

Filippo Bricolo  
**Carlo Scarpa and the story of Castelveccchio.  
 Narrative analysis of the Sculpture Gallery**

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Abstract

Forty years after his death, the figure of Carlo Scarpa still appears to be inextricably linked to distorted and interpretative critical clichés that obstruct a deeper analysis of the complexity of his work. Among the less studied and misunderstood aspects there is the narrativity. By this term is meant the complex system of deep structures that organize its architectural narratives. Such project machines escape from the typical tools used by the critics and can be understood only through a narratological analysis. The essay moves in this direction by addressing the analysis of the Sculpture Gallery of the Museum of Castelveccchio, one of the most intense narrative sequences of the Scarpian architectural corpus.

Key-words

Carlo Scarpa — Narrative architecture — Narratology

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Among the narrator-architects, Carlo Scarpa plays a leading role. In all his works, in fact, we can clearly spot pieces and passages that remind us of the mechanisms and devices typical of a story. All of his masterpieces, like *Castelveccchio Museum*, *Brion Tomb* or *Villa Ottolenghi*, are entirely based on precise narrative sequences. Such aspects have often been the object of misaligned elegiac inquiries triggered by the historical fascination surrounding his figure. However, his works have never been examined through the specific toolkit of narratology.

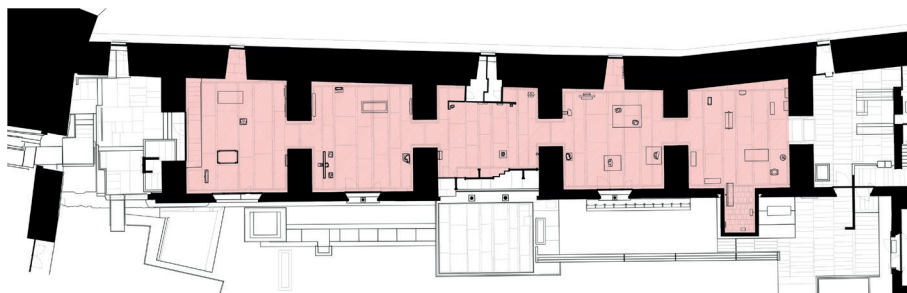
Moreover, the changes that affected narrativity in all of its variations - the influences coming from non-linear media and the spectacularness of the image - have firmly bound the figure of Scarpa to the iconicity of the fragments of his works. Nevertheless, in so doing, the consequential and intrinsically diageitic nature of its spaces has been overlooked.

Grounding the study of Scarpa's architecture on long-established techniques employed in film and story analysis can shed new light on the misunderstood identity of his figure, while, at the same time, offering an instance of how such analytical framework can be developed and included in the realm of architecture studies.

To offer a concrete example of the narrativity of Scarpa and the potential benefits of this type of research, due to the inbound space limitations of an article, the present paper will focus on the narratological analysis of a short fragment drawn from one of the most important works of the Venetian master: *The Museum of Castelveccchio in Verona*<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, our preliminary and synthetic analysis will focus on the narrative passage *The Sculpture Gallery*, which constitutes one of the most intense spatial sequences in the work of Carlo Scarpa and in the history of Italian muse-

**Fig. 1**

The narrative sequence of the Sculpture Gallery at the museum of Castelveccchio designed by Carlo Scarpa (1964).

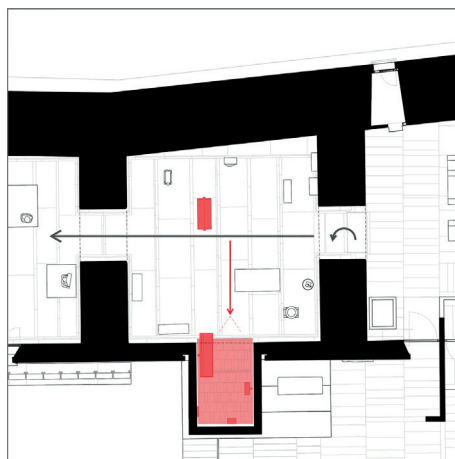
**Fig. 2**

The entrance of the Sculpture Gallery at the museum of Castelveccchio in Verona by Carlo Scarpa (Photograph by Klaus Frahm).

