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Between an object and a tale: Strategies of local narratives construction in semi-peripheral museums¹

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this article is to single out and interpret the processes of constructing images of locality in regional museums in the Podkarpackie Province and in the Košice Region, as well as to indicate phenomena which affect these processes. We are interested primarily in discussing individual components of legacy (local, national, material, immaterial, etc.) and using them to build a sense of identity in museum visitors. Relying on the principles of the new museology: “protect – examine – inform”, we focus on the last of these spheres, which refers directly to the practice of creating meanings that engage both museologists and the public.

When we single out the field of research, we position the subject of our inquiry in the context of the theory of globalisation, which means that we regard the specified areas as peripheral within semi-peripheral countries. This specification of the field is supposed to help us determine whether local museums in Central Europe still function within the framework of the traditional (modernist) paradigm or whether they have fully or partially implemented the principles of the “new museology”.

In the course of the analysis, we show that the process of constructing locality is a matter of control over legacy and its interpretations. However, it is not an action which depends solely on a museologist, who has to deal with time pressure and the availability and completeness of a collection when creating his or her narrative. It means that in reference to

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educational museum activities, we should rather talk about multiple images of locality, the construction of which is affected by various factors.

The material was gathered from in-depth interviews conducted in selected Polish and Slovak museums, thanks to which this article reflects primarily the museologists' perspective on the problems in question.

Słowa kluczowe: globalizacja, nowa muzeologia, konstruktywizm, tożsamość lokalna, edukacja muzealna

Keywords: globalisation, new museology, constructivism, local identity, museum education

Ideology and education in museums

Since the 16th century – when the idea of the cabinet of curiosities emerged – museums have been an important system of ordering and interpreting reality. Artefacts and natural specimens juxtaposed within their spaces intended to be models of the world. As Martin Prösler argues, the development of museums is strictly connected to the growing importance of the scientific method, organising stages of object collection, analysis, exhibition building and their presentation to the audience.² This harmonises with James Clifford's suggestion, that culture may be identified as a collection composed of many meaningful patterns which are assessed and selected by an anthropologist.³ Thus scientists (and also museums) identify objects as important from a certain – predefined – perspective, secure them, and then make them accessible to recipients, often providing an explanation as to what this display means and why it is crucial to the museum or rather to the region, the country or even the world (not to mention the visitors). The paper follows the last stage of this process, focusing on objects interpretations conducted by museum pedagogy officers during educational activities. Our main objectives are distinguishing and understanding locality construction processes in the regional museums of south-eastern Poland and Slovakia. We concentrated on the museum staff perspective, aiming to indicate factors influencing their practices. We are especially interested in determining certain components of heritage (local or national, tangible or intangible, etc.) and its use in developing a sense of identity in visitors. Museum education particularly interests us in this context. This is due to the fact that it is situated in the field of museum-audience relations and is strongly related to the problem of interpretation,⁴ putting the educator between the collection and visitors.

The conviction of the uncontested status of museum-generated knowledge was rooted in 19th century intellectual and cultural phenomena: modernism, positivism, evolutionism

² M. Prösler, *Museums and globalization* [in:] *Theorizing museums: Representing identity and diversity in a changing world*, ed. Sh. Macdonald, G. Fyfe, Sociological Review Monograph Series, Oxford 1996, p. 21–44.

³ J. Clifford, *Kłopoty z kulturą. Dwudziestowieczna etnografia, literatura i sztuka*, transl. E. Dżurak, J. Iracka, E. Klekot, M. Krupa, S. Sikora, M. Sznajderman, Warszawa 2000.

