

**MUSEOLOGY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF REALITY:  
THE DISCOURSE OF HISTORY (provocative paper)  
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*Every discourse may be understood as a 'metamorphosis of emotions',  
which produces another form of discourse: history .  
Hence, what makes history is  
less the complex of events occurred in time and in space  
then the new 'reality' reinstated by those who narrate the facts.  
Jean-François Lyotard*

Modern historiography, says Certeau<sup>1</sup>, develops by representing reality under four categories: the written discourse, temporality, identity and conscience. There is no place for an 'unconscious nature': facts must be documented in uniformity. History is thus produced as formal narrative, as an interpretation of reality that organizes facts as from processes of writing, composing a text that re-signifies cultural processes, in time and in space. An operation of complete displacement.

For a culture that intends to be 'occidental' and 'modern'- and that conceives itself as the center of the civilization process, nothing is more adequate than this complex of symbolic operations which 'produces, preserves, [and] cultivates undying "truths"<sup>2</sup>, following an itinerary of world reading that shifts from the center to the margins of the economic universe, from the top to the bottom of the social pyramid. Writing makes History in an organized and conscious manner, building identities and moving through a straight timeline, where the present follows the past and projects towards a never reached future.

Yes, writing makes History. And in order to build History, it uses oral narratives and cultural processes as they develop in space and in time, crystallizing intangible references under the form of archival documents, in successive operations of preservation and accumulation, of covering and uncovering of facts. The written text is powerful: it projects itself onto the space, much beyond the individual or collective body, keeping a virtual relationship with its origins, re-conducting "the plurality of pathways to the unity of the producing nucleus"<sup>3</sup>. In this process of constitution, differences are nullified and the spontaneous and free nature of the spoken language, of gestures, music, glances, expressions and emotions is substituted by grammatical norm and by purity of style.

While it develops as text, History re-signifies symbols, re-creates gods, replaces the immemorial myths of Tradition by the personal mythology of those who enunciate the facts. It acts directly in the core of non-material culture, founded in the intangible processes of heritage, leaving in second plan all that cannot be captured under the form of 'document': oral experience (here understood as language in process); spatiality (relationship between the cultural fact and the places where experiences occur); alterity; and unconsciousness (as spontaneity and freedom of expression, not related to any specific norm or knowledge).

That is why the recognition and the study of the so-called 'simple' and traditional societies, and also of any collectivity which social mode is founded in oral experience,

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<sup>1</sup> CERTEAU, Michel de. **The writing of History** (A escrita da História). Trad. Maria de Lourdes Menezes. Technical Revision Arno Vogel. RJ: Forense, 1982. p. 215

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 215

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, op. Cit, p. 219

have remained, for centuries, as an attribute of Anthropology and Ethnography – a situation that gained legitimacy based in a scientific status defined around the 17th century.

That is why the Museum – this enunciator of culture and of the human experience – was strengthened as hegemonic experience throughout the same century, through one of its representations: the traditional museum, space of shelter of documents considered culturally relevant by those who, from the center, built the narratives of History. It was not by chance that the ‘museological’ discourse of Modernity has developed based in those narratives; and that, to do so, it has made wide use of Chronology, Paleography, Diplomatic – fields of knowledge recognized, up to a recent past, as ‘auxiliary sciences of History’. Even ethnographic museums, essentially devoted to the study of the ‘simple’ societies and of illiterate groups, have been mostly founded in the chronologic approaches and narratives of historiography, making the discourse of the Different as from a center-based perception. In such museums, the writings about oral societies have turned people into objects – and cultural facts into narratives of the ‘exotic’.

A similar movement has permeated Natural History museums, where nature has been approached as the main character of a grandiose script, referring to the evolution of life in the planet. Built with the purpose of enunciating a ‘history of nature’, such museums articulate narratives according to which life evolves in space, under a temporal, chronologic, linear perspective. This movement enables all kinds of tendentious interpretations: the images of a ‘savage world’, of ‘primitive societies’, of the ‘Amazon Hylea’ and of ‘ferocious animals’ are part of this context, just to mention some of the terms and concepts which have characterized such narratives. Under the assertion of retaining things in their ‘purity’, the trajectory of life in the planet, mainly of human life, is re-created under a centralized perspective – using words ‘as the body that signifies’<sup>4</sup>, as that which gives a true meaning to reality.