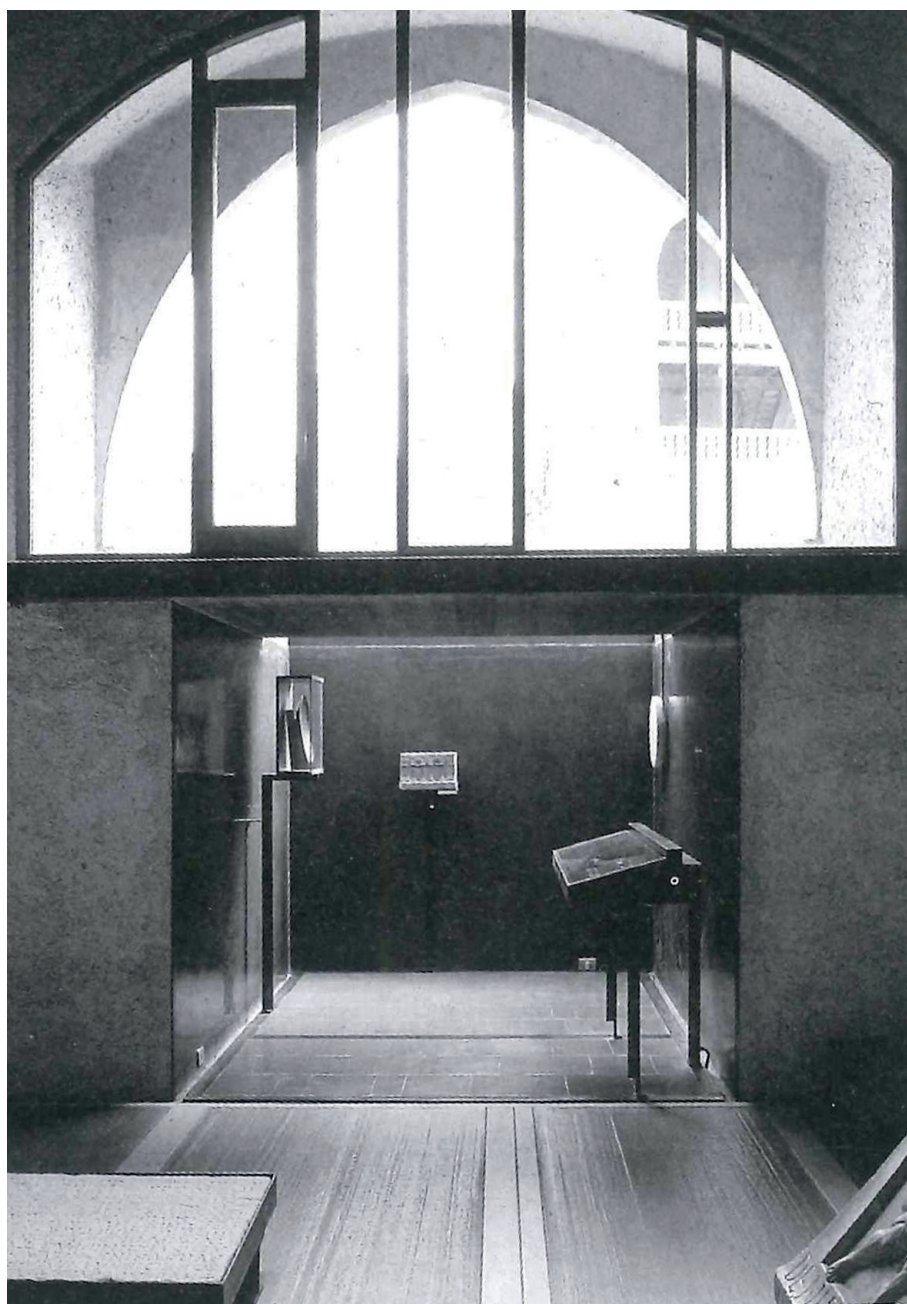




**Fig. 3**  
First room: diagram.



**Fig. 4**  
First room: view of the Sarcellum.  
(Photograph by di P. Perina).



ography *tout court*.

