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*Fiction as Curatorial Practice:  
Rethinking Kyrgyz State Historical Museum  
through Mukai Elebaev's The Long Way*

Master's Thesis

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authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Asel Rashidova, 5 October 2025

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the curatorial potential of exhibiting a literary novel in a historical museum, focusing on the 1916 Uprising in Central Asia. It examines Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* and the State Historical Museum in Bishkek as narrative texts, using critical museology, narratology, memory studies, and decolonial theory. Through interdisciplinary analysis and critical museum visit frameworks, the thesis proposes a hypothetical audio-based installation integrating the novel into the museum. Curating emerges as a method blending theory and imagination, aiming to introduce narrative, affective, and decolonial strategies into a post-Soviet, didactic museological context.

**Keywords:** Critical museology, post-Soviet space, historical representation, narratology.

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>12</b>
POWER, POLITICS, AND THE MUSEUM IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET CONTEXTS	12
MUSEUMS AS NARRATIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR STORYTELLING AND LEARNING	14
LITERARY MODES OF NARRATING: BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY	16
CURATING LITERARY NARRATIVES IN THE MUSEUM	19
<b>CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>21</b>
RESEARCH PARADIGM	21
INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF THE RESEARCH	22
RESEARCH DESIGN	22
METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	23
FROM ANALYSIS TO PROPOSAL: CURATING AS METHOD	24
VARIABLES AFFECTING DATA	25
<b>CHAPTER 3. FINDINGS</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>PART 1. MUSEUM'S NARRATIVE ANALYSIS</b>	<b>26</b>
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE MUSEUM	27
EXHIBITION SPACE AND NARRATIVE CHRONOLOGY	29
EXHIBITION TEXTS AS SUMMARY OF THE EVENT	31
VISUAL IMAGES AS SCENES	34
SILENCES AND ELLIPSIS	35
<b>PART 2. NOVEL'S NARRATIVE ANALYSIS</b>	<b>37</b>
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL	37
NOVEL'S NARRATIVE OF THE UPRISING	38
<b>PART 3. MERGING THE MUSEUM AND THE NOVEL: CURATORIAL INTERVENTION</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>PART 4. REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVENTION</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>50</b>
1. VISIT PLAN	50
2. CURATORIAL PROPOSAL	51
<b>LIST OF REFERENCES</b>	<b>60</b>

## List of figures<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1. The State Historical Museum, general view of the exhibition dedicated to The 1916 Uprising.....	29
Figure 2. The showcase with two display surfaces. ....	29
Figure 3. The showcase presenting military objects. ....	30
Figure 4. The showcase presenting military objects. ....	31
Figure 5. The slide on the second digital display presenting a map.....	32
Figure 6. The slide on the second digital display presenting archival photographs of the Uprising’s participants. ....	32
Figure 7. The slide on the second digital display presenting the 1916 Uprising painting by Semyon Chuikov.....	34
Figure 8. The view of two visual images of the exposition. ....	34
Figure 9. Sketch of the current exposition layout. ....	54
Figure 10. Sketch of the layout with a proposed integration of the installation. ....	54

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<sup>1</sup> All the photos provided in the document are provided by the author of the thesis.

## **Author's declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

# Introduction

## Research Topic

The worlds of the fictional and the documentary have traditionally been understood as parallel, self-contained domains. Yet, over the course of the twentieth century, the boundaries between fiction and reality have increasingly dissolved, particularly in the sphere where art intersects with history. As Liderman (2019) observes in relation to visual art, and through the prism of semiotics, this shift can be understood as a reconfiguration of the relationship between the signified and the signifier, accompanied by the pervasive infiltration of indexical signs. Such signs — reinforced by the widespread use of the technical photographic image — do not depict the past so much as they point to it, evoking it through testimony and trace rather than through mimetic representation (Liderman, 2019).

This paradigmatic shift has been reflected across various practices and disciplines concerned with history. Within the historical field itself, a significant development has been the emergence of memory as both a cultural and scholarly category, giving rise to the interdisciplinary domain of memory studies. Memory, in this sense, challenges the epistemic authority and disciplinary boundaries traditionally claimed by history, disrupting distinctions between fact and interpretation, between what is remembered and what is recorded.

It is at the intersections and frictions between these domains — of the real and the fictional, history and memory — that this study is situated. Here, the research takes the form of an experimental inquiry into the potentials of convergence between a literary work and a historical museum exhibition. This inquiry is grounded in a specific case study: the exposition at the State Historical Museum in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel, both of which address one historical event — the 1916 Uprising. By bringing these two narrative environments into dialogue, the study seeks to probe how fiction might operate within the framework of the museum.

## Statement of the Problem

This research stems from a recognition of the problematic nature of the exhibition under consideration, as well as of museum display practices in general given that these practices continue Soviet traditions of approaching the past and presenting history. The guiding principles of the Soviet museum were shaped in Russia between the 1910s and the mid-1930s (Kaulen *et al*, 2010). By 1930s, Soviet authorities had clear understanding on the role of historical museums as

instruments of propaganda with the aim of legitimising communist authority. This approach denies any agency of museums as institutions and implies predominantly fact-based, didactic, and distanced in tone narration, situated simultaneously on the verge of myth-making, with fictional works (e.g., theatrical or cinematic stagings) used for illustrative purposes (Khazanov, 2000).

Since 1991, the State Historical Museum in Bishkek has been housed in a branch building of the former Central Lenin Museum (State History Museum, online). In this sense, it embodies directly a post-Soviet institution, although the term “post-Soviet” has become the subject of ongoing debate, with a number of scholars advocating for its abandonment as an outdated formulation (Marat, Kassymbekova, 2023). Nonetheless, in the context of museums in Kyrgyzstan, the term arguably remains relevant, as these institutions continue to inherit and reproduce exhibition strategies and interpretive methods fixed under the Soviet regime. While the external surroundings may have changed, the underlying principles remain intact: museums continue to be positioned as platforms for the “dissemination of state policy” and the creation of “a new heritage, a new nation”, thereby functioning as agents of official ideological indoctrination (Kapalova, Midinova, 2023: 14). Against this backdrop, the research seeks to explore alternative approaches to museum display that move beyond the constraints of Soviet-influenced practices.

### Context: Placing the Research within the Broader Educational and Cultural Systems

This thesis is produced within the framework of Western academia, which shapes its overarching theoretical orientation and grounding concepts, including critical museology (and, indeed, the very notion of the museum and the field of museum studies), memory studies, and narratology. At the same time, both the author’s positionality and the object of study belong to a non-Western context. In this situation of dual positioning, it is important to engage with the locality under study with particular caution, in order to avoid blindly transferring concepts and models from one context to another.

One of the key strategies adopted in this study is to rely, wherever possible, on the work of local authors. This includes not only academic researchers publishing in peer-reviewed venues, but also thinkers producing knowledge outside of academia and sharing their texts through open-access platforms (for example, the Kyrgyz philosopher Eleri Bitikci). In this regard, some part of the texts that inform this research were originally published in Russian and have been translated into English by the author, when cited in the thesis. The novel at the centre of the case study is also provided in translation from its original Kyrgyz version.

At the same time, museums as institutions in Kyrgyzstan represent a colonial legacy, having emerged in the 1920s with the establishment of the Soviet rule. For this reason, it is also

crucial to examine them within a broader historical frame. Consequently, the theoretical framework necessarily expands to include authors from the Russian-speaking post-Soviet world as well as from the wider Western academic discourse — returning, in this way, to the initial acknowledgment of the research’s placement within the Western educational system. It is also important to note that the author’s specific educational trajectory (within the Master’s programme) has influenced the more targeted selection of authors and sources from an otherwise vast academic field.

### Context: Research Sites and Objects

As outlined above, the analysis focuses on the State Historical Museum in Bishkek and, more specifically, one of its permanent expositions dedicated to the 1916 Uprising. The choice of the institution is based on its symbolic status as the principal historical museum of Kyrgyzstan, a site in which the official narrative of the nation’s past is formulated and disseminated. It holds extensive archaeological and ethnographic collections as well as valuable scientific and cultural materials (State History Museum, online). The focus on one particular section — dedicated to the 1916 Uprising — is determined both by its profound historical significance and by its simultaneously muted presence in the public sphere. Occurring at the juncture of two colonial regimes in Central Asia — the Russian imperial and the Soviet — it offers a compelling case for examining the preservation of memory at both official and personal levels.

Official materials documenting the Uprising are marked by contradictions in their accounts of its causes, chronology, and casualty figures — as their compilation and preservation were (and still are) shaped by prevailing political circumstances. The mobilisation for the First World War initiated by the Russian Empire is conventionally considered as the main cause of the Uprising. However, several historians have argued for a more complex reading of its origins. Mamadaliev (2017), for instance, examines the wider Central Asian context, focusing on the specificity of each locality while noting a common discontent with colonial policies that escalated ethnic and religious tensions between the local and settler populations, compounded by the economic exhaustion of the former. In the Soviet period, official historiography predominantly adopted a Marxist framework, emphasising the Uprising’s classist and anti-colonial dimensions, yet, such interpretations also pursued certain political interests of those in power (Bitikci, 2016, Chokobaeva, 2016, Mamadaliev, 2017).

In this context where official sources require cautious engagement, an important source of knowledge appears to be materials that exist parallel to the official ones: personal memories, either passed down orally from generation to generation, or recorded in the form of memoirs or works of

fiction. Given the temporal distance from the event, direct oral testimonies are now scarce, although some researchers have managed to collect accounts from participants in both Kyrgyzstan and China. Notably, artist and curator Altyn Kapalova has created an intervention at the Historical Museum in Karakol, drawing on collected testimonies and artefacts.

This study turns towards fiction, in the form of a novel, as a potential historical source with particular value for activating the memory of the Uprising. Based on decolonial and postmemory theory, an artistic interpretation is understood as an active, generative process — in opposition to passive remembrance (Hirsch, 2012) — as well as a mode to imaginatively re-envision erased or forcibly forgotten memories (Tlostanova, 2021). The novel under investigation is *The Long Way* written by Mukai Elebaev (1906–1944).

The 1916 Uprising has been represented widely in culture — in novellas, poems, feature films, and paintings — and *The Long Way* is neither the first nor the only work to address it. Its selection for this study, however, is based on several factors. First, the novel draws directly on the author’s own lived experience. It is an intensely personal work, yet it strives for a degree of documentary authenticity, preserving real names, of people and places, and chronology. This brings the text closer to formats more familiar and legitimate for museums (i.e., historical documents, memoirs, or oral history transcripts), while remaining a work of literature with a coherent narrative, developed characters, and internal dramaturgy. Thus, the combination of the author’s personal and professional positions enables him to create a work that conveys the complexity of an entire historical period through the story of one family (Malenov, 1959). The novel holds both literary and symbolic significance within broader social, political, and cultural frames — making it a compelling choice for the study and its experimental inquiry.

## Case Study Rationale

The choice to pair the State Historical Museum’s exhibition dedicated to the 1916 Uprising with *The Long Way* novel is driven by the distinctive perspectives they offer on the same historical event. The museum reflects the legacy of Soviet museological traditions and the shaping of official narratives, while the novel presents a personal, historically informed account that questions and expands those narratives. Together, they provide a focused case for exploring how fiction can be used as a curatorial tool to create more diverse and profound ways of engaging with the past.

## Aims and objectives

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the State Historical Museum and *The Long Way* narrate the 1916 Uprising, and how the novel's narrative strategies could be used to enhance the museum's exhibition.

The objectives are to:

- theorise the role of fiction in museums, drawing on scholarship in museum studies, memory studies, narrative and decolonial theory;
- analyse the museum's 1916 Uprising exposition through the frameworks of narratology and critical museum visit;
- analyse the novel's narrative of the Uprising and narrative strategies implemented to construct it;
- design a hypothetical curatorial intervention integrating literary narrative into the exposition and critically reflect on possibilities of such an intervention to reshape representations of history and memory in public space.

## Research questions

The underlying research question is formulated in the following way: In what ways can fiction, in a form of a novel, function as a curatorial medium within a historical museum? To address it, the ensuing sub-questions guide the study.

First, on the representation of the 1916 Uprising at the State Historical Museum in Bishkek:

- How does the current 1916 Uprising exposition narrate history, and what forms of knowledge and memory does it privilege or exclude? What are the curatorial choices (including object selection, spatial arrangement, and interpretive strategies) are employed to frame the events depicted?
- What types of books are included in the current exposition? How are they displayed and what contribution do they make to its overarching story?

Second, on the representation of the 1916 Uprising in Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel:

- What narrative about the Uprising is constructed by the author? What narrative strategies are employed to frame the events and experiences depicted? Which events, details are given attention?
- How does the novel influence the perception of the historical event and contribute to or challenge existing collective memories? How does the novel mediate between historical fact and literary imagination?

Finally, on the possible intersections between the novel and the exposition:

- In what ways can a fictional novel be integrated into a historical museum? What interpretive possibilities does the inclusion of fiction offer in terms of its role as historical source and in shaping the narrative of the Uprising within the museum space?
- How might the integration of literary narrative disrupt, expand, or reframe the museum's representation of the 1916 Uprising? How does the inclusion of a fictional text in a historical exhibition negotiate the tension between historical accuracy and creative representation?

## Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining field observations of the State Historical Museum's 1916 Uprising exposition and its subsequent analysis, together with the novel. The study develops a hypothetical curatorial proposal, based on the curatorial as a method of knowledge production when approaching museums as dynamic narrative spaces.

## Significance of the study

This study contributes to discussions on how fiction can be mobilised as an interpretive tool in historical museums. While literature has long been recognised as a medium of cultural memory, its potential to actively shape museum narratives remains underexplored, particularly in Central Asian contexts. By bringing Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* into dialogue with the State Historical Museum's exhibition on the 1916 Uprising, the thesis offers an example of how fictional narratives can both complement and challenge official histories. This approach is especially relevant when official historical sources are incomplete, politically shaped, or inaccessible.

## Structure of the Thesis

The main body of the thesis is organised into three chapters. Following the Introduction, the Literature Review brings together debates from museum studies, narrative theory, memory studies, and decolonial thought to establish the conceptual grounding for the study. The Methodology chapter outlines the interdisciplinary approach adopted, including the research design and analytical frameworks. The final chapter, Findings, presents the analysis of the museum's and the novel's narrative strategies and, drawing on these insights, proposes and critically reflects on a hypothetical curatorial intervention.

