

TRANSLATING HISTORY IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD: KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST THROUGH COUNTERFACTUAL MEANS AT THE DEUTSCHE HISTORISCHE MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum (on display from December 2022 until March 2026) through a translational lens, proposing that it enacts a form of counterfactual historiography that can be understood as translation in the subjunctive mood. While the curatorial team insist upon a distinction between 'verifiable' alternatives and counterfactual historiography, this article argues that such a binary is untenable. Through an analysis of the exhibition's spatial and artistic design, alongside its use of primary sources, the article demonstrates how visitors are invited into an experiential process of discovery in which they critically assess historical alternatives through subjunctive translation. In doing so, the exhibition positions visitors as co-translators of the past, thereby fostering a critical and participatory engagement with the historicization process.

KEYWORDS: Counterfactual Historiography; Museums; Knowledge; Interpretation; Experience

1. Introduction

If the act of historical interpretation can be understood as translation (Burke, 2007; Alonzi, 2023; Savchenkova, 2024; Vidal Claramonte, 2025), it follows that the work of historical museums can be characterised as translation as well. The creation of historical exhibitions requires curatorial teams to translate the concrete events of the past into exhibitions that visitors then encounter in the present (Butler, 2024; Vidal and Campbell, 2025). In this way, Hilda Kean's argument that "[h]istory is not a given, but a construction involving choices drawn from materials garnered from the past made by different creators" (2017, p. 403) is clearly seen in a historical museum, where historical narratives are constructed and corresponding exhibitions curated with a precise purpose. Because such a framework highlights the constructed nature of the historical narratives that are presented in any exhibition, it leads us to question *how* history is translated there – that is, what historiographical strategies have been employed and which semiotic resources have been drawn upon in order to create a cohesive exhibition experience for the visitor (Ravelli, 2006; Neather, 2025). Yet, this translational process that lies behind any history exhibition is often entirely hidden (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 7), as visitors engage with the end product without necessarily questioning curatorial choices concerning the exhibition's narrative, and if other choices or angles could have been displayed instead. So, what if an exhibition were to invite their visitors into this historiographical process?

This is precisely what the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum (German Historical Museum, hereafter referred to as DHM) in Berlin sets out to do. The full title of the exhibition is "Roads not Taken. Or: Things could have turned out

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differently”¹, and it functioned as the museum’s main exhibition on German history while the permanent exhibition was being refurbished, running from December 2022 until March 2026. As the title suggests, the exhibition adopts a rather unusual approach, as it explores what almost happened (but ultimately did not) at 14 different ‘turning points’ throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This approach can be understood as counterfactual historiography, which, at its essence, involves investigating what actually happened through the lens of what did not (Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 126). In other words, by questioning what could have otherwise happened (a ‘what if’-style question), we can come to better understand why what actually happened indeed came to pass. Such reasoning is arguably implied in all history-making, counterfactual historiography simply brings it to the forefront; as Black and MacRaild put it, “no historian of the twentieth century has failed to wonder what human history’s most miserable century might have been like without Hitler, or the two world wars, [...] or the atom bomb” (Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 126) – and, indeed, each of these scenarios are engaged with in one way or another in the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition. What is curious, however, is that the curators of this exhibition continually insist that they have not adopted a counterfactual approach, but rather one that focuses on ‘verifiable’ alternatives (by which they mean alternatives that can be proved to have almost happened through primary sources).

In this article, I argue that the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition enacts a form of translation in the subjunctive mood. This subjunctive translation proves the binary suggested by the curators between ‘counterfactual alternatives’ and ‘verifiable alternatives’ is actually false, and that, despite their insistence to the contrary, the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition employs counterfactual historiography in a valuable way, as it invites visitors into the process of translating the past by asking them to critically judge for themselves the likelihood of the historical alternative exhibited at each turning point. The article proceeds in two stages: (1) an explanation of counterfactual historiography as translation in the subjunctive mood, where I unpick and challenge the curator’s insistence that the exhibition does not utilise counterfactual historiography; and (2) an examination of the construction and content of the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition (namely the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition and the primary sources displayed), whereby I show how the exhibition works to translate counterfactual alternatives of the past in a non-authoritative and experimental manner by engaging visitors in a process of critical discovery.

