerned with the content on display. Exhibition graphics are part of the medium’s strategies of communication and display; they fulfil a role in supporting the navigation through the content and the question of access is one of the dominant topics in the discussion of exhibition graphic design. At the same time, exhibition graphics have a visual presence in the exhibition space and can be understood as one of the visual components of the exhibition narrative; in other words, they not only display content but are part of the exhibition content itself. To enable the focus on this relationship between graphics and exhibition content I consider exhibitions here within a frame of transmedial narrative theory.

3 Hyland – King 2006.
Terms and concepts borrowed from narrative theory appear in many guises both in exhibition-making practice and in museum studies. ‘Narrative’ or ‘story’ are used, often interchangeably, to describe exhibition content, both its nature – in other words, what kinds of content are brought on display or whose ‘stories’ are told – and its structure – that is, what are the modes of presentation, comparisons between narrative and taxonomic exhibitions or examinations of different models of narrative construction, for example, the adaptation of a dramatic three-act structure to exhibitions. Others draw on concepts of narrative theory to analyse exhibitions, to critically examine the cultural practice of exhibiting or to conceptualise exhibitions as narratives, for example, by exploring the transposition of concepts such as the narrator figure to exhibitions or examining the medium-specific features of narration. My visual-narrative analysis of exhibition graphic design here aims for a deeper understanding of exhibitions as narratives with respect to the relationships between different components of verbal, visual and material content.

In the field of narratology definitions of what constitutes a narrative vary; while the narrowest definitions include only literary narratives, broader definitions describe narrativity as a matter of the degree to which a reader may interpret a given text as a narrative, thus allowing for an inclusion of a wide range of cultural objects. It is in this latter, broader definition of narrative that I consider exhibitions as a narrative medium that can be shown to carry distinct, medium-specific characteristics. My analysis draws in particular on the concept of the storyworld as articulated by the narrative theorist David Herman. According to Herman, one of the key qualities of narrative is the power to create worlds. He defines this world created in and

5 For example, Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Watson 2007.
6 For example, Macdonald – Silverstone 1990; Roberts 1997.
7 Francis 2015.
8 Bal 1996.
9 Buschmann 2010.
10 Thiemeyer 2013.
11 See Ryan 2006; Herman 2009 and also Richardson 2000.
13 Herman 2002.
through the narrative as its storyworld: “Storyworlds are mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate […] as they work to comprehend a narrative”.\textsuperscript{14} Much more than merely the description of the geographic setting of the story, the features of the storyworld shape how the reader interprets the narrative, its context, its temporal and spatial expansion and the nature of the characters and events populating this space. The process of this interpretation relies on the cues available in the text and the inferences that can be drawn from them; this means, the reader is not presented with a fully formed description of the storyworld but successively constructs their mental model as the narrative unfolds.

Having taken the concept of the storyworld to a discussion of exhibition narratives, this notion of textual cues is extended in the light of the multimodal nature of exhibitions. Compared with literary narratives, exhibitions, and in particular thematic exhibitions, deliver content through various means of showing and telling. As such, it is premised here that exhibition narratives are not limited to verbal cues, but that they may build their storyworlds through material, spatial or visual cues. My focus is here in particular on visual cues as they are provided by the exhibition graphics, by the individual graphic object but also through the system of graphic objects as it is evident across the exhibition. These visual cues are considered in terms of what the design theorist Michael Twyman\textsuperscript{15} defines as the features of verbal and pictorial graphic language, including, for example, the use of colour, the shape of the letters, the composition of text on the page, the size and format of graphic objects, their materials, their production and their position and presentation in the gallery. Certain features of the graphic language of, for example, object labels can be examined in terms of exhibition conventions and genre-typicality, specifically with regard to the notion of typographic genres as described by Robert Waller.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, as part of the strategies

\textsuperscript{14} Herman 2002, 5.
\textsuperscript{15} Twyman 1979; 1982; 1985.
\textsuperscript{16} Waller 1987.
of display in museums, object labels show typical features not only in terms of the verbal information they present but also how they present this information in typographic form, in terms of their size or positioning in relation to the objects on display. Nevertheless, despite these genre-conventions, the graphic language of exhibition graphics is hugely variable. Exhibition graphics may be designed in alignment with the graphic language adopted more widely by the institution but they may also appear as part of the exhibition design in such way that the features of their graphic language are bespoke to the respective exhibition and its themes, its objects and its space.