## Chapter 1. Literature Review

The Literature Review chapter draws on a multidisciplinary body of scholarship from museum studies, narrative theory, memory studies, and decolonial thought to establish the conceptual foundations for this enquiry. It begins by outlining the context in which the research is situated, with particular emphasis on the role of museums as political agents within the post-Soviet museum landscape. The focus is made on the correlations between museums and politics, examining how museums operate as active participants within broader political, social, and economic environments, rather than as neutral institutions. This perspective is closely aligned with the principles of critical museology, which constitutes one of the key theoretical frameworks underpinning this study.

Within this framework, museums are subsequently revealed as dynamic narrative and experiential spaces that foster meaningful engagement with the past, encouraging learning through storytelling and multimodal interpretation. Narrative is considered not only as a communicative tool but also as a cognitive and pedagogical structure that actively shapes how individuals construct meaning, process historical events, and connect personal memory with collective history. In this regard, particular attention is given to literature as a narrative form that blurs rigid boundaries between fact and fiction. Literature's capacity to operate as a decolonial tool — challenging dominant, official historiographic approaches that often prevail in museum contexts — is explored as a central concern. Finally, the chapter addresses the notion of the “curatorial” as both a conceptual and practical method for interpreting and integrating literary narratives into the museum space, revealing its potential to reframe established ways of engaging with history.

### Power, Politics, and the Museum in Soviet and Post-Soviet Contexts

Since their inception, museums have played a key role in the organisation and reorganisation of knowledge by displaying cultural artefacts and natural specimens (Foucault, 1994, in Bell, 2012). Scholars have increasingly explored the regulatory role of museums, particularly in terms of how they mediate between politics and cultural representation (McLean, 1998). As cultural repositories, museums connect the past with the present, this connection is, however, neither neutral nor objective. The selection of artefacts, their interpretation, and the narratives constructed around them are deeply influenced by institutional, political, and epistemological frameworks.

By ordering and contextualising objects and narratives, museums contribute to the construction of collective memory and a shared sense of belonging. As Anderson suggests, the

museum becomes a place where the nation can imagine itself; the curated narrative both confirms a particular version of the past and derives its legitimacy from scientific and institutional authority (Anderson, 2001, in Eremeeva, 2021). This power to confer meaning and legitimacy places museums at the heart of national ideological projects.

This “museum effect” (Bennett, 1995) arises from processes of selection, isolation and recontextualisation, which give objects new identities that are not necessarily any less authentic. Through this process, museums legitimise selected historical narratives and reinforce dominant power structures. They play a significant institutional role in shaping society's symbolic order, particularly by endorsing specific representations of national identity.

In authoritarian contexts such as the Soviet Union, museums were explicitly used as propaganda tools and for ideological indoctrination (Khazanov, 2000, Eremeeva, 2021). Rather than being autonomous historical or cultural institutions, they were responsible for implementing state policies and cultivating the image of “the new Soviet person” (Kapalova and Midinova, 2021). In this setting, museums lost any claim to an independent identity, becoming extensions of official ideology (Khazanov, 2000).

The Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 marked a turning point. During the transition to post-Soviet societies, museums underwent a period of narrative re-evaluation and institutional transformation. Although ideological pluralism became possible, the perception of museums as temples of absolute meaning — spaces of reverence rather than critical engagement — persisted (Eremeeva, 2021). Consequently, although the surface of museum displays changed, their deeper ideological structure often remained intact.

Thus, newly independent national states, including Kyrgyzstan, approached museums as strategic platforms for articulating and legitimising official policies, creating new heritage narratives and shaping national identity (Kapalova, Midinova, 2021). In times of uncertainty, the past is often invoked to provide symbolic frameworks for consolidating power in the present (Lübbe, 1992, in Lvovsky, 2021). Historical and national museums became therefore foundational institutions in post-Soviet nation-building process. Interestingly, these types of museums are commonly associated with authoritarian regimes rather than societies with stable political and cultural identities (Khazanov, 2000). These museums function as symbolic repositories of cultural identity, often transmitting selective and ideologically charged versions of the past.

In current situation post-Soviet museums face a dual challenge. On the one hand, they should rethink the Soviet legacy (perceptible both in the form and content of exhibiting practices) and search for new symbolic orientations in the present. On the other hand, this local crisis is unfolding alongside a broader crisis of modernist museology in the West (Eremeeva, 2021).

In the second half of the 20th century, a number of new currents emerged within Western museology — new, critical, reflexive, and radical museology — each seeking, in its own way, to reconceptualise the museum as an institution in a changing world (see Lorente, 2022). This study aligns with the principles of critical museology, as it foregrounds an understanding of museums as inseparable from their surrounding political, social, and economic contexts, and, from this standpoint, undertakes a critical engagement with both the institution and the practice of the museum (Shelton, 2013). At the same time, it draws significantly on the principles of new museology, in which the social role of museums is emphasised, particularly the visitor engagement through educational and participatory practices (see, for example, Macdonald, 1996, Boast, 2011).

These ideas are disclosed here in the context of historical museums and their transformation from solely repositories of historical facts into sites where memory is constructed, negotiated, and experienced. This is influenced by the emergence of memory as a dominant cultural and academic paradigm at the same time and locality (the second half of the 20th century, Western academic context). Broader social and political emancipatory processes, shaped by the development of postcolonial theory, feminist scholarship, and queer theory, play equally significant role (Zavadsky *et al*, 2019).

### Museums as Narrative Environments for Storytelling and Learning

Museum displays thus have gradually begun to break away from overarching master narratives and to incorporate previously overlooked, forgotten, or marginalized voices (Macdonald, 1996, Anderson, 2004, Zavadsky *et al*, 2019). Museums have become spaces for indirect engagement with the experiences of others — forums for individual lives and memories (Arnold-de Simine, 2013). As Erll (2011) argues, memory culture increasingly favors affective, fragmented, and narrative forms of representation over linear historical accounts. This attention to individual stories is also consonant with the broader educational turn in museum practice. When dealing with the past, museums are increasingly understood as platforms for dialogue, learning, and critical reflection.

For exhibition practices these tendencies are reflected in a shift from object-centered repositories to experiential, story-driven environments. Contemporary exhibition practices increasingly move away from the reliance on the authentic aura of objects, foregrounding narrative structures, multimedia technologies, and immersive scenographies to generate meaning. This shift reflects a broader trend towards narrativisation — the application of literary, cinematic and performative techniques to evoke memory, emotion and reflection (Arnold-de-Simine, 2013, Austin, 2020).

Within this framework, museums on their own are approached as dynamic narrative spaces that communicate through spatial design, curatorial framing and multimodal display. Drawing on literary theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, exhibition scholars analyse how elements such as architecture, lighting, sound, text, and object arrangement interact with each other to produce coherent, affective, and immersive stories and experiences (see Lindauer, 2006, MacLeod *et al*, 2012). These spatial narratives invite visitors to engage physically and emotionally with the exhibition, creating an environment in which knowledge is not merely transmitted but performed and interpreted.

At the heart of this approach lies the concept of narrativity. It is tightly connected to the ideas from cognitive psychology emphasising the role of pre-existing narrative templates in the process of meaning-making. It is considered that the process of experience framing and memory shaping is guided by cognitive structures, or schemas, that help organise and interpret events. And these structures are often culturally sedimented, shaped by inherited modes of storytelling and conventional narrative forms (Mandler, 1984, Bruner, 1990).

From an educational perspective, Bruner (1990) distinguishes between two modes of learning: the logico-scientific mode, based on abstract reasoning and generalisable facts, and the narrative mode, which is subjective, immersive, contextual and interpretive. In a museum setting, narrative encourages the kind of personalised, absorbing learning that allow visitors to make sense of content through their own experiences, emotions, and associations (Peirce *et al*, 2012, in Eaton, 2024). This emphasis on contextual and affective learning is consistent with Hein's (1996, 1998) constructivist approach, which asserts that learning cannot occur in isolation from prior knowledge or lived experience. Rather than presenting information as fixed or objective, narrative frameworks enable museums to connect the past and the present, content and visitors, and emotion and cognition — fostering thus experiential and embodied learning.

Narrativisation strategies — commonly associated with literature or cinema — are increasingly integrated into museum practice, supported by the development of interactive and multimedia forms of engagement. In such contexts, the museum “performs” knowledge, coming closer to the theatrical mode, in which “the visitor is encouraged to reenact the drama in a kind of empathetic walk-through” (Williams, 2011: 223, cited in Arnold-de-Simine, 2013). These tendencies are also evident in the post-Soviet context. For example, narrative techniques are actively employed through the audio guide at the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn, Estonia (based on the author’s own observations); similarly, at the Tomsk Regional Museum in Russia, the history of the 1931 Chayinsk Uprising of dispossessed and exiled peasants was presented not as a conventional exhibition but as a documentary theatre performance — a

process described by Mikhail Kaluzhsky (2019) in his article “The Museum as Stage: Possibilities and Limits of Documentary Theatre in the Museum Space.”

It is noteworthy that the sources of such experimental practices range from archival materials (administrative records and correspondence) and collected oral testimonies to fictional narratives. The latter appearing both in Vabamu’s storytelling and in the artistic interpretation at the Tomsk Museum. The following section of this chapter explores this point in greater depth — the potential of literary narratives as a medium of memory and as a museum object — drawing on research in memory studies, narratology, and decolonial theory.

### Literary Modes of Narrating: Between the Real and the Imaginary

Literature is considered an important medium of memory, according to a number of researchers who raise and study this issue (see Ball, 1999, Erll, 2011, Hirsch, 2012). The world of cultural memory is believed to be a narrative-driven one. The world of cultural memory is believed to be a narrative-driven one. Collective cultural memory, defined as a socially constructed long-term memory system, transmits knowledge, among other things, through literature and artistic expressions with the aim of making sense of history through shared meanings (Assmann, 2010).

For Erll (2011: 146), “every conscious remembering of past events and experiences — individual and collective — is accompanied by strategies that are also fundamental to literary narrative”. When analysing correlations between literary and memory practices, she distinguishes three primary intersections: narration, condensation and genre — each of these contributes to the transformation of complex historical experiences into accessible forms (Erll, 2011). Here the focus is directed towards the narrativity and the “alliance of narratology and cultural memory studies” conditioned by a “semanticised” nature of literary forms that do not serve as simply “vessels” to preserve content, but create and carry meaning on their own (Nünning, 1997, in Erll, 2011).

Literature has the power to actualise stories forgotten or repressed or unarticulated in a public sphere. This takes on a whole new level of importance when talking about preserving memory across generations. Thus, in the theory of post-memory, literature has a special place in preserving memory by people “who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create.” (Hirsch, 1999). For this people, named by Hirsch as the generation of post-memory, fiction becomes a means of active remembering which contrasts with the act of passive recall (Lowenthal, 1998, Hirsch, 2012). In this sense, literary narration produces memory rather than merely reflecting it, and the poetic and

affective dimensions of literature — its rhythms, imagery, metaphorical language and emotional resonance — become central in conveying experiences.

In the context of this study, an autobiographical novel based on personal experience is examined, and the theory around this genre is helpful when reflecting on its potential merging with the museum world. Literary theorists have emphasised this liminal status, suggesting that autobiographical texts recount and shape lived experience narratively, oscillating between documentary intention and imaginative reconstruction (Frye, 1957, Ricoeur, 1984, in Löschnigg, 2010). Recent developments in autobiographical theory reflect a 'relaxation of the borders' between fiction and non-fiction (Löschnigg, 2010). This shift does not merely stem from poststructuralist scepticism towards notions of 'truth' or 'authenticity'; rather, it signals a broader recognition that narrativity is central to the construction of identity. As Löschnigg (2010) argues, the autobiographical act can be considered a means of self-creation in dialogue with memory, desire and cultural norms.

The text's author constructs retrospective narratives in their attempt to bridge the temporal gap between the present and the past Müller-Funk (2003). From this perspective, the remembered past must be considered equally "real" as the author's current consciousness. Rather than being passive recollections, the contents of memory are actively shaped by the present sociopolitical context surrounding the author, as well as the internalised values through which they interpret their lives (Löschnigg, 2010).

At this point, it makes sense to return to Erll (2011), as she indeed cautions against treating literature as interchangeable with other symbolic forms that mediate cultural memory. To this end, she outlines four key differences between literature and memory: fictional privileges and restrictions; interdiscursivity; polyvalence; and the "reversible figure" of production and reflection. The notion of fictional privilege, in particular, opens up a critical space for exploring the potential of literary narration to be integrated in museum spaces. Such privileges include the use of fictional narrators, the depiction of consciousness and the incorporation of unverified or counterfactual elements into representations of the past (Nünning, 1997, in Erll, 2011). These allow literature to explore alternative realities and present pluralised, embodied experiences of history. At the same time, literature also operates under constraints, including its limited referentiality, detachment from empiricism and necessary openness to interpretation (Cohn, 1999, in Erll, 2011).

However, it is precisely this openness that becomes a critical resource when the boundaries between fiction and history are politically charged and ideologically enforced — which is precise for the context of post-Soviet Central Asia, where the study is conducted. As Shelekpaev and Chokobaeva (2020) contend, the region's historiography has long been influenced by internal and

external actors with ideological agendas — with colonial legacies producing certain epistemic silences and ruptures. Thus, when examining the historiography of the 1916 Uprising, it is clear that it underwent a series of “corrections” by the authorities, including, for instance, “selective forgetting of mutual acts of violence” in order to “project images of unity and construct a collective supranational Soviet identity” (Chokobaeva, 2017:68). In light of this, the renewed scholarly attention is demanded to marginalised sources, such as oral histories, religious manuscripts and transcriptions of Kyrgyz epic poetry (Shelekpaev, Chokobaeva, 2020). Interestingly, the latter served as vital conduits for social memory and historical consciousness in the 19th and early 20th centuries, prior to their professionalisation into written literature.

The turn to alternative sources, questioning the authority of official historical materials and rooted in suppressed or marginalised subjectivities, is widely reflected in decolonial theory. This study relies on the understanding of decoloniality formulated by Tlostanova (2020) — in opposition to postcoloniality with a focus on post-Soviet space — as a problematisation of colonial ‘architecture of power, knowledge, being, gender, perception’ and a search for other options. In her theorising, she aligns herself with Argentinian scholar Mignolo, who historically links decoloniality to the 1955 Bandung Conference, which aimed to delink from the two major Western macronarratives — capitalism and communism — and became a striking example and driver of political and epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2014).

