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Museology - a Useful Perspective or a "Real Science"?

Some Thoughts on How to Make the Most of a Great Idea

The purpose of this article is to bring forth a few interesting points that rise from the writings of Stránský and Šola, especially from their treatment of the scientific foundations of museology as an academic discipline. The two question areas addressed in this article are: firstly, museology and the post-modern, and secondly, museology and its stance towards continuity and change. Finally, a suggestion for the use of museology as a useful perspective in a number of academic fields is brought forth. It is a real question whether we want museology to be a pragmatic, normative and ethically value-based discipline or whether we yield to a description and an analysis of the complexities of our society and the role of history/past in the construction of the present. This is a question that must be addressed

Key words: museology, postmoderna, museological theories, contemporary museology, philosophy of culture

It is difficult to name two more influential and authoritative thinkers in 20th century European museology than Zbynek Stránský and Tomislav Šola. Their intellectual effort in creating a concise theoretical framework for the discipline, has enabled it to become established in several universities on the continent. The purpose of this article is to bring forth a few interesting points that rise from the writings of Stránský and Šola, especially

from their treatment of the scientific foundations of museology as an academic discipline. Although the choice of texts that are taken into consideration here will not give full recognition to the extremely rich body of academic production of these two scholars, I hope it will be sufficient to highlight certain questions that may rise from the practical usage of the museological perspective as an academic tool for thinking. Stránský's (1995) *"Introduction to the Study of Museology"* was written to support his lectures at the International Summer School of Museology. Šola's (1997) thinking is represented by his recent collection of articles *"Essays on Museums and Their Theory - Towards the Cybernetic Museum"*.

The two question areas I am going to address in this article are: firstly, museology and the post-modern, and secondly, museology and its stance towards continuity and change. Finally, I will bring forth my suggestion for the use of museology as a useful perspective in a number of academic fields.

Museology and the Post-Modern

Zbynek Stránský (1995:19) writes that:

I am convinced that it is post-modern thought that creates a much more fertile soil for museology.

According to Stránský, museology has, for a long time, been limited by its neo-positivistic arsenal and judged by other sciences¹ from the positivistic point of view. In his view, the post-modern thought stands for blurred borders between branches of academic interest; in other words, the post-modern facilitates a multi- or interdisciplinary approach. It is clear from the context that Stránský is referring to the philosophy of science, not just the era of the post-modern (the last historical phase of western modernism). (Stránský, 1995:18)

It is highly interesting that Stránský considers post-modernism as a fruitful philosophical starting point for museology. I think it is well worth investigating the full consequences of this choice.

There is no short and simple way to analyse post-modern thought. I refer to Briitta Koskiahö (1990:109-114) in the following. In her view, post-modernism has not established a model of thought directly applicable as a research method. Its main characteristic is criticism against the "modern project" and positivism. It derives from hermeneutics and phenomenology as well as post-structuralism. The human and societal view is essentially fragmented. It has turned its back on the "great narratives" and seeks not answers but new questions; consequently, opening up new ways of thinking is seen as the goal of scientific activity. The greater narratives get

¹ In this context there is not distinction made between art and humanistic or natural sciences, all academic disciplines are labelled as sciences.

fragmented into smaller discourses that are time- and space-specific. The danger in post-modern scholarship, according to Koskiaho, is an anarchistic or even nihilistic conclusion where anything can be nullified and nothing is authentic. As a consequence, the only scientific aim may shrink into observing the irrationality of activity, revealing the deconstructive nature of the world, or narrowing the scope of research into small localities.

The obvious fragmentation of the world of the post-modern and its relation to the museum institution is one aspect that calls for a closer observation; the other aspect is the post-modern hostility towards the positivistic worldview.

Šola (1997:35) writes that

The aim of criticism must be honest, so that even if true and painful it is not malicious and destructive. Its aim cannot be but providing a comprehensive inventory of weak points that the profession has to be aware of in order to revise its theory and practices. ... it should be able to face its imperfections and *compete for its own place in the configuration of institutions*. (Emphasis mine)

In this passage Šola brings forth the interconnectedness of museology and the museum institution. At the same time it is obvious that the position of the institution is seen as meaningful for society as a whole, not only for a fragmented, narrow section of it. However, it is also explicitly stated that there is competition of institutions, in other words, the museum is part of a complex society with various actors, the interests of which may even conflict.

Similarly, in Stránský's (1995:28) opinion

[the] role [of "social museology"] is to unveil the motivation and importance of this process [of musealisation] for an individual, a group, or a society, and to grasp the forms in which this process is realized.

This means that Stránský sees the plurality of the levels of the meaning of musealisation, but at the same time he retains that "...social museology can help us move forward in the transformation of museums and museum work for the benefit of society" (Stránský, 1995:31). Interestingly, both Stránský and Šola on one hand point towards plurality and multiple and even conflicting interests, while on the other hand insist on a capability of the institution to benefit society as a collective whole. Therefore, the least we can say is that the post-modern thought within museology is not quite as fragmented as it could be. There is a tendency towards perceiving society as a collective whole and a belief in the benevolence of science.

