
Telling the Truth About History, the Polish Way

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Only a few years ago, democracy seemed to be developing and strengthening in its performative phase and – as Dipesh Chakrabarty observed with satisfaction – was replacing the psychological model of democracy. Whereas the latter model preferred “abstract reasoning and imagination,” the former appeared to be more friendly, bringing into view “the embodied and the sensual” (Chakrabarty, 2014). Today, we can see that although performativity, which refers to sensual involvement, truly means the progress of democracy, it also has a dark side to it. This dark side comprises simplifications, ignoring those aspects of the past that do not satisfy the audience directly, “do not forge bonds” and “do not strengthen communities.”

The opening topic of the fifth issue of the *Studia Litteraria et Historica* is the “musealization of history,” which is an aspect of the above-mentioned performativity, related to the transition of history from academia to museums. Chakrabarty has observed that museums are significantly more active in shaping policies than academia. They are also more flexible both in the ways of reaching their audience and in negotiating the content of the message. However, a history transformed into a narration of an exhibition or that of a guide, or into a tangible spatial context affecting the senses and emotions, frequently loses its critical and conversational potential.

The analyses collected in this issue demonstrate the fact that the difficult aspects of the past – ambiguous events, shameful facts that have been socially stigmatized, individual experiences of witnesses of history (victims, heroes and observers alike) – are frequently left outside the narration of museums. A portion of texts herein look at how historical knowledge is shaped by the structure of museums and their contents, and what outcomes this has. A thorough analysis of what museums present “to be experienced” simultaneously reveals what has been ignored, what is absent, veiled or even denied by the very fact of establishing a museum. The examples of local history, oral history and critical history reveal the absent topics as well as the absence of a “subject” of the museum narration with whom one might enter into a discussion.

History enclosed within the space of a museum is neither complete history nor a memory of the past. Regardless of how linear the narration of a museum is, the process of its creation involves selection, fragmentation and accumulation, the shifting of accents, and concealment. As one enters a museum, or the area affected by the presence of the museum and its influence, they may be either enchanted or disappointed with it, they can either accept or reject the vision proposed, but it is difficult to enter into a dialogue or polemics with it. The authors of the papers presented here show what happens when we forget that history in a museum is only a narration – a fragment of ambiguous, multilayered past, marked with contemporary interpretations and historic policy.

The fifth issue of the *SLH* tries to demonstrate the significance of historical reflection in anthropology, social sciences and literature for ensuring the critical and conscious experience of the historical narration of museums, as well as how different – and how much more individual – is the perspective introduced by oral history, local history or historical anthropology.

In 1994, three US historians, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob published a resounding book *Telling the Truth About History*, which was quickly appreciated and translated by the philosopher of science, Stefan Amsterdamski (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994, 2000). This text, published at the peak of interest in poststructuralism and post-modernism, may today seem just a voice against the abuses of relativism. It is, however, much more than that, as evidenced by the following quotation:

“[h]istory is a disciplined inquiry about past events, separate from what the guardians of nationalism might want its citizens to believe. [...] A democratic perspective includes far more than the government’s point of view, embracing as it does all the different groups with their divergent opinions within the society. The idea that nations control the memory of their citizens pushes to the fore the question of which persons are in charge of the nation. They may be virtuous leaders, cultural elites, locally powerful minorities, pluralistic coalitions, triumphant interest groups, or the winning competitors in the latest electoral donnybrook. Whichever they are, they are manifestly not the whole people. So to speak of the nation as an institution working assiduously to forget experiences incompatible with its righteous self-image is to fudge the issue of whose experiences must be forgotten and for which group’s benefit” (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994, p. 155).

The above question emerges in almost every paper presented in this issue. It is addressed by the “Fake Openings” section about the Polin Museum, the paper by Marcin Komosa, the interview with Kate Korycki, the analysis by Claudia Snochowska-Gonzales and two other statements, which we would like to discuss more extensively here.

One is a reply by Mirosław Tryczyk to a review of his book, *Miasta śmierci* [Cities of death], published by Krzysztof Persak, collaborator of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research (Persak, 2016). On account of the high gravity of the issues discussed there, we have made our pages available to the author to respond to his critic.

We believe that the review by Krzysztof Persak stems from a misunderstanding as to the genre of Tryczyk’s literature. It is impossible to start the interpretation of any narrative with-

out assuming what genre it represents (Bruner, 1996, p. 136). The genre determines how to conduct discourse, interpret the topics that emerge within it, the language registers or even idiolects characteristic of a discourse, as well as the specialized vocabulary required.

The discussion whether genres are generated by narratives or are rather constructed by their researchers started in the times of Aristotle (László, 2008). In the academic narrative, at least that applied by traditional Polish historians who are not well versed in the recent theoretical achievements of the humanities, it is not always – or even rarely – possible to make a statement leading to the state of “happy forgetting.” The term comes from Paul Ricoeur and refers to the ultimate stage of the processing of the past when the past is no longer a burden because the symbolic order has been restored and evil labeled as evil, whereas the good has been measured and appreciated.

Representatives of other humanities disciplines than history sometimes find it easier to face up to such challenges. Since cultural anthropology deals with the taboo on an everyday basis, its representatives typically do not panic when facing the consequences of it. Only high standards of research that synthesizes the competence of historians and all other researchers of the past can protect us from the false memory produced by various historical policies.

Dr Mirosław Tryczyk is a teacher and community worker, not a scholar. It is true that he is also a philosopher, ethicist and co-founder of the educational program “Wrocław against racism and exclusion,” but assuming that his book will meet the standards expected of an academic monograph does not speak well of the reviewers. Scholars are not supposed to work a subject through with their readers – this is the task of teachers and preachers. Attacking the teacher who endeavored to present a topic like this, one defies the very idea of the division of labor. His book, where he describes neighbors murdering neighbors in the Podlasie region, plays a great role in the process of the assimilation of this topic that Polish historians had been somewhat reluctant to tackle until Jan Tomasz Gross (2000) published his book *Sąsiedzi* [Neighbors].

The last but by no means least important text we would like to introduce here is the movie by Łukasz Konopa titled *Ukryci* [The hidden], which also addresses a majority of the above-mentioned issues. Although based on a single account, it performatively emphasizes it, thereby achieving more than many an extensive academic paper.

The movie, shot in 2010, was initially not intended for screening. “The hidden” from the title refer to a married couple who left their hometown to flee from neighborly persecutions for hiding Jews during the war. These persecutions resulted in the mother of one of the Righteous being raped and murdered by soldiers from the underground, who are named the Cursed Soldiers nowadays, perhaps for a reason. When Mr Wasilewski died, his relatives decided to reveal his testimony. Thanks to this, we can take a look at the faces of the blind heroes and ask ourselves what it is that we actually see.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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