

A photograph of ancient stone columns on a hillside, likely the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece. The columns are made of stacked stone blocks and are set on a stone platform. The background shows a valley with green trees and mountains under a clear sky.

# Digging Deeper: Exploring the Philosophical Roots of Heritage Interpretation



# Digging Deeper: Exploring the Philosophical Roots of Heritage Interpretation

Studies by Patrick Lehnés & James Carter

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Waldkirch, Germany, and Alden Biesen, Belgium, 2016

Title image by Patrick Lehnés: Ancient Delphi, a place which can be interpreted under the perspective of interpreting heritage interpretation



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## Preface

Back in 2011, at the GINCO conference in Thessaloniki, Patrick Lehnes approached me and asked whether I would be ready to take part in a project. His aim was to connect heritage interpretation with other currents in European education and with new trends in the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme. My background in anthropology and in storytelling made me realise immediately that such a cooperation could make sense.

When we later discussed the project idea and work packages, Patrick strongly advocated for a small study on European philosophy and its significance for the professional field of interpretation. It was clear from the beginning that such a study could only be a minor part of the InHerit project, because the EU's Grundtvig programme focuses on improving adult education practices through international collaboration rather than funding basic research. However, a small subcontract was possible to explore the relationship of heritage interpretation with progressive and formal education and with ideas from the Enlightenment and Romantics. Then we needed to find somebody who was competent to do such a study, somebody with a deep understanding of heritage interpretation and an interest in philosophical thinking. We were glad to find the right person for this task, James Carter, and he produced a very inspiring work to this end.

The dynamics of the project then confronted us with the difficult heritage which has been left by the Nazi occupants in Poland. This experience impressed all of us, but in particular Patrick as the responsible work package leader for the philosophical foundation of European heritage interpretation. He then investigated what interpretation and its philosophical foundations could mean for a general education aiming to strengthen democratic values. This resulted in the second study in this volume.

Now, as InHerit is concluded, I am rather surprised to realise that what had seemed to be a rather marginal add on to the core task of InHerit – to foster competence oriented in-service training for heritage interpretation in Europe – turns out to be a highly significant result. Nobody, James and Patrick included, had expected that confronting the approach of heritage interpretation with the works of philosophers would lead to new views on current pressing challenges such as the rise of populist movements which threaten plural societies.

It is clear and evident that these tiny studies can only point into a direction which will require further research – and thinking. Financial and time constraints meant many aspects and implications had to be ignored. But these limitations have also a great advantage: brevity.

Thus I hope that this e-book will find many readers and that it provokes a lot of constructive thinking.

Alden Biesen, August 2016,

*Guy Tilkin*

InHerit project coordinator



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## About these studies

The two studies in this publication explore the philosophical foundations of heritage interpretation and their relations to Europe. What might at a first sight sound like a rather academic question is highly relevant for practice. The philosophies, the paradigms of a discipline, provide orientation for those who work in it. They guide the thinking and thus they guide the direction in which a discipline develops. They shed light on the meaning of the discipline of heritage interpretation within a bigger picture – in our case they explore the question of what heritage interpretation can mean for European societies.

The ways in which we perceive natural and cultural heritage today as well as how we think about it originate in European philosophies - despite the fact that heritage interpretation as a professional discipline first developed in North America. Without the Humanist ideas which emerged in Europe during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment movement and the Romantics, which both also influenced European descendants in America, something like heritage interpretation would hardly exist. Furthermore these philosophical currents influenced the paradigms of different approaches to education. Relating heritage interpretation more closely to European philosophies and education traditions should therefore help to understand better how this professional field can be significant for the EU, European states and the people living on this continent.

For such reasons the InHerit project ([www.interpretingheritage.eu](http://www.interpretingheritage.eu)) allocated a small budget to explore the philosophical roots of interpretation. This investigation was only considered one among many other activities of this multilateral project which aimed to foster professional development for heritage interpreters in Europe. The authors are aware that this venture can only be a beginning which is likely to provoke new questions and further research.

The first study in this publication deals with the original question. James Carter drew from secondary literature on the Enlightenment and Romantics and on formal and progressive education in order to place heritage interpretation in these greater contexts. His study aims to set interpretation within a bigger picture, which could be used in training European interpreters. Therefore this study was needed before the curriculum of the InHerit in-service training was fixed. It was first presented at Interpret Europe's international conference in Kraków, Poland, in 2015.

However, this conference raised new questions, triggered by the experience of the disturbing heritage left by Nazi-Germany in Kraków and Auschwitz. This European disaster in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often considered as a hiatus in Western civilisation without precedent. The question became pressing what this reversal of human values means for our understanding of heritage and interpretation – and what follows from all that for heritage interpreters and their responsibilities. This has not yet been sufficiently discussed within the profession.