The analysis' goal is to render intelligible the meaning-making mechanisms hidden in these interlinked spaces by decoding the narrative systems and communicative codes adopted by Scarpa.

The sequence under scrutiny starts in the entrance room on the ground floor, at the extreme east side of the *Sculpture Gallery* and ends on the opposite side of the same long sleeve, where the renown equestrian statue of Casagrande I della Scala is placed.

The visitor, to complete this pathway, must walk through five rooms containing masterfully positioned sculptures and stone elements original of the Verona countryside. The five rooms are connected to one another through a series of spectacular arch-passages shaping a high-impact perspective succession.

Contrary to what one might commonly assume, what makes this sequence narratively expressive and effective, is not the long perspective-driven *Spannung* (climax), but, quite paradoxically, the opposite forces aimed at wearing off its own one-directionality. Such opposite forces are represented by the composition of the five rooms of the Gallery, which, as we will see, act as narrative agents.

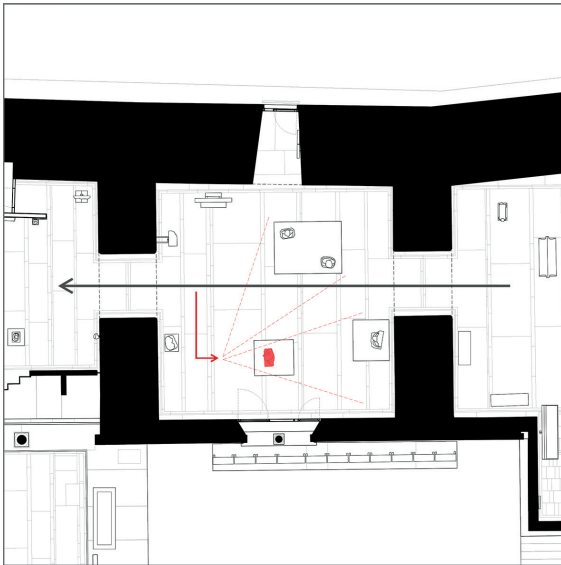
These, in fact, pull the visitor inward and, as she moves along, implement calculated *anti-climax* factors.

The preliminary analysis of the architectural text of the *Sculpture Gallery* allows us to identify – in the conflict between opposite tensions designed by Scarpa – the overlapping between such text and the deep structure at the basis of every narrative form. A structure involving *obstacles* (the five room-induced actions) that a subject (the visitor) has to overcome to reach her *object of value* (the end of the pathway). Along this dynamic pathway, the subject swings from an initial equilibrium phase, to a mid-imbalance stage, up to a final (re)equilibrium phase.

In the research theory on the deep structure of a story and its narrativity<sup>2</sup>, the aforementioned figures are called actants. To the aforementioned ones, three more agentive figures are to be added: 1) *the adjuvant* (all the elements moving the storyline toward its conclusion like, for example, the reiterated sequence of arches). 2) *The addresser* (the step in the first room, which signals the beginning of the plot and determines its subsequent twists). *The addressee* (in our case study it coincides with the *subject* i.e. the visitor<sup>3</sup>).

To further study the text of the *Sculpture Gallery*, it is important to analyze how these figures enter the architectural story by means of a *prolepsis-like* mechanism that is, by anticipating figures (physically) situated at later points along the pathway-story.