The article draws upon two main datasets: a selection of promotional materials created for the exhibition in which the curators outline their curatorial process, and my own fieldnotes taken during several visits to the exhibition in January 2025. Section 2 of this article focuses solely on the promotional materials, which I use to highlight and unpick the curator’s seeming disdain for counterfactual historiography, interwoven with an explanation of how a translational lens confirms and redeems the use of counterfactuals in

¹ The German title of the exhibition is “*Roads not Taken. Oder: Es hätte anders kommen können*”.

the exhibition. Key to this section is my suggestion that counterfactual historiography functions as translation in the subjunctive mood, which I explain by drawing upon Vidal Claramonte's writings on translating history (2025) and several seminal texts that set out the theory of counterfactual historiography (Hawthorn, 1991; Ferguson, 1999). Then, Sections 3 draws upon what is set out in Section 2, where a critical analysis of the exhibition's artistic and spatial design and use of primary sources shows how the exhibition translates the past through counterfactual means by inviting the visitor into an experimental process of discovery (Macdonald and Basu, 2007) that functions as a 'translational experience' (Blumczynski, 2023) as the visitor perceptually experiences the exhibition and the counterfactual possibilities it enacts. In all of this, I rely on Karen Bennett's understanding of translation as a "generative" rather than "reproductive" act, where "reproducing what is already known in a fresh context [creates] the conditions for new knowledge to be constructed" (Bennett, 2023, p. 456). This is precisely what I propose occurs in the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition: by reproducing narratives of the German past through a counterfactual lens, the exhibition creates the conditions for new knowledge to be created. This new knowledge comes in the form of a critical reflection on the past that the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition incites amongst visitors, meaning it is experienced in a manner that is personal to each individual visitor and not simply received unquestioningly as an authoritative singular narrative from the curators. In this way, the exhibition translates the past in partnership with the visitors, as, through the manner in which they enact counterfactual historiography in the exhibition, the curators create the environment that enables the visitor to translate the past for themselves, according to their own powers of judgement.

2. Translating the past through counterfactual means

2.1. Institutional position of the Deutsche Historische Museum

There is a wealth of promotional literature relating to the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. In this article, I am relying upon materials where the curators (and, in two cases, the President of the DHM) explain the exhibition concept and their curatorial process. For ease of referencing, I detail in the table below the various materials I am referencing.²

Table 19. Promotional materials relied upon

Source ³	Description of specific sections utilised	Date published
<i>Companion Catalogue</i>	'Preface': an introduction to the catalogue written by Raphael Gross (President of the DHM).	2023

² All of the materials referenced exist in English translation (from the original German) except for the *Companion Magazine*. When quoting from these materials I use the published English translation, except in the case of the *Companion Magazine* where the translation is my own, which is always signalled in the corresponding reference.

³ Full references for these materials can be found in the bibliography.

	'A talk with Dan Diner on the exhibition concept': a transcript of an interview with Dan Diner, a historian on the curatorial team who originated the concept for the exhibition. The interview is led by Fritz Backhaus, the exhibition project lead.	
<i>Companion Magazine</i>	'Interview mit dem Projektleiter Fritz Backhaus' [Interview with Project Lead Fritz Backhaus]: a question-and-answer style article detailing the curatorial process behind the exhibition.	2023
'Roads not Taken' exhibition website	'More story: President Raphael Gross': video of the President of the DHM discussing the exhibition.	2022
	'Digital curator tour': video of three curators (Julia Franke, Lili Reyels, and Stefan Paul-Jacobs) walking through and discussing different elements of the exhibition.	

As the data used is promotional material, it exists as part of the "uniform action governed by role expectations, norms, values and belief systems" that constitute any institution (Koskinen, 2014, p. 17). That is to say, the promotional material is produced by the museum for the purpose of promoting the exhibition in line with the institutional values that define it as a museum, and anything expressed by the individual curators in these materials must align with these values in order to be included. Because of this I will not be focussing on the individual curator's opinions or methods but rather treating them as a whole; that is, as representing the overall curatorial process inscribed by the institution.

On their website, the museum is "a place for strengthening historical judgement, where overarching philosophical, ethical and historical questions are negotiated" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.). This suggests that the museum seeks to engage the visitors in debates around the past (concerning 'philosophical, ethical and historical questions') rather than simply mediating authoritative narratives that visitors are not to question. This is perhaps made clearer in the German version of the website; the term translated as "historical judgement" in the English version is *Urteilstkraft* [judgement power] in the original German, which suggests a sense of agency and ability on the part of the visitor. In other words, the museum is signalling that it is a place where the visitors will learn to judge historical narratives for themselves, rather than simply being a place where they passively and unquestioningly receive narratives about the past without critically assessing them for themselves.