The American Way – Die USA in Deutschland

*The American Way – Die USA in Deutschland* was a temporary exhibition at the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn which was on display in the main exhibition gallery from March 2013 to February 2014. The topic of the exhibition was the changing German perceptions of and attitudes towards the USA from the end of WWII to the (then) present day. Divided into eight sections, the exhibition content was presented in a chronologically arranged, primarily linear route. The exhibits combined a range of elements, including objects and in particular photographic objects, verbal information and time-based-media such as audio interviews and films.

The exhibition graphics of *The American Way* can be grouped as text-based and image-based graphic objects. The text-based items included introduction panel and section panels, small text labels, wall quotations, information graphics as well as a number of ‘do not touch’ and ‘no photography’ notices and an image credits panel. The exhibition did not use object labels in a genre-typical sense. While the small text labels followed the genre-typical conventions of object

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17 The exhibition was curated by a team led by Dr Hannes Sowade under the direction of the exhibitions director Dr Jürgen Reiche and designed by the exhibition design consultancy Beier+Wellach Projekte.
Figure 1: Exhibition views of *The American Way – Die USA in Deutschland*, Haus der Geschichte, Bonn.
labels in terms of their format and position in relation to objects, the
verbal information provided on the text labels could refer equally to
an object or a group of objects, a wall graphic or a media installation,
or indeed provide an independent unit of verbal information. These
graphic objects adopted the same graphic language that is visible else-
where in the museum on the exhibition graphics of the permanent
galleries: text is set aligned left in a sans serif typeface in black against
white and pale grey backgrounds, using a combination of regular and
bold weights to differentiate between headlines and body texts. With
the exception of the wall quotations, the graphic objects were laid
out in two languages, German and English. Within each group of
graphic objects the graphic language remained consistent across all
items in the exhibition.

In contrast to the strong visual coherence of the text-based
graphic objects, the image-based graphics varied greatly in visual con-
tent and format. In the format of image panels or printed as graphic
wallpaper that covered entire exhibit wall units the image-based
graphics served as backdrops to other items such as text labels and
objects, and, in case of the image panels, were often themselves lay-
ered on top of larger wall graphics. The majority of these graphic
objects were created from existing visual material that was enlarged
and cropped to format and brought together in complex collages on
the gallery walls. Their source material primarily included photo-
graphs but also other printed matter such as newspaper clippings,
maps or advertising motifs from the period. Also part of these image-
based graphic objects but somewhat external to the exhibition narra-
tive in the gallery space was the title graphic whose image was also
used as key visual on the marketing material of the exhibition.

In my analysis here I consider both groups of graphic object, text-
and image-based. Due to the relationship of their graphic language

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18 The spatial design of the exhibition was based on modular wall units of different heights
and depths comprising wall units and plinth units as well as a range of different types of
showcase.
with the wider institution, the text-based graphic objects, as discussed below, are less relevant with respect to the exhibition narrative itself but point to the position that the institution takes in relation to the narrative on display. The image-based graphic objects on the other hand, especially the photographic wall graphics, provided visual information that was highly specific to the particular exhibition narrative of *The American Way*. For example, they cued the spatiotemporal setting of the storyworld, not only establishing a sense of the time unfolding across the course of the exhibition but also informing the understanding of the geographic setting.

**The visual characterisation of a prototypical German**

The photographic wall graphics create a sense of place on different levels: they locate the narrative, provide contextual information, show sites in terms of associated activities and evoke symbolic locations. The photographs anchor the narrative where the image’s location is either self-evident in its iconicity – such as views of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin – or where the location is specified through the textual elements contained in the photographs or the verbal information delivered on accompanying text panels or quotations. In contrast, the images of bombed German cities used at the beginning of the exhibition are examples of images that serve as contextual introductions to individual exhibits or sections of the narrative. In these instances the images contribute to a wider sense of place or, rather, of the situation in a place, by extending the spatial information that is provided verbally on the text panels without necessarily being geographically specific. The exhibition narrative does not take place in the USA; the large projections of photographs of contemporary America, the images showing scenes of the American lifestyle and the 1950s German map of the USA can be considered as representations of an aspirational far distance rather than depictions of concrete locations. The visual cues provided through the exhibition graphics, then, locate the narrative in Germany and, further, capture the key theme of the exhibition by visualising a German view onto the USA. However, the images not only cue the spatial dimension of
the storyworld, they also provide visual information regarding the ‘who’ of the storyworld and thus contribute to a visual construction of the characters cast as protagonists of the narrative on display: the German people.