This non-temporal narrative device, highly used in literature and cinema productions, is deployed by Scarpa to scaffold expectations and rituals, and constitutes one recurring element throughout all of his work. Let us think, for example, about the entrance system of the *Brion Tomb*. From the propylaea, the window – framed along the shape of the *vescica piscis* – enables the view of the inner space, however impeding the direct access to it. Another instance is the rectangular opening in the access corridor leading to Piet Mondrian's exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. (1956-1957). This space, at the beginning of the chronological pathway, revivals a view of the painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, located in the final room of the exhibition and representing the culmination of the artist's development.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 5**  
Second room: diagram.



**Fig. 6**  
Second room: Statue of Saint Cecile on the left (Photograph by Klaus Frahm).

However, it is with the *Sculpture Gallery* in Catelvecchio that the so-called-Scarpian *prolepsis* reaches its apex. The single-framed synchronic vision (the first arch) of the final part of the pathway (the end at the start, a typically literary device of novels like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*<sup>5</sup>) and of all the figures determine the overlapping of all the latent tensions. Only by analyzing this density of such intertwined meanings, can we grasp the strength of the framed space that initially welcomes the entering *subject-visitor*.

Here we can spot the little access garden leading to the rooms that transforms the crossing of the arch into a ritual-like threshold full of meanings (*addresser*). Here we can spot the final goal of the pathway (*the object of value*) and before it, the serial sequence of arches. Here we can spot the great stones that, leaning against the arches, set the rhythm of the series and the huge central beam supporting the ceiling that – like a red thread – runs in the pathway direction (*adjuvant*).

Here in fact, we can spot the white stone stripes cutting through the cement floor in the opposite direction to the one of the pathway. Here we can spot the items of the fitting, which threaten the force of the central axis by partially invading it.

Here, finally, we appreciate how, through this total *prolepsis*, the big arch of the entrance room of the Gallery, becomes a multilayered metonymy, introducing the plot and loading the story with suspense.

The first narrative semes, generated by the perceived anticipations at the entrance, start to yield fruits already in the first room, right after passing the arch leading to the “exhibition room”.

In this space, the central perspective gets half-invaded by the position of the *Arc with Saints Sergius and Bacchus*, which appears to advance toward the center of the room from the right. Such disposition plays the role of the opponent with respect to the main axis of movement.

The presence of the arc and its directionality, opposite to the one of the pathway and parallel to the white stripes on the floor, push the gaze of the *visitor-subject* toward the left and face her with an inviting dark cavity carved out of the Gallery walls, beneath a great outward looking arch.

This little chamber opens onto the main exhibition space and turns itself into a new *object of value*, attracting the *subject-visitor*. The result, in this particular case, is not just the vision of a new figure, but a real coupling



with the *Sacellum*, one of the leading narrative agents in the garden standing before the one that is currently under scrutiny.

In this episode, to activate the attention of the visitor, Scarpa strategically places some narratively contradictory elements. On the one hand, such elements lie between the inside and the outside of the *Sacellum*. On the other hand, they stand between the inside of the *Sacellum* and the inside of the room.

From the garden, in fact, the figure raises as a convex parallelepiped covered in white-and-pink Prun stones. This creates a contrast with the grey plaster of the outer wall. From the room, instead, the figure appears as a concave space, coated in bottled-green (almost black) shining Venetian lime, in sharp opposition to the raw, white plaster of the room.

In the first room, the overlapping of these balanced oppositions creates a crucial center of force for the narrative management of the conflict between the desired coupling and the de-coupling with the *object of value*. After the *Sacellum*, one goes back to the main pathway through the second arch leading in the second room. Here, the element that distorts the climax of the perspective sequence is the masterful disposition of the statue of Saint Cecile.

The museographic novelty of this piece consists in placing the statue with the shoulders facing the visitor coming from the previous room. In doing so, Scarpa wants to highlight the finishing touches and the posterior shape of the sculpture that would otherwise go unnoticed. However, the innovative aspect of the disposition resides in the clear metonymy formed by the co-existence – in the same point of observation – between the preview of the statue and the simultaneous impossibility of enjoying a “correct” frontal view of it.

In order to solve this masterfully induced duplicity, the visitor is prone to move by 180° into space and finally reach the front view. But in doing so, she responds to a specific rotary spatial dynamism aimed at breaking with the usual pathway projected toward the end of the process.

