
PHD RESEARCH PROPOSAL:
ALTERITY AND DIFFERENCE
IN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND REGIONAL MUSEUMS IN EUROPE

AIM:

This project aims at analysing images of cultural difference in ethnographic and regional museums within German-speaking Europe. It will see how these museum images converge, differ or overlap and examine them in relation to each other as well as in a wider societal discussion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic and regional museums present two different approaches to a wide-ranging set of concerns around the representation of difference. Ethnographic museums, and all new permutations emerging from them (Musée des Civilisations, Weltkulturen Museum, Weltmuseum), display alterity by definition, and have often defined their area of expertise by differentiating between European and non-European cultures. By contrast, regional museums, as well as all those we could call societal museums (which includes local and regional museums, city museums, history Museums, Heimat museums, thematic museums), represent the society they are inscribed in. Yet these days, they tend to address similar topics: themes of migration, exchange and hybridity. They are also in a period of intense reimagining, rewriting and contestation, working to open the museums to voices of migrants, to other cultures and to problematise power relations. All these museums are linked in transnational networks of professionals (Meyer and Savoy 2014), share many of the same challenges and solutions, and are in constant dialogue with each other. They form a museal landscape in which they complement each other in producing and reproducing various imaginings of alterity. This study proposes to analyse these images, to explore how they differ and overlap, and to map representations of alterity and cultural differences in museums.

The German-speaking part of Europe, comprised of Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland, provides an interesting example. Its relationship with colonialism, which has often been glossed-over is now being reinterpreted (see for instance Lüthi, Falk, and Purtschert 2016 for Switzerland, Sauer, 2017 for Austria and Haschemi Yekani and Schaeper, 2017 for Germany). It has become an important problematic in ethnographic museums, whose directors have signed the Heidelberg statement in May 2019¹ on the topic of decolonising museums. In Germany and Austria, ideas of the nation have been constituted around linguistic identity (Pasteur 2011) and culture have been viewed as homogenous. German-speaking Switzerland has defined itself in relation with the French, Italian and Romanche-speaking parts of the country. For all of them, migration is often understood as a recent phenomenon, linked to the

¹ <https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/en/content/heidelberg-statement>, accessed 28.05.2019

arrival of the so-called Gastarbeiter in the sixties and seventies. The current political discourse on migration carries hints of chauvinism, more or less virulent, in all three countries. There is now a very interesting energy at work to tackle themes of difference, including migration, religious diversity and a decolonisation of museums, all of which makes German-speaking Europe a very interesting space to look at. This study will look at how ethnographic and local museums in German speaking Europe explore ideas of difference and alterity.

2 CONTEXT AND FIELD SURVEY

Much of the current museum questioning revolves around including new voices, reframing discourses and opening the museum landscape to new perspectives.

Ethnographic museums are busy reckoning with their own difficult past and their present collections, often acquired through shady deals and within a racist frame (Gonseth, Hainard and Kaehr, 2002). Fabien Van Geert describes the long road to self-reflection and self-criticism now embedded in the very methodological frame of anthropology, which has been trickling down – unevenly – to museum practice since the seventies (Geert, 2017). The majority of the collections themselves are dated, which has an impact on the way these museums address contemporary issues. Contemporary questions centre around decolonising the museum (de L’Estoile 2008, Giblin, Ramos and Grout, 2019). This includes the return of remains and symbolic objects, publicised by the Sarr-Savoy report of 2018, following a long discussion of predatory practices in ethnographic museums (Gonseth, Hainard and Kaehr 2002, Benkirane and Deuber-Ziegler 2007, Van Geert 2017, Maranda and Brulon Soares 2017), the reinterpretation of collections (Joseph and Mauuarin 2018) and questions about whose voice and narratives should be heard, and how these institutions shape the knowledge we have (Minott, 2019, Couttenier, 2019).