We understand, though, that the relationship between Museology and History is not simple at all – and that the analysis of the subject may be full of misunderstandings. This question does not exhaust with the approach of exhibitions in museums of History or with the musealization of historic sites, even if those movements are part of a ‘quantum’ related to the theme. The problem of the relationship between Museology and History goes deeper than that, and interferes directly in the ways and methods through which both History and Museology are conceived and developed.

Among the many questions to be analyzed, the following categories may be considered as more relevant:

## 1. MUSEUM AND LANGUAGE

We could also say *Museum and World Narratives*. Movements of convergence and divergence may be identified here. Both the Museum and History are built through discourse, approaching reality in a very specific way; both make use of a rational and temporal conscience of the world, both articulate through reason, based in factual evidence. Yet **museums are constituted simultaneously in spatiality and temporality**. And, even if for a long time they have only perceived or narrated the world historically, the shift from modernity to contemporary status has enabled museums to articulate their narratives as from new discursive frameworks.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, in op. cit, p. 217.

At present, it is not possible to disregard the mythical character which defines cultures in their genesis and in their core, or the influence of myth in the constitution of a very rich symbolic universe that impregnates, in the most varied forms, the mechanisms of representation. Museums do not care so much in recreating the world starting from a center or a pre-given idea: they now tend to present things in multiplicity, exposing them as they are - singular, fascinating fragments of reality. And each one of us must find within ourselves the meanings that can be assigned to them.

To think History and Museum implies, thus, in trying to understand how the circular (or cyclic) temporalities of Tradition articulate with the linear, focused temporality which characterizes the 'occidental' (historic) mode of thinking reality; and also to perceive how evidences articulate, both among themselves and with the documental fragments that signify them. It is imperative to think about the ways and forms through which museums *represent* the synthesis of those tendencies, specially in what refers to the narratives they elaborate.

The emotional character of museological language must be also taken into account: that which makes possible to impregnate, in every way, the senses of the receiver - or even articulate, with passion, all the actors of the communicational process (a process that historiography relegates to a second plan). It is important to remember that both History and museums operate with re-readings of reality, through memory; and that the different configurations of History, promoted by museums, depend of intrinsic relationships that each museum establishes both with memory and with History, in each time and place. Such process develops through operations of presentation of the vestiges of facts and phenomena which remain in the memory, as elaborated by historical narrative.

But the question does not wear out in the relationship between historiography and museography. It goes beyond: how is it that History represents museums? And how museums represent History? **Which** History they represent?

### 1.1 – Memory, evocation, representation

Although definitely social, the process of memory initiates as an individual process, directly related to self-perception and to the perception of the inner and outside worlds to which each individual relates. This 'private'<sup>5</sup> memory is defined by means of the intertwining of voluntary and involuntary movements of perception, where past and present experiences are in close and permanent contact. Past is projected onto the present, by means of mental and sensorial representations, contributing for the shaping of 'sceneries' where the individual behaves as observer and/or acting character<sup>6</sup>. The sum of the tangency nodes of such sceneries constitutes that which Halbwachs nominates as 'social memory'- a process of articulation of remains that are common to determined human groups, and that would be at the base of the movements that constitute group identities. About this process, Nora adds that what comes to us by manipulation of remains is no longer memory, it is already history<sup>7</sup>; we could thus say that, although memory and history are not the same things, social memory is impregnated with historicism.

But to sense the world in historicism does not signify to understand it only through the viewpoints of History, or to enunciate it through the discourse of History. Culture, says Sahlins, functions as a space of encounter, 'a synthesis of stability and change, of

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<sup>5</sup> (as studied by Freud, Bergson and Proust)

<sup>6</sup> See Erwin Goffman's works

<sup>7</sup> NORA, Pierre, apud CERTEAU, Michel de. Op. Cit.

past and present, of asynchrony and synchrony'<sup>8</sup>. We are all fully immerse in this dynamics of traits, experiences, remains and perceptions that constitute our beings and through which we shape our individual and social self, by means of mechanisms of change and of cultural reproduction. In such process, many times the incorporation of the new helps precisely to justify and reinforce values, concepts and world perceptions that are already established. But this does not signify the crystallization of the cultural process: all reproduction of culture implies an alteration.

We must also remember that all conscious perception of reality has the character of a recognition: instinctively, we relate the perceived objects with pre-existent concepts and/or perceptions, in a continuous movement – as the *Gestalt* analyses have so well explained. The same occurs with the logical structure of discourse, where the specific is assimilated in the interior of a more general concept: 'objective representation is not the starting point in the process of language building, but the final point'<sup>9</sup>. Language does not nominate, from the outside, objects that already exist – on the contrary, it mediates their shaping from inside out.