In this context, fiction and imagination become vital epistemological tools. Emma Pérez’s concept of the decolonial imaginary powerfully challenges dominant historical paradigms by foregrounding storytelling and embodied memory. She argues that fiction enables us to “redeem that which has been disregarded”, offering new ways of constructing historical knowledge that go beyond archival legibility (Pérez, 1999).

Tlostanova (2021) extends this critique further, calling for a decolonisation of memory through imagination. Recognising the role of official archives in perpetuating dominant narratives, she asserts that imagination is the initial and essential step in the process of rehabilitating memory and discrediting official historical narratives. Here, the emphasis is on the epistemic value of subjective, fragmented memory: although often dismissed by historiography, these personal recollections convey the lived texture of historical experience. They do not serve state-sanctioned narratives and offer therefore invaluable insights into the emotional and social undercurrents of the period (Tlostanova, 2021).

A way of conveying such subjective experiences and memories is through the form of an artistic work, including textual forms. A telling example is the researcher herself, who engages in creative writing. Thus, in her *Zalumma Agra* novel she explores familial memory through recurring motifs and historical and personal narrative patterns. Her work embodies Gloria

Anzaldúa's notion of "la facultad" — a sensory and intuitive knowledge grounded not in rational abstraction, but in the lived bodily experiences of people marked by historical oppression. In such a novel, the silenced and erased emerge as vital presences. The text becomes a "museum of unlived lives", resisting the exclusions of institutional historiography and offering a space for lost memories (Tlostanova, 2021).

In this way, literature — particularly when grounded in decolonial theory — offers a counter-narrative to hegemonic historiographies, as well as a compelling model for approaching fiction in curatorial practice. In the context of post-Soviet museums such narrative strategies are particularly relevant. By adopting literary narration as a decolonial tool, exhibitions can challenge established historical narratives by amplifying marginalised voices and giving space for more pluralistic approaches to the past.

### Curating Literary Narratives in the Museum

Literature acts as a medium of memory — but the question remains as to how it can find its place within the museum space. It is impossible to ignore that books, including fiction ones, have long been present in the museum space. The most common way of presenting them is through a conventional "glass coffin" that transforms "an intimate object meant for active handling" into "a passive public object" (Sitzia, 2015: 126). Musealisation of books is a complex process, which requires considerate strategies balancing between the novel's content and the museum's space and modes of transmitting knowledge.

Working with literary narrative in a historical museum is particularly challenging due to the need to balance between subjective and fictionalised memory on the one hand, and documents and statements claiming objectivity and sole authenticity on the other. When approaching museums as dynamic narrative spaces, curatorial framing can be relied on to maneuver this process and search for new decisions and ideas.

It is important to note that the figure of the curator, in the context of museums in Kyrgyzstan — particularly historical museums — is not clearly distinguished. For this reason, it is necessary to clarify what is meant here by "curatorial", as it forms the basis of the intervention proposed in the final, culminating part of this study.

The understanding of curatorship as a practice of knowledge production draws on a substantial body of literature (see, for example, Sigfúsdóttir, 2021, for an analysis of different models of curatorial research in museological discourse). At the same time, there has been a tendency towards the dissemination — or appropriation — of this concept across diverse theoretical and practical domains, to the extent that curation has become a buzzword with "porous

and indecipherable” boundaries, and questionable pervasive and critical potential (Tinius, Macdonald, 2020).

In the context of this study, the understanding of “curatorial” is close to the definition proposed by Maria Lind (2012), who calls for an expansion of the traditional notion of curator as a multifaceted role encompassing organisation and presentation, as well as criticism, editing, education, and fundraising. For Lind (2012), what is crucial is a shift in understanding — from roles to “a method, even a methodology”: one that is intensively performative and self-reflective, and that consists in creating meanings and relationships between objects, people, places, and ideas. This perspective foregrounds the critical and political dimension of curatorship as a mode of knowledge production (Lind explicitly links her understanding of the “curatorial” to Chantal Mouffe’s conception of the “political”) Such an approach allows the curatorial to be embodied as a method for uncovering new interpretations and perspectives within the museum’s narrative and in the historical events and phenomena it addresses — through the search for potential intersections between literature and memory, and between literature and the museum.

To conclude, this chapter has brought together a diverse range of theoretical perspectives to illuminate the complex interconnections between narrative, memory, and museum practice. The review demonstrates how museums are increasingly understood as narrative environments that promote connective, contextual, and participatory forms of engagement with the past. The shift from object-centred curating to experience-based interpretation underscores a growing recognition of narrative’s capacity to foster subjective and affective encounters with history. At the same time, the discussion has examined how literary narratives can unsettle and reconfigure conventional approaches to historical knowledge. Literature — and fiction more broadly — emerges as a potent medium of memory, one that not only recalls the past but also reimagines and reconstructs it through acts of creative and imaginative engagement. In decolonial contexts in particular, fiction is recognised as a critical means of reclaiming silenced histories and amplifying the voices of those who have been suppressed or marginalised.

In light of these discussions, the theoretical contributions reviewed here establish a foundation for the central inquiry of this thesis: the potential of fiction, in the form of the novel, to function as a museum object. Building on this conceptual groundwork, the following chapter turns to the research methodology that shapes and directs the study’s further course.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for the research in order to address its objectives. The study explores the possibilities of literary fiction to function as a curatorial tool within a historical museum by proposing a hypothetical intervention that integrates Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel into the permanent exhibition on the 1916 Uprising at the State Historical Museum in Bishkek. Given the experimental and interdisciplinary nature of the research, the methodological framework was shaped and reshaped throughout the process, balancing theoretical inquiry with curatorial imagination.

### Research Paradigm

The research is qualitative in nature and operates within an interpretivist approach based on the assumption that there is a world to be comprehended and the knowledge is constructed through interaction with it (Firmin, 2008, in Eaton, 2022). Interpretivism resonates strongly with constructivist epistemology emphasising an active role of a certain agent (i.e., researcher, museum worker or visitor) in knowledge production (Schwandt, 1994). In a museum context, the constructivist paradigm plays an important role in terms of analysing and constructing learning experiences. According to this approach, museums are viewed not as repositories of “truth” given that “its contents are arranged by fallible and culturally influenced humans” (Hein, 1998: 176).

In this study, the figure of the researcher is perceptible throughout the paper. The influence applies to theoretical and methodological selections, and becomes vital for interpretive decisions when analysing data and formulating a curatorial intervention. This is embodied directly through a reflexive approach — the acknowledgement and articulation of the researcher's role and positionality in the text (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013).

The research process follows an inductive logic. The initial hypothesis — that a fictional narrative may offer a meaningful addition to a history-focused museum display — evolves gradually through the course of the work. The research unfolds as a sequence of inquiries: starting from theory, moving into analysis of both the museum exhibition and the novel, and culminating in an imagined space of a hypothetical intervention where they intersect.

It is crucial to note that the project is situated at the intersection of theory and practice, and is experimental in its nature. The methodological path was not fixed at the outset. Over time, the research design, theoretical framing, and even the modes of analysis underwent significant transformations. Only the core subject matter — the chosen historical event (the 1916 Uprising),

the museum, and the novel — remained consistent. The final form of the research reflects a process of continuous adjustment and appears to be the most compelling in the conditions in which it is conducted. Nevertheless, the possible vectors for its further development and refinement are acknowledged at the end of the paper.

### Interdisciplinary Nature of the Research

At its core, this research is multidisciplinary. The boundaries of the theoretical framework can be defined somewhere at the intersection of museum studies, narrative theory, memory studies, and decolonial thought. These domains provide a shared intellectual ground, from which the analysis develops through a selective use of concepts, approaches, and methods.

Within the field of museum studies, the theories of museum education and exhibition design are essential for the research. The general approach is shaped by the insights from critical museology that positions museums as inherent elements of wider social, political, and economic fields with their own political agency — and calls for more experimental practices, making museums closer to the laboratories rather than ‘temples’ or ‘forums’ (Shelton, 2013). At the same time, the observations from the narrative theory enrich the inquiry significantly from its perspective. They emphasise the importance of narrative mode in creating and gaining knowledge in the context of museums (Bruner, 1990), while simultaneously providing applied tools for analysing the storytelling strategies within both the exposition and the novel.

Memory studies offer further depth by foregrounding the politics and poetics of historical representation. The way memory is performed or silenced in public spaces such as museums is considered alongside historiographic critique and decolonial approaches to remembering the past. These perspectives are helpful for understanding both the challenges and the potential of introducing a fictional narrative into a state historical museum context, especially in a post-Soviet setting where memory politics remain sensitive and contested.

This interdisciplinary approach mirrors the complex nature of museums today — institutions that operate at the crossroads of education, culture, politics and memory. In the context of this research, interdisciplinarity opens space for thinking of the historical museum not only through its traditional roles, but through alternative perspectives that may challenge or enrich its current practices.

### Research Design

The study takes the form of a single-case analysis, focusing on the representation of the 1916 Uprising in the permanent exhibition of the State Historical Museum in Bishkek and in Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel. This narrow scope is intentional — the idea is to explore the case in its full complexity (Yin, 2018, in Eaton, 2022). This is possible by giving space for a specific focus on one museum exposition – its analysis and a subsequent attempt of bringing change through a hypothetical curatorial intervention based on the chosen novel. It might be clearer to say that the research is indeed creating a case study rather than analysing an existing one. This is precisely why the study is characterised as experimental.

The core materials of the study include both primary and secondary sources. The primary materials comprise the second edition of *The Long Way* novel, published in Frunze (now Bishkek) in 1984, which serves as the literary basis for the proposed intervention; as well as the visual, textual, and material elements of the museum exposition, documented through field visits, notes, and photographs. Secondary sources include scholarly literature across the aforementioned fields, which provide the conceptual foundation for the analysis. The research adopts a combination of document analysis, close reading, and field observation, unified by a critical and reflexive stance.

### Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data analysis is document analysis, involving close reading and interpretive engagement with the selected materials. Both the exhibition and the novel are approached as narrative texts, analysed through a lens that combines narratology with critical museology.

To examine the museum display, the research adopts the approach of the critical museum visit, following the ideas outlined by Lindauer (2006) and Moser (2010). According to it, museum is a multidimensional communicative environment, where meanings are produced and conveyed not only through content, but also through the display design and organisation (Moser, 2010). Thus, museum is comprehended in a holistic way, with equal attention paid to the form and content. It is in Lindauer's work, where this approach is formulated as the «critical museum visit» as she emphasises museums' role in reflecting political context and power structures they operate within and encourages “critical” visitors to focus “on the political implications of written text” (Lindauer, 2006: 213). She regards the museum itself as a text to be decoded, being influenced by semiotic theory. These ideas provide a productive ground to identify the narrative and narrative techniques that shape the story of the Uprising within the exposition. They serve therefore as a basis for a plan that guides museum visits during the field work process of the research.

The plan is structured in parts that move from general impressions of the museum environment (location, architecture, spatial design) to more specific elements (object selection, tone and style of language, word choice, visual rhetoric). Special attention is given to the emotional and cognitive responses of the researcher, in line with the interpretivist and reflexive paradigm. Over the course of the fieldwork, three visits are made to the museum, each lasting approximately one hour. This number is considered optimal considering the exposition's scale, as well as the objective to allow for immersive engagement while retaining the freshness of observation. During each visit, detailed notes are taken, and photographs are used to document the structure and content of the display. These records form the basis for the subsequent data analysis.

In terms of the novel, the data collection occurs in the literal form of reading. The novel consists of 192 pages. During the research, it is read several times — before familiarising with the exposition and subsequently in dialogue with it, based on insights that arise during its analysis.

The analytical process is influenced by the theory of narratology, particularly the work of Mieke Bal (2017), whose conceptualisation of fabula, story, and text is used to trace the narrative structure of the exposition and the novel. The close reading of the texts is guided with the following key questions:

- Who speaks? From what position?
- How is the narrative structured?
- What is included and excluded?
- How is time handled — chronologically or disrupted?
- What perspectives shape the general narrative of the event?

The aim of this dual analysis is to uncover the narratives of the 1916 Uprising as they are constructed within the spaces of the exposition and the novel. The analysis then serves as the foundation for the final part of the thesis: a curatorial proposal.

### From Analysis to Proposal: Curating as Method

The final phase of this research takes the form of a hypothetical curatorial proposal in the form of an intervention that imagines the integration of *The Long Way* into the museum's exposition through an audio installation.

This proposal acts as a methodological tool in itself. It aligns with approaches in curatorial research that use curatorial thinking as a method of inquiry (Lind, 2012). Emerging directly from the analytical process described earlier, it is grounded in the insights generated by the narratological reading of both the museum exposition and the novel. Having identified the narrative structures, silences, and fragmentations in the museum display, and having understood

the emotional and temporal depth of the novel, the intervention seeks to imagine a new mode of engagement within the exhibition.

In this sense, the proposal imagines a potential reality not as a final solution, but as a critical experiment. This is especially relevant for a field like museology, where actual implementation may be constrained by institutional, political, or financial limits. The proposal makes space for curatorial thinking as a legitimate research act — one that draws on imagination and theory in equal measure.

### Variables Affecting Data

Finally, it is important to take into consideration the variables that shape and influence the process of gathering and interpreting data. First, the positionality of the researcher — already mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. The visibility of the researcher is conditioned by the nature of the study with a curatorial inclination. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the situatedness of the research, coming from a particular perspective, background, and context. Second variable is the institutional context. This includes temporary aspects (e.g., as time of day, presence or absence of other visitors, general rhythm of the museum environment), as well as larger and more permanent boundaries within which the museum operates (e.g., political and economic context). These factors shape not only what is available for analysis, but also the very terms in which a curatorial intervention can be imagined.

## Chapter 3. Findings

This chapter explores the possibilities of reimagining historical narration in the museum through a curatorial intervention grounded in narrative analysis. By examining the storytelling strategies of both the 1916 Uprising exposition at the State Historical Museum in Bishkek and Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel, the chapter asks how divergent narrative modes — museal and literary, institutional and personal — might correlate within one space.

Drawing on the theory of narratology, the analysis approaches the exposition and the novel as narrative texts. This approach follows Mieke Bal's (2017) definition of the narrative text as a story transformed into signs and communicated to a particular audience through a specific medium. In her foundational work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal (2017) distinguishes three stages in the formation of a text: fabula, story, and narrative text. In the context of this study, the fabula is the historical event of the 1916 Uprising, composed of its key moments. Bal (2017: 9) poetically defines fabula as “the memory trace that remains after reading is completed”, arguing that it is the essential core of the story. The fabula is shaped into a story through various techniques such as ordering, rhythm, use of space, and focalisation. These tools serve as analytical instruments to uncover how the narrative is constructed and mediated through the exposition and the novel.