This museological stance is very much in line with the New Museology movement that took hold in the 1990s,⁴ which has seen curators move away from providing authoritative narratives in museum exhibitions and preferring instead to provide material that provokes critical reflection and dialogue amongst the visitors, who are left free to

⁴ This movement was a response to growing complaints voiced in the latter-half of the twentieth century that museums were largely elitist and disconnected from society. As a result, this movement emphasises the social responsibility of museums by advocating for a much larger degree of community involvement, as well as a shift away from a focus on objects towards a wider focus on people and participation (McCall and Gray, 2014).

make up their own mind (McCall and Gray, 2014). In particular, the rejection of ‘authoritative narratives’ involved a call for a plurality of voices and perspectives when it comes to exhibiting the past, rather than exhibitions that suggest that there is only one objective historical narrative. This directly rejects a Rankean view of historiography, which aims to produce a single, impartial narrative of history “as it actually happened” (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 164; Ferguson, 1999, p. 42; Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 40). Instead, the New Museology movement advocates for multiple narratives and perspectives of what happened in the past to be made available to visitors, leaving them free to assess these various narratives according to their own powers of judgement.

In this way, the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition fits neatly within the DHM’s vision of being “a place for strengthening historical judgement”, as its approach in offering “alternatives” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.) to what actually happened invites critical reflection from the visitors as to how the events of the past came to be. Yet, as previously mentioned, throughout the promotional material for the exhibition, the curators routinely insist that their approach is not one of counterfactual historiography, but rather one that relies on alternatives that are ‘verifiable’ through primary sources. My attention will now turn to demonstrating how the curators define and explain the exhibition concept throughout the promotional materials, before then turning to challenge their rejection of counterfactual historiography.

2.2. The ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition as defined by the curators

As has already been stated, the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition focuses on 14 different turning points throughout German history. And, for each of these moments, rather than focussing solely on the reality that did happen (as is the norm in historical museums) the exhibition contrasts these realities with another possible outcome that could have happened instead. For example, the first ‘turning point’ addressed is the peaceful protests in the German Democratic Republic in 1989, which ultimately led to the fall of the GDR and the reunification of Germany. The alternative suggested here is that the government of the GDR could have violently suppressed these protests, thus posing the question of whether this would have ensured the survival of the GDR as a nation.

Throughout the promotional material, three key themes relating to the exhibition concept continually reappear. The first and most significant of these is the (at points, rather defensive) insistence that the exhibition is not concerned with counterfactual claims but rather with ‘verifiable’ alternatives – that is, the exhibition only deals with possibilities that can be proven to have almost come to pass through primary sources. In the preface for the Companion Catalogue, Raphael Gross (President of the DHM) states that they do not “undertake a counterfactual retelling of history” but are only interested in “the moments for which we as a history museum have sources” (Gross, 2023, p. 8). In the video of him discussing the exhibition on the ‘Roads not Taken’ website, he similarly posits that the exhibition “does not elaborate on something fictional” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022b). Other members of the curatorial team express similar views: in an article in the

Companion Magazine, the exhibition project lead Fritz Backhaus states that counterfactual historiography is “exciting” but “difficult and problematic for a historical museum that must stick closely to sources” – instead, according to Backhaus, they “provoke thoughts” in the exhibition without going down a counterfactual route (Backhaus, 2023, p. 26, my translation). Moreover, in the interview that is recorded in the *Companion Catalogue* between Fritz Backhaus and Dan Diner (the historical advisor for the curatorial team, who is credited with having originated the exhibition concept), Backhaus asks Diner to explain how the exhibition “differs from counterfactual historiography” (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 20), to which Diner responds:

‘Counterfactual’ means taking history in a different direction than the one that actually occurred, a direction that is then fully imagined. But the exhibition doesn’t intend to narrate a different history. (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 20)

To summarise, then, throughout the promotional materials the curatorial team repeatedly establish a binary between counterfactual historiography on the one side – which they see to be fictive, problematic, and imagined – and their curatorial approach on the other, which they emphasise does not deviate from history because it relies upon primary sources.

The other two themes that reappear throughout the promotional materials are interrelated, and hinge upon the above understanding of the exhibition offering verifiable alternatives; these themes are (1) that the exhibition exposes the process of historicization (i.e. the process by which the past is made into a historical narrative (Kean, 2017, p. 403)) and (2) that this exposure of how history is created is intended to incite visitors to reflect critically the past for themselves. Concerning the first of these, in the video of him explaining the exhibition published on its website, DHM President Raphael Gross suggests that the exhibition “actually does exactly what historians do, they try to put themselves into a historical situation, and ask: why did it actually come [sic] the way it did?” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022b). In a similar vein, curator Fritz Backhaus states in his article in the *Companion Magazine* that they have created an exhibition “whose theme is the process of reflecting on German history itself” (2023, p. 27, my translation). Moreover, in his interview in the *Companion Catalogue*, Dan Diner posits that the exhibition presents the argument that a better understanding of the unrealised historical possibilities helps us to understand why the past happened as it did, which in turn helps us better understand how we arrived at the present (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 11), and that “in the exhibition [...] the process [of historical thinking] is exposed” (p. 20). Relatedly, the latter theme expressed throughout the promotional materials – that the exhibition is designed to incite critical reflection amongst the visitors – is emphasised in similar terms to the aforementioned goal of the DHM to be a place that “strengthens historical judgement” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.). Fritz Backhaus literally states that the exhibition aim is “to encourage historical judgement”, while Raphael Gross says that the exhibition

helps visitors “hone their ability to judge history and form their own opinions about historical events” (2023, p. 8).