We must thus analyze very closely the ways and forms by which such process is apprehended by museums. **The appropriation of objects always depends on the eyes of the observer**<sup>10</sup>, be this eye individual or collective; this process would be, therefore, always arbitrary and historic, related to pre-existent concepts, to specific ways of conceiving the world and engaging in it.

This is the problem of language, and of interpretation: facts and phenomena are not always perceived and explained in the same way, by observes who use different symbolic systems, even when they occur in the same time or space. This problem projects into the sphere of museums. As all the acts of re-reading of reality, interpretation is built from the differential relationships existent in the interior of a given symbolic system (the cut in reality promoted by the interpretive movement); **in museums, a new symbolic complex is added to the complex already created by other languages - this hybrid that we call 'museological language'**.

## 1.2 – Museum and the narratives of History

We know that language cannot represent all the notions (ideas) that a referred object awakens on the mind. This generates a disproportion between the word, the sign and the referred thing: words will always say less than each thing signifies. But material objects (material things), when they make themselves present in the discourse, will unveil to the observer in their spectacular complexity, presenting, 'under the form of experience, more properties and relations that could be chosen and valued by any other sign'<sup>11</sup>. An unquestionable advantage of museological language must thus be recognized, when it is built over musealized material objects<sup>12</sup>: their symbolic force as elements of personification of ideas.

In the relationship between Museology and History, it must be taken into account the kind of relation that is being built, case by case. Museology develops a discourse about History, and History has a discourse about museums. There is also a discourse about History, elaborated by museums. This latter may be articulated, among other forms, as academic language – and in that case, it will be defined and shaped by the

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<sup>8</sup> SAHLINS, Marshall. *Structure and History. (Estrutura e História)*. In: **Islands of History (Ilhas de História)**. RJ: Zahar, 1990 [1987]. p. 180

<sup>9</sup> CASSIRER, E. Apud SAHLINS, M. Op. Cit, p. 183

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 182

<sup>11</sup> BRÉAL, J. Apud SAHLINS, M. p. 185

<sup>12</sup> We are here considering the expanded concept of object, which encompasses all the movable and immovable references of material heritage.

limits of written or oral language; but it may be frequently built as museological language, and represented, in most cases, under the form of exhibitions.

In all those alternatives, it would be useful to analyze which perception of facts and actors of History museums allow, and which narratives they develop. In the present times, many museums tend to project themselves beyond formal narratives, presenting an enacted re-creation of historic and/or natural facts, in spaces consecrated by their patrimonial (heritage) value. In such theatrical narratives, places and objects may function as scenic spaces. In some cases, visitors are incorporated as actors, in experiences that build a bridge between different spatialities, or between different temporalities, offering a fascinating sensation: that of being in the place of the Other, assuming, even for a short moment, another identity.

## 2. MUSEUM AND IDENTITY

To offer to the visitor the experience of **being the Other**: that is a fascinating experience to museological narrative. We know that museums have always been related to the perception of identity (or identities, as we could now consider). And, although identity may be conceived, in the theoretical sphere, as a permanent value, in practice it is always constituted in process, as the result of a permanent re-ordination of traits, multifaceted kaleidoscope of infinite – tangible and intangible – fragments of reality.

How to approach the relationship between museums and identities? Although the theme must be approached historically, **we must also understand identity beyond history**, looking for signs of its presence as mark of Tradition, form of art, poetic movement or perceptual context. That is, trying to understand identity as a complex of individualities, where the *id* of each trait unveils, in all its significance.

Contemporary society develops a strong, continuous public debate about the theme of identity: it is treated in several fields of knowledge in an almost obsessive form – as if talking about an aspect of reality could guarantee, by proximity, its unveiling. Socio-analysis shows that such interest is related to the collapse of the ‘welfare State’<sup>13</sup> and to the emptiness of democratic institutions, consequential effects of a globalization process that leaves us at drift, in a world where nothing more is secure, certain, or expected – and where the social links are re-shaped and re-signified, in continuous process. In such environment, all that we aspire for is to return to the protected, familiar sphere of norms and traditions, that (we imagine) would save us from the uncertainties and the imponderable, offering a suitable alternative for the evils of a globalized world, where everything seems to be mediated by technique – from the great global decisions in the political field to kinship and neighborhood relationships.

The policies on identities speak, above all, the language of the excluded, of those who stand at the margins of the globalization process; or those who try to redefine and reinvent their own history, linking nostalgia for the past to the fugacity of the cultural processes of the present. In such process, we tend to forget that identities represent, on one side, ‘a socially necessary convention’<sup>14</sup>, that allows us to transfer to the political plan the complex of individual perceptions about what signifies our selves; and on the other, the sum of traits and tendencies which characterize individual or group authenticity, in its core.