Moreover, this movement triggers a reverse shot of the room, allowing *the subject-visitor* to view the statue on the border wall with the first room (*Saint Catherine of Alessandria*). Were it not for this movement, this statue would be completely ignored by the tendency to normally continue on the main axis.

The relationship between climax and anti-climax assumes a different thematization in the central passage, halfway through the pathway story.

The sides of the room are fenced with two different sets of walls, which create a considerable spatial narrowing, and increase the tension along the main pathway.

Nevertheless, a vast gamut of expedients interrupts and even out this main pathway. As far as the meaning is concerned, there are two agentive groups acting according to different modalities.

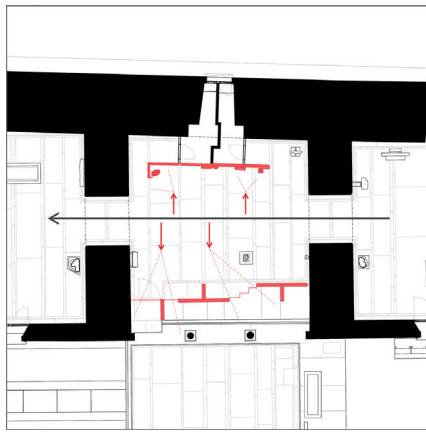
On the left side, the attention-grabbing narrative agents are the unframed windows underneath the reinforced concrete ceiling.

Scattered along the black Venetian lime walls, they allow, for the first time, a glimpse of the garden beyond the gothic arches. On the right side, the narrative agent is embodied by the color. Here, on a long wall decorated with red and azure attributes in pit lime, various little works like *Mary on the throne with the baby* and *the Crucifixion* stand in harmony.

After the main room – resting and transitory space – we enter the fourth room, which represents the emotional peak of the whole sequence. The

**Fig. 7**

Third room: diagram.

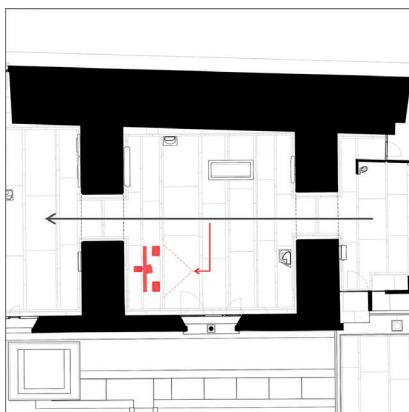
**Fig. 8**

Third room: red and azure pit lime boards on the right. Black boards and view of the garden on the left.