To summarise, the curators suggest that their curatorial process instituted in the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition is one that is verifiable through sources even as it explores alternatives to what actually happened. They insist that showing the verifiable nature of these alternatives serves to illuminate the process of historicization, which thus in turn incites visitors to critically reflect on their preconceived ideas about the past. This process is founded on an understanding of counterfactual historiography that insists that this style of historiography cannot be verified and exists only in the realm of imagination, which thus makes it untenable in the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition. This is because, following the logic of the curators as expressed in the promotional materials, if the alternatives presented are not verifiable, then they cannot expose the historicization process because these alternatives would never have been a legitimate possibility anyway. And, if that were the case, then the visitors will not be led to think critically on how the past came to be, because the ‘imagined’ alternatives would seem too fanciful to take seriously. So, according to the curators, counterfactual historiography has no place in the exhibition. However, I propose that this does not have to be the case; in what follows I now show how a translational view of historiography legitimises theorising the curatorial process of the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition as counterfactual, and how the binary expressed by the curators between ‘verifiable’ and counterfactual historiography can be exposed as false.

2.3 Counterfactual historiography as translation in the subjunctive mood

Of course, the insistence of the curatorial team that counterfactual historiography is not based on verifiable evidence from the past is not entirely unfounded; counterfactual methods can indeed be used to consider entirely speculative and fictive scenarios, which is precisely what counterfactual fiction does. Indeed, counterfactual fiction was the first instance of a widespread engagement with this method of considering the past. In fact, in the words of historian Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, counterfactual fiction was, at his time of writing around the turn of the century, “applied with striking frequency to the subject of the Third Reich” (2005, p. 1) – Philip K. Dick’s 1962 novel *The man in the high castle* and Robert Harris’ 1992 novel *Fatherland* (both of which imagine a world in which the Nazis and their allies won WWII) are popular examples of this kind of fiction.

It is perhaps because counterfactual fiction ‘came first’, so to speak, that counterfactual historiography is still somewhat controversial, as, much like the ‘Roads not Taken’ curatorial team, certain historians critique it for being “too speculative” as a method (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 4; Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 1). Yet, as is shown through the comprehensive theories of counterfactual historiography that arose in 1990s, just because counterfactual methods can be used to conceive of completely fictive scenarios does not mean that they do not have value when used to consider possibilities that are more tightly aligned with the events that actually came to pass. Indeed, the two seminal theories of counterfactual historiography come from Geoffrey Hawthorn’s *Plausible*

worlds: Possibility and understanding in history and the social sciences (1991) and Niall Ferguson's edited collection entitled *Virtual histories: Towards a 'chaotic' theory of the past* (1999), both of which are still referenced as foundational texts today (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, pp. 2, 23).

Both Hawthorn and Ferguson's principal argument in favour of counterfactual historiography is that it is in fact implicit in all historical reckoning, particularly when it comes to causation – that is, the consideration of why the events of the past occurred the way they did. Ferguson argues that “if we want to say anything about causation in the past [...] we really have to use counterfactuals, if only to test our causal hypotheses” (1999, p. 81), and, in a similar vein, Hawthorn suggests that “the plausibility of [historical reasoning] will turn on the counterfactual it suggests” (1991, p. 16). In other words, both posit that the very nature of asking why something happened implies the question of why something else did not – in this way, counterfactuals constitute “the dark energy of history”, often invisible but yet holding the “potential for explaining some of the most fundamental workings” of the matters at hand (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. vii). So far, then, this in fact resonates with the curatorial process as expressed throughout the ‘Roads not Taken’ promotional material, particularly regarding the suggestion that the exhibition exposes the process of historicization to its visitors.

However, what of the curatorial team's principal objection to the counterfactual method, that it deals purely in speculation and thus cannot be verifiable? Ferguson directly refutes such an idea, arguing instead that a clear distinction can be made between implausible counterfactuals (the sort more likely to be explored in counterfactual fiction, as referred to above) and plausible counterfactuals, the latter being “only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered” (1999, p. 86). This, of course, is precisely what the ‘Roads not Taken’ does, as we have seen through the curator's own words – the alternatives considered throughout the exhibition are largely (though not entirely, as I will show in Section 3.2) those for which the museum has primary sources, making them thus ‘verifiable’ options for the course that history could have taken.