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<sup>13</sup> VECCHI, Benedetto. Introduction (Introdução). In: BAUMAN, Z. **Identity**: interview with Benedetto Vecchi. (**Identidade**: entrevista a Benedetto Vecchi). Trad. Carlos Alberto Medeiros. RJ: Zahar, 2005. p. 11

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 13

The importance attributed to museums in the present times derives from the current perception that museums offer a possibility of recreating, amidst chaos and permanent change, an orderly world, where identities cease to be 'fragile, vague and instable'<sup>15</sup>. That is, to recreate order and method beyond the complex texture of reality. Yet museums are more than that: they are a powerful cultural 'agora', an instance of approach of the Different. And what matters here is less the norm than the possibility of generation of the new – new discourses, new ways of looking towards identities.

### 3. MUSEUM AND HERITAGE

To approach the question of identity leads us to heritage, that is – to the pathways through which Museology and History relate with the conceptual pair *heritage x identity*. Here I mention again Collomb<sup>16</sup>, who presents a notion of heritage and of the operations for *patrimonialization* of references as movements for institutionalization of memory and the links between generations. In such process, that which is frequently considered as material or immaterial 'evidence' of historic relevance (thus justifying the attribution of a 'patrimonial' value to certain objects and/or symbolic complexes), is nothing more than a complex of objects, intentionally selected in the name of an 'imagined community' – inexistent in the plan of concretude, but with a symbolic (and ideological) force that is sufficient to define certain procedures of validation and cultural legitimacy. Heritage may thus be perceived under its real face: a mental construction, a value attributed to determined segments of reality, over which specific discourses are established.

#### 3.1 – Heritage as discourse

Heritage may be, thus, constituted in the sphere of discourse. The articulation between institutionalized memory and the places and facts considered as 'patrimonial' (i.e., having value as heritage) depends on a convincing articulation of discursive forms that includes the creation of conceptual and visual sceneries (*mise-en-scène*), these latter so common to the museum field. And, if the discourse of History is produced as the result of operations of mediation between the facts and the ways through which they are interpreted and narrated, what makes History is in fact this new 'reality', created by narrative:

"Factual reality is superimposed by narrative interpretation, which recreates facts as from very definite ideological operations – aiming, in many cases, at provoking certain emotional effects in the interlocutor. Everything can be reinvented, adapted, manipulated: places, facts, characters, and also the time of History. All can become narrative effect"<sup>17</sup>.

Museologists and historians should thus try to identify, in this process, the ethical limits for interpretation, "the subtle line that establishes the difference between interpretive creation and ideological manipulation"<sup>18</sup>, caring that interpretive operations do not present facts in a completely distorted way. This is the most difficult task of the interpretive process, since every human movement is crossed by sensations and emotions, and each movement of mediation incorporates new emotions. In this process of *metamorphosis of feelings*, we perceive that "the narrative mechanism does not operate between history and discourse, but between the singularity of desire and its

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<sup>15</sup> BAUMAN, Zygmunt. **Identity**: interview with Benedetto Vecchi. (**Identidade**: entrevista a Benedetto Vecchi). Trad. Carlos Alberto Medeiros. RJ: Zahar, 2005. p. 65

<sup>16</sup> COLLOMB, Gérard. COLLOMB, Gérard. *Ethnicité, nation, musée, en situation postcoloniale*. IN: **Musée, Nation, après les Colonies. Ethnologie Française**, 1999-3. Tome XXIX. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, Juillet-Sept. 1999: 333-336.

<sup>17</sup> SCHEINER, Tereza. *Museología, patrimonio y la construcción de la Historia*. Conferencia presentada en el II Seminario de Museos y Casas Históricas. Alta Gracia, Argentina, set. 2000. Alta Gracia: Museu Virrey Liners, 2000 [preprint]

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

occurrence in time and in space”<sup>19</sup>. We must recognize that the new realities, recreated by interpretation, will always be impregnated by our own perceptions. As we already know, absolute impartiality does not exist...