For the museum, analysis also lies within the critical museum visit framework — following the theories of Moser (2010) and Lindauer (2006). The combination of frameworks allows for an in-depth understanding of how the exhibition conveys history — through the selection and spatial arrangement of objects, their relationships to one another, and the interpretative strategies applied to them. Compared to the novel, the exposition is approached with deeper focus (in the chapter's first part) as the findings guide iterative engagements with the novel (in the second part) and the process of designing the hypothetical curatorial intervention (in the third part).

### Part 1. Museum's Narrative Analysis

When approaching the museum exposition, it is crucial to embrace the holistic experience shaped within its space by the interplay of multiple exhibition elements: architecture, location, spatial layout; light and color; subject matter, messaging, and text; display styles and exhibition design. Lindauer (2006) stresses as well the importance of the visitor's positionality and calls on us to be critical viewers — paying particular attention to what remains off-display and the motivations behind such omissions and silences.

Following Lindauer's suggestion, I begin by articulating my own expectations and assumptions, while also acknowledging my positionality. At the State Historical Museum, I position myself as an academic visitor. First, I bring specific expertise regarding the historical event at the heart of the exhibition. This stems from my involvement in a research platform focused on memory studies and memory activism, through which I am familiar with scholars who approach the event from diverse angles — historiographical, literary, memorial — and who engage in memory activism that responds to the shortcomings of official commemorative practices. These include organising memorial tours and initiating the creation of monuments. This perspective enables me to understand the topic in a broader context and to pay particular attention to the museum's stance — its orientation and the context from which it draws.

Second, my academic training lies in museum studies. This informs my professionalised perspective on museums as spaces of significant educational potential, closely intertwined with political, social, and cultural processes. Finally, there is a third, more personal layer to my engagement: I first learned about the 1916 Uprising during my professional work, as an adult. This was a moment of encountering my own history, cultural heritage, and language — reading historical and literary texts in Kyrgyz for the first time. It brought to light gaps in the formal education system and the possibilities of addressing them through alternative educational spaces such as museums. This moment of discovery inspired the idea for this thesis.

The analysis is based on three visits to the museum, which took place between February and April 2025. During these visits, I immersed myself in the exhibition, recorded notes following the visit plan — both during and after the visits, and took photographs. These primary materials serve as the basis for the analysis. The chapter begins by outlining the historical context of the museum — its founding in the Soviet era and current configuration. The analysis of the exhibition itself is divided into four sections, each examined through the dual lenses of critical museum visit framework and narratology: space/chronology, texts/summary, visuals/scenes, and silences/ellipsis.

## Historical Context of the Museum

The location and history of the State Historical Museum in Bishkek already speak volumes. Situated at the very heart of the capital, on its central square, the museum occupies a building that once served as a branch of the Central Lenin Museum. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, the building was transformed into a national historical museum. Although the museum officially traces its founding back to 1925,

when it was known as the Central Museum, it later operated as the Museum of Regional Studies before being renamed the State Historical Museum in 1954 (State Historical Museum, online).

In the independent Kyrgyzstan, the museum underwent its first major renovation between 2016 and 2021. This state-funded reconstruction was supported in part by Turkey; however, a part of Turkish financial assistance was withdrawn after the Kyrgyz side refused to cede control over the development of the new exhibition concept. The approved concept nevertheless remains controversial: it was finalised within the Presidential Administration without consultation with the academic community (Kaktus, online). As a state institution, the museum is closely affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports, and Youth Policy, and its operations are determined by state funding and national legal frameworks.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter of this thesis, the State Historical Museum exemplifies a Soviet — and to a large extent, post-Soviet — tradition of understanding the museum as a politically charged institution. It is mobilised by state authorities as a stage and a mouthpiece for the production and dissemination of ideological narratives and state-sanctioned values (Khazanov, 2000, Ereemeeva, 2021, Kapalova & Midinova, 2021).

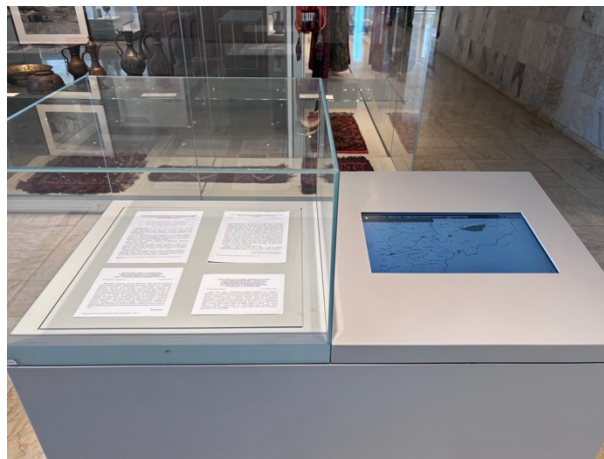
From my own observations, the renewed exhibition, including the section dedicated to the 1916 Uprising that is the focus of this chapter, appears to have taken on a more symbolic character. There is a noticeable dominance of graphic elements — maps, diagrams, illustrations — and reconstructed models of traditional dwellings, garments, and archaeological finds. These often take precedence over ‘real’ objects in the sense of authenticity and historical provenance. This may reflect a deliberate strategy to create a more visually compelling and accessible display, crafting a curated image of national identity through easily legible symbols and narratives that verge on myth-making. At the same time, the lack of authentic archaeological materials raises serious concerns. Between the 1970s and early 2000s, 503 artifacts were reported missing (Radio Azattyk, 2017), and in other cases, objects have been intentionally removed from public view. One prominent example is the reburial of a mummy dating from the 1st to 5th centuries CE, ordered by the Minister of Culture as a gesture of respect toward the deceased.

The exhibition spans two floors. It begins on the second floor, which presents a chronological narrative of Kyrgyz history from antiquity to the twentieth century — culminating in the section devoted to the 1916 Uprising. The third floor covers the Soviet era and the

contemporary period of independent Kyrgyzstan. The following section of this chapter focuses specifically on the exhibition dedicated to the 1916 Uprising.



*Figure 1. The State Historical Museum, general view of the exhibition dedicated to The 1916 Uprising.*



*Figure 2. The showcase with two display surfaces.*

## Exhibition Space and Narrative Chronology

When entering the exhibition from the main gallery of the museum’s second floor, you paradoxically arrive at what appears to be its end — if considering the introductory wall text as the beginning and follow after the circular route of the showcases clockwise. Yet this apparent end is in itself quite telling. The final showcase consists of two display surfaces: a glass-covered one and one with a built-in digital screen. The materials presented here are grouped under the theme “Kyrgyzstan within the Russian Empire.” They include archival photographs depicting Russian officials, settler schools and hospitals, everyday scenes (from a market or a telegraph installation), as well as a map illustrating telegraph routes. These descriptive and ideologically neutral visuals establish a relatively soft transition from the previous gallery, which focuses on the integration of

Kyrgyz territories to the Russian Empire. In this sense, this display could just as well be interpreted as the beginning of the narrative, offering a contextual backdrop for the events to follow.

This ambiguity in narrative sequencing is characteristic of the entire exhibition. The display consists of six showcases arranged in two rows, with no clear starting or ending point. A possible point of entry is the wall text providing an overview of the 1916 Uprising, followed by a vitrine featuring textual materials: one financial document (a 50-ruble bond) and three books. Two books are shown with title pages: *The 1916 Uprising in Kyrgyzstan – A National Tragedy of the Kyrgyz People* by Nuriddin Isaev (2016), and *The 1916 Uprising in Kyrgyzstan* with no author mentioned. A third book is opened to reveal selected pages, including a reproduction of Emperor’s decree on mobilisation in the Turkestan region, alongside telegram and newspaper excerpts. The books are not accompanied by labels, and no bibliographic information is provided for the book with open pages.

Immediately following the digital display mentioned earlier, another showcase presents four historical documents printed on new A4 paper. These include another copy of the imperial decree, two reports from the colonial administration describing uprisings in Osh and Pishpek districts, and records of the killing of 138 and 517 prisoners in Pishpek and Belovodsk, respectively. In between these showcases is another one containing books and printed archival documents. Three additional vitrines display military objects: a rifle, sabres, bullet cases, and handcuffs. With the exception of a few minimal labels describing approximate dates (“early 20th century”) and materials (“metal,” “iron”), there is no further contextualisation of these items — no indication of their provenance, connection to the Uprising, or any other interpretive framing.



Figure 3. The showcase presenting military objects.



*Figure 4. The showcase presenting military objects.*

Responding to Lindauer’s guiding questions — How do you feel as you approach and enter? Are you calm, agitated, contemplative, or confused? — my immediate impressions were of fatigue and saturation, having already passed through the rest of the second-floor displays. In this room, I felt lost and disoriented, unable to grasp the narrative logic connecting the objects. At the same time, the space felt “clean” and composed: the natural light streaming through tall windows, the light-grey and white palette, and the absence of emotionally charged visual cues made the room feel neutral, almost serene. The six identical showcases, uniformly designed with grey bases and clear glass, initially suggest clarity and order — but this is quickly undermined upon closer engagement with their content. Overall, the spatial arrangement generates a sense of fragmentation: it becomes impossible to trace the chronological development of the story or to discern its underlying fabula.

### **Exhibition Texts as Summary of the Event**

The fabula of the 1916 Uprising is articulated most clearly at a single point in the exhibition: another showcase, which features a second integrated digital screen. Here, 15 digital materials are presented, including reproductions of paintings, archival photographs and documents, a map, and a film fragment. Of particular narratological interest are the accompanying textual annotations, which function as what Bal (2017) defines as summary — a narrative instrument that offers contextual information and forges connections between disparate episodes.

This is the only place within the exhibition where the fabula of the event emerges explicitly, as interpreted by the museum. The display opens with historical context preceding the events of 1916, focusing on Russian colonial policies — specifically, land redistribution — which caused growing discontent among the local population. This dissatisfaction is linked to previous uprisings, notably the 1898 Andijan revolt in the southern region of present-day Kyrgyzstan and southeast

Uzbekistan. Three slides are dedicated to this earlier uprising, featuring two archival photographs and one document, accompanied by brief commentary on its causes, leaders, and suppression.

Only on the fifth slide does the narrative of the 1916 Uprising itself begin, marked by the display of yet another copy of the imperial decree on mobilisation. This is followed by a map and archival photographs showing the Uprising’s participants, executions, and fleeing to China. These documentary materials are interspersed with artistic visualisations — paintings and a film fragment — blurring the boundaries between documentation and representation.

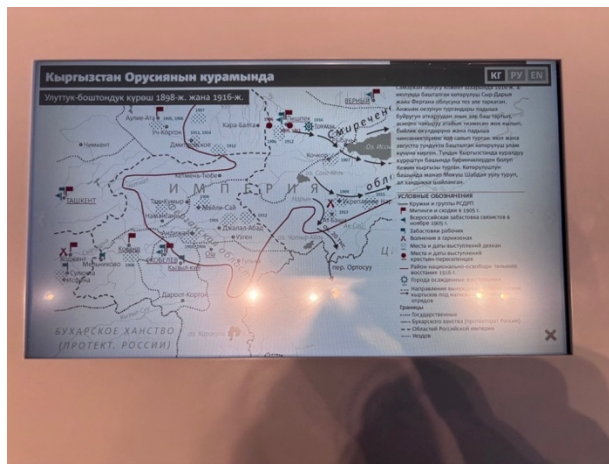


Figure 5. The slide on the second digital display presenting a map.



Figure 6. The slide on the second digital display presenting archival photographs of the Uprising’s participants.

The annotations accompanying the visual materials are largely factual. They provide key information: the date and location of the Uprising’s outbreak (4 July 1916, in Khodjent, Samarkand region), the subsequent geographical spread (with a focus on Kyrgyz participation), the names of select leaders, and estimated numbers of victims killed and exiled. One comment offers potential reasons for the failure of the Uprising: despite its mass scale, it lacked cohesion, organization, and armament. While punitive detachments were equipped with firearms, the insurgents had only sticks, spears, and makeshift weapons. This passage offers an explanation for the presence of certain physical objects in the room — rifles, sabres, bullet cases, and handcuffs — thus revealing

the summary's connective function between digital and physical elements. However, this connection remains implicit, unarticulated in the exhibition space.

It is important to note that no sources are provided for the visual or textual materials — there are no image credits, no identification of individuals pictured, and no citation of statistical data or textual origins. The language, however, suggests that the text is excerpted from a published source, one that strongly reflects a Soviet historiographical approach. This is apparent in the ideological framing of the Uprising as an anti-colonial, national-liberation struggle — a narrative pattern consistent with Soviet interpretations, which sought to contrast Russian imperialism with the emancipatory promise of Soviet rule (Chokobaeva, 2016). The museum refers to the Uprising as “the national liberation struggle of the Kyrgyz people,” which was “defeated and brutally suppressed by tsarism.” The term tsarism, a politically charged label common in Marxist discourse, signals a continuation of Soviet terminology and evaluative frameworks.

The final slide of the digital display offers a rare evaluative statement. It asserts that despite being “defeated and brutally suppressed,” the event remains “one of the most significant events in the social and political life of the Kyrgyz people.” This conclusion is illustrated by a painting by Semyon Chuikov titled *Uprising of 1916*. Here, the past appears fictionalized, or mythologised, focusing on symbolic resonance. The museum's aim might be perceived as producing a commemorative and visually accessible introduction to the event rather than conveying an evidence-based historical account.

Overall, the textual materials in this section do not allow for a comprehensive or nuanced understanding of the Uprising. This is because of the physical display as the main body of information is concentrated on a small digital screen. Moreover, because of the organisation of the content: the information is presented in brief, episodic fragments that conflate two distinct uprisings — 1898 and 1916 — without deeper exploration of their causes, complexities, or consequences. Visual and textual elements are presented without attribution, which implies they are to be accepted as historical fact, even though several are artistic or fictional representations serving primarily illustrative purposes.