Yet, I do not want to entirely dismiss the curatorial team's binary between verifiable alternatives and counterfactual alternative – Ferguson himself goes on to note that “the artefacts [historians] treat as evidence have often survived only by chance” (1999, p. 89). Ferguson's reasoning for making this point is that all evidence-based history is seemingly random, therefore the best one can do is “make tentative statements about causation with reference to plausible counterfactuals” and accept a certain amount of chaos as part of the nature of historiography (1999, p. 89). I propose, however, that a translational lens offers a more solid reasoning for undoing the binary between ‘verifiable’ and counterfactual alternatives.

To return to the idea with which I opened this article, conceptualising historiography as translation allows us to see how all historical narratives are constructed from a particular viewpoint and for particular purpose. As Vidal Claramonte points out, “[u]nderstanding

historical texts as translations [...] helps us to understand that there is no single History (with a capital H and in the singular)” (2025, p. 8). In her work *Translating His-stories*, Vidal Claramonte shows how this ‘history’ is never neutral and unbiased because it involves the production of knowledge, which inextricably “has to do with the production and ostentation of power and with the strategies used by this power to represent the other” (2025, p. 6). In this way, she argues that what has become ‘history’ is simply the narrative perspective of the dominant voices of the time, a perspective that has been legitimised as the ‘neutral’ way of knowing the past because of the hegemonizing power of the voices that created it. In resistance of such hegemonizing voices, Vidal Claramonte highlights how translation can be a tool for those ‘other’, minority voices to fight back and reclaim their narrative space within the wider process of historicization. She writes that this “is not a matter of denying factuality but rather of putting facts on the table that have various interpretations and rewritings” (Vidal Claramonte, 2025, p. 7).

I propose that this translational understanding of history can be extrapolated out to apply to counterfactual historiography, and the fact that it is “not a matter of denying factuality” (Vidal Claramonte, 2025, p. 7) is key to my rebuttal of the rejection of counterfactual historiography espoused by the ‘Roads not Taken’ curatorial team. Indeed, the act of “putting facts on the table that have various interpretations” (p.7) is, in a way, precisely what the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition does – but, instead of a rewriting of history from a previously unheard minority perspective (as in the case studies looked at by Vidal Claramonte), the various interpretations offered in the exhibition involve a temporal transportation to consider what was indeed considered possible at the so-called ‘turning point’ in focus. In other words, the exhibition asks visitors to place themselves in the position of those alive at the time of the turning point in question and to use their powers of reasoning to assess an outcome that, at the time, seemed likely – perhaps even more likely than what actually ended up happening. I illustrate how this is enacted in the exhibition space in the next section, but for now it is enough to note that primary sources aid this process, but it is not entirely dependent on them in the way that the curatorial team suggests. Rather, the very act of using facts known to us in the present about the past creates a simulation for the visitor of the experience of considering a hypothetical as if it were still a future possibility, which it once was. In other words, the exhibition presents the “fields of experience” known to those who were alive at the time of the turning point in question, and these fields of experience involve the “social, political, and material structures that render these horizons possible” (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145). As such, the exhibition does indeed rely to a certain extent on primary sources to guide what historical alternatives are considered, but they are not the lynchpin of the historiographical process in the way the curators insist they are. Rather, the primary resource that makes the act of historical translation possible are the powers of reasoning of each individual visitor – in a sense, the very ‘historical judgement’ that the DHM seeks to promote.

As such, if the visitor's powers of reasoning are key to the mode of historiography employed in the exhibition, the following statement from Hawthorn is worth considering:

...practical reasonings [are not] entirely pre-ordained by rules or reasons. They are conditional, subjunctive hypotheticals, a matter of counterfactual judgement. They turn on what agents more or less reflectively believe, in the light of their inclinations and the circumstances, to be possible. (1991, p. 15)

Leading on from this idea, I propose that the counterfactual historiography at play in the 'Roads not Taken' is an act of translation in the subjunctive mood, where history is translated through the visitors very reasoning as to whether a proposed hypothetical could have occurred or not, a reasoning which is enacted as if they are present in the moment of the turning point, rather than looking back on it as a moment that has already passed. In this way, the translational process functions as suggested by Luigi Alonzi, in that it is "also an act of synchronization which connects past, present, and future, disrupting and resetting time, as well as creating complex temporalities differing from linear chronology" (2023, p. 1). Thus, this translation of the past through counterfactual means is an act of "reconstituting 'past futures'" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145), prompting the visitor to consider history in the subjunctive mood as they reason through events that at once could have happened but also did not.