The ‘museologic’ discourse, which results from interpretive/narrative operations specifically built for museums, will always be (as any other form of discourse) elaborated as image and resemblance of the narrator. Hence, museums have the special responsibility to make sure that the narratives they enunciate are shaped in the frontier between reason and emotion, looking for a point of balance that can be considered ethical, without running the risk of erasing the facts, or silencing about them. It is imperative that museums define **who speaks**, and clearly establish the ‘speaking places’ from where such discourses operate – aiming to reach a balance, without silencing the voice of those who build interpretations. It is also important to specify **to whom the discourse is addressed**: as we have said before,

[...] “when not addressing anybody specifically, the narrator annuls the interlocutor, or self-effaces, enabling the receptor to take his/her place and to aggregate, to each narration, his/her own emotions”<sup>20</sup>.

Let us not forget that museums are powerful media, which reveal themselves in plenitude when used under the adequate criteria of Museology. The use of correct communication languages becomes, thus, a fundamental trait of museum practice. It will never be an exaggeration to remember the necessity of critically evaluate the criteria of such use, specially in what refers to the languages of the exhibition. **Museological language has very defined spaces and timing, and all discursive creation must adapt to the characteristics and necessities of each museum**, preventing the use of maniqueist discourses that lead the interlocutor to a wrong or distorted perception of the events.

In previous articles, I have already called attention to the fact that museums, today, frequently try to renew their discourse by approaching the discursive forms used by propaganda and the other media. The result may be the overestimation of a vocabulary and a discursive mode not always compatible with the realities and temporalities of museological language: facts may be reduced to ‘leads’, advertisement slogans or brochure-like scripts – rather contestable interpretations, both from the scientific and the ethical point of view.

The ways by which the nation, heritage and identities are brought to the scene may also lead museums to legitimate specific ideologies or social practices, contributing to ‘build’ nationalities and/or to legitimate discourses which make prevail a certain ‘official’ vision of History. In certain cases, museums may be used as instruments of suspension of collective memory, silencing about facts – as it has occurred in many countries, with relation to recent and/or ambivalent periods of national history; or being opposed to the official discourse, thus operating in the margins of the official History, giving special emphasis to individual stories, or to the stories of minority groups.

We know that there are many strategies of reiteration and/or annulment of History. Hence, in the process of appropriation of historic evidence, museums must prevent from giving a partial interpretation of facts which contributes to perpetuate, in the collective unconscious, the idea that the only possible relationship between memory and museum is the one that is established when facts have ceased to exist. To constitute their discourse, both Museology and History promote a division in reality: but nothing forbids those segments to be offered under a pluralistic and diversified approach. Even though it

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<sup>19</sup> LYOTARD, J. F. (1973). Apud SCHEINER, op. Cit. (2000).

<sup>20</sup> SCHEINER, T. Op. Cit.

is very difficult to present History without referring to a past time, museums must try to present, whenever possible, facts and phenomena under their original form – or at least try to integrate the present to their narratives<sup>21</sup>, approaching facts from a *phenomenic* perspective, or from the point of view of common people as actors of History.

### 3.2 – The living instance

Museums must work with the evidences of reality under the form of articulated open conjuncts, in permanent and continuous interaction. This idea, already consecrated in the museum field, lies at the base of the theories of the Field Museum and of New Museology. The importance of this kind of approach must be again reinforced, since it allows a synthesis between temporality and spatiality, between tradition and rupture, between processes and products of human action.

The relationship between Museology and History must be seen, here, in a thoroughly complete way: not only in the sphere of discourse, but also in the domain of daily practice. More in essence, and less in appearance. In this approach, consecrated memory articulates with daily practices, with the realities of daily life, making possible the mentioned syntheses. History is thus built as a sum of multiple segments: sense does not lie with those who develop the narrative, it emerges from all sides.

I do not defend the utopian perspective of ‘egalitarian’ communities, proposed by the first texts of New Museology, a perspective already discarded by the experience of community museums. I refer to the fascinating paradox of museum practice: to act simultaneously over all possible times and spaces, registering all possible points of view, using all possible languages - to recreate, in a thoroughly special way, the memory-synthesis (shaped in the borders between the emergent and the consecrated), the discourse-synthesis (the spoken and the non-spoken, the present and the absent), the scenery-synthesis (the official history and the evidence that remains at the margins); and to make all this through cuts in reality, treating each reference as a fractal.

This is the perspective that allows museums to perform as true frontier spaces, bridges over cultures, as multifacet mirrors of human experience, where all human beings can recognize themselves, understand themselves and learn to respect Difference through their own experience – perceiving History not as return, but as a flux of events where each individual, each society has a specific place and significance.

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*English version by the author*

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<sup>21</sup> See comment about Museums and the Holocaust. In: SCHEINER, Tereza. **Museología, Patrimonio y la construcción de la Historia**. Op. Cit.