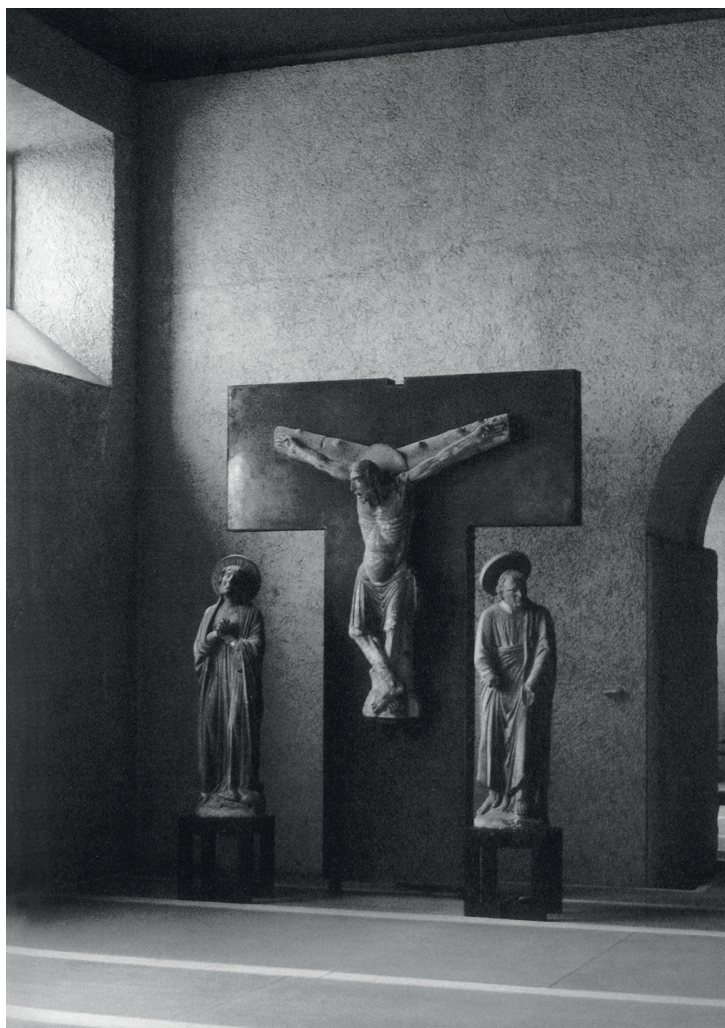
**Fig. 9**

Fourth room: diagram.

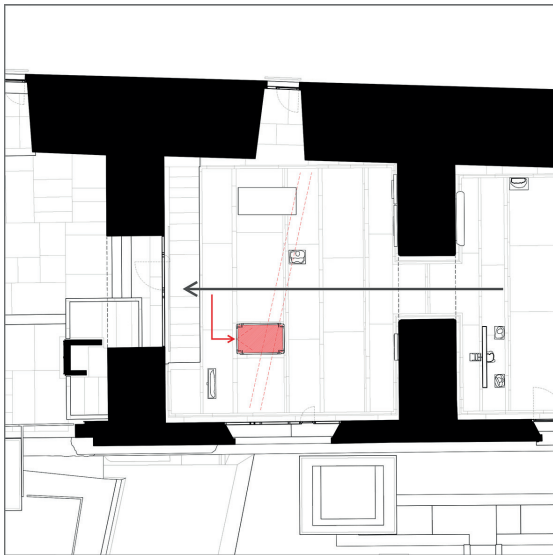


**Fig. 10**

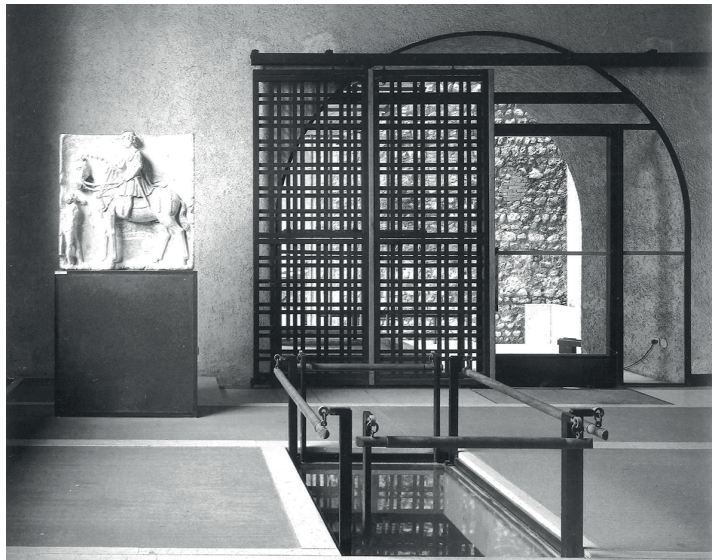
Fourth room: Crucifixion (Photograph by Bianca Albertini).







**Fig. 11**  
Fifth room: diagram.



**Fig. 12**  
Fifth room: Floor opening on the ancient Wall.

room is dominated by the sculpture group of the *Crucifixion and Mary and Saint John* carved by the famous *Master of Sant'Anastasia*. The attention-grabbing shape and position of this work make the visitor-subject stop.

The fulcrum in this sculpture group is the screaming Christ. Scarpa positions this expressive work so that the light, penetrating from a high window, beams over the face of the suffering Christ sideways.