⁴ F. Tilden, *Interpreting our heritage*, Chapel Hill 1977; J. Skutnik, *Muzeum sztuki współczesnej jako przestrzeń edukacji*, Katowice 2008.

and colonialism. The spirit of modernity shaped national museums as important actors of identity construction. Their collections were carefully selected to provide a clear picture of nations,⁵ these newly invented communities, with their ‘glorious pasts,’ ‘ancient traditions,’ ‘powerful leaders,’ ‘widely recognised artworks,’ etc. National museums brought reference points for their respective community members as well as for the ‘others,’ helping to tell one group from another. Apart from the educational system, the museum was one of the most important tools of socialisation and national identity cultivation.

The 20th century has brought arguments questioning this consistent view of the museum. Beginning with 1939 Stanisław Ossowski’s study, scholars more precisely indicate that ideologies play the important role in museum.⁶ Apart from the strive for understanding and the classification of foreign and own culture, inventions of ethnographical and national museums were results of colonialism and nationalism. In the case of the famed 1937 ‘Entartete Kunst’ exhibition, racism played the core role in its design while in Soviet museums, communism and class struggle supported the interpretation for the displayed artworks.⁷ So, it is not the objective method but people who decide which artefact should be included in the collection and what the former means to the latter treated as a whole, as well as to the audience. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue, the reality is socially constructed and the one who is in power is capable of imposing his own version of the past.⁸ Since the national museum was co-dependent on the then developing modern nation-state, it not only provided the base for the constructed interpretations but also transmitted them through its communicative practices.⁹

In contemporary, pluralist and democratic societies, a multitude of different, often competitive, versions of reality exists.¹⁰ This also concerns perspectives on the past reconstructed in museums, which Vera Zolberg described in analysing the conflict in The National Air and Space Museum about interpretations of the atom bomb dropping on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She showed that the event might be defined differently by curators, veterans, Japanese and Americans, military, pacifists and politicians.¹¹ This example perfectly fits the notion of the end of great narratives.¹² The multiplicity of groups, sharing the conviction they have got access to the right answers, challenge the ‘truth’ that museums used to administer.¹³ The difference between modern and postmodern museum

⁵ B. Anderson, *Wspólnoty wyobrażone. Rozważania o źródłach i rozprzestrzenianiu się nacjonalizmu*, przeł. S. Amsterdamski, Kraków 1997; P. Levitt, *Artifacts and allegiances: How museums put the nation and the world on Display*, Berkeley 2015.

⁶ S. Ossowski, *U podstaw estetyki* [in:] S. Ossowski, *Dziela*, Warszawa 1966; K. Hudson, *A social history of museums*, London 1975; J. Clifford, *Kłopoty z kulturą...*

⁷ S. Ossowski, *op. cit.*

⁸ P. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *Spoleczne tworzenie rzeczywistości*, transl. J. Niżnik, Warszawa 1983.

⁹ M. Prösler, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ P. Berger, Th. Luckmann, *op. cit.*

¹¹ V. Zolberg, *Museums as contested sites of remembrance: The Enola Gay Affair* [in:] *Theorizing museums: Representing identity and diversity in a changing World*, ed. Sh. Macdonald, G. Fyfe, Sociological Review Monograph Series, Oxford 1996, pp. 69–82.

¹² J.-F. Lyotard, *Kondycja ponowoczesna*, transl. M. Kowalska, Warszawa 1997.

¹³ J. Urry, *How societies remember the past* [in:] *Theorizing museums*, ed. Sh. Macdonald, G. Fyfe, Sociological Review Monograph Series, Oxford 1996, pp. 45–68.

is clear: while the former used to speak, the latter is a space for discussion.¹⁴ Contemporary institutions – while still providing tokens of cultural inclusion and shaping collective identities – give an individual the possibility of constructing his/her own identity.¹⁵ This participative aspect is raised as one of the elements of new museology and treated equal to studying and protecting collections.¹⁶ An important element of these ‘informative’ practices is museum education. While education *per se* is another element of nation-state socialising practices and factors leading to uniform national identity creation,¹⁷ its museum counterpart, while sharing some similarities, also demonstrates a number of unique traits. This applies especially to more recent museum teaching practices. They draw particularly from the constructivist theory, assuming student as an active partner of educational process.¹⁸

