INTERTEXTUALITY OF A MUSEUM COLLECTION: THE CASE OF COLLECTIONS IN THE HOMELAND MUSEUMS OF BAR AND ULCINJ

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Introduction

Intertextuality is a notion introduced in literature analysis that considers texts in terms of horizontal and vertical axes – the former connecting the author and reader of a text, and the latter connecting the text to other texts. The notion of intertextuality also means treating the author of a text as a writer of the already written. In other words, a text has its own history of writings and readings, so that we can announce ‘the death of the author’ and ‘the birth of the reader’. Texts are framed by other texts, as Foucault has clearly shown: ‘The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. [...] The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands; [...] its unity is variable and relative’. Having considered the idea of a text’s origins and its problematised boundaries, we face the question of where the text begins and where it ends. If we follow the idea of the preferred reading as a way ‘to fix the floating chain of signifieds’, in a museum exhibition we must first recognise elements that can serve as an anchorage of a recommended interpretation of a world depicted in that exhibition. In analysing features of intertextuality in museum exhibitions, we will concentrate mainly on a possibility of different readings or structural unboundedness – i.e. the extent to which the text is presented (or understood) as part of or tied to a larger structure of an exhibition etc., factors which are often not under the control of the author of the text. We will look at ways of reading the exhibition following two approaches: a semiotic approach and then

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1 Kristeva 1980, 69.
3 Foucault 1974, 23.
a narrative approach relating to the content of the exhibition, so that exhibits might be treated like texts and subjected to a critical reading. All the photos in this article were taken by the author.

1. Museum exhibition: readings and interpretations

Artefacts in museums are taken from the real world – isolated, classified and displayed according to curators’ classifications and their professional and personal points of view. By creating order and pointing out significance among the artefacts on display, a museum becomes an abstract system of cultural authority, so that our reading is settled in an interpretative framework. This interpretative framework allocates to artefacts their significance. If we forget for a moment the rules of the offered interpretation, the objects become parts of ‘a silent text in potentia’. Objects are dumb, and ‘the problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie. [...] once removed from the continuity of everyday uses in time and space and made exquisite on display, stabilised and conserved, objects are transformed in the meanings they may be said to carry’. By selecting objects related to certain collections, curators seek to recreate the past with ‘a powerful effect of realism’, depicting history as ‘the way things were’. How can we argue with contents that seem so real and factual, as the usual solidity of a curator’s work tends to exclude doubts and other interpretations? However, we do need deconstructive reading – looking at the ways in which exhibitions enable and disable other interpretations, articulating and producing a myth about our own or others’ cultural identity.

Among museum practices, the narrative museum layout – in which the visitor follows a story – has become very popular in contemporary museums. In an arranged composition of exhibits, fixed and anchored by their alignment, museum designers lead us from the first moment to read their interpretation of the past or some other aspect of life, and we assimilate their intended or unintended suggestions in exhibition messages. But how can we say that the exhibits are evidence pointing to a truth, and that the truth being pointed to is the only one? We need then to bear in mind that displays are polysemic and that there is a plurality of readings. An exhibition has its own semiotics and mechanism of invisible meanings emerging from an open possibility of revealing different connections between exhibits.

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5 Taborsky 1990, 64; Crew, Sims 1991, 163.
6 Craig 2003, 260.
2. Intertextuality of a museum collection – museum exhibition

A museum object has two notable characteristics: its physical presence and its meaning. The object’s physical presence is fixed, but the level of meaning has no stability. Taking into account the fact that exhibitions may be permanent or temporary displays, and that the linkages between exhibits may be within either a comprehensive or a thematic frame, the level of meaning stability depends on a curator’s intentions in displaying the selected artefacts. As the thematic frame expands, the linkages between artefacts increase, making polyvocality in the exhibition much more perceptible and dynamic. Exhibitions are selective and are a product of systems or politics of representation. They are expected to be in line with certain kinds of articulated discourses. It is noticeable that permanent displays always seem at first sight to be static, and are therefore very popular, but their broadened and less tightly defined base at the same time integrates other perspectives and voices not suggested in the purposeful design of a curator’s displays, since one cannot avoid the fact that, unlike the curator’s motivated activities, artefacts survive as authentic primary material from the past. Texts in the museum work together in linked groups (in other words, in clusters) in a physical space defined by a thematic construction of the exhibition, so that we have museum items shaped into a meaningful whole by spatial context and a syntax of possible relations. We agree that the spatial context functions on three levels: immediate items and texts clustered together within a museum exhibition; their relation with other clusters; the relation at the level of the overall exhibition and the museum as a whole. Generally speaking, there are three types of intertextual relation: thematic, actional and heteroglossic, and among these three we are mainly interested in thematic and heteroglossic intertextuality. Instances of heteroglossia in a museum exhibition mean the appearance of different alternative voices. These voices may be consciously employed, but for the most part they are unintentionally allowed to coexist. Intertextuality is a ‘crucial factor in the construction of museum meanings that operates at several contextual levels: within texts; between co-spatially situated texts; between such texts and the broader sociocultural contexts’.