Across the exhibition, the photographs used in the wall graphics show people; individuals or small groups are juxtaposed with images of masses of people. They are shown at work, talking, demonstrating, dancing and at music concerts. Discussing the features of pictorial language and, specifically, its difference from verbal language, Twyman argues that pictorial language “does not lend itself readily to the making of general statements”\(^{19}\) and that, while verbal language can describe something or someone in general terms, pictorial representation “cannot avoid being specific in at least some respects”.\(^{20}\) The visual descriptions of the protagonists of *The American Way* benefit precisely from this photographic detail and specificity. The photographs not only show facial expressions, gestures and ways of interacting they contain elaborate detail in terms of fashion, clothing, hairstyles and accessories as well as the surrounding environment. As a result, the visual richness of the photographic images also links the depicted persons to moments or periods in time, creating a sense of temporal specificity, and in doing so, establishing a sense of the passing of time across the exhibition: even though the exhibition’s narrative was focused on the changing image of the US in Germany, the exhibition graphics also showed the changed image of the Germans as they are looking at the US.

Some of the people in the photographs on display are recognisable, including Helmut Kohl or Elvis, and others are identifiable on account of their political roles or the specificity of the depicted situation, as in the case of the images showing the Nuremberg trials. However, a large number of the persons shown are not identified by their names. Though some of the small exhibition texts related to the visual content of the wall graphics, this information rarely included

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19 Twyman 1985, 262.
20 Ibid, 263.
details about the individuals depicted, nor, equally, information regarding the photographer. People are referred to here as ‘the Germans’ or ‘the German people’ and specified only occasionally according to their position in society as housewives, students, workers, soldiers or children, while the wall quotations are ascribed mostly to public figures or institutions. In the few instances where quotations of ‘ordinary’ people are presented, the descriptions, rather than linking the quotes to named individuals, are again generic: ‘travel guide, member of SED’ or ‘mechanic’. In other words, those shown on the photographs were not presented through their individual histories, their individual voices. The curator and historian Jana Scholze discusses the notion of the ‘illustrated storyline’ in the context of the object displays in the permanent exhibition at the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig, one of the branches of the Haus der Geschichte, where, so she argues, objects are used primarily for a legitimisation of the intended narrative. Slotted into their respective positions in the narrative and presented without any information that points to other meanings or interpretations outside of this narrative, the individual artefacts are fundamentally reduced to function as material evidence for the verbal information presented on text panels and labels. In The American Way, the photographic artefacts undergo a similar process.

On the one hand, in terms of their visual nature, the photographic wall graphics function within what Sturken and Cartwright describe as the perceived “truth-value of photography”. The photographic nature of the images supports the impression of evidence-based and therefore accurate representations; the photographs visually validate the narrative on display and the display of identifiable public figures further enhances the sense of viewing a non-fictional ‘historical reality’. On the other hand, while representations of an iconic figure such

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21 An exception are the contemporary photographs of the USA by Horst Hamann which were accompanied by a label that introduced the photographer and the project.
as Elvis held, owing to their immediate denotative value, a more independent position in relation to accompanying verbal information or, indeed, the spatial context of an exhibition gallery, the anonymous figure, in contrast, is more strongly subjected to the influence of its context and thus is more readily integrated into the narrative, more easily assigned a role. By omitting the ‘object information’ and, further, by allocating generic descriptors to the individuals on display and thus actively preventing their personal stories from moving into focus, the images are turned into a resource for the exhibition narrative. In other words, released from the context of individual identities, the photographs become available to fulfil their role as visual content in the larger narrative; the faces of the individuals on display can be borrowed to visually ‘illustrate’ the characters of the narrative.

In the sequence of photographs presented in the exhibit focused on the political relationships between Germany and America in the events leading up to the German reunification, the then chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Kohl, is shown in different social situations: as a speaker, a listener, a negotiator, a friend. While on the one hand serving to focalise the exhibit in terms of a political and, further, a decidedly Western German perspective, the sequence also creates a multifaceted, ‘round’ image of his character in terms of his political role. In this instance, the visual cues in the images successively build up to a “character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative”. In contrast, the unnamed people depicted each appear only once across the exhibition and, as described above, no further information is revealed; and while their photographic detail may underline a passing of time on a general level — a sequential unfolding of the historical narrative —, on the level of individual characterisations the images show separate moments in time. They do not build up to characters but remain a succession of types that, over the course of the exhibition, accumulate to a collective. This sense of a collective is further supported in the juxtaposition of images of individuals with images

that show large groups of people. The latter provide visual information in terms not of the features of the individual but of their activities and practices as part of a larger community. In doing so, they develop the visual description of ‘the German’ from an unnamed individual to a visual sample, a prototypical representative of a group of many, of ‘the German people’.