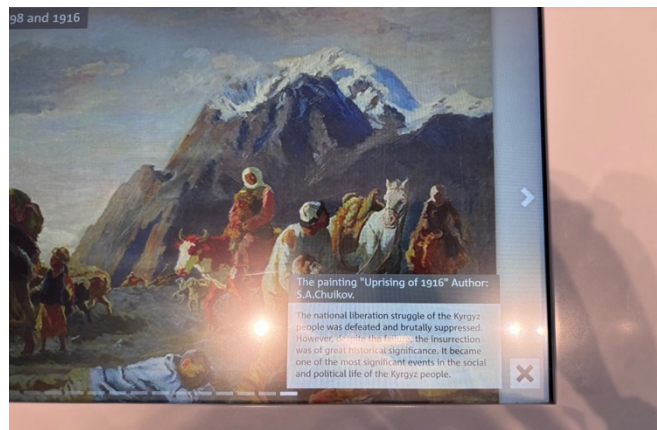


Figure 7. The slide on the second digital display presenting the 1916 Uprising painting by Semyon Chuikov.



Figure 8. The view of two visual images of the exposition.

## Visual Images as Scenes

In contrast to summary, which condenses events and provides contextual or connecting information, scenes in narratology capture a single moment and focus the viewer's or reader's attention on it. As Bal (2017: 96) describes, a scene "spins out a single event over a relatively long stretch of text", offering a concentrated lens through which to experience the narrative. In the spatial context of the exhibition, two visual images function as such scenes: they emphasise specific moments of the 1916 Uprising and intensify their affective charge.

These are the only vertical elements within an otherwise horizontally structured display space, making them immediately visually distinct. The first one is a large black-and-white image reminiscent of a grainy archival photograph. It is as wide as the long display case with the digital screen and extends nearly to the top of the wall. The photograph depicts a mountain crossing: in the foreground, human figures with snow-covered headdresses are distinguishable; in the center, a line of people straggles one by one through a narrow pass. There are no captions or interpretative

labels attached to the image. However, it might be read as an enlarged visual representation of the crossing of the Bedel mountain pass mentioned in one of slides of the digital display.

Next to it hangs a smaller painting, clearly a hand-painted work of art. It also depicts a mountain crossing but through a different lens: this scene emphasises destruction and death. In the foreground, a traditional cradle with a deceased child is depicted prominently. Behind it, half-buried in snow, lie the remnants of a collapsed yurt — the traditional nomadic dwelling. The visual emphasis in this artwork — on cultural motifs such as the cradle and yurt — may symbolise the loss of traditional life and a significant part of the population as a result of the Uprising. The scene becomes not just a representation of a moment in the exodus, but a symbolic rendering of national trauma.

While narratological definitions of scenes are typically concerned with temporal duration in textual narrative, in exhibitions an additional spatial dimension appears. Scenes may be defined not only by their focus on a singular moment but also by their placement within the exhibition space — their size, location (central or peripheral), and the presence or absence of accompanying commentary. These two paintings are centrally positioned and large in scale, immediately drawing the viewer's attention. Their vertical orientation contrasts with the horizontal layout of the surrounding display cases, further emphasising their importance. Their prominence in the gallery visually centers the episode of crossing into China through the mountain passes — an event remembered as *Ürkün*.

These images, then, serve as scenes of inhuman effort, suffering, destruction, and death. The museum's narrative — constructed not only through text but through spatial and visual choices — centers on this moment of the mountain crossing which becomes the emotional and symbolic climax of the exhibition's story.

### Silences and Ellipsis

The preceding analysis allows us to address several central questions in the narratological approach to exhibitions: Who is speaking? With what authority? To whom? About what? (Ferguson, 1996, Bennett, 1988, in Sitzia, 2018). Despite its reticence, the museum nevertheless assumes the role of narrator — but it speaks almost imperceptibly. Its voice is difficult to grasp — both physically, as it is embedded in a small digital display, and ideologically, as it communicates primarily through factual statements. Yet, the selection and framing of facts, along with particular word choices and emphases, reveal the museum's position.

If we apply Hein's typology of exhibition strategies, the narrative mode at work here can be identified as didactic, grounded in a realist view on knowledge. That is, the exhibition presents

its information as undisputed historical fact and something that cannot and should not be disputed or questioned in any way (Hein, 1998, in Sitzia, 2018). This didactic voice does not encourage dialogic engagement or interpretation; rather, it asserts its version of the past with an expected museum authority.

Nevertheless, the exhibition is marked by multiple silences, which are crucial for Lindauer (2006) and her approach to the critical museum visit. From the narratological point of view, they can be perceived as ellipsis — as the omission of events that are expected to be included, or omitted in an otherwise coherent sequence (Bal, 2017). These narrative gaps are not accidental; they structure the visitor's understanding just as much as the included content.

One such ellipsis emerges directly from the exhibition's focus on the scene of the harsh mountain crossing. While the physical ordeal is powerfully evoked by giving a central position to the visual images mentioned in the previous part, the broader context remains unarticulated. The viewer is left wondering: How did people decide where to flee? Who left, and who stayed? Were there survivors? If so, what became of their lives in China? Did any of them return to Kyrgyzstan? These are questions that remain unanswered, rendering the historical event abstracted and dehumanised.

The Uprising and its aftermath are thus presented in isolation from individual experience. The exhibition lacks personal perspective, the focalisation — the vision through which the elements of the story are presented (Bal, 2017) — that would bring the event closer to the visitor's emotional and cognitive understanding. This absence weakens the narrative's affective potential.

One of the most effective tools to restore such focus is the inclusion of a character. As Bal (2017) notes, the character-effect is essential to making a narrative compelling: we identify with characters, laugh and cry with them, resist or root for them. For Currie (2010), by presenting a person's beliefs, feelings, decisions, and desires through a character, narrative activates the capacity to simulate mental experience — thus creating engagement, even without necessarily fostering full empathy. Through the character, abstract history becomes imaginable, perceptible, and morally complex.

The absence of focalisation and character in this exhibition results in a flattened portrayal of historical experience. Without subjective accounts, the narrative remains distant, unable to mobilise the visitor's imagination or critical reflection. As a result, the 1916 Uprising is presented as a generalised national episode, and not as a lived event. Stemming from this problem, the following section moves on to an analysis of the narrative presented about the 1916 Uprising in Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel, in search of possible answers to the questions raised here.

## Part 2. Novel's Narrative Analysis

As with the exposition section, before engaging in the analysis itself, I will address my positionality from which the novel is read. While I approach the museum from a professional standpoint, in the case of the book, the situation is the opposite. First, my area of expertise does not overlap with literary theory: I approach it from the perspective of narratology, a subject that I began studying in the course of this research. Secondly, due to my Russian-language education, I am not deeply familiar with Kyrgyz literature. This creates a language barrier: Kyrgyz is a language that I use exclusively in everyday life thanks to my family. Reading of the novel is therefore accompanied by the need for translation, either through online translators or in collaboration with translators. This circumstance is complicated by a cultural barrier: many words are unfamiliar not because of the language, but because of my detachment from the cultural context. This is due to more general factors, such as the generation gap, but also more specific ones, such as the gap exacerbated by living in a different cultural, linguistic, social and political context. Thus, professional and cultural barriers affect my perception of the text and the degree of interaction with it. My engagement with the book is mainly reinforced by personal enthusiasm, interest, and cultural roots.

### Historical Context of the Novel

The novel was first published in Kyrgyz in 1936 and later translated into Russian in 1959. It is considered the first professional Kyrgyz novel, and its author, Mukai Elebaev, is widely recognised as one of the founders of modern Kyrgyz literature. This corresponds to the approach of the Soviet regime, which emphasised a distinction between oral and written traditions, between folklore and “professional” literature. However, it is true that Mukai was known as a talented poet and narrator way before he got education, he combined therefore these two dimensions of Kyrgyz literature within himself.

His *The Long Way* novel belongs to the genre of realist and autobiographical prose, which became especially prominent in the 1930s. Mukai's life itself resembled an epic narrative in its hardships and trajectory: during the 1916 Uprising, he was ten years old. Along with his relatives, he fled to China, where he lived for two years before deciding to return to Kyrgyzstan with his younger brother.

Through the story of a single family, Mukai conveys the complexity and contradictions of a historical moment significant for the whole society. He writes during the rise of socialist realism as the officially sanctioned method of artistic and literary expression. The definition of the method

— truthful representation of time in its revolutionary development — is vague, allowing art to be co-opted for political purposes whenever necessary (Gasparov, 2018).

In this context, it becomes clear why the novel has been subject to various — and often highly politicised — interpretations. For instance, in his *The Work of Mukai Elebaev* monograph, published in 1959 by the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz SSR, Baydylda Malenov analyses the novel from the class theory perspective in uncompromising ways. He emphasises the influence of the writer Maksim Gorky, who was considered at this time the main figure of the socialist realism in literature (and it is true that Mukai read and translated him into Kyrgyz), furthermore he makes certain accents by choosing specific words, saying, for instance, that that the family story of Mukai discloses stories of “all Kyrgyz working people in the feudal and tribal society” (Malenov, 1959: 56).

It is true that in the Soviet realm certain rules had to be followed when creating art or knowledge. However, this study does not aim to delve into them — the novel is approached not as a political instrument, but as a deeply personal work, an attempt to preserve a lived reality through the expressive possibilities of written literature.

At the same time, just as memory is subject to individual and collective revision and manipulation, literary texts are similarly “continuous with the communal fictionalising, idealising, monumentalising impulses thriving in a conflicted culture” (Bal, 1999: 13). As cultural forms, literary texts actively participate in shaping public memory by engaging with broader discourses of history, memory, and identity. These close interrelations between the novel and cultural memory provide the rationale for the novel’s inclusion in the State History Museum.

### Novel’s Narrative of the Uprising

The narrative of the 1916 Uprising as constructed in *The Long Way* is briefly analysed through Mieke Bal’s theory of narratology. Drawing on the idea of three levels of a narrative, suggested by Bal (fabula, story, and text), the fabula in this case is identified as the protagonist’s personal experience of the 1916 Uprising. The events are presented in a linear structure: the narrative begins with life before the revolt, then moves toward the climax — the Uprising itself — followed by the protagonist’s escape to China, and concludes with his eventual return to the homeland.

The novel is narrated in the first person, with the author being simultaneously narrator and protagonist. While the traditional first-/third-person distinction remains relevant, Bal’s concept of focalisation offers a more nuanced tool for analysis. Focalisation, defined as “the relation between the vision and what is seen, perceived” (Bal, 2017: 133), allows to understand how the narrative

is filtered through a certain agent's subjectivity. In this novel, the narrator and focaliser overlap — the narrative is internally focalised and character-bound, with the narrator participating in the fabula and referring to himself as the main protagonist. This produces a particular rhetoric of truth, where the narrator explicitly claims to recount events as they were personally experienced (Bal, 2017).

The story is told in the past tense, creating a reflective distance between the narrator and the events. This narrative stance resembles the act of telling a personal story to the contemporaries. However, the text is not monotonous or purely descriptive: it incorporates rich dialogues between characters — mainly family members who raised the protagonist and his siblings after the death of their parents. Through dialogue, interaction, and unique modes of speech, the characters' emotional lives are vividly conveyed. This creates a certain level of polyphony in the text, nevertheless everything remains filtered through the narrator's perspective, maintaining the focaliser's consistent presence.

Evidently, and inevitably, the narration is highly subjective. The novel is based on personal memory, which Bal (2017) considers a special form of focalisation — a narrative act of a certain person to piece together scattered fragments into a coherent story. However, the narrated memory is never equal to lived experience (due to specificity of memory as such).

The historical moment is reconstructed through focalised fragments deeply rooted in the everyday life. Notably, the revolt itself is not foregrounded. It exists as a background event, while the author's personal life remains at the center. For instance, growing political tensions are not presented in a historical exposition but overheard in casual discussions among villagers. The event of the Uprising is first announced in a single line overheard from a passerby: "The Kyrgyz are fighting the Tsar!". From a narratological standpoint, this quick exclamation serves as a summary of a major historical turning point. The reader experiences it as the narrator does — with limited context and no clear direction, caught up in the flow of unfolding events. By contrast, the protagonist's escape to China is narrated in extensive detail — temporally expanded into a scene, with thorough descriptive attention. It is this event that stands as a dramatic climax of the fabula in the author's memory.

The novel does not delve into a political analysis of the Uprising — the act of remembering and narrating daily life is strongly political in itself, revealing the complexities and contradictions of the historical time. The narrator also includes explicit commentary on his emotional state or observations, drawing the reader into his inner world. For example: "What can be said? Who could comprehend such times? Life itself had become an endless, haunting tale...". Elsewhere, the author suggests that people living in poverty were the Uprising's real catalyst, and that wealthier families

only joined later once it had already gained momentum. These reflective commentaries indicate that the narrator does not remain neutral but actively engages with the story.

This section has sought to outline the key narrative strategies through which the author Mukai Elebaev constructs the story of the Uprising, with a focus on the initial outbreak and the subsequent escape to China. These specific episodes serve as the basis for the proposed curatorial intervention disclosed in detail in the following section.

### Part 3. Merging the Museum and the Novel: Curatorial Intervention

*The Long Way* novel is proposed to be included in the museum exposition in the form of a multimodal installation that includes an audio recording (displayed through a media player and a set of headphones) and tactile materials (the book itself and printed scripts of the recording available in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English, consistent with the trilingual exhibition texts). These elements are gathered in a seated zone where visitors can listen, read, or simply rest. The installation is placed at the centre of the exhibition, forming a semi-secluded space within the open-plan layout and maintaining connections to surrounding displays. To support engagement with the installation, explanatory signs are provided. They function as mediating devices, creating a social context for interacting with the installation. This aligns with Perry's model of learning, which identifies clarity, confidence, control, challenge, and curiosity as key factors for successful museum experiences (Perry, 1992, in Hein, 1998). Further detailed description of the installation is provided in the Appendix.

The decision to present the book as an audio installation is guided by several curatorial considerations reflecting a deliberate shift — from static visual display to multisensory, immersive engagement. The exhibition is already highly textual in its nature: it draws on books, historical documents, and interpretive labels accompanying visual materials, all of which require close reading in order to follow the fabula of the event. It is worth emphasising that books are already present in the display as museum objects. However, this intervention introduces a new dimension — both in terms of the type of book and the mode of its presentation.

Unlike the historical works currently exhibited (four out of five books are historical monographs, while the fifth is a publication on the visual representation of the Uprising, released on the centenary of the event), this is a literary work of fiction, which opens up a new narrative form for engaging with the historical event through the lens of memory.

