

The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation

Questions for the online symposium 2026

1. How do narratives shape the way people relate to heritage, identity and place?

- What is the relation between narratives, brain scripts and stories?
- Are narratives, brain scripts and stories the 'human way' of bringing order to things?
- How can narratives shape collective memory, identity, and belonging?
- How do narratives contribute to community cohesion, or to division?
- How can narratives contribute to a conscious and responsible shaping of our common future?
- How can working with narratives foster civic dialogue and democratic engagement?

2. Whose stories are told?

- Who decides which stories are legitimate, acceptable or excluded?
- Who should be able to foster their narratives and share their stories?
- Are there narratives that shouldn't be accepted as part of the exchange? If yes, for what reasons and who decides?
- How can people become aware of their own narratives?
- What issues come up when dealing with multiple and even contradictory narratives?
- What rank do 'prescribed narratives' have (e.g. the Outstanding Universal Values in a World Heritage Site)?
- How should we deal with narratives that are factually or ethically questionable?
- What should we do if narratives are silenced because they challenge institutional or political comfort zones ('cancel culture', 'political correctness'...)?
- How can heritage interpretation contribute to healing or reconciliation when narratives are contested or painful?
- How do we manage power imbalances when co-creating interpretive strategies and plans (between institutions and communities, experts and locals, dominant and marginal voices, ...)?

3. How do we balance factual accuracy with narrative richness?

- What role do facts play when dealing with multiple narratives, especially contradicting ones?
- How do we deal with narratives that are not based on proven facts (e.g. local legends)?
- How do we deal with narratives if scientists or experts prove them wrong?
- How can we use narratives that are part of the perceptual memory?
- Can interpretation be a way of contextualising rather than correcting non-factual stories?
- Should we aim to separate factual explanation and interpretation? Is this possible to do?

- How can we teach critical thinking within interpretive experiences without diminishing emotional engagement?
- What evaluation do we need to have in place?

4. How do narratives interact with our current interpretive principles?

- How are narratives defined? (in general, in heritage interpretation, within Interpret Europe)
- How can we design interpretive experiences that reveal, rather than hide, the existence of multiple narratives?
- How do narratives interact with the interpretive tools we use?
- To what extent do current discussions about narratives influence how we deal with interpretive themes?
- What formats (digital, performative, participatory) best allow multiple voices to coexist without confusion?
- How can we use 'narrative tension' (contradictions, paradoxes...) as a creative and reflective device?
- What does an interpretive strategy or plan based on narrative pluralism look like in practice?

5. What values and competences are needed to work with multiple narratives?

- What does interpretive literacy require from us and what does it need from the 'wider public'?
- Which tools do we need to work with multiple narratives?
- How can we teach skills that help interpreters/ enablers/ facilitators to foster and manage multiple narratives?
- How can we teach skills that help participants or users to embrace multiplicity?
- Can LLs become spaces for co-creating new shared narratives, not only preserving existing ones?
- How can we strengthen trainers as mentors to encourage and enable interpretive agents to work with ambiguity and uncertainty?
- Which methodological approaches (story circles, reflective practice, dialogic learning, etc.) can cultivate those skills?
- How can the above-mentioned methodological approaches serve interpretive guides, writers, planners, etc.?

6. How is the interpretive profession adapting for the future?

- How would integrating multiple narratives influence the identity and scope of the interpretive profession?
- Can heritage interpretation itself be understood as a meta-narrative practice – one that both creates and critiques narratives and stories?
- What is the relationship between interpretation and mediation – are we moving from interpreters to mediators/ facilitators/ curators of meaning?
- Can anybody be an interpreter – and if so, what does it take?

- Is the term interpreter still justifiable for our profession, given that we now do many more things besides interpreting?
- Is a professional who is interpreting for others always necessary, when dealing with narratives?

Glossary

Brain script

Set of stored behavioural patterns that suggests to the individual how to behave in a particular situation. **Example:** Ritualised processes, such as eating at a restaurant or approaching people at a funeral.

Co-creation

Development of something by a group of people or parties who are in general all actively involved throughout the entire process and jointly determine the outcome. **Example:** Everyone has a different coloured pen and together, they create a piece of art.

Frame

Set of (un)conscious associations evoked by something. While surface frames tend to provide examples or explanations, deep frames provide deeper meaning. Different people may frame the same facts and concepts in different ways. **Example:** On the surface, war is generally associated with battles, soldiers, victories and defeats; beneath the surface, it can be associated with fear, loss, cruelty – but also with success or heroism.

Interpretive theme

Profound idea about something, expressed as a complete sentence. Strong themes often provoke, include some revelation and are usually organised around a universal concept that affects all people. Several themes might be structured hierarchically (Main theme, theme sub-theme) and could build on one another (theme line) or be organised in a more open way (theme circle). **Example:** Although the wound left a scar, it formed the character of the tree.

Narrative

Broad interpretive frame that is shared by many, puts things or events into a meaningful context and influences as a proposed truth what people believe and how they interpret their surroundings. **Example:** No matter who you are, if you work hard, you will gain respect and maybe one day become President.

Participation

Involvement at different levels, from self-determined experience to influencing collective decision-making.

Story

Illustrative description or depiction that may itself consist of storylines (plotlines) as a connected and coherent series of events. **Example:** Homer's 'Iliad' tells the story of the siege of Troy, Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa' tells the story of shipwreck ending in misery and the promise of rescue on the horizon.

Universal concept

Idea of a socio-cultural trait (playing, owning, etc.), a value that people strive for (justice, success, etc.) or an emotion (anger, joy, etc.) that is familiar to every adult person on Earth.