At the same time, fuelled by political storms, there has been an increase in the long-standing interest in migration and museums (for instance Baur 2009, Gourievidis 2014 and Whitehead et al. 2015, Kamel and Gerbisch, 2014, Berlinghoff, Rass and Ulz, 2017 and Bertheleu and al., 2018), much of which has argued for more representation, a more inclusive view of history and a place in permanent collections. There have also been studies on city museums as an alternative level on which to study migration (Lanz 2014, Hesse, 2017 as well as Dogramaci, 2017), as well as on immigration and emigration museums (Baur 2009, Lanz, 2016, Blaska-Eick, 2017). The representation of Islam in museums has also garnered interest (Kamel and Gerbich 2014, Grinell 2016). Part of the reflection has been on participatory work and the inclusion of the voices of the migrants themselves, and how these are also shaped by power relations (Aysel and Nogueira, 2017, Vacca, 2017 and Wonisch, 2017 and Garnier, 2018 for instance). There again, the idea is to bring new points of view, be more inclusive and rewrite history, something which has also been pushed by associations for several decades (Bertheleu and al., 2018, Topper 2017). In such a context, the focus is on enabling a new rewriting of history.

This study will look at the way difference is represented in this context of change of paradigm and the at times painstaking evolution of institution. Here are a few questions this study will investigate.

2.1 Can we map spaces of difference in museums?

The very visible divide between European and non-European collections is quite telling of the way knowledge is organised. Studies of non-European societies will appear in ethnographic museums, and contemporary research of European societies in Volkskundemuseum, Heimatmuseum, écomusées and various historical, local and regional museums. It is obvious in museal narratives about settler societies like New Zealand, Australia and North and South American countries, whose societal divides are unmistakably revealed in whose objects are preserved in ethnographic collections. Some areas stand on the margin of this divide: what about Russia, Asia Minor, Northern Africa, the Middle East? The very category of Islamic art, which became prominent after 9/11, can only give a very limited view of the heritage – and areas - it is supposed to represent, as Islam is not a geographical delimitation (Grinell 2016). Thus collections of Turkish objects, which would be very relevant in German and Austrian societies, can be found in ethnographic museums, Islamic art museums as well as migration museums, in different context and iterations.

Part of this comes down to questions of classification. And this very separation of European/Non-European objects in museums is at the heart of the question: where is knowledge about specific people being produced, which in turn influences how it is produced – also in terms of European and non-European ethnography. Shelley Errington has written about the creation of the category of “primitive art”, how this category is formed and what it implies for people – that is being seen as “not quite there yet” on an axis of progress, and thus being dismissed more easily (Errington 1998). More recently, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has very keenly re-examined the power relations underlying archives and ethnographic museums, the violence of these classifications in imposing a certain point of view on objects, photography, practices while denying actual power relations (Azoulay, 2019). This is how institutions normalise dominant point of views, a process masked by the perceived neutrality of the museum space (Minott, 2019). And these classifications have very real effects as they feed general discourses on difference.

The space given to migration also reflects the debates about the place of migrants in society. Whether migration is a societal question (or problem) which should be addressed as such: for instance, the Landesmuseum Zürich has placed its main installation on migration between “Aging of the population”, “Robotics”, “Climate change” and has divided a number of video segments between Optimism and Scepticism, as various people weigh in on it. Or whether it is a fact and part of the history of a place, a transversal theme, as more and more museums do (Maischein and Bayer, 2016). Another aspect is the integration of migration in the history of countries: should there be a migration museum in Germany (see the long-term effort of DoMID), in Austria (the initiative to start an archive of migration, see Akkiliç and al., 2017) or Switzerland (as attested by the online Musée Imaginaire des Migrations, an initiative of the Migrationsmuseumsverein), or it is a way of excluding it from a more general discourse? These questions all point to societal positionings. Where do we talk about differences and how we talk about it are intrinsically linked questions, and it is something that this study will delve into.