Regarding the choice of displaying the book, the form of a multimodal installation offers an alternative to the conventional musealisation of books — exhibited, as a rule, behind “glass coffins”. Inclusion of a physical book and scripts within the installation brings a tactile dimension,

enhancing the visitor's sense of connection — with the literary narrative, the historical event, and the objects within the museum. Moreover, at the heart of the installation is an audial experience. In curatorial practice, sound is increasingly recognised as a powerful exhibition tool as it generates affective responses and emotional resonance, functioning as a tool for engaged and embodied learning (Everett, 2019). Creation and integration of soundscapes is believed to enhance the narrative cohesion of an exposition — by linking, highlighting, separating, or correlating different elements through display (MacLeod, 2013).

The notion of soundscape, to which MacLeod refers, can be defined as an acoustic environment composed of all surrounding sounds in a given context (Schafer, 1977, in Ignatiadou, 2022). In case of this study, the soundscape is produced within the audio recording. The aim is to evoke a sense of presence — of being with the novel's protagonist, Mukai, in a specific place and moment. This is achieved through multiple auditory layers: human-related actions (voices, footsteps), ambient natural sounds (wind or horse hooves), and Kyrgyz traditional instrumental music (komuz, choir). These three layers interrelate with each other, following each other or playing simultaneously. Ideally, the soundscape is made in collaboration with a sound artist in order to create a compelling audio narrative based on the material outlined above.

The audio layer, composed of human voices, is based on a fragment from the novel. It centres on the protagonist Mukai's experience of the Uprising's climactic moment: how he learns about it, how he finds himself among the fleeing people, and how he endures the crossing to China. This storyline offers a possible response to the questions raised at the end of the exposition analysis — by providing a close-up perspective on the moment of escape, which the current display presents through visual elements and brief commentary. Notably, this episode of the Uprising holds a central place in cultural memory. The very word *Ürkün*, the name under which the event has been preserved, literally refers to a mass stampede (commonly used in reference to horses — raising therefore ongoing debates about the appropriateness of the term in this context (Bitikci, 2016).

The thematic focus of the installation does not seek to resolve the achronological structure of the exposition; rather, it introduces a moment of narrative focus and affective immersion. It renders the episode through the perspective of the novel's author and creates a space for a more integrated and nuanced engagement with the historical event. Hypothetically, the installation could be expanded by adding audio recordings with additional storylines: for instance, episodes depicting the author's survival in China and the eventual return to his homeland. At this stage of the study, a draft script of the first storyline — escape to China — is included in the Appendix.

## Part 4. Reflections on the Intervention

The development of the intervention unfolds in three key steps. The first synthesises analytical insights. The findings from the narratological analyses of the museum exposition and the novel illuminate distinct modes of narration, highlighting both differences and points of overlap — to identify possible openings for their integration.

The narrative of the 1916 Uprising, as constructed by the museum, can be described as fragmentary. Despite the use of varied display types, the overall approach remains rooted in traditional, object-based museography — static and assembled in a somewhat chaotic manner. The museum’s communication feels distant and detached. This is true both physically — one must actively dig deeper into the display, engage with the digital screen, flip through slides, and read captions closely to grasp the fabula of the event — and in terms of content, with the Uprising presented as a sequence of factual statements.

In Hein’s (1998) typology of exhibition styles, this can be characterised as a didactic approach, implying a singular, authoritative interpretation of the event. The exposition poses no questions, nor does it offer interpretive complexity. A telling example concerns the number of victims: exact figures are given (332 thousand people escaped and 200 thousand killed), yet significant discrepancies across historical sources are not mentioned. The only statement where the museum’s voice becomes perceptible — on the significance of the Uprising despite its tragic outcome — is superficial and symbolic, without deeper argument or explanation. Overall, this mode of presentation makes it difficult to trace a coherent fabula within the exposition.

By contrast, the novel constructs a narrative anchored in personal proximity to the event, as the author experienced it himself. The story is coloured with a singular subjectivity — that of the author, who also functions as narrator, protagonist, and focaliser. Here, too, a distinct interpretation of the Uprising is presented, but unlike the exposition, the act of reconstructing the event is foregrounded. The author recounts how he experienced and remembers it, explicitly aiming to create a literary work. This artistic intention shapes the form and depth of interpretation. The resulting narrative is cohesive (events are tied together through one person’s journey and perspective) and emotionally resonant (achieved through literary dramaturgy and the “character-effect”).

Building on these findings, the second step involves re-engaging with the novel to identify a thematic focus for the curatorial intervention. Here, the novel’s subjectivity becomes central, guiding the selection of episodes that might resonate with the existing exposition. The thematic focus is placed on the climactic event of the Uprising — the forced displacement from the homeland and the subsequent crossing of mountain passes en route to China.

This selection seeks to introduce narrative depth and affective focus by engaging with a personalised story. It brings the figure of the author into the exhibition space, creating a conceptual bridge between the character-effect, a central concept in literary theory, and the museum-effect, foundational in museology. The character-effect creates space for empathy, whereas the museum-effect has the power to legitimise everything displayed within the museum space (Bennett, 1995). Thus, when a character enters this space, they bring with them the potential for empathy — now amplified by the legitimising authority of the museum.

The first two steps form the basis for the third: a curatorial sketch of the intervention's final form. At this stage, the author "performs the curatorial" in Maria Lind's (2012) sense — as a method of knowledge production aligned with the interpretivist, reflexive research strategy adopted for this study. This involves designing how the novel might be experienced within the museum context: determining the interpretation of the chosen thematic focus (selecting a specific novel fragment and its presentation format), choosing an appropriate medium, and identifying its spatial placement.

The novel enters the museum space (hypothetically) in the form of a multimodal installation, offering an alternative to a conventional book display by integrating audial and tactile elements. This fosters an embodied connection with both the narrative and the historical context. The approach shifts learning toward an active, participatory mode, closer to Hein's (1998) discovery learning model. However, the content remains paramount. While interactive digital devices are already present in the exposition, their mere presence does not guarantee meaningful engagement. Here, the goal is to create a more immersive and affective encounter — one that is narrative-driven, focalised through a single perspective, and conveyed through audio.

The proposed curatorial response thus takes the form of a multimodal installation that integrates narration within a listening and reading space. Its central aim is to imagine new potential approaches to historical narration by introducing:

- transparency in the process of creating museum narratives — acknowledging a specific person (or group) behind the intervention and articulating their intentions in the installation's description;
- alternatives to object-based historical representation and conventional book display practices in museums — offering a multimodal format with audial and tactile dimensions not yet present in the current exposition;
- epistemic plurality and deeper engagement with historical narratives — presenting a story based on the novel's author's memory, moving beyond factual representation toward a coherent and emotionally resonant narrative.

The boundary between fictional and documentary is already blurred in the museum's 1916 Uprising exposition — artworks, unattributed archival photographs, and a fragment of a feature film are extensively used for illustrative purposes. The novel-based installation further dissolves this boundary by moving beyond symbolic presence to acquire narrative force, intervening in the museum's narrative structure and strategies of historical representation.

The strategy here relies on the narratological device of focalisation, whereby the past enters the museum space through a specific personal and subjective perspective — that of the novel's author. This creates a counterpoint to the master narrative of the current exposition, introducing a counter-narrative in the spirit of the «petit récit» described by Jean-François Lyotard — stories focused on the life of a single, ordinary person (Adler *et al*, 2019). Thus, at the centre of this intervention is the author, who reconstructs a lived history from fragments of memory in the form of a literary novel.

In this sense, the fictional nature of the novel becomes its central strength. It foregrounds the constructed nature of historical narratives — always authored by particular individuals or institutions. This challenges the exposition's foundational claim to present the sole “true” representation of history, enabling a move away from its didactic tone and opening space for pluriversal historical interpretations.

Recognising fiction as a legitimate historical source aligns with decolonial thought, which emphasises the need to establish parity between different systems of knowledge and being, as well as between the modes of their production and transmission — often delegitimised under modernity and coloniality (Tlostanova, 2020). This perspective grants literature the power and the potential to engage with the past, particularly in its ability to access and illuminate erased stories and lives. Mukai Elebaev, for example, honours and reclaims the silenced stories and memories of his family and, more broadly, of those suppressed during the Uprising. In this sense, the literary text becomes a “museum of unlived lives” (Tlostanova, 2021) — a museum beyond the official narratives conveyed through historical documents or oral testimonies in public institutions.

Such a “museum” requires trust and a willingness to move beyond dominant historical approaches. This is not at odds with cultural tradition: prior to the Soviet period, oral epics — highly imaginative and artistically rich — were in fact the primary mode of transmitting history in Kyrgyz society. Yet these traditions were paradoxically reduced to written documents — cultural artefacts — under the processes of their documentation and professionalisation during the Soviet era. Kyrgyz written literature occupies a similarly complex position: being a product of the Soviet period, it remained nevertheless “underground” within cultural hierarchies (in a literary sphere dominated by Russian literature and language). This position is still perceptible today, reflecting an internalised sense of cultural dominance that is difficult to overcome both psychologically and

systemically — an issue Tlostanova (2020) discusses in critiquing the “post” in “postcolonial,” which implies the completion of coloniality despite its continued presence in new and unexpected forms. At the same time, in the context of building a new nation-state, Kyrgyz culture has gained symbolic prominence (as now the officially dominant culture), and its public use can also become a political instrument in the hands of the current authorities.

In this sense, the decolonial impetus underlying this act of “performing curatorial” is an attempt to expose and question the colonial practices and principles embedded in the museum’s foundations — principles and practices that inform its work today — and to identify potential counter-practices: perspectives, narratives, and modes of their presentation. The intervention, by its very nature, highlights the constructed nature of historical narratives and calls for a more reflective and critical engagement with the past — one that allows space for subjective memories, emotions, and interpretations.

Ultimately, this intervention remains a hypothetical curatorial proposition — an imaginative exercise in reconfiguring the museum not only as a site of factual display, but also as a narrative and emotional environment. In considering its potential realisation, several barriers must be acknowledged. The foremost is the issue of resources, as state museums in the country operate under extremely limited budgets. Another is the museum’s political caution. Its current detached position may be interpreted as an effort to maintain a delicate balance: the very act of presenting this historical event in the public sphere is significant gesture, yet it is done carefully, with historical documents left to speak for themselves. Within this context, the proposed intervention aligns more closely with the idea of small-scale interventions — subtle acts that have the potential to activate a more engaged and participatory learning experience in the museum, requiring minimal resources while drawing on the imaginative world of literature.

## Conclusion

### Key Findings and Interpretative Insights

This thesis has sought to explore the intersections between museum practice and literary narrative in the specific context of the State Historical Museum in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Through a critical analysis of the exposition dedicated to the 1916 Uprising and the formulation of a hypothetical curatorial intervention based on *The Long Way* novel by Mukai Elebaev, the research has examined how historical narratives are produced, mediated, and potentially reimagined through different forms of storytelling.

Both the museum and the novel are approached as narrative texts in the sense articulated by Bal (2017), who identifies three key aspects: the story, the medium, and the narrator. This framework brings questions, grounding for the research: what story is being told? who is telling it? in what ways? Proceeding from these questions, the narrative constructed and the narrative strategies employed by the museum and the novel are defined and compared. This is made with the intention to reveal potential intersections, and, ultimately, to consider the feasibility and implications of integrating the novel into the museum exposition.

The findings disclose a curious divergence between the two narratives. The museum's narrative is characterised by an impersonal and detached position. It presents an abstracted account of the Uprising, heavily reliant on isolated facts and objects that appear, in many cases, to have been assembled without a coherent narrative thread. This lack of narrative cohesion makes it difficult to trace the fabula — the sequence of key events — of the Uprising. Moreover, the museum's rare interpretative interventions adopt a didactic tone, offering a definitive version of events without posing questions or acknowledging the complexity of the act of interpretation itself. References to sources are absent, even for factual statements, and the exposition employs visual materials as illustrative evidence without contextualising their provenance or interpretative framing. These decisions reinforce the perception of the museum as primarily symbolic, privileging mainly illustrative approach when dealing with the past.

In contrast, the novel's narrative emerges from a position of personal proximity to the historical event. The author's lived experience informs a subjective voice, embodied in the protagonist, who also functions, from the narratological point of view, as the focaliser — the lens through which all events and characters are filtered and presented. This results in a narrative that is cohesive and emotionally resonant. In recreating the historical event in narrative form, the author manages to strike a delicate balance between the documentary and fictional dimensions of the work. The retention of chronological structure, original names, and geographical details lends the

novel a sense of documentary authenticity, while the act of shaping personal memory into literary form foregrounds its constructed and interpretative nature.

The juxtaposition of these two forms of narration reflects a broader discussion on the correlation between the documentary and the fictional in historical representation. The proposed hypothetical intervention emerges from this situation of tension, imagining a multimodal installation centred on audio material — soundscapes based on the novel’s plot, layered with ambient sounds and traditional melodies. The thematic focus is on the episode of the escape to China through mountain passes, a pivotal moment in the memory of the Uprising. In the current exposition, this episode is represented visually through a number of illustrative photographs and artworks (with two enlarged paintings displayed on the wall, functioning as scenes, from the narratological perspective). The intervention proposes to «activate» these materials by embedding them within a narrative voice and perspective grounded on the novel.

The method guiding this design follows the idea of “performing the curatorial”: a critical, imaginative engagement with reality that seeks or builds connections between objects, people, places, and ideas. This method begins with an acknowledgement of the situatedness of museums within broader political contexts, where they act as agents in shaping national and historical narratives. Museum spaces are therefore not neutral — their selection, omission, and framing of historical events reflect broader power structures and cultural hierarchies. In this light, the curatorial act becomes a means of reframing the narrative — opening it to contestation, revealing the ideological work of museums, and situating them within the broader politics of history-making.

The intervention thus forges non-obvious links between the museal and the literary worlds. In seeking epistemic plurality, it imagines a space within the museum for subjective, memory-based literary narratives and the perspectives they carry. This strategy both extends and disrupts the museum’s existing narrative of the 1916 Uprising. On one hand, it encourages deeper engagement with history through contextualised, personalised, and affective learning; on the other, the integration of a fictional narrative — deliberately and explicitly claiming its legitimacy in a historical museum — provokes confusion and questioning.