This way, one can appreciate his twisted eye sockets.

The analysis of this work allows us to grasp how Scarpa uses the light for narrative purposes. More specifically, the light dramatizes the meaning-making mechanism of the museographic pathway by establishing an intimate and intense relationship with the artistic work.

In the sublime cooperation between the work and the light, Scarpa's diegesis molds a signification process where the *visitor-subject* gets emotionally and cognitively involved. The natural light bathing the face of Christ grows into a metaphorical construct, thus amplifying its meaning attributions.

Eventually, after this high-intensity segment, we walk into the fifth room, coinciding with the end of the Sculptures Gallery and thus with the end of the story. Here, in fact, the subject-visitor can finally be coupled to her *object of value*.

However, before finishing the pathway, Scarpa gives, once again, proof of its destabilizing narrative mastery. On the floor of the last room there opens a rectangular window accompanied by an oriental parapet. Looking into the hole, we discover an inaccessible secret chamber hosting the remains of an ancient wall prior to the construction the Gallery. In the end, we figure out that the hole is a time machine constantly re-opening the story through analeptic mechanism right where the initial metonymy finds its resolution.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed museographic and project development analysis of this sequence, See a: DI LIETO A. (2006) – *I disegni di Carlo Scarpa per Castelveccchio*, Marsilio, Venezia e MURPHY R. (2017) – *Carlo Scarpa and Castelveccchio revisited*, Breakfast Mission Publishing, Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> See MARCHESE A. (1990) – “Teorie della narratività” in *L'officina del racconto. Semiotica della narratività*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, pp.5-68 RON-DOLINO G. – TOMASI D. (2011) - “Che cosa è un racconto” in *Manuale del film*.

*Linguaggio, racconto, analisi*, De Agostini, Novara, pp.10-17.

<sup>3</sup> Such approach can be applied, bearing in mind the different peculiarities, to all the narrative architectures. The power of a work like *the Chapel of Bruder Klaus*, designed on Eifel hill valley by Peter Zumthor, lies in the tension marking the relationship between the *object of value* (the chapel) and the long pathway (*the opponent*) that the subject has to overcome to reach her *object of value*. The same of for the Liyuan library by Li Xiaodong where the emotionality is conveyed by the tension between the view of the *object of value* (the building) and the obligation for the subject to descend a cliff and cross a river (*opponents*) to get there. A similar approach can be distinguished also in the entrance sequence of two narratively alike buildings. Both in Stockholm Library by Gunnar Asplund and in Ljubljana Library by Jože Plečnik, the conflict rises in the crossing of the dark stairs (*opponent*) to reach the bright room of culture. (*the object of values*).

<sup>4</sup> Palma Bucarelli, *Mostra di Piet Mondrian a Roma*, in *L'architettura. Cronache e storia*, n.17, March 1957, pp.786-789.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the chapter *La fine all'inizio* in Vincenzo Cerami, *Consigli a un giovane scrittore. Narrativa, cinema teatro, radio*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Turin, 1996, pp.66-73.

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Filippo Bricolo (Verona, 1970), architect, graduated with honors from the IUAV of Venice. At the same institute he obtained, with mention of publication, the title of Doctor of Research in Architectural Composition with a dissertation thesis on the Kampor Memorial by Edvard Ravnikar (speaker Luciano Semerani). He has taught at the IUAV of Venice and the University of Parma. He is currently an adjunct professor at the Polytechnic of Milan Polo Territoriale di Mantova. Among his publications: *On the tracks of Carlo Scarpa. Grafts in Castelveccchio* (Cierre), *Set up in the Museum. Thirty exhibitions in Castelveccchio* (with Alba di Lieto, Marsilio). In 2003 he founded the Bricolo Falsarella studio with which he received several awards and reports. In 2017 he completed the recovery of the East Wing of the Castelveccchio Museum left unfinished by Carlo Scarpa in his 1964 restoration.