For Europeans such questions are even more relevant if one considers that the very existence of the European Union is to a significant extent a response to this European catastrophe. Therefore the second study explores what the European experience of totalitarian regimes and their anti-human ideologies can mean for the philosophy of heritage interpretation.

In this context the works of one thinker who never had anything to do with heritage interpretation is most interesting. Hannah Arendt struggled hard to understand what had happened with Germany, and how the former so-called “nation of thinkers and poets” could follow such an anti-human ideology. As a philosopher she investigated the human mind in order to understand better the relationship of the human individual with a community or society. The first volume of her conclusive

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work on “The Life of the Mind” deals with how phenomena appear to our mind and how we make meaning of them through thinking – a topic which points at the very centre of interpretation.

Inspired by Hannah Arendt’s philosophy, the second study in this publication investigates the processes of perception and different modes of thinking in relation to heritage interpretation. It is based on typical experiences everybody can have when in touch with natural or cultural heritage. It differentiates several modes of consciousness in experiencing heritage and mentally digesting such experiences. And it discusses what all of this can mean, on the one hand for the philosophy of heritage interpretation and on the other hand for plural and democratic societies which can be attacked by anti-human ideologies.

The two studies in this publication approach the problem from two sides: the first by looking back and revealing the historical roots that help understand better today’s practice of heritage interpretation as well as different currents within contemporary interpretation. The second study starts from experiences which the perceiving and thinking mind makes, or can make, in order to understand better what heritage interpretation can mean for open societies.

*Patrick Lehnes*

Past Executive Director of Interpret Europe

Waldkirch, Germany

August 2016

# It's education, Jim, but not as we know it

(James Carter)

## Abstract

Interpretation is often considered and sometimes defined as “an educational activity”. This paper considers what this might mean in the light of major strands in educational philosophy, and identifies the progressive educational tradition as closely allied to the goals and practice of interpretation. The paper also considers how interpretation has roots in the cultural and philosophical movements of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and how their influence defines interpretation as well as leading to potential conflict in its approach and delivery. Based on this discussion, the paper looks briefly at a potential basis for ethics in interpretation.

## Keywords

Interpretation; education; learning; enlightenment; romanticism; ethics

## Introduction

In many ways, this paper is a crystallisation of thoughts about interpretation that have developed over many years through conversations with colleagues and friends. I am grateful to them all, but I particularly want to thank Patrick Lehnés, Thorsten Ludwig and Sam Ham. Patrick and I discovered our shared impressions about interpretation having roots in both the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions at the Interpret Europe conference in 2013, but my ideas at least were rather unformed at the time. It is through Patrick's energy and commitment that it has been possible to pursue them in this paper and I hope we can explore them further together. Thorsten covered some of the same ground in his 2011 examination of the links between European and United States approaches to interpretation: I am very grateful to him for sharing his study with me. Sam has long been an inspiration and friend: his passionate interest in supporting the practice of interpretation with sound psychological theory, and his commitment to explaining that theory in clear, practical language are invaluable. Lastly, I would like to thank Professor Gary Thomas, whom I have never met. His book *Education: a Very Short Introduction* is a wonderfully concise and good-humoured guide to educational thought, and was a valuable foundation for this paper.

Of necessity, the paper can only draw on a small selection of possible sources in the fields of philosophy and educational theory as well as interpretation. It is hoped that the selection is representative enough for the conclusions drawn to be valid, and that the paper may serve as the basis for further research in future.

## Interpretation and learning

Heritage interpretation has proved a notoriously difficult discipline to define. Many sources describe it as an educational or learning activity, and most professionals in the field would accept that their work is at least partly about learning. But definitions of learning are as varied, and sometimes as hotly contested, as definitions of interpretation.

Most theories of learning and teaching have been developed in the field of formal education, where they influence policy and practice in schools, universities and vocational training. Since at least the time of Aristotle, two broad approaches have dominated discussion, often identified as *formal* and *progressive*. The debate between them could be described, in crude terms, as a debate about whether education should be about learning facts, or about encouraging thinking. Underlying these two approaches are assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the nature of learning, and why learners need to learn.<sup>1</sup>

The formal approach sees knowledge as existing in its own right, external to the learner, and as something that can be passed on from one person to another. Learning involves absorbing that knowledge, and it can be demonstrated by the learner proving they have acquired specific facts or skills. Learners themselves are seen as people who need to be prepared for the roles society needs them to play. In this tradition, learning and education are essentially pragmatic and functional, training individuals to be useful members of the community.