This productive tension is resolved, within this study, through an appeal to the decolonial theory that emphasises the value of imagined worlds in restoring the lives and memories of those suppressed by official systems of power and knowledge. In this paradigm, fiction is not supplement to history but a legitimate form of remembering and narrating past events. It can serve as a sanctuary from colonial epistemologies that seek to dictate what is remembered and in what way.

## Research Boundaries and Limitations

While this research makes a case for the creative integration of fictional narrative into historical museum context, it is important to recognise its limitations. Some of these are practical: the constraints regarding the time and volume and general expectations from a Master's thesis inevitably shaped the course and the form of the study.

However, the crucial limitations are conditioned by the methodological foundation of the research. The first one concerns the scope as it relies on a single case study — the configuration of one specific exposition and specific novel. This inevitably restricts the generalisability and representation of alternative practices and narratives dealing, at the very least, with the same historical event of the 1916 Uprising.

The other limitation is connected to the interpretative approach relying heavily on the researcher's perspective. The author's presence is embedded in every stage of the work: in selecting the case study, framing the theoretical and methodological approaches, analysing the exposition (following the critical museum visit framework), and designing the intervention (following the “performing the curatorial” method). This is consistent with the experimental and author-driven nature of the study, based on the curatorial aspiration to work with the substantive and conceptual components of the exposition.

The intervention itself remains hypothetical. It is not implemented in the museum, so the analysis cannot account for real, in the sense of measurable, impact or change. Moreover, while the intervention is conceptualised as deeply interactive — drawing on the concepts of personalised, affective, and critical learning about the past — the study focuses primarily on the museum as an institution and does not include an analysis of visitor engagement. This is a notable omission, particularly given the importance of audience research in museology, especially for critical museology that constitute one of the main frameworks of the study. For these reasons, at their present state, the findings remain at the level of informed speculation. The main avenue for further development would be to test the proposed intervention in practice, ideally through participatory processes with potential audiences.

### Vectors for Future Research and Practice

The most obvious direction for further work would be the practical implementation of the proposed intervention. As discussed in the Reflections part of the Findings chapter, institutional and financial barriers are likely to be the most significant obstacles — requiring the museum's consent and the acquisition of resources. An initial, minimal version could be realised with basic equipment (e.g., an audio recording played through a simple media player with headphones) alongside printed scripts and the novel edition. Should the museum decline to integrate the

installation, it could be staged in another venue, including digital platforms. Only then does the opportunity arise to test the idea in practice and possible methods of data collection and analysis would include both qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., observation, in-depth interviews, or the collection of shorter forms of feedback).

Beyond the technicalities of realisation, this research opens a space for broader decolonial transformations in museum practice in Kyrgyzstan and, more widely, in post-Soviet contexts. The central question is whether a dialogue between fictional and historical narratives can contribute to reimagining museums — not simply as authorised interpretations of history — but as sites for discursive, affective, and participatory engagement with the past. Such an approach could help shift museums away from their historically entrenched role as institutions of ideological indoctrination toward spaces of critical reflection and epistemic plurality.

The broader implication is the potential to strengthen the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems in the representation of history in public spaces. Future experimental practices might blur the boundaries between knowledge domains that have been separated by colonial practices — for instance, between oral traditions and “professional” historical scholarship. Such practices could help validate and amplify local epistemologies, both in their traditional forms (e.g., epic tellings) and in hybrid forms at the intersection of the traditional and the modern (e.g., written literary forms).

This requires museums to be methodologically open — not only to different sources of knowledge but also to reflexive inquiry into the processes by which the past is preserved, remembered, and interpreted in the present. Such openness could lead to innovative curatorial roles and experimental forms of museum practice, creating the conditions for more resonant, affective, and plural ways of engaging with the past. At the same time, a careful balance must be maintained to preserve the museum’s legitimacy as a public institution and avoid the risk of further symbolic abstraction of history.

# Appendices

## 1. Visit Plan

The plan, including the helping questions, are based on Moser (2010) and Lindauer (2006).

Subject	Notes
<b>“Landscape biography”</b>	
<b>History of the building</b> <i>*What decisions and why are made to preserve, develop, destroy or otherwise use the given site?</i>	
<b>Architecture and surrounding</b> <i>*Does the architecture assign an integrity or authority to the display, or indeed undermine it?</i> <i>*Is it easy to reach the place? Are there any difficulties, obstacles, intended/unintended neighbourings?</i>	
<b>Inner space where exhibitions are presented</b> <i>*What is the size/shape/navigation of the space?</i> <i>*What is the relation between topic and space allocated to it + design/light + between themselves (display layout, spatial relationships) + the use of surfaces?</i> <i>*Do you feel cultured, sophisticated, herded, under surveillance, or enlightened? Calm, agitated, contemplative, or confused?</i>	
<b>Display analysis</b>	
<b>Texts and messages</b> <i>*What are sources of texts?</i> <i>*What is the tone and style of writing (descriptive, catchy, or questioning)?</i> <i>*Are there missing messages? What information is found beyond display (leaflets, floor plans, and visitor guides – how do they advance the message?)?</i> <i>*Does the text encourage you to develop your own informed opinion? Does it lead you to a state of intrigue, boredom, receptivity, devotion, anger, or reflexivity?</i>	
<b>Display types</b> <i>*What display elements are used: original objects or artefacts, graphics (maps, photographs, illustrations), audiovisuals (video footage, soundtracks), interactives (computer presentations, educational activities, games), storytelling/re-enactment, audio-guides, sensory displays?</i> <i>*What is their role (reinforcing the message?)?</i> <i>*Come back to the relations between objects and space allocated to them, between objects themselves - what is noticed, highlighted this time?</i>	
<b>Exhibition style</b> <i>*How the exhibition style can be described: (interpretive/descriptive, didactic/discovery, esthetically oriented, immersive, contextual)?</i> <i>*Is it distinct and clearly perceived? Or combination of styles is used?</i>	

## 2. Curatorial Proposal

This proposal suggests integrating a multimodal installation based on Mukai Elebaev's *The Long Way* novel into the 1916 Uprising exhibition at the State Historical Museum in Bishkek. It presents the central concept, form, and content of the installation, alongside its financial and technical requirements. The goal is to offer the museum a concise and clear understanding of what the intervention is and what value it brings to the current exposition.

### Objectives

By combining literary heritage, sound art, and curatorial practice this installation aims to enhance the educational potential of the exposition and strengthen its resonance with contemporary audiences.

The specific objectives are to:

- Deepen visitor engagement with the history of 1916 through narrative and emotion.
- Introduce a personal perspective on the Uprising by connecting visitors with the author's voice.
- Offer a multisensory experience that is accessible to diverse audiences.
- Add new dynamics to the existing exhibition while also providing a resting point within the space.

### Concept

The installation is based on *The Long Way* novel by Mukai Elebaev. It introduces an experimental format of presenting a book within the museum space — through a multimodal installation, centered around an audio interpretation of the text.

The installation consists of a seating area (a table with three chairs). On the table are placed:

- an audio player,
- a pair of headphones,
- a copy of the novel,
- printed scripts of the audio recording in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English (reflecting the trilingual nature of the current display; the audio itself is in Kyrgyz, as it is based on the original Kyrgyz version of the novel).

Together, these components create a multisensory experience, combining narrative and immersion.

Narrativity — the perception of information in the form of a coherent story — is achieved thanks to the reliance on the book. The novel becomes a way of remembering and engaging with history through specific characters, emotions, and experiences.

Immersiveness — both intellectual and emotional connection to a certain historical context — is achieved through the multisensory encounter created by the installation, which dimensions include:

- tactility: handling the scripts and the book;
- audibility: listening to the soundscapes based on the novel's fragments.

The aural aspect of the installation is revealed further.

### Content

The novel is presented in audio form as a soundscape. This format was chosen because it creates an immersive environment that allows visitors to enter the story without necessarily reading the text. The soundscape evokes a sense of presence — being with Mukai in a specific time and place — strengthening visitors’ emotional connection to the historical event.

The soundscape combines three auditory layers:

- human-related actions (including a voice reciting fragments of the novel),
- ambient natural sounds,
- traditional Kyrgyz instrumental music.

The recording follows the general chronology of the novel while allowing curatorial and artistic interpretation. The selection focuses on the central storyline of the family’s forced escape to China, highlighting vivid moments that reveal both the broader historical context and the intimate experiences of individuals. It is not a literal retelling of the novel but an independent narrative designed for museum space.

The soundscape runs for about 10 minutes. This duration balances the average visitor’s attention span (3–5 minutes per object with the more extended engagement invited by interactive or multimedia exhibits). In the future, additional audio tracks could be developed, focusing on subsequent episodes from the novel — for example, life in China (emphasising daily survival) or the eventual return home (exploring motivation, the physical journey, and feelings after the return). Offering alternative tracks would expand visitor choice and sustain long-term interest.

### **Visitor experience**

The installation is designed for a broad audience, including school groups, families, researchers, and casual visitors.

- Engagement styles: visitors may choose to listen, read, or combine both, depending on their preferences.
- Accessibility: trilingual scripts ensure that all visitors, regardless of language, can follow the narrative.
- Atmosphere: the quiet, seated space encourages reflection, offering a different pace within the exhibition.

Thus, the installation acknowledges diverse learning styles and encourages emotional as well as intellectual engagement.

### **Location**

The proposed location for the installation is the far-left corner of the exhibition hall (facing the windows). This placement is motivated by three factors:

- Position within the exposition: situated mid-way, the installation engages visitors after they have already absorbed part of the historical narrative.
- Seclusion: this relatively sheltered corner in a quite open exhibition space supports the immersive nature of the installation.
- Contextual resonance: located near printed archival photographs and paintings, the installation gains a visual backdrop that complements its audio dimension.

To accommodate the installation, a small rearrangement is required: showcases along the left wall should be moved closer to the wall text. This will both optimise use of space and introduce variety into the exhibition environment. The inclusion of seating places also addresses the current absence of resting points for visitors.

The display layout plan, which includes the installation, is shown in Figure 10 at the end of this document.

### **Description text (for exhibition space)**

To ensure effective interaction with the installation, it is important that a brief text panel accompany the installation. It should include brief information about the essence of the installation and the mechanics of the intended interaction. The possible example of the text:

*“This installation is based on Mukai Elebaev’s The Long Way novel. The book draws on the author’s childhood memories: at the age of ten, he lived through the 1916 Uprising, fled with his family to China, and returned home two years later.*

*Here, the novel is presented as an audio interpretation. The recording immerses visitors into one of its storylines, offering a personal perspective on the historical event.*

*You are invited to listen to it through headphones. Scripts of the recording and a copy of the novel are also available for reading.”*

### **Financial and technical considerations**

The project balances experimentality — introducing new curatorial strategies and ways of representing the book and history in a broader sense — with feasibility, requiring minimal intervention into the current exhibition and modest additional resources.

Estimated costs:

- Furniture (table and three chairs): ~10,000 KGS
- Technical equipment (media player and headphones): ~25,000 KGS  
\*Initially, simple devices with loop playback may be used. Later, a tablet could be introduced to host multiple tracks.
- Book copy and printed scripts/labels: ~1,000 KGS
- Honorarium for sound artist (concept, mixing, recording, editing, installation): ~25,000 KGS

Total budget: ~61,000 KGS (approx. 600 EUR)

Museum staff involvement: basic daily support from attendants (switching equipment on/off).

Possible sources of funding include private support, government or international grants. The author of this proposal can assist in identifying and applying for funding opportunities, as well as coordinating the project’s realisation.

### **Timeline**

The installation can be developed for the museum in three months. Approximate timeline:

- Month 1: collaboration with sound artist, preparation of audio recording and scripts.
- Month 2: recording, mixing, and production of the soundscape.
- Month 3: installation of furniture and equipment, preparation of label text, testing, and eventual public launch.

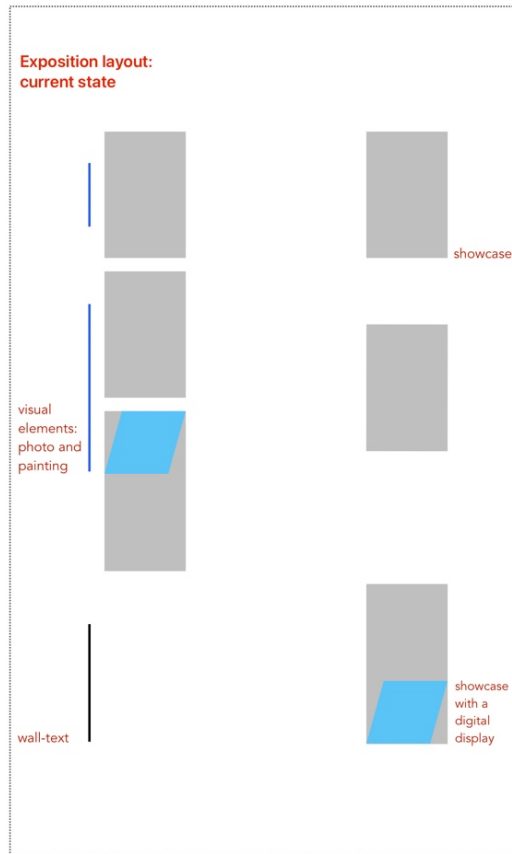


Figure 9. Sketch of the current exposition layout.

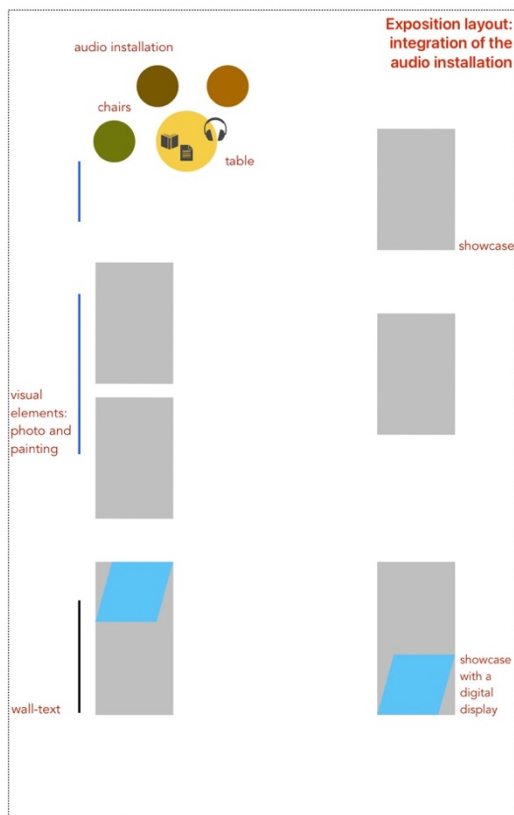


Figure 10. Sketch of the layout with a proposed integration of the installation.