Another question connected with the post-modern and museology is how we are to relate to positivism. What might at first strike the reader as odd is that both Stránský (e.g. 1995:52) as well as Šola (e.g. 1997:228 ff) resort to the system theory or cybernetics when bringing the theory to its formal abstraction. Was not cybernetics originally a positivistic, scientific approach - having its roots in the mechanisms of hard, lifeless machines although later on applied to biology? There are two points, which the authors must have taken as implicit but which one would have hoped they had

explained. Firstly, when considering human communication, the system theory in its two-dimensionality falls short because we must take the cultural biases of the actors into account. What gets communicated builds on what has already been communicated. Therefore, the human communication system is not a circuit but a spiral. Secondly, for Šola in particular, the cybernetic museum is an actor in a world of multiple parameters, conditions and other actors. (See e.g. Šola, 1997:231) This is the world-view of the cultural-ecologist. The cultural-ecological model allows for continuity and change and a cybernetic circuit, which, nevertheless, is remarkably more complex than the original "input-output-feedback-product"-model. A truly intriguing question here is whether cultural-ecology is still a positivistic model. In my opinion, it is.

Museology, Continuity and Change

Referring again to Koskiahio's treatment of post-modern thought, one of her concerns is the dimension of time. If the post-modern scholar merely opens up new questions, but is not morally responsible for answering them, he or she is inevitably working on an extremely short time-span. In the area of ecology the difference is radical. Previously the order of nature was perceived as an absolute and the meaning of the environment as total. The policies of nature conservation and sustainable development have been based on these notions. (Koskiahio, 1990:111.)

Šola's thinking has an approach that is very close to that of sustainable development.

[O]ur mission is retaining from the past as many values as possible and passing them to those in need: 1) to build quality in human relations and 2) to achieve quality in relation between humans and the natural environment. (Šola, 1997:280)

We can see here that the emphasis is on continuity and it seems a basic assumption that the past has values that are worth preserving. Šola (1997:281) defines the purpose of a heritage institution as being the assurance of continuity and survival of the identity it was created for. This is, in my view, a crucial question in museology. If we have an academic discipline *committed* to the survival of past values, it cannot logically be particularly deconstructive by nature.

Another question is the possibility of ruptures. This idea originates from the "effective history" of Michel Foucault. As Eileann Hooper-Greenhill has demonstrated, the museum institution as such is not eternal. The epistemological changes have been of such depth that institutional continuity of the European museum does not reach as far back as one had believed or would like to believe. (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992.) In one of my cases, a small local museum in South Western Finland, it seems that the institution has undergone remarkable changes regarding the original intention and present function. Nonetheless, it may be hard to prove this using any other method other than applying a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. The rea-

son for this is that while the physical form of the museum has not changed very much, the meanings attributed to the forms have changed tremendously over the same time frame. (Savolainen, forthcoming) In a sense we have a case, which accommodates *both rupture and continuity*.

Museology in the Context of the Post-Modern World of Sciences

It is a real and compelling question whether we want museology to be a pragmatic, normative and ethically value-based discipline or whether we yield to a description and an analysis of the complexities of our society and the role of history/past in the construction of the present. This is a question that must be addressed.

It is not an easy question. On one hand, research committed to the continuity of the institution will prove a much better starting point for any reasonable heritage policies. On the other hand, how can we ensure any development without due criticism?

It is my conviction that only an increase in serious study of heritage institutions will create a situation in which we are able to discern what the paradigmatic essence of museology is. The formation of theory should be organically intertwined with substantial studies of the real, prevailing situation. However, each and every scholar will have to make an individual choice. Ultimately, it is based on something as simple as our world-view as to whether we want to be committed or deconstructing; bringing forth solutions and suggestions or merely opening up unanswered questions. I would like to note that in this context, I am not opposing either of the approaches.

I have, however, one suggestion. As much as I see it unnecessary to imply post-modernism as a philosophical starting point for museology, I strongly feel it is wise and recommendable to understand that we indeed live in a post-modern, fragmented world of conflicting interests. In academia, new disciplines such as Gender Studies are flourishing. The idea behind this discipline is to make visible, through discourse, the previously invisible part of society. This research is not merely carried out under the auspices of the few chairs of Gender/Feminist/Women Studies, it is ausable perspective and frame of reference in all humanities. Could this approach not work for Museology as well?

In my view, the eternal question whether museology is a real science or not, is peripheral. However, one of our gravest concerns in the profession is that our belief in any kind of longer processes and communal good is perishing. We have amnesia on one hand and nostalgia on the other. In Šola's words, we need *wisdom*. Could museology as such and any museologically-oriented humanistic research give to the chaotic, fragmented world, a valuable contribution in making the growth and change of human civilisation visible, simply by showing long-time causes and effects?

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