This articulation of the prototypical German was supported through the use of information graphics in the exhibition that served to subsume individual voices into an average or collective voice. Interspersed with objects and text labels, layered on top of the photographs, the diagram panels present the opinions of ‘the German people’ on questions such as “All in all, do you support or oppose the NATO Dual-Track Decision?” or “If the Russians tried to occupy West-Berlin, what do you think would happen? Would the Americans defend West-Berlin or wouldn’t they risk a war over the city?”.

The percentages of ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘maybe’ answers are visualised in bar charts. Bal describes the recurrence to a ‘scientific discourse’ as one of the rhetorical strategies employed by museums and part of what she terms ‘truth-speak’, the presentation of content as representation of reality. In this sense, in terms of their mode of communication, namely the representation of data as visual statistics and the adherence to scholarly conventions such as associating information with trustworthy sources, in this case the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, the diagram panels are another means of validating the narrative on display. However, the photographic wall graphics fulfil a doubly illustrative role: first, together with the information graphics they appear as evidence to the non-fictional historical narrative, and second, they provide cues that allow a visual construction of the narrative’s protagonists as prototypical German. This illustrative role assigned to the photographs raises questions regarding the relationship between exhibition graphics and museum objects and their respective status in the exhibition.

25 The American Way 2013, diagram panel ‘German Reunification’ exhibit.
26 The American Way 2013, diagram panel ‘Berlin Wall’ exhibit.
27 Bal 1996.
Graphic objects, especially object labels, are typically described in relation to the museum object, spatially and with regard to the information they contain, but are considered as separate elements. In *The American Way*, however, this relationship is called into question in the use of historical photographs in the wall graphics. As described above, the exhibition contained a large number of image-based graphic objects, the majority of which were large reproductions of historical photographs, but in addition the exhibition also presented a large number of photographic artefacts as museum objects. This differentiation between graphic object and museum object is not based on the content of the images, on account of which the images could be read simply as one group of photographic, two-dimensional objects that were on display alongside a number of three-dimensional objects. Key to the differentiation into the two groups is the way in which the photographs were displayed in the exhibition. The images considered as objects were shown as photographic prints; their format of display, framed and behind glass, declares the status of these photographs as museum objects. On the other hand, those photographs that are considered here as exhibition graphics were not presented in their original format, but appeared in the gallery modified: they were enlarged, cropped to the width or height of the wall units, partly obscured or layered on top of each other. While museum objects may appear in different exhibits in different constellations, frames or display cases, they nevertheless remain physically largely unaltered. However, the photographic wall graphics in *The American Way* appeared altered in response to a particular exhibition narrative and, further, to a particular spatial situation in an exhibition and in the gallery space.

Two significant shifts take place here: on the level of the story, the museum object is reduced to function as visual information, it is

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28 ‘Original format’ is, of course, a problematic description. It is used here to describe the appearance of the photograph as an evidently photographic print, and in a typical photographic format such as 35mm, medium format or large format.

29 Though this applies specifically to artefacts as they are discussed in the context of this research and less so, for example, to site-specific (photographic) artworks. Of course, historical artefacts undergo processes of aging and restoring.
subsumed as visual content into the larger story, and at the same time the museum object is integrated in the *telling* of the story in such a way that it shifts in status from a ‘museum object on display’ to a ‘means of display’. Hans Walter Hütter and Dorothee Dennert, the former then deputy director of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, describe such dissolving of the distinctions between exhibition elements in the exhibitions at the Haus der Geschichte as a ‘merging’: “Three-dimensional objects, photographs, documents as well as sound and film elements merge to historical exhibition scenes and create a path of images, sounds and impressions”. Rather than foregrounding artefacts as the primary element, all components are variably deployed to fulfil their role in the narrative, regardless of whether the content appears in verbal, visual or material format. The results are exhibition narratives that, purposely drawing on different types of exhibition content, begin to fully explore the multimodal potential of the medium exhibition. At the same time, such merging of exhibition components raises questions with regard to the characteristic features of each component and to what extent these are revealed or concealed, negated or made use of in the exhibition.