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7 Neather 2012, 200.
9 Neather 2012, 215.
3. Collections of the Homeland museums of Bar and Ulcinj: museum exhibitions and reading their messages

In reading and interpreting displays’ messages, we seek to understand them on their three levels, according to Roland Barthes in Rhetoric of the Image\(^\text{10}\): linguistic, denoted and symbolic. In the case of the ethnographic display of the Homeland museum in Bar, there is no textual explanation of exhibited artefacts. Showcases in the ethnographic exhibition of the Homeland museum in Ulcinj offer to visitors limited textual information about the artefacts arranged inside. With regard to the two iconic messages – denoted and symbolic – we must point out that museological language means coded, denoted message, governed by professional rules, the curator’s experience and the museological code. The level of denoted, literal message means lines, clusters or groups of arranged and presented items in the museums. In the Homeland museum of Bar, traditional costumes in the ethnographic unit are displayed in two rooms, various pieces of jewellery are in a separate showcase without any distinction and additional textual explanation, old coloured wooden boxes with textile pieces are in both rooms, and finally we notice two very similar necklaces with filigree crosses on two different female costumes – a traditional Albanian costume from Shestan (Fig. 1) and a traditional costume from Spich (Sutomore, Fig. 2). These costumes are clearly associated with quite different national groups. The same type of necklaces, made in silver and with Turkish coins, could also be seen in the ethnographic display of the Homeland museum in Ulcinj on the Albanian bridal traditional costume from Bregasore (Fig. 3), as well as on a (Muslim) Albanian Anamali traditional female costume (Fig. 4) as a part of the ethnographic exhibition in Cetinje. This detail can be considered as the first anchorage of the curator’s symbolic message in the ethnographic display in Bar, or as a starting point in a visitor’s suggested reading. In the Ethnographic museum in Cetinje, the type of the filigree necklace with the cross is also associated with the traditional adornment in Spich, and a piece of jewellery with crescent moon can be seen on the traditional female costume of northern Albanians (Fig. 5). In the separate showcase with jewellery, there are many filigree pieces made of silver, grouped together as if they bear information about their common use in Bar and its surroundings, but the presence of the crescent moon symbol on silver earrings presented in the showcase imposes additional conclusions and questions such as: ‘Who used to wear them?’ A spontaneous and more or less correct answer might be: ‘They were worn by Muslim and Albanian women’. But is this answer precise enough (Fig. 6)?

\(^{10}\) Barthes 1977.
Within the Ethnographic exhibition of the Homeland museum in Ulcinj, pieces of jewellery are always presented with a particular traditional costume, as a part of the whole, so that the above-mentioned type of jewellery with the crescent moon symbol can be seen on the traditional female costume of Shestan (Fig. 7), a region mostly inhabited by Catho-
Within the collection of jewellery of the Ethnographic museum in Cetinje, where different types of traditional adornment from all over Montenegro are collected, there are earrings with the same symbol, described also as a piece of jewellery related to Shestan Albanians. Variations of the crescent moon symbol also appear as a decoration on a silk apron of the displayed Albanian Highlander female costume and the Bregasore bridal costume, as well as combined with crosses decorating the upper part of the Bregasore costume. Both of the traditional costumes are related to Catholic Albanians.

Focusing our attention now on the other part of the Ethnographic exhibition of the Homeland museum in Ulcinj, we find two levhas – framed Islamic pictures – produced
in an identical calligraphic manner (Fig. 8). One of them is devoted to God and includes prayers for his help, while on the other levha we read the name of Ahmed ar-Rifa’i. Taking into account the fact that Ahmed ar-Rifa’i was the founder of the Rifa’i Sufi order, we can draw the conclusion that the Rifa’i Sufi tradition had its followers in Ulcinj. Levhas are placed in a separate showcase with household tools. What is the connection between the crescent moon symbol and Islamic inscriptions in the Ethnographic museum exhibition in Ulcinj? At first sight, they seem related to each other, but very conditionally and only at the level of the literal museological message. As we know, the crescent moon with or without a star is the symbol of Islam, but in this case the crescent moon is not a religious symbol. It is a symbol appearing in the ancient Albanian tradition, and may be found among artefacts related to Muslim Albanians as well as to Catholics. As we have seen, the museological texts in both of the Ethnographic exhibitions in the Homeland museums of Bar and Ulcinj are written as a mixture of the curator’s intended arrangement of signals in order to make suggestions as to how to read the exhibition. Making comparisons between two museological ethnographic scripts, we have noticed similarities in items represented and arranged in quite different ways and surrounded by their particular contexts. In each group, they have immediate distinctive features. This mixture of signals leads a visitor’s interpretation towards allusions to particular traditions and social customs, as well as cross-cultural references. The above-mentioned instances of the crescent moon symbols and pieces of the same handicap origin and design used in different national or religious groups make a range of allusions to layers of traditional and cultural texts, always overarched by new layers, making new texts in the process of transformation. The range of allusions changes and is dependent on the visitor’s knowledge, experiences, accepted cultural stereotypes and cultural values.

In the Homeland museum in Bar, we read items and texts clustered together within a museum exhibition, their relations with other clusters, and the relations at the level of the overall exhibition and the museum as a whole in a relatively open layout. The conceptual frame in the Homeland museum in Ulcinj is tightly defined in a presentation of local traditions. However, our possible interpretation of both exhibitions requires a comparison between items, based on traces of their interactions and cross-cultural references. In this brief survey of the two museums’ ethnographic displays, we have looked at two purposeful, designed displays. Authentic primary material from the past is presented as an outcome of the curator’s motivated activities. Their museum texts work together in linked groups or, in other words, in clusters, in a physical space defined by a broad or narrow thematic construction, but their messages are also a locus of intertextual relations with other contents outside the museum, emerging from a system of common or individual cultural references.
**Conclusions**

The museum layout as a readable text activates the interpretation of interactions between the discursive and cultural practices of a society. Its polyvocality and plurality of invisible meanings are derived from the scene of variable signs, made to form a seemingly coherent narrative, which is always open to the visitor's interpretations. As we have seen, the curator's work tends to exclude doubts, but in deconstructive reading, allusions and comparisons with other museum texts and sources are inevitable.

**Bibliographical references**