2.2 Migration and multiculturalism

Migration is now generally understood as a vital aspect of society and museums have been incorporating it as a topic since the 70s. Most local museums seem to be in the process that

Bozoğlu and Whitehead, working on representations of Turkish identities in western European museums, call "folding" the "guest" into the "host" (Bozoğlu and Whitehead, 2015, p.280), showing diversity, working to un-exoticize the foreign rituals and objects (for example Henna, the veil, etc.) and reconfigure the "host" landscape. For this, the visitor is often coded as non-immigrant to whom outsider cultures have to be explained. Much of it centres around the figure of the *Gastarbeiter*, a central figure in the coming of the migration society (*Einwanderungsgesellschaft*) and in many cases the central figure. Faime Alpagu has written about the stereotypes of the *Gastarbeiter*, and insists on the importance of individual stories rather than a generic approach (Alpagu, 2019). Museums have also reacted very strongly to the important population movements of 2015, and topics of flight and refugees have been included in the reflection and new displays. Ethnographic museums have also started to take migration into account, as shown by the Heidelberg statement. The Linden Museum in Stuttgart produced an exhibition called *In Stuttgart zu Hause* (July to October 2018), dealing with themes of belonging and diversity. The Weltmuseum in Wien has devoted a room to migration and another to the consequences and implications of colonialism, and articulates contemporary topics in temporary exhibitions, such as *Verhüllt, enthüllt! Das Kopftuch* (Oct 2018 to Feb 2019), on the veil. The Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt also has an exhibition on migration *Weltbewegend. Migration macht Geschichten* (Oct. 2019 to Dec 2021) and *SW5Y: Fünf Jahre Zivile Seenotrettung*, on the arrival of migrants through the Mediterranean route and the rescue operations. Moreover, some of the most important museums in Europe have been part of an EU-project called SWICH – Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage², a reflection on ethnographic museal practices in a post-migration society.

Most of the drive to inscribe migration in museums has been militant, and a reaction to mainstream negative discourses against immigration – Gérard Noiriel speaks of discourses around immigration as existing within a matrix within which the parameters for response are given (Noiriel, 2014). In order to fight against negative images of migrants, many representations of migration have an underlying counter-discursive function. For instance, the miserabilist vision of the 'Gastarbeiter' migrants' living conditions in the 80s was also a counter-discourse to the idyllic view of successful economic stories and a denunciation of its negative aspects (Dogramaci, 2018). In the same way, many exhibitions have focussed on images of working, integrated, "successful" migrants (Wolfgarten, 2018), the trope of the "good migrant", bringing something to the country of destination. The "Galerie des Dons" in the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris is a good example: it showcases the contribution of individuals to France (artistic, social, economic, etc.) to present a very positive picture and counteract the prevalent negative political discourses. The overrepresentation of work migration is one of the consequences of this approach.

Nowadays, most exhibitions on migration rely on participative work, which is both a welcome opening of new perspectives, and provides the museum legitimacy. Very few museum professionals have personal experience with migration (Vacca, 2017 as well as Wajid and Minott, 2019, who speak of only 3% BAME staff in UK museums), and so need the expertise.

² The list includes the Weltmuseum Wien, The National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden and Amsterdam, the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, Marseille, the National Museums of World Culture, Stockholm and Göteborg, the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico «Luigi Pigorini», Rome, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, the Slovenski Etnografski Muzej and the Museum of World Cultures, Barcelona.

In Germany, DoMID has largely stepped up as a resource for museums. But participatory work comes with many pitfalls: it is unequal, always. In the UK, Bernadette Lynch has long reported the power imbalance inherent to it (Lynch, 2014 and 2017), as the framing, choosing and decision power ultimately rest in the hands of the institution. In Austria, Regina Wonisch has also spoken about the paternalism of the museums towards external participants (Wonisch, 2017) and the fact that the objects are gathered through campaigns which shift a lot of the responsibility onto migrants themselves. They, in turn, might be wary of “exposing themselves” (Bertheleu et al., 2018), or can lean towards self-exoticism as they respond to the perceived expectations of museums (Vacca, 2017 as well as Grognet, 2016). This has to do with how people want to project themselves, especially as members of marginalised communities: Christina Johannson recounts a participatory exhibition with members of the Roma and Sinti communities who did not want to address negative aspects of their lives as they already experienced much negative representation (Johannson, 2014). In the end, the museum took a step back. Rachael Minott describes a participative experience which turned harrowing for the external curators working on “decolonising the museum” in Birmingham (Minott, 2019), while Sumaya Kassim recounts her experience on the other side of this exhibition, from fear of being treated as a token, to exhaustion and wish for fair pay (Kassim, 2019). It comes back to the question of who writes about whom, and how. This study will look in-depth at various narratives around migration, if and how they work as counter-discourses as well as how the participative experiences function within this frame.