In her analysis of the relationship between museum object and practices of presentation and display, Scholze argues that a disappearance of the distinctions between the object on display and the practices of display not only impacted on the status of the object and its position in the narrative, but also affected the status of the practices of display. In *The American Way*, the photographic artefacts were not presented as historical artefacts that are inherently polysemic and therefore open to a range of different, potentially conflicting and distracting interpretations, but were conceptually reduced to their visual dimension. They were also physically, formally, assigned a different status in the exhibition. Their treatment as wall graphics transformed the ‘photographic artefact’ to a ‘graphic object’, which, as was argued

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above, was part of what enabled their narrative role as visually cueing the exhibition’s characters, while at the same time drawing on their inherent status as a photographic artefact.

However, Scholze\textsuperscript{32} suggests that in merging with the objects and the verbal information, design as part of the practices of display loses its capacity to delineate between authentic object and interpretive addition and to (re-)present or mediate exhibition content through abstraction and stylisation. Thus while the challenging of established hierarchies between the museum object on the one hand and verbal and visual information on the other arguably benefits the exploration of the medium exhibition and its potential to tell stories, it can be problematized with respect to the role of design. Aside from brief copyright statements, no background information was made available for the photographs in the exhibition; the identities of the photographers or the persons portrayed, the purpose of the images and the conditions under which the photographs were taken were not revealed. Nevertheless, the images used in \textit{The American Way} to visually construct the narrative’s characters existed prior to the narrative in another context. In contrast to visual content that is purposefully created for an exhibition narrative, they were appropriated as a means of narration. Processes of graphic design such as enlarging, cropping or collaging converge here with processes of exhibiting described by Michael Baxandall\textsuperscript{33} as intentional acts of selection and construction: how are these photographs brought together here in the exhibition, where do they come from? Are the photographs read as historical objects or as design devices? Who selects or omits, who acknowledges or negates their status, museum object or otherwise?

\textbf{Between author-narrator and audience}

Exhibitions are both time- and site-specific, therefore every exhibition’s storyworld has to be considered within its context, that is, the institutional context, the physical location of the exhibition and the

\textsuperscript{32} Scholze 2004.
\textsuperscript{33} Baxandall 1991.
way it is experienced by the visitors, as well as the temporal location of the exhibition, the moment in time in which the exhibition narrative exists to be experienced. In *The American Way* the exhibition narrative was tightly linked to the wider institutional narrative, not only covering a similar period of German history, but also in some instances showing objects that are typically on display in the permanent galleries of the museum. Moreover, the Haus der Geschichte as institutional author was visible in the exhibition graphics. In contrast to the visual articulation of the storyworld’s characters through the photographs, the features of their content and their formatting in the gallery, here, it is the features of the graphic language of the text-based graphic objects that come to the fore.

An exhibition’s graphic language may follow the design language established for the wider institution or may be created in response to the themes and concepts of the exhibition. A clearly differentiated graphic language is one of the ways of establishing the boundaries of a narrative, aside from spatial separation or a clear thematic distinction between, for example, permanent and temporary exhibition content. While a unique graphic language visually distances the exhibition narrative from its institutional frame, a shared visual language between temporary and permanent exhibitions creates a close visual connection between the temporary display and the institution and its wider practices. The graphic language of the text-based graphic objects followed that of the exhibition graphics across the Haus der Geschichte, thus aligning the exhibition visually with the permanent exhibition. In addition to this, the graphic language of the Haus der Geschichte’s exhibition graphics is closely linked also to the museum’s visual identity, using the same typeface as used in the logo of

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34 The Haus der Geschichte in Bonn is one of several locations held under the direction of the foundation Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, which was founded following a proposition raised in the government statement of then chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1982; the museum’s aim is to convey the history of post-war Germany (HdG n.d.).

the Haus der Geschichte and in their publications such as the quarterly *Museums Magazin*.36

The use of genre-typical graphic objects such as labels and text panels in an exhibition is part of the conventional codes of museum display,37 part of the museum’s visual rhetoric as expository agent.38 The adherence to typical features of graphic language can be considered as part of these codes of museum display but if these genre-typical graphic objects go on to make use of features such as typefaces or colour combinations connected to the visual identity of the museum, their rhetorical function is extended further. The graphic object, then, affirms not only the expository agency of a museum institution but the expository agency of this museum institution. In other words, the conventions of a general ‘exhibition situation’ are specified as expressions of a particular institution. In this sense, a graphic language that foregrounds the visual identity of the museum in the exhibition over the exhibition’s narrative becomes part of the ‘floating signatures’ of the museum39 that link the content on display to the wider museum institution. As such, a systematic foregrounding of the institutional visual identity can also appear as an act of reinforcing the strength of the museum’s voice and as asserting the museum’s agency in the telling of the narrative.