When the new museology movement was emerging in Western countries, Poland and Slovakia were still parts of the system which cultivated one of the great narratives. Yet the political and economic changes in the 1990s, and especially accession to the European Union introduced post-communist countries into the space of global flows. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, these states are situated in the semi-peripheries transferring patterns from western core-states.¹⁹ The process occurs in many spheres including culture. In the case of europeisation (a term used by Kurczewska²⁰), contrary to its sceptics, national identities continue to exist, but the growing activity of local communities is also perceived. While being global they also keep maintaining their individual traits – a form of globalisation called ‘glocalisation’ by Roland Robertson.²¹ Locality in the 21st century, as Dariusz Wojakowski writes, is a symbolic cord stranding global, national and local threads.²² Since it may take different attitudes towards its own or alien cultural patterns, its uniqueness in relation to the national culture may be more or less clearly visible. Regional museums may play roles similar, for their communities, to the ones

¹⁴ Ch.S. Smith, *Museums, artefacts, and meanings* [in:] *The new museology*, ed. P. Vergo, London 1989, pp. 6–21; J. Clifford, *Routes. Travel and translation in the late 20th century*, Cambridge, London 1997.

¹⁵ P. Kisiel, *Muzeum sztuki wobec zmieniającej się roli kultury* [in:] *Sfera publiczna – przestrzeń – muzeum. O zmieniającej się roli instytucji kultury*, ed. E. Nieroba, B. Cymbrowski, Opole 2016, pp. 33–48.

¹⁶ S.E. Weil, *Rethinking the Museum* [in:] *idem, Rethinking the museum and other meditations*, Washington 1990, pp. 57–67; P. Vergo, *Introduction* [in:] *idem, The new museology*, London 2006, pp. 1–5.

¹⁷ F. Znaniński, *Współczesne narody*, Warszawa 1990, p. 149.

¹⁸ G.E. Hein, *The constructivist Museum*, “Journal for Education in Museums” 1995, No. 16, pp. 21–23.

¹⁹ I. Wallerstein, *Analiza systemów-światów*, transl. K. Gawlicz, Warszawa 2004.

²⁰ J. Kurczewska, *Europeizacja społeczności lokalnych jako problem badawczy* [in:] *Oblicza lokalności. Ku nowym formom życia lokalnego*, ed. J. Kurczewska, Warszawa 2008, pp. 25–53.

²¹ R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*, London 1992; R. Giulianotti, R. Robertson, *Forms of glocalization: globalization and the migration strategies of Scottish football fans in North America*, “Sociology” 2007, No. 41 (133), pp. 133–152.

²² D. Wojakowski, *Kultura lokalna czyli węzeł symboliczny. Z doświadczeń badacza współczesnych społeczności pogranicza wschodniego Polski* [in:] *Oblicza lokalności. Różnorodność miejsc i czasu*, ed. J. Kurczewska, Warszawa 2006, pp. 127–144.

national museums play to their nations.²³ For us it is interesting what their meaning is in the marginalised, conservative and less developed regions of Central Europe. Although certain studies show the EU accession resulted in changes among cultural institutions²⁴ it would be interesting to know whether they have influenced the identity creation sphere.

Since local community studies usually concentrate on the meso-level, we wish to examine the practices carried out during the encounters of educators and visitors. This micro-level perspective allows for the reconstruction of museum personnel mental structures relating to the past and its contemporary uses as well as reaching to the processes of meaning construction (management of social memory and heritage) undertaken during educational practices. Such a set-up of research objectives indicates the choice of research field and methodology. Data was collected through 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with curators of local museums situated in the Polish Subcarpathian and Slovak Košice Regions. An equal number of interviews (eight) was conducted in both Poland and Slovakia. The data collecting process was designed to include museums from regional centres (Rzeszów and Košice) as well as from peripheries (i.e. regional museums). The obtained material was then analysed using a bottom-up approach.²⁵

The choice of research field resulted from the need to determine the influence transformation of western museums (new museology and educational constructivism) on Central European institutions. The indicated regions are considered peripheral, conservative, excluded and underdeveloped in comparison to central and western parts of their respective countries.²⁶ This allowed for the assumption that cultural patterns constructed in the west reach these areas with a delay (and after nation-state and regional centres already change). In the study of institutions, it moved us toward searching for original – local elements and those modified by national and global variables.