2.3 How do concepts of time and modernity shape displays?

Time is a central idea in musealisation. The long-held idea that the objects and associated rituals (particularities, differences) would soon disappear were there no museums is only made more urgent by a frenetic globalisation, which would then erase these last traces. The temporal gap between objects in use and on display in museums is a prerequisite of any exhibition. But there is also a visible temporal gap between the majority of European and non-European objects and stories – often presented without historical context. Rachael Monitt crystallises the question: while non-European (in her case colonial) objects are barely documented, attributed to huge swathes of people across a very imprecise timeline, our knowledge of European objects is very precise. This positions “occidental” cultures as sites of modernity and civility, by opposition to other cultures (Monitt, 2019). In a well-known critique of anthropological methods, Johannes Fabian analysed ethnographical practices as producing a denial of common temporality between the anthropologist (and his society) and the object (the people and society he studies), which he calls a denial of “co-evalness” (Fabian 1983 and Fabian 2006). The denial of a common timeline, sometimes implicit in the uses of the word “traditional” and its negative counterpart “backward” is also visible in ethnographic museums. It carries with it an idea that non-European (or non-“western”) cultures are not quite modern, operating on a different timeline. This is linked with ideas of progress and also a sense of urgency, implying that these cultures will soon lose all originality – due to globalisation – and that they are all (or should all be) tending towards a western ideal (Errington, 1998). It also separates objects from the violence of the historical context in which they were made, or taken (Azoulay, 2019).

Some ethnographic museums, of which the Musée du Quai Branly is a prime example, prefer an artistic vision: by presenting ethnographic objects as art, according to mostly aesthetic criteria, they become included in the category of universal art (Benkirane and Deuber-Ziegler,

2007). This leads to abandoning the context of the object, whether cultural or historical – and these ahistorical objects, in the name of a universal experience of art, fixate imaginings of other cultures. Sometimes difficult or current questions are left to be analysed by contemporary artists who can present other points of view and voices. Julie Bawin, analysing interventions by contemporary artists in ethnographic museums, talks about the danger of instrumentalising artists and letting them play the role of “postcolonial conscience” (Bawin 2018, p. 56).

In terms of local museums, addressing more contemporary situations on a different register, does this still apply? There has also been an important public discourse about the “backwardness” of migrant cultures (very often linked to practices that are deemed unmodern such as arranged marriages, wearing the veil, or, in a different register, FGM). Benjamin Opratko has researched this ascription of backwardness within some liberal discourses to unearth a form of islamophobia linked with ideas of modernity, which sees islam as un-modern, as opposed to liberal European values (Opratko, 2019). Linked with this is the problematic category of “Islamic art” itself, which tends to set Islam in the Middle-Eastern middle ages (Grinell, 2016), contrasting with the contemporary takes in some local museums (the exhibition *Islam* in Schallaburg in 2017). Should ethnographic museums have Turkish or Middle Eastern objects (such as the *Weltkulturen Museum Wien* or the *Linden Museum Stuttgart*), they often are a reflection of the orientalism of the time of collecting, and difficult to contextualise in relation to actual Muslim people. By looking specifically into ideas of modernity and time, this study will try to assess how are contemporary questions and challenges addressed and how difference is presented in relation with ideas of progress and modernity.