Through the adoption of typographic features introduced across the museum as visual expression of an institutional identity, *The American Way* carries over the identity of the Haus der Geschichte into the exhibition narrative. Visually aligning the written texts in the exhibition with the identity of the institution, the graphic objects identify the Haus der Geschichte as the author-narrator of the exhibition narrative. However, the exhibition narrative was not only told

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36 The graphic language of the exhibition graphics at the Haus der Geschichte was developed by the exhibition design consultancy Würth and Winderoll as part of the design of the permanent exhibition (Hütter – Dennert 2002). The logo of the Haus der Geschichte was designed in 1992 by Bruno K. Wiese following a design competition (HdG 1995).
38 Bal 1996; see also Bal 2011.
in the voice of the museum institution. Another visual strategy is notable here, namely the way in which this author-narrator was positioned in relation to the storyworld, especially when considering the exhibition texts. The panel texts were written in the third person throughout – ‘they’ and ‘them’, rather than ‘we’ and ‘us’ – and delivered in the removed style of a report in which punchy one- or two-word headlines are followed by short, authoritative descriptions, assuming as much ‘scholarly seriousness’ in the verbal format of the text as they did in the visual format of the statistical data. In other words, the verbal content was presented by a narrator positioned outside of the storyworld. At the same time, the texts – though with the exception of the wall quotations produced as separate panels – were overlaid and collaged on top of the wall graphics; they were physically and visually integrated into the graphic surface of the exhibits.

In her study of a gallery at the American Museum of Natural History, Bal describes an effect of spatial distancing between the expository agent and their displays that results from the positioning of text panels separate from the displays, outside the gallery rather than inside, adjacent to the exhibits. In *The American Way*, then, an opposite effect can be observed. As the texts become part of the image layer, the distance that is maintained in the style of the verbal information is reduced; the texts are positioned on the same level as the storyworld’s characters, telling the story from amongst them. As a result, the position of the author-narrator in relation to the storyworld they present oscillates between distance and proximity. On the one hand, the institution – visually present in the exhibition – maintains a distance to the content they present, speaking authoritatively as an expert, drawing on the museum’s scientific discourse, thus instilling trust in the expertise and trustworthiness of the narrator. On the other, this narrator assumes a close (visual) proximity to the content in which they are positioning themselves not as a distanced observer but as part of the storyworld. It is the integration of visual and verbal

40 Bal 1996.
content in the physical construction of the display in the exhibition space that implicitly shifts the position of the institution from that of an author-narrator to that of a narrator-protagonist, a narrator that appears to be part of the story they tell, and, in consequence, suggests that it is part of the German public as it is constructed through the photographic images. As the narrator-protagonist of *The American Way*, the Haus der Geschichte appears to be speaking expertly, authoritatively – and on behalf of the German public.

Moreover, a similar suggestion of proximity can be observed in the visual positioning of the audience in relation to the storyworld and the characters that populate the storyworld. As a result of the nature of the medium, exhibition audiences, the readers of exhibition narratives, are physically immersed in the narrative; as the architect Michael Brawne describes, they enact the exhibition narrative through their movement in the gallery space: “the typical museum experience is one of viewing images in sequence, that sequence being sensed by a walking observer meeting static objects”.41 In addition to this physical immersion, in *The American Way* the exhibition graphics further support the visitors’ involvement with the storyworld. Specifically, the photographs afford a possible engagement with the narrative and its characters on a personal, emotional level that is not enabled through the verbal content and its tone of voice. In particular it is the scale of the photographs and their format in the exhibition that enable the audience’s connection to the protagonists of the story. In many of the images people are shown in close-up and at human scale – that is, life-size or even larger than life-size – facing the audience or looking ‘over their shoulders’, inviting the viewer into a dialogue by making them part of the photographic situation in the exhibition.42 This effect of drawing the viewer close to the characters of the storyworld is enhanced by the small text labels that require the visitors to physically move close to the exhibition walls – in doing so,

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41 Brawne 1982, 10.
creating face-to-face encounters between the characters inside the storyworld and the audience.