The progressive approach sees knowledge as more fluid. Although there may be facts that exist outside the learner, such as two plus two equalling four, those facts are only useful when the learner has found personal meaning in them and absorbed them as part of their world view. The essential goal of learning is not to absorb facts, but to develop the ability to reason and solve problems. Learners are independent beings who need to be able to respond to unpredictable life events, adapting to circumstances or developing new solutions to meet new challenges. In the progressive tradition, learning can have practical value but it is also desirable in itself, contributing to a more fully developed and capable individual.

The formal approach can appear to be the "common sense" view, since our everyday experience tells us that the world does indeed consist of externally existing facts, and we need to know some of them in order to function effectively. Because it emphasises defined, measurable outcomes, it is much easier to assess than a general ability to deal with unpredictable situations. It is the foundation of behaviourist approaches to education, based on the work of psychologists such as Edward Thorndike and B. F. Skinner.<sup>2</sup>

However, the progressive approach has been far more widely developed and has more empirical support. It has become the dominant philosophy among education professionals, although there is always a tendency for education policy to fall back on formal approaches, especially in times of uncertainty or when politicians feel they must take a strong line on the usefulness of education and demonstrate the effectiveness of their policies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, G., 2013: *Education: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, S., 2013: *Behaviorism*. [Online].  
Standridge, M., n.d.: *Behaviorism*. [Online].

<sup>3</sup> Furedi, F., 2014: *Liberal education: preparing students for life's journey*. [Online].



## Progressive principles

Many of the key principles that underpin a progressive approach to learning stem from the way children naturally learn about their environment through play, and they have a surprisingly long history. The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato suggested in *The Republic*, his description of an ideal state, that teachers should “not keep ... children to their studies through compulsion but by play”. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the tutor to Queen Elizabeth I of England advised “Bring not up your children in learning by compulsion and feare, but by playing and pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

Learning through direct experience and experiment is another important foundation for progressive education. It has a long tradition in European thought, beginning with the English philosopher John Locke. Locke was one of the key thinkers associated with the range of ideas known as The Enlightenment: we shall look in more detail at its traces in interpretation later in this paper. In 1693, he published *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which established the ideas that children are eager to learn, that they build knowledge from their experiences, and that those experiences are based on what they perceive with their senses.<sup>5</sup>

Locke's views had little effect at the time, but they were a major influence on the Swiss writer Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778). His novel *Emile, or On Education* was an impassioned plea for what we would now recognise as progressive education, and claimed it was essential in developing fully as a person. Rousseau's ideas were a challenge to the authoritarian systems of his day – *Emile* was banned in France and Switzerland, and copies were publicly burned – but they got widespread public attention and led the way to a new, universal system of education in France following the Revolution.

Rousseau's ideas were adopted and further developed by educational pioneers such as the Swiss Johann Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827), who emphasised the need for emotional learning and respect for children, and the German Friedrich Fröbel (1782 – 1852), who stressed the importance of creative and practical activities. The Italian Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) built on their work and introduced care for the environment as part of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

The progressive ideas about education developed in Europe were visionary and exciting, but until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century they were applied patchily and often only in specialised schools. It was through the work of John Dewey (1859 – 1952) in the United States that they began to have wider influence on mainstream education, in Europe as well as North America. Dewey was active as a philosopher, psychologist, educationalist and political theorist. He saw the heart of effective education as being “reflective thought” – the ability to think about experiences critically, and to examine and challenge ideas before accepting them as true.

## How we make meanings

Dewey was one of a number of thinkers whose work is based on constructivist psychology: a foundation for progressive education that has particular relevance to heritage interpretation. Constructivist theory describes the way individuals actively build meanings from experiences and reflection on those experiences, rather than receiving meanings passively. Meanings are personal, and are influenced by an individual's life history as well as their cultural background. Constructivist education practice recognises and welcomes the result that reality has multiple possible meanings, and encourages learners to build meanings through social interaction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, 2013, *ibid*, p. 4 & 11.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 2013, *ibid*. And Wikipedia, n.d.: *John Locke*. [Online]

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, 2013, *ibid*

Constructivist approaches to education were developed by authors including Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) and American Jerome Bruner (1915 – 2016). Bruner contributed significant ideas on how learning can progress with support and guidance. Piaget had suggested that children went through definable stages of cognitive ability, and should not be introduced to more advanced stages before they were ready: this aspect of his thinking has now been largely discredited. In contrast, Bruner thought that “anyone can learn almost anything if it is pitched at the right level and presented in the right way”.<sup>8</sup>

The Russian Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934) emphasised social interaction, with a facilitator or with peers, as fundamental to the process of building personal meanings from experience. He developed the concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development” to describe skills and understanding that are beyond what an individual can achieve independently, but can reach with appropriate support and social interaction. Vygotsky also placed a strong emphasis on language, the medium through which individuals represent experiences and concepts to themselves and others, as crucial in cognitive development. His ideas form the basis of Social Constructivism, and have had a major influence on education theory and practice.<sup>9</sup>

### Progressive interpretation

To anyone familiar with heritage interpretation work, the theories and practice of progressive education and constructivist psychology are immediately familiar. Reading the ideas of Locke, Rousseau, Bruner and Vygotsky is like finding many of the principles of heritage interpretation presented in different words and in a different context.