2.4 The political side of museum praxis

Both as institutional symbols able to legitimise representations, and as educational media, Museums are subject to intense scrutiny. They often end up in the news, as did the Musée du Quai Branly regarding the recent report about the restitution of several bronze statues from Benin and the possibilities of restitutions by ethnographic museums in general (Sarr and Savoy 2018). Themes of migration, religion and gender are all eminently political, both because exhibitions and projects are the cause of much negotiation and because any representation is inherently political, and can have actual consequences on policy (quotas, citizenship rights, rights of refugees etc. see Gouriévidis, 2016). Recently, there has been an increase in active calls for commitment on the part of curators (Širok et al.2016, Lynch, 2014, Nightingale and Sandell 2014, Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński, and Sternfeld 2018, Sandell and Janes 2019, among countless others), asking for curating to be a (more) self-aware and activist practice. Many authors also discuss the practical difficulty for museums to open their doors to diverse points of view and community participation (Lynch, 2014, Lynch, 2017, Gourévidis, 2016).

There is a sense that museums should counteract numerous alarmist and racist patterns of explanations in public discourse. Gérard Noiriel, also involved in the project of the Cité Nationale de l’Immigration in Paris, has written in-depth about the importance of public discourse importance in the fabrication of representations, and its consequences in leading to stigmatisation (Noiriel, 2014). Mirjam Shatawani speaks of curating “against”, to describe the sense of active resistance (Shatawani 2014), and Kylie Message has spoken of an “‘anti-racist praxis’ that positions the exhibition within and reflects upon a wider field of media texts” (Message 2014, p.46). The idea of “anti-racist praxis” has also been explored in the German-

speaking context, an appeal to bring the museum into reality (Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński und Sternfeld, 2017). The current interrogations and the appeal to decolonize the museum and work on an anti-racist praxis are an integral part of museum work today. This study will see how they play out in different contexts and how these ideas take shape in the resulting exhibitions, displays and attitude.

3 METHODOLOGY

Museums are understood as ever-changing constellations of various actors whose negotiations, frictions and agreements manage to produce permanent and temporary exhibitions (Drouguet 2016). As such, the museum is not a single voice, but an institutional compromise. Exhibitions are the produced discourse and the main interface with the public. They are compromises between the many people involved and made with a set of practical constraints (logistical, regarding time, regarding budget...) and the way they come into being and the negotiations around them are political (Sandell and Janes, 2019). Museums are also understood as being in dialogue with each other, through networks of professionals and a plethora of common projects, seminars and associations. Therefore it makes sense to study them as part of a museal landscape, and to analyse findings in light of these networks. Finally, Museums are understood as being part of a wider societal discourse, in relation to other media – whether educational media (textbooks, teaching resources, etc.), general media (the press, news, debate, blogs and other internet websites, etc.) (see Message, 2014) or other sites of public discourse (politicians’ speeches and campaigns, other governmental publications, material of various associations, etc.). It is important to view them and the display and exhibitions analysed in relation to this context.

This analysis will focus on German-speaking Europe (Germany, Austria, German-speaking Switzerland), with some comparisons with other museums across Europe. It will define four or five museums as “case studies”, which will be analysed in detail. The picture will be completed by a less detailed study of other relevant museums. The research will analyse the museum displays themselves, using elements of discourse analysis (core figures, objects, themes and common tropes), as well as interviews with various actors (permanent staff, contracted externals and visitors) and analysis of networks between museums as well as various research and collaborative projects. Ideally, there will be field studies in the core museums. This will be completed by semi-formal interviews with various museum actors (including curators and guides) and visitors.

SCHEDULE

- **Spring sem. 2020 - Winter sem. 2021:** Visit of relevant museums, building of networks, Reading, theorisation of difference and modernity
- **Winter sem. 2021 - Spring sem. 2022:** Field research (museum stay), Writing of notes, Interviews, Reading, Visit of relevant museums for comparison
- **Winter sem. 2022 - Spring sem. 2023:** Reading, Finalising interviews, Writing

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