Further, while the visual construction of the exhibition’s characters through the use of historical photographs was above described in terms of its exclusions – namely, the omission of the voices of the individuals on display – the reduction of individuals to character types can also be considered in terms of an increased potential for the audience’s engagement and identification with the exhibition narrative. The narrative on display in The American Way is not concerned with the story or the opinion of an individual or a group of individuals; rather, it presents a more general story of the German public. Thus, as generic types rather than particular representations, the images afford the potential for an engagement with the narrative precisely because people are shown not in terms of their individual features but as prototypical characters. Hütter and Dennert describe the audience of the Haus der Geschichte as “Alltagsmenschen”\(^\text{43}\); this can be translated as ‘as persons of the everyday life’, but it also suggests the ‘alltäglich’, the day-to-day, the ‘ordinary’. In The American Way, these ordinary visitors are drawn into the storyworld populated by typical Germans, allowing the audiences to see themselves, implicating them in the narrative on display. In effect then, the expository agent, the author of the exhibition, positions themselves, the characters of the storyworld and the visitors on the same narrative level: they are all positioned to be part of the German public and the museum takes on the role of the expert narrator. Discussing the relationship between the utterance of the museum as expository agent and the audiences of an exhibition, Bal argues that through the loss of their critical position within the speech act that is the exhibition, the audience is “manipulated into accepting the speech as her own”.\(^\text{44}\)

Here, the visually implied proximity of narrator, characters and audiences of the exhibition undermine the possibility of a critical distance between audience and narrative, of differentiating their own position

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44 Bal 1996, 72.
as readers from that of the other participants of the narrative, in other words, the possibility of questioning the perspective and version of historical events presented in the exhibition. The narrator-protagonist in *The American Way* appears to be speaking not only for the German public on display but also for those who came as its audience.\(^4^5\)

**Visual contributions to story and narration**

The above discussion focused on the exhibition graphics in *The American Way*, examining their contributions to the visual articulation of narrative characters and, as a consequence of this visual articulation, their role in positioning the author-narrator as well as the exhibition visitor in relation to the characters in the exhibition’s storyworld. The analysis draws attention to a number of aspects with respect to the narrative on display but also with respect to the role of graphic design in exhibition narration. While the analysis focused on the visual features that are seen here to combine to an image of a prototypical German, it did not yet address the question of what exactly was visualised as typical, what features were presented as ‘typically German’. The German was shown in the exhibition primarily in the public than the private realm, they were shown as politically active and politics – and politicians – took an important visual role. The question that arises here concerns the narratives that are presented to the exhibition visitor: what kind of typical German is constructed here, what narratives of ‘the German public’ are represented or created in the display?

Querying the relationship between the exhibition narrative and its institutional authors or producers, questions also arise in terms of who assumes the authority of narration. How does the institutional context, visually embodied in the graphic language of the exhibition graphics, shape an exhibition narrative? And, further, how is this au-

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\(^4^5\) There is, of course, a question regarding the non-German audience of the exhibition that, judging from the consistently bilingual exhibition texts, was expected to visit the exhibition.
Authorship obscured or revealed and thus made negotiable or disputable? In this respect, the questions that emerge from an analysis of the relationship between the roles of the exhibition graphics as expressions of the institutional identity or as means of narration draw attention to the aims of an institution in making exhibitions: what narratives are offered to the exhibition visitor? To what extent does the presence of the external image of an institution, their brand, inside the exhibition undermine other efforts with regard to exhibition-making? Or, to put it differently: where is the (visual) space for multiple voices, multiple stories if exhibition content is presented as part of a visual identity that serves to unite all speech acts of the museum in a coherent, seamless, authoritative voice?

Finally, in terms of the role of graphic design in exhibition narration, the analysis underlines the potential of graphic design for the storytelling in exhibition, the possibilities with regard to the scale, size and position of graphic objects in the space. Focusing on the (historical) museum object and the graphic object, and their respective position in the narrative, the discussion problematizes the status of individual components of exhibition narratives. However, highlighting the shift from object to graphic object as a means of ‘narrativising’, it also stresses the interplay between these different components as a medium-specific resource for strategies of exhibition narration. It is here that the potential of the medium, the potential of exhibition narratives as multimodal narratives, comes to the fore and offers further scope for exploration, both in the analysis of exhibition narratives and in the practice of exhibition-making.

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