Shaping local identity narratives

The conceptual content of the notion of museum education seems to be quite vague when discussed by curators. On the one hand the museum itself is identified as an educational institution, on the other hand some representatives of the museum staff recall lessons conducted with school groups as pure examples of museum pedagogy.²⁷ This is not unusual since school groups make up the largest part of museum visitors, especially in the Subcarpathian regional museums. Yet Polish interlocutors draw a distinctive line between museum and school education. It is often defined in opposition to the school

²³ J. Kurczewska, *Dwie ideologie lokalności z narodem w tle*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2003, No. 47 (3), pp. 131–147.

²⁴ E. Nieroba, *Pomiędzy dobrem wspólnym a elitarnościami*, Opole 2016; D. Porczyński, T. Kosiek, *Muzea podkarpackie 2004–2014. Globalizacja i europeizacja a przeobrażenia lokalnych instytucji kultury*, Rzeszów 2016.

²⁵ K. Charmaz, *Teoria ugruntowana. Praktyczny przewodnik po analizie jakościowej*, transl. B. Komorowska, Warszawa 2009.

²⁶ M. Stopa, *New boundaries: Regional consciousness in the Polish Subcarpathian Voivodship* [in:] *Borders and fields, cultures and places: Cases from Poland*, ed. D. Wojakowski, Kraków 2008, pp. 31–46.

²⁷ D. Porczyński, T. Kosiek, *op. cit.*

system and in result, it is depicted as a departure from a routine school lesson. Unfortunately the Polish curricula (especially on a secondary education level) leave little place for local history, thus the duty of teaching children and the youth rests with the museums. This leads to the development of tension between the museums and schools, where educators express the conviction that the schools do not prepare their students well and the entire burden of a 'proper' education rests on their shoulders. What is important, pedagogy officers don't criticise the students themselves but rather the educational system. Museums define their own role as a completion of knowledge acquired in school emphasising their importance in the entire process. Simple knowledge transfer is, however, just a single element of an educator's role. Their locality-oriented practices should rather be perceived as a complex of functions consisting of shaping the right attitudes, raising awareness of the local past and relaying historical (ethnographical, archaeological etc.) information. The unique local heritage is perceived as a value in itself and basis for searching for common elements with the history of Poland and Europe. There are local historical personae, events, examples of architecture or other objects which are identified as important not only for the locality but also for national and European history.

In Slovakia, the idea that museums should serve only as a substitute for schools is outdated. However, that does not mean that museums do not offer programmes or activities for schoolchildren. As in Poland, schools comprise the largest and probably the most important off-season group of museum visitors. It is only natural that museums try to come up with activities based on school curricula that should complement school subjects, whether they are focused on: national history, local history, biology or technical fields. Many museum educators also cooperate with teachers when creating the activities or they even bring those activities over to the schools. In this way, museums do not only educate children, but try to shape their attitudes towards museums as institutions. Museum workers generally believe that if children see that museums are places where they can both learn new information and have fun, then they will come back more often and also later on in life.