The first author to define the field of heritage interpretation, Freeman Tilden, described it as “a kind of elective education that is superior in some respects to that of the classroom, for here [the visitor] meets the Thing Itself”<sup>10</sup>, an echo of progressive education’s emphasis on learning through direct experience rather than abstract theory. Direct experience of a place, an object or a collection is an essential part of most approaches to heritage interpretation. Tilden’s six principles of interpretation include the injunction that interpretation must “relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor”, and he discusses how visitors are strongly motivated to translate the content of a guided activity or a display into something they can link to their own knowledge and experience<sup>11</sup> – views that could have been inspired directly by constructivist psychology.

It is tempting to assume that Tilden knew of the work of John Dewey, much of which was being published and discussed at the time Tilden was writing his book *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Dewey railed against the tendency of schools to fill students full of information at the expense of knowledge<sup>12</sup>: Tilden’s second principle says that “Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information.” Ted Cable and LuAnn Cadden have also drawn comparisons between Dewey and Tilden’s work in discussing the common roots of interpretation and environmental education.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> University College Dublin, n.d.: *Constructivism and Social Constructivism*. [Online]. And McLeod, S., 2007: *Cognitive Approach*. [Online].

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, 2013, *ibid.* p. 76. McLeod, S., 2012: *Bruner - Learning Theory in Education*. [Online]

<sup>9</sup> Thomas (2013), *ibid.* University College Dublin (n.d.), *ibid.* McLeod, S. (2014): *Vygotsky*. [Online].

<sup>10</sup> Tilden, F. (1977[1957]): *Interpreting our Heritage*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>12</sup> Thomas (2013), *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Cable, T. T. & Cadden, L. (2006): *The Common Roots of Environmental Education and Interpretation*.

In a paper on how to interpret historic sites effectively, Bruce Craig also emphasises the importance of contact with original objects (Tilden's the "Thing Itself"), and describes how "the past we know or experience is always contingent on our own views, our own perspective, and above all our own present".<sup>14</sup> He goes on to discuss how "meaning for the visitor is not a series of facts but 'the sum total of the experience'".

Sam Ham's work has explored in detail how the goal of interpretation is to encourage people to think about ideas rather than to communicate facts, and draws explicitly on constructivist psychology in his discussion about how to make places, events, objects and concepts relevant to an audience.<sup>15</sup> Ham sees visitors' cultural background and social interactions as vital components in their making of meaning, and acknowledges Vygotsky as a key influence on his approach.<sup>16</sup>

Writing specifically about learning in museums, but in a discussion relevant to all heritage interpretation, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill also builds on Vygotsky's ideas. She reviews how the interpretive community to which visitors belong enables but can also constrain the ways they read objects.<sup>17</sup> George Hein specifically applies constructivist theories of knowledge and learning to museum settings, and suggests that they should influence the organisation of exhibitions as well as the way they are interpreted.<sup>18</sup>

Many definitions of interpretation see it as a form of education, and include the words "education" or "learning". A review of theories about education and learning leads to the inevitable conclusion that interpretation is indeed about learning, but it is very clearly in the progressive tradition. It must focus on the learner and their experience rather than what is to be learned, and on thinking and ideas rather than facts.

## What is learning for?

For most progressive educationalists, learning is not just a purely functional, practical achievement, but an essential part of personal development. This view has its roots in the great revolution in philosophy, science and politics known as The Enlightenment, a term that describes a wide range of ideas developed by numerous writers in different ways across Europe. The work of Frenchman René Descartes (1596 – 1650) is often seen as the beginning of this radical shift in thinking and practice, which continued until the time of David Hume (1711 – 1776) in Scotland and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729 – 1781) in Germany: arguably its influence is still current today.

The many contributors to The Enlightenment never saw themselves as part of a unified movement, and it cannot be defined by a consistent set of principles: it is more a broad pattern of thinking that led to major changes in many different fields. It established research based on careful observation and logical thought as the basis of scientific progress. It challenged the authority of religion and absolute rulers, which had controlled society for centuries, and laid the foundation for a new social organisation based on reason and debate rather than unquestioned authority.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Craig, B. (1989): *Interpreting the Historic Scene: the Power of Imagination in Creating a Sense of Historic Place*.

<sup>15</sup> Ham, S. (2013): *Interpretation - Making a Difference on Purpose*.

<sup>16</sup> Ham, S. - in personal communication with the author (2