To close this section, I return once more to the binary suggested by the curatorial team, that 'verifiable' alternatives are not the same as 'counterfactual' alternatives. I have shown that this is not a view shared by theorists of counterfactual historiography, and, more importantly, argue that this is not necessarily the key factor that drives the historiographical process of the exhibition. Rather, I propose that in disrupting the linear chronology of history, the exhibition translates the 'fields of experience' of those who were alive at the time of the turning point in question, thereby placing the visitors in their position. In doing so, the alternative proposed in the exhibition is translated in the subjunctive mood, as the visitor is asked to consider it as if it were a present hypothetical. This can be linked back to Bennett's understanding of translation as a generative act of knowledge production, where the restaging of what is familiar creates the conditions for new knowledge to be produced (2023, p. 456). In other words, by restaging the past into a counterfactual hypothetical, the past is translated in a new manner, in the subjunctive mood, which allows the visitor to consider it as if it was still a future possibility.

What follows from here is an exploration of precisely how the exhibition enacts subjunctive translation amongst the visitors – that is, how it brings the visitors into the 'fields of experience' of the particular turning points in order to consider the alternative routes of history as if they themselves are present in the moment of the turning point in question.

3. Counterfactual translation of the past as an experimental process of discovery

Having challenged the curatorial team's understanding of counterfactual historiography, I will now demonstrate how the process of translation in the subjunctive mood (which I propose equates to counterfactual historiography, as detailed above) is actually enacted in the exhibition. This examination looks at the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition and the primary sources presented there. I have chosen these lines of analysis because they are the essential building blocks of the exhibition experience, as elements which the visitors encounter perceptually. In this way, I am examining the exhibition as a 'text' (Boria and Tomalin, 2019), just as one would analyse different aspects of a written text (such as the form, register, tone, etc.). The overall analysis in this section ultimately demonstrates how the exhibition creates the aforementioned 'fields of experience' that prompt the visitor to consider the historical alternatives presented as if they are experiencing them as present possibilities.

3.1. Spatial and artistic design

The spatial and artistic design of the exhibition have been carefully constructed – in his interview in the *Companion Catalogue*, Dan Diner notes that “the tension between possibility and reality is dramaturgically staged” in the exhibition (2023, p. 13). What he means by this is that each ‘turning point’ that is addressed is contained within its own section of the exhibition, and, within each of these sections, there is a ‘reality space’, where what actually happened is addressed (including the context that led up to the event in question), and a ‘possibility space’ where what could have happened instead is explored. The two spaces are distinguished by their artistic design – in the ‘Digital curator tour’ video that is published on the exhibition website, curator Lili Reyels comments that they designed the reality space to be “strictly museum-like” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022a), keeping everything in black and white with structured text boxes. In contrast, the possibility space is “strongly staged in terms of design” with lots of colour and distorted images and text (DHM, 2022a). Figures 1 and 2 below show that this is the case in the exhibition's opening section, which focuses on the peaceful revolution in the GDR in 1989. The stark contrast between the ‘reality space’ and the ‘possibility space’ is clear, and, beyond the change in design, there is nothing else to mark the move from reality to possibility.

In this way, the exhibition physically enacts the ideological shift in museum practice that was heralded by the New Museology movement (discussed previously in Section 2.1) – that is, a shift from authoritative narratives to more open-ended discussions that are intended to incite the visitor to critically reflect for themselves. The visitors encounter this shift perceptually, and the information they encounter in each respective space mirrors the perceptual experience: familiar museum design tactics (a formal black and white design with uniform text boxes) are utilised in the ‘reality space’ to complement the factual knowledge of what actually happened, while the unusual and noticeably different design of the ‘possibility space’ (use of strong colours on the walls and floor with slightly distorted images and cartoons that are not boxed in) aligns with the new counterfactual knowledge

of the past presented there. In each section of the exhibition, the visitor encounters the 'reality space' first. This plays a role in constructing the 'field of experience' necessary for the visitor to be able to consider the historical alternative through the mode of subjunctive translation because they are first brought to consider the context of the turning point in focus in a way that does not yet ask them to question anything but rather presents the knowledge offered as plain facts. Then, when they physically move into the 'possibility space', the strikingly different aesthetics prompts them to consider what is said in a different manner. In this way, the "'medium' and 'message' are identical" as "what [is said] and how [it is said] are two halves of the same apple" (Pearce, 1995, p. 15). Thus, as the visitors investigate how the design of the space has changed, so too are they prompted to investigate why the design of the space has changed, priming them to question the information relayed to them there.



Figure 6. Part of the 'reality space' in the '1989' section of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. Image my own.

Moreover, the physical act of moving from one clearly defined space to another (that is, from the 'reality space' to the 'possibility space') enacts the disruption of a linear chronology that translates the visitor's perspective from the present to the past in order to consider the historical alternative presented as a "past future" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145). The chronology is disrupted because the shift to the 'possibility' space requires the visitor to think back over what they have just learned in the 'reality' space, as they are prompted to question whether the alternative suggested would have been as likely as what eventually did happen. In this way they are made to reason in the same manner that those alive at the time of the turning point would have, which is precisely what I understand to be the process of subjunctive translation that occurs through counterfactual historiography.



