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Lately, one of the most relevant issues in the field of museum studies has been the question of how to better engage—seduce, even—museum visitors. Should museums prioritize quantity or quality? Is cultural democracy the best option, or rather is cultural democratization the answer? Should museums produce blockbuster exhibits or focus on collaborative practices with local communities? In *Museum Exhibitions and Suspense: The Use of Screenwriting Techniques in Curatorial Practice*, Ariana Karbe adds to the ongoing conversation by arguing that museum workers should take entertainment seriously. If films routinely manage to attract people, then maybe such tools as suspense and tension could be brought to bear in the exhibition room as well. The book thus sets out to answer, what can museums learn from storytelling forms and suspense techniques used in other media? How can these techniques be successfully applied to exhibit making? And what do these answers tell us about different kinds of suspense and their potential use in exhibitions?

In the first four chapters, Karbe carefully constructs her conceptual framework to explain why the concept of “suspense” must be studied in all its variety and how to effectively apply suspense to exhibits. The first and second chapters are an ambitious undertaking, bringing together research from film theory, curatorial studies, museology, and literary studies to flesh out how different disciplines have conceptualized and developed notions of suspense, narrative, discourse, story, storytelling, and plot. The third chapter narrows the focus, addressing how suspense is produced in classic Hollywood films, that is, how events are selected, arranged, and connected to provoke surprise by playing with linearity, information gaps, and empathetic emotions like hope and fear. Finally, chapter 4 surveys the variety of dramaturgical tools that screenwriting manuals use to create suspense, exploring such methods as tele-
graphing, dramatic irony, planting and pay off, and turning points.

Although each chapter is thoroughly researched, some lack a more linear narrative thread, and the plot can easily be lost in paragraphs containing too many frameworks, terminologies, and references. While this is a reflection of the sheer breadth of information the author commands, it can leave the reader lost. However weighty, the first section does lay the necessary theoretical groundwork, making clear how the study of suspense has focused too narrowly on dramatic suspense, which the author characterizes as eliciting strong emotions with regard to a story’s protagonist and their wants and needs, leading viewers to constantly anticipate the outcome of a story with both hope and fear. In chapter 5, Karbe offers an in-depth analysis of three classic Hollywood films through the tools and techniques for suspense surveyed in the previous chapters. She concludes that although each film presents different combinations and occurrences of suspense techniques, all three follow a structure corresponding to dramatic suspense, meaning that all focus on a main storyline that revolves around dramatic questions, linked to the wants and needs of a protagonist, who moves the plot forward toward an answer through their actions.

A major turning point happens with the analysis of exhibits in terms of suspense by applying the same methodology to three cultural historical exhibits. After a careful examination of each one, Karbe finds that even though some suspense techniques were present, none resulted in dramatic suspense, or offered dramatic questions focused on a protagonist and a series of events. Rather, exhibits exhibited milder forms of suspense, which could be characterized as thematic rather than dramatic. This triggers a new question tackled in chapter 7: can these techniques be applied to exhibitions to produce dramatic suspense? In a plot twist, Karbe finds that although one could theoretically curate an exhibit focusing on one protagonist—an actor with distinct wants and connected to a central dramatic question—this would greatly change the exhibitionary form. Exhibits are rebellious to these kinds of linear and closed arrangements. Their spatial rather than temporal character interrupts the strict linear order necessary to create dramatic tension: visitors often move autonomously from object to object following their own interests in a fragmentary fashion. Additionally, exhibit storylines are often polyphonic, as Karbe points out, in that they intermingle a variety of voices instead of focusing on a central organizing character. This opens exhibitions to a plethora of interpretations, again fracturing the causality, unity, and closure needed for dramatic suspense. Finally, the complex structure of an exhibit—with its architecture, music, smell, furniture, design, colors, typography—further forces the visitor to switch modes of reception, interrupting narrative flow and plot.

The final chapter contains the culmination of the book, in which we find the answers so long delayed. Karbe argues that, although exhibitions are not well suited for dramatic narrative, not all is lost. Exhibitions might make use of epic drama, which emphasizes links to a theme instead of events toward an ending. Such dramas are rich in detail, introducing several protagonists and plots, all of which fit better with the typical exhibition structure. And once we understand exhibits as epic rather than dramatic, we can again attempt to apply dramaturgical suspense tools from film studies to them, in particular, from epic films. Here, Karbe finds that exhibits can make use of a “mild” form of suspense, in contrast to the “wild” suspense we find in films. Mild suspense relies on interest, on such questions as “what is that?” or “what comes next?” It can still be evoked through plot but is not determined by the result, like wild suspense. She ends with examples from exhibits she curated in which she employed different sus-
pense techniques to build mild suspense, with some dramatic tension softened by epic devices.

This book is no doubt an interesting addition to scholarly conversations about new and exciting curatorial techniques and museum practices, embracing rather than snubbing the value of excitement, where epic suspense can turn interest into learning and critical thinking. It clearly shows how one might apply suspense techniques from film to exhibit making, grounded in both theory and practice. No doubt this is a personal quest, where Karbe’s passion for both films and museums is palpable and come together to produce an original book. Yet for the same reason it would have benefited from outside voices. Although Karbe argues that curators must put audiences at the center of museum work, she fails to do this herself; the book constantly foregrounds curators, not only in the case of the curators of the three analyzed exhibits but also in her interests and practice as curator herself. If the heavy prose of the first chapters had been more concise, more room could have been left for the rich literature on visitor studies and educational museum practices that center publics and look for techniques tailored to their interests and motivations.

Despite this criticism, Karbe has produced an important work for museum practitioners, curators, and scholars interested in pushing the boundaries of the exhibitionary form to exciting new frontiers. No doubt the wide-ranging compilation of literature on suspense, the application of novel techniques and analysis to exhibition studies, and her passionate argument for experimentation in the field are a valuable resource to the discipline of museum studies.

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