Educational strategies are dynamic sets of practices shaped by interactions between the pedagogue and the group. It is a matter of openness and status. Most Polish and Slovak educators are open to discussion and people are encouraged to share their opinions and knowledge, but the openness degree changes in various contexts making a designation of different instructional patterns possible. One of the distinguished strategies is an authoritative one, where the educator assumes himself or herself as a host and an authority on the matters of local heritage. This is also connected to a more precise list of permitted visitor behaviours, in some cases even more strict than the school ones. Certain Polish and Slovak museums tend to have control of most aspects of interpretation. Most of the researched museums offer guided tours, in some they are even compulsory. Some of the interlocutors believe that people learn more this way, especially since visitors are not always interested in reading the accompanying texts. In this strategy educators assume a role similar to school-teachers while the context and the topic are different. And this is true in the case of majority of our interviewees.

The contradictory strategy is an open one, which is based on dialogue between the educator and the either audience or visitors' own interpretations of display's a narrative. This type is closest to educational constructivism. The choice of strategy is based

mostly on the visitors' age and their professional background. Regardless of the country, informants admit that they are convinced of their own competences when working with children and youth. Elderly people, collectors and experts – on the contrary – are often found competent on matters of local heritage. They are a source of knowledge on certain historical events or unknown (or less-known) objects. The performed mode of action is – in fact – an interplay between the officer and participants with shifting momentums of expertise advantage.

The educator-audience relation is also linked to the form of narrative, regardless of whether it is formal – closer to an academic lecture – or informal. Polish pedagogues claim they are serious about their jobs and in their narratives rather stay close to confirmed facts. Anecdotes are, however, found to be a useful tool in getting the audience's attention and they are even used by interlocutors accustomed to rather more formal relations. Visitors are more interested in objects with a story behind them rather than in objects that might be appealing to experts. People like to hear interesting (or even scandalous) histories connected with those objects on display or with the people to whom they belonged. And sometimes, on the contrary, they are drawn to mundane objects that remind them of something familiar. This might be the reason why more visitors frequent thematic events or why they are more interested in seeing mementos of daily life and castles furnished with period equipment. Slovak educators state that museums should try to use this natural curiosity to show their visitors what life was like in the past, which might help them to understand how our society has changed and evolved. As for the type of collections that is the most suitable for mediating the history of each region and locality, our interlocutors agreed that it is important to offer visitors a complete picture of the past reality and so museums should not favour just one type of collection. However, they might put an emphasis on some specific type of objects based on the topic of the exhibition.

An important element constituting the educators' strategy of meaning construction is related to neither her nor visitors' traits. It is often the limited time for the museum visit that defines the possible range of information they are capable of transferring to their audience. When juxtaposed with this objective variable, the degree of a pedagogue's actual influence on picturing the town's past might be perceived. While acting under the pressure of time, his role in the selection of events, personae and objects which are – from his perspective – crucial for the locality's presentation is more clearly visible. This also confirms that the locality images created for purposes of every visiting group might be different.

Every territorial unit has its own, unique, resources²⁸ which might be used during the process of locality construction. These might be divided into tangible and intangible (using UNESCO's terminology) heritage. In fact, there are several possibilities of dividing and organising historical resources which intersect. Applying temporal, social, political, economical variables is helpful in locality creation and the analysis of this process. Educators have the possibility of using artefacts, personae, events, and locations, that played a role in different time periods but they may also concentrate on different social groups distinguishable through their specific configurations of cultural patterns (folk, ethnic, religious, town, professional etc.). Thus, the locality may be constructed as a configuration of past processes conducted by representatives of: craftsmen, traders, Catholics, Jews,

²⁸ G. Ashworth, *Planowanie dziedzictwa*, transl. M. Duda-Gryc, Kraków 2015.

soldiers and officers of local garrison. In the ideal situation, an educator would have an access to all information about past events and through the process of rational and objective analysis would be able to build up a complete description. This rarely happens.

Pedagogues also use various elements of heritage and different educational strategies while applying different forms of museum education. During museum guided tours they refer to displayed artefacts and pictures while this is rather difficult during town excursions, yet they may present buildings and sites important for local history.