Figure 7. The transition from the ‘reality space’ to the ‘possibility space’ in the ‘1989’ section of the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition. Image my own.

3.2. Primary sources

In referring to primary sources, I mean anything sourced from the historical period being referenced, such as objects, videos, audio recordings, pictures, and documents. As discussed in Section 2.1, the curatorial team stresses that they only consider historical alternatives for which they have primary sources, and they even go as far as to suggest that the absence of primary sources renders an alternative not worth considering. In spite of this, I found that the number of primary sources (particularly objects) is in fact somewhat sparse. There are even sections where there are virtually no primary sources that concretely testify to the unrealised possibility; these sections are 1866, which explores the possibility of Austria having won the Austro-Prussian War, and 1914, which explores the possibility of the Social Democrats being able to prevent the outbreak of World War I.

However, there are instances where primary sources do lend particular strength to the likelihood of the proposed historical alternative. Perhaps the strongest example is a coin that is displayed in the ‘1848/9’ section, which focuses on the possibility of a democratic-constitutional government being formed at the will of the people. Ultimately, this did not come to pass because the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV refused to accept the role of German Emperor (to which he had been elected by the people’s representatives) because of his belief in the hereditary divine right of Kings over democratic election. However, a coin displayed in this section celebrates the election of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV as Emperor, having been minted prematurely before he declined the position. Some other particularly effective usages of primary sources are: facsimile examples of documents that were prepared in order to assume power over Germany if the Operation Valkyrie assassination of Hitler had been successful, which is the possibility explored in the 1944 section, and, a video of a speech recorded by the West German President that would

have been played to the public in the event of a nuclear attack by the USSR, which is the possibility explored in the 1961 section. These examples clearly show that the alternatives explored were considered as genuine possibilities for those alive at the time, and are presumably what the curatorial team have in mind when they emphasise the usefulness of sources in legitimising the consideration of the alternative in question.

The reason that sources so powerfully affirm these possibilities as legitimate can be explained using the concept of translationality as theorised by Piotr Blumczynski. He describes translationality as a “profoundly experiential” phenomenon (2023, p. 4) which “involves an experience of connecting – metaphorically, but through material, sensory mediation – with another reality across temporal and spatial distance” (p. 180). In this way, primary sources – particularly objects – directly facilitate this material, sensory mediation by their very existence; simply being in their presence translates the visitor’s experience back through time in how it affirms the legitimacy of the hypothetical it is being used to support. This is put another way by historian David Lowenthal: “...relics [...] confirm or deny what we think of [the past], symbolize or memorialize communal links over time, and provide archaeological metaphors that illumine the processes of history and memory” (1985, p. xxiii).

However, as I have suggested already, I propose that, while primary sources such as artefacts do strengthen the legitimacy of the alternative in question, they are not essential to enabling productive counterfactual historiography in the way that the curatorial team insist throughout the promotional materials. This is supported by the aforementioned fact that the exhibition is not replete with primary sources. At a different point in his work *Experiencing translationality*, Blumczynski describes the translational experience as profiling “an imaginary journey through time and space, activated at and by a special site”, whereby “[t]he temporal dimension is compressed as one makes a translational connection with [this site]” (2023, p.146). This describes exactly what I propose occurs through the subjunctive translation of the past through counterfactual means: the very experience of being asked within the exhibition space to consider an alternative possibility for how the past could have occurred enacts this temporal compression, which can be directly linked to the aforementioned point made by Alonzi that the translation of history is “also an act of synchronization which connects past, present, and future” (2023, p. 1). This experience, facilitated by the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition, as explored in the previous sub-section, and at times strengthened by the primary sources on display, is the core of what the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition offers to the visitor. In this way, the strength or weakness of the likelihood of the suggested historical alternative does not actually matter – what matters more is the process of consideration that the visitors are invited into, where they decide for themselves how likely or not each possibility is. Thus, having illustrated how the mode of subjunctive translation through counterfactual means is enacted, I now focus on what the result of this translational experience is for the visitor – in other words, why staging a historical exhibition in such a way is a worthwhile endeavour.

3.3 'Roads not Taken' as an experimental process of discovery

As I noted in Section 3.1, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition utilises the binary between authoritative narratives (traditionally used in museum exhibitions) and open-ended discussions (a style of exhibition argued for by the New Museology movement) in how it stages the exhibition, as the visitors first encounter the former style in the 'reality space', which then primes them to be all the more receptive to the questioning that is incited in the subsequent 'possibility space', as they are brought to question why the very design of the exhibition changes between the two spaces. As detailed in the previous section (3.2), it is this experience that is the driving force in engaging the visitor in the subjunctive translation, as it is the very act of moving through the exhibition and experiencing how it changes that primes the visitor to be curious about the historical alternatives staged within the exhibition.