## Audio script in Kyrgyz<sup>2</sup>

>

Ашыгып бараткан элдин эч кимиси жооп берген жок. Берегинде бир, алдындагы койго шашып баратып, артынан кууп келе жаткан койчуга караган карышкырдай алактап, кетип бараткан бирөөнү көрүп, Элебес дагы жанкыдай кыйкырып, иштин жөнүн сурады эле, ал: — Падыша менен кыргыз урушуп калды! — деди да буйдалбай чаап кете берди. Бар укканыбыз ушул.

>

Ушинтип мындан бир нече мүнөт мурун жайбаракат жаткан дүйнө заматта булунуп, чакчалекей түштү да калды. Биз үйдүн чайына күтпөй аттанып кеттик. Күн батарга жакын Кызыл-Кыяга жакындаган кезде, тору быштысын энтиктирип, Бейшемби алдыбыздан чыкты. Ошондон бизди баштап алып, калын токойго салып, кайра төмөн карай алып кирип кетти. Бул убакта түн кирип калган. Баягыда биз отун алуучу калын токойду аралап, күңүрт тартып үн-сөз жок кетип барабыз. Алдан бир аз убакыттан кийин калың токойдун ичинде бир жерден билектей от жарк этип, кайтып өчүп калды. Биз ошону карай тарттык. Барсак баары биздин үй-бүлө! Башариндин чоң, кызыл бээси менен карагер кунаны жүрөт. Айраң каласың...

>

Элде тынчтык жок. Күндө бир жерге которулуп конобуз. Түн болсо эркек аттуунун баары айбалта, найзаларын кармап, бир жакты көздөй тартып беришет.

Бир күнү Бейшемби:

— Жоодон мал алып жаткандар көп болду... Мен эчтемеге тийгеним жок, — деп келди. Аныкын туура көрүп, Бурмаке:

— Албаганын жакшы, балакетиңди алайын! Бирөөнүүнө кара санап кереги жок. Замандын түрү минтип турганда, кишиники эмес, өзүбүздүкү буюрарын кудай билет, — дейт.

>

Болуп жаткан окуялар тууралуу элде кулак элүү:

— Байсоорунду алып коюптур дейт.

— Саяк көтөрүлүп, бери карай көчүп калыптыр.

— Арык тукуму беш жүздөй кол курап, Караколго кириптир...

— Сарыбагыш эли кол курап, «урушабыз, качпасын» деп элди токтотуп жатат дейт.

— Саруу, Желден, Кызыл сууга кирип, бир топ кыргын болуптур.

— Замандын шыйкы жаман. Элдин кача турган туру бар.

— Кыргыз жеңилип калыптыр...

>

Ушинтип эл ары-бери толкуп туруп күндөрдүн биринде четинен бузулуп-жарылып, көчүп да калды. Кечкенде бүтүн эл түбүнөн көтөрүлө катуу толкугандай, жер бети шыкай толуп, камалышып, айдаган малдай каптап,

эгин-тегин дебей тепсеп, кытайды карай бет алып, агып алып бир жөнөп берди дейсиң — “Кудай, тирүү пендесине бербесин!..”

>

Ошол кезде баятан бирөнүн чегине батпай толкуп, тирешип турган калың журт «эми өлсөк да сенден өлөлү, сен өлтүр!» деп башын өлүмгө байлап, бардык күчүн жыйып бир таштагандай, черуулөрдүн тарсылдатып, ок жаадырганына карабай калың көч, дүркүрөп каптап алып жүрүп берди. Ошо замат ээн жерде койго тийген ач бөрүдөй эми калмактар да чын оюнду баштады. Туш-туштан тарсылдатып аткылап, элдин үрөйүн алып, үйүрдүү малды үйүрү менен, жуктуу малды жугу менен четинен тизип алып жөнөдү. Бара-бара

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts are taken from the second edition of the novel (published by Mektep, Frunze, 1984).

тандап, малга, дүнүйөгө тойгондон кийин, көчтү аралап, сулуу кыздарды, келиндерди коштой качып кетип жатты. Муну көргөндөн кийин кыздарын жаман кийинтип, түрүн бузуп алгандар да болду.

>

Эл кара талашып алактап кетип баратып, бир кезде Музарттын күркүрөгөн, тайгак суусуна көч-мөчү менен, бешиктуу катын бешиги менен камалыша чуркурап барып, чогуу бойдон бир күрүлдөп кирди дейсин — эми мындагы кыргынды сураба! Чуркураган сансыз үндөр адамдыкы экенин, айбандыкы экенин айрып болбойт. Бир жерде жуктуу мал агып бараткан, бир жерде элечеги чубалып, бешиктүү катын агып келе жаткан, бир жерде өлүп, суунун четине тырайып чыгып калган, бир жерде көмөлөнүп сууга кетип бараткан баласына чыркырап түшө калып жаткан, бир жерде селейген өлүгүнүн жанында боздоп турган... Эми кайсы бирин айталы! Кимди-ким билген заман. Өмүрдө түгөткүс бир жомок болуп жатты...

>

— Кызасыз кыямат жок» деген ушул. Илгери кыргыз да калмакты ушундай кылып бир чаап алганда «мунун эсеси кырк жылда кайтарылат» деп калган экен. Ошого быйыл кырк жыл...

— деп бир кур карыялар кетип баратып, өзүнчө кобурап коёт.

— Дүнүйөгө көз тойбогон ач көз байлар, демейде кедейге бир тайдын учун берчү эмес эле, эми кантип жаны калып жатат экен?! — деп коюшат дагы бир катындар.

>

Көп болду. Кыш түшүп калган. Эл катуу кысылды. Малдын баары качып келе жатып жолдо бүттү. Падыша солдаттарынан кийин Кытай Калмактын куралдуу черуулөрү чек арадан кезигип, эң акыркы малдарын ажыратып калды. Ак кардуу бийик ашууларда, күнсүз капчыгайларда калды. Кыямат кайым төрт жактан кысып, ач-арыктар чындап кысыла баштады. Бир табак данга катын-балдарын сатты. Ачарчылык залдарынан элди келте оорусу каптап, тунжурап, четинен кырыла баштады. Ата-баладан, бала энеден ажырады. Баягы баш аягына көз жетпеген сансыз көчтүн эми дайыны да жок.

>

Дөөлөтбак деген Кызайдын жанына түшүп, көлдөн ала чыккан бир аз ууктарды жерге сайып жиберип, алачык жасап алдык. “Кудай кылса кубарыңдын акысы барбы” дегендей каптаган он үч бүлөнүн токумдай алачыкка сыйба-сына ылаажы барбы! Башка түшсө ким көтөрбөйт. Ушул алачыктын ирегесине чейин шыкай камапып, айбандан айырмасы жок, бөлүмсүз өмүр өткөрүп, биз да кыштан чыктыг го!

>

Суу-Ашуунун башына жакындаганда, Чүкөй эжемди бир Кызайга сатып жибердик. Андан бир уй алдык. Минтпесек өлүмгө таяп калгандай учурга жетип калганбыз. Ушуну менен кытай жеринде мени менен уялаш эки эжем калды. Мындан улуусу - Батыйма деген эжем да Кытайга баргандан кийин, мурунку Көлдө экенде берген күйөөсүнөн качып баратып, жолдо бир дунганга кармалып кетиптир деп укканбыз. Кай жерде экени маалым эмес. Бирок алган дунганы Карашаар деген жерге алып кетиптир деген кабар бар эле. Өлүптүр деп да угулган.

>

Кендир мүшөктөн тиккен көйнөгүмдүн белин курчанып алгамын. Тапканымды жылаңач койнума тыга берем. Бу жерге бизден мурун да тилемчилер көп келе берип, элин тарытып койгон экен. Муну мен башкы бир-эки үйгө киргенден эле байкагам. Ошентсе да кечинде үйгө келгенде карасак, үчөөбүздүкү бир кыйла нан. Үйдөгүлөр тамак ичпей бизди күтүп отурган экен. Бурмаке сүйүнүп кетип:

— Мына, оокат кылат деген ушул, — деди биз кирип барганда.

>

Нечен кайгылуу кара күндөрдө жокчулукка чыдап, ушул жерге бизди сүйрөп жеткирген Бейшемби эле. “Мынча жетимди чубуртуп бееде кырылгыча, четинен таштап сатып кетели” деп Элебес нечен айныганда да, Бейшемби болбой көшөрүп жүрүп отурган. Бейпилчиликте

көрсөткөн эрдик — эрдик эмес. Кыйын кыстоо замандарда көрсөткөн эрдик. Жөнөкөйдө кайрылган кайрымдуулук эмес, башына түшкөн кара күндөрдө кылган кайрымдуулук...

### Audio script in English<sup>3</sup>

>

No one in the crowd responded. Elebes saw a shepherd, who was hastening after a sheep, like a wolf chasing from behind, and asked him the same question, about what was going on. He said:

— The Kyrgyz are fighting the Tsar! — and hurriedly galloped away. That's all we heard.

>

The world, peaceful just a few minutes before, was suddenly thrown into turmoil. We set off without waiting for tea. When we approached Kyzyl-Kiya around sunset, Beishembi appeared in front of us. From there, he led us into a dense forest, and then brought us back down. By this time, night had fallen. Earlier, we had been wandering silently through the dense forest, gathering firewood. After a while, deep inside the forest, a small fire flashed somewhere (like a wrist's length) and then went out. We headed towards it. When we arrived, it was all our family! Basharin's big, red mare and the black foal were there grazing. Truly wrenching...

>

There was no peace among the people. Every day we moved and settled somewhere new. At night, all the men on horseback would take their axes and spears and be on the watch.

One day, Beishembi came and said:

— There were many people taking livestock left by others... I didn't touch anything.

Burmak saw that he was right:

— It's better not to take it. God knows: when times are like this, we don't know if we will keep our possessions, let alone those of others.

>

The rumors spread among the people :

— They say Baysoorun was captured.

— Sayak has risen up and moved back.

— The Aryk tribe, about five hundred strong, joined forces and entered Karakol...

— The Sarybagysh people formed a coalition, saying, “We will fight and won't run”, and are rallying the people.

— Saruu, Jelden, and Kyzyl Su saw heavy casualties.

— The times are grim. The people are looking for somewhere to escape.

— The Kyrgyz have been defeated...

>

And so, as the people swayed back and forth in turmoil, one day they were finally on the verge and started to move. The entire people surged as if stirred from their roots. The earth was teeming — the movement was as strong as the one of driven cattle, trampling over everything, not sparing even the crops, and moved towards China in one massive current. “God, may no living soul ever have to witness such a thing!”

At that moment, the masses who had long been living at the edge, full of tension and resistance, cried out: “Even if we die, let us die from you — kill us if you must!” — as if tying their fate to death itself. Gathering all their strength in one last push, they stormed forward despite the thundering of guns and a hail of bullets. And now, like a starving wolf pouncing on sheep, the Kalmyks began their real game. Gunfire came from every direction, terrifying the people. They rounded up herds of livestock — gathering them in lines and driving them off. Gradually, after gorging themselves on livestock and possessions, they began raiding the caravan itself, abducting beautiful girls and young brides as they fled. Seeing this, some families dressed their daughters poorly and disfigured their faces to protect them.

>

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from Kyrgyz, with the help of Google Translate and a following editing of the paper's author.

Scattered in chaos, the entire caravan — including women with cradles — ran straight into the roaring, slippery river of Muzart, plunging in with a thunderous crash. What kind of massacre followed! Impossible to tell whether the countless screaming voices belonged to humans or animals. In one place, livestock floated by; in another, a woman with a cradle drifted along with her headscarf trailing; elsewhere, bodies washed ashore; a mother leapt into the river after her drowning child; and in yet another place, someone wailed beside a lifeless body... What can be said? Who could comprehend such times? Life itself had become an endless, haunting tale...

>

— “The end of the world does not happen out of blue” they say. Long ago, the Kyrgyz had struck the Kalmyks once like this, and people said back then: “This revenge will be repaid in forty years”. And this year — it's been forty years... — an old man muttered to himself as he walked away.

— Those greedy rich men who never used to give a poor man even the tail of a calf — how are they clinging to life now? — muttered some of the women.

>

Much time passed. Winter arrived. The people were in great distress. All the livestock was lost on the way. After the emperor's soldiers, armed Chinese Kalmyk troops met them at the border and stripped them of the last of their animals. In the high snowy passes and sunless gorges, many were left behind. The apocalypse closed in from all four sides, and the starving poor were truly squeezed. They sold their wives and children for a bowl of grain. A wave of illness followed the famine, and people died one by one. Fathers were separated from sons, children from mothers. The once countless caravan was now nowhere to be found.

>

We descended to a place of the Kyzai people and made a small shelter out of the few wooden poles we managed to bring with us. What room could there be in that tiny tent for the thirteen people of the family? “When fate strikes, who escapes?” — as the saying goes. Crowded to the very edge of that little shelter, we survived the winter like cattle, with no privacy, stuck to each other — but we made it through.

>

When we approached the top of the Suu-Ashu, we sold my sister Chüköy to a Kyzai man. In exchange, we received a cow. We had reached a point where it felt like death was breathing down our necks — we had no other choice. With that, two sisters of mine were left in China. My elder sister, Batyma, had also gone to China, trying to escape from the husband she had been married to back when we lived in Köl. We heard that she was captured by a Dungan man on her way. We didn't know where she ended up. There was a rumor that the man brought her to a place called Karashaar. There was also a rumor that she had died.

>

I tied my shirt made of hemp sack around my waist. Whatever I managed to find, I would put it inside my bare chest. Many beggars had already come to this place before us, and the people were weary of them — I could tell just from entering the first couple of houses. Still, when we returned home in the evening, there was quite a bit of bread found by the three of us. The family hadn't eaten waiting for us. Burmake exclaimed happily:

— This is how you make a living! — she said when we walked in.

>

It was Beishembi who had endured all the dark, painful days, the hunger, and had dragged us to this place. At times when Elebes was despaired to say: “Instead of letting all these orphans die here, let's abandon or sell them off one by one”, — Beyshembi refused, stood firm, and carried on. Courage shown in times of peace isn't real courage. True courage is what's shown in times of dire hardship. Kindness offered in ordinary times doesn't compare to kindness shown in the darkest days...

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