Components of locality construction described thus far allow visitors to use several senses for building their own image of the place's past. They use their hearing, sight and touch. During this process the audience may base their understanding of locality on visible objects and the educator's instructions and in some cases it is even possible to have an object in hands and feel its qualities as some Subcarpathian museums allow for this with selected exhibits. In fact, the possibility of experiencing material objects is one of the most important motivations for visiting the museum. Museum staff assume that artefacts are crucial in picturing a locality. When comparing available tools there are material objects that carry the strongest potential in recalling the past. The lack of artefacts related to a certain historical period, person or group – according to interlocutors – makes the created picture incomplete or distorted and alternative tools as multimedia presentations or stories do not make the result as sound as it could be.

There is a difference between the picture of locality built by the educator and its understanding from the visitor's perspective. While the museum's representative, as an expert on heritage, possesses knowledge of the place's past and actual capabilities of picturing it, the visitor – if not interested in the local history – acquires information during the museum visit. This means that he or she learns only what the educator is able to communicate during a session. The question raised is, however, if he is able to fully understand the locality. Our interlocutors are convinced that more recent (19th and 20th century) events generate more chances to understand contemporary towns of South-Eastern Poland and – if compared to national museum practices – the elements of Polish national consciousness. In certain cases this may be interpreted by the common presence of this heritage in history books, street names, statues and narratives of older generations. The last factor can particularly be seen in the case of ethnographic heritage and objects formerly used as school equipment. In this case, nostalgia also plays an important role.

Slovak educators raise the question of multicultural and multi-ethnic regions, like the Košice region. Historically, different ethnic and religious groups lived in this region and it is a borderland even today. So the role of museums in this region is maybe a little bit more complicated – they try to promote cultural tolerance while they also try to encourage local patriotism and regional awareness. They need to be objective and present history as it really happened so that people might realise that they were (mostly) able to live in harmony with people of different cultural backgrounds in the past as well and that history is not black and white. Our interlocutors believe that museums should try to teach people to be proud of their heritage and they should support all the minorities or nationalities equally. Some also specified important personae, sights or events that the younger generation should especially be made aware of. In the case of the Subcarpathian region, multi-ethnicity is an element of the past. It constitutes the narrative of educational

programmes and exhibitions, but – especially in the case of Jewish culture – in many museums it cannot resound clearly enough due to the scarcity of artefacts.

The process of locality construction seems to be a matter of control of heritage and its interpretations. To create a complete picture of a territorial unit's past, it is necessary to have a number of artefacts carrying the meanings covering all the historical periods. However, this is rather impossible. While the museums conduct a methodical process of collection building, it are not always possible to acquire all the important objects. In this case – as one of our interlocutors says – all that is left are *tales*. The product of the locality construction process is therefore the combination of the educator's intentional choices and independent variables as artefacts availability. As such, it is more or less distant from 'completeness' or 'objectivity.'

When recalling relations between cultural change and its influence on museums, it might be noted that strategies applied by Polish and Slovak educators are still grounded in the *sameness* and *distinctiveness* paradigm, yet in some cases the slow introduction of post-modern, an *individual* paradigm might be perceived.²⁹ Paradoxically, this new perspective is applied to encounters with elderly people, raised within modernity's framework, while the instruction of children and youth is still performed with the use of traditional means.

The comparison between peripheral museums and the ideas defined in the literature linked with new museology shows that some of its aspects were introduced into educational practices. Education is defined as an important element of museum work, however its forms may vary from traditional to constructivist with the former's prevalence. Museum workers are rather positive about globalisation. An increase in mobility means that people more often visit museums abroad, which allows regional museums to focus more on their local culture. Thus, most – but not all – of the studied Polish museums are strongly attached to the local values and concentrate on them in their narratives. Slovak institutions – on the other hand are more often focused on edutainment and more often apply the constructivist approach. One of the most important differences between the Subcarpathian and Košice regions lies in the contemporary cultural context, especially in the latter's multi-culturalism.

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