In this way, the 'Roads not Taken' fits the style of exhibition that Basu and Macdonald call an "[experiment] in meaning-making" (2007, p. 3). They have based this understanding on the epistemology of the scientific age (inaugurated in the mid-seventeenth century), which moved away from the Aristotelian "authority of accepted truths" grounded in doctrine and rhetoric that dominated the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (2007, p. 1). In contrast, the scientific age demonstrated a "commitment to establishing truths about the world through the staging of experiment" (Macdonald and Basu, 2007, p. 1), with experiment understood as a means of discovery. Applying this to museum exhibitions, they argue for exhibitions that are constructed to generate knowledge, offering a "process of discovery" to the visitor (2007, p. 9), rather than a single authoritative narrative. Significantly, this process of discovery will differ for each individual visitor, as each approaches the exhibition with different levels of preexisting knowledge and interacts with it in different ways, meaning that no two visitors will ever experience an exhibition in exactly the same way, thereby enabling a plurality of interpretations.

This links back directly to Vidal Claramonte's point that "there is no single History", as well as her understanding of history translation as the process of "putting facts on the table that have various interpretations" (2025, pp. 8, 7). Indeed, as part of the 'experimental process of discovery' at work through the counterfactual historiography of the exhibition, visitors play "an active role [...]; drawing their own observations and conclusions without the reassuring presence of an 'authority' to defer to" (Macdonald and Basu, 2007, p. 16). To put it another way, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition enacts a mode of public history that is concerned with "[helping] members of the public do their own history and [aiding] them in understanding their role in shaping and interpreting events" (Grele, 1981, p. 48). In this way, the 'process of discovery' that the visitors are invited into explores the process of history production – "doing their own history", in the words of Grele (1981, p. 48) – where, rather than simply being offered a finalised 'product' (i.e. an authoritative historical narrative), the visitors become translators of history alongside the curators as they are brought to critically reflect on historical alternatives suggested through the mode of subjunctive translation. And, as we saw in Section 2.2, inciting critical

reflection – or, what they termed ‘historical judgement’ – amongst visitors is a key goal of the exhibition according to the curators.

This reaffirms what I suggested in the previous section (3.2), that it is the process of consideration and critical reasoning that is most important in this exhibition. In the end it actually does not matter as to whether or not the visitor comes to a concrete conclusion about whether each particular alternative could actually have happened or not – it is simply enacting the experimental process of discovery that matters, as through this process the visitor learns to critically reflect on history for themselves. Indeed, from this experimental process of discovery enacted through subjunctive translation, “a more reflexive definition of history emerges as both open and co-constructed between the participant and the professional historian” (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. xi). It is thus precisely in this way that the visitors are taught to “[do] their own history”, to borrow once again the words of Grele (1981, p. 148), as they are brought to reason for themselves without passively relying on singular, authoritative narratives. This process is the particular strength that comes from the museological strategy of the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition: the very experience of the exhibition teaches visitors to judge history for themselves, as they learn to do their own history through this counterfactual method of considering “past futures” (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145) in subjunctive translation.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum can be understood through a translational lens, and, more specifically, as enacting a mode of translation in the subjunctive mood. In doing so, I have challenged the curatorial team’s insistence on a binary between ‘verifiable’ historical alternatives and counterfactual historiography, suggesting instead that such a distinction does not hold when considered in light of both established theories of counterfactual historiography and a broader understanding of historiography as a translational practice. Rather than existing in opposition, the ‘verifiable’ alternatives presented in the exhibition can be seen to operate as plausible counterfactuals, occasionally grounded in primary sources but, most importantly, activated through the visitor’s own powers of reasoning.

By conceptualising historiography as translation, it becomes possible to move beyond the notion of a singular, authoritative past and instead recognise the multiplicity of narratives and interpretations that constitute what we come to understand as history. Within this framework, the ‘Roads not Taken’ exhibition does not merely present alternative historical outcomes but actively stages the conditions through which these alternatives can be experienced, assessed, and translated by its visitors. It is in this sense that the exhibition translates the past in the subjunctive mood: it does not ask what happened, but rather what could have happened, and, crucially, invites the visitor to inhabit this space of possibility as if it were still open.

Importantly, this process foregrounds the role of the visitor as an active participant in the production of historical knowledge. As has been shown, the exhibition creates an

environment in which visitors are not simply consumers of authoritative narratives but are instead positioned as co-translators of the past, tasked with evaluating the plausibility of alternative outcomes and, in doing so, reflecting critically on the nature of historicization itself. Ultimately, the value of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition lies not in the degree to which its proposed alternatives can be verified, but in the extent to which it succeeds in opening up a space for critical engagement with the past through the process of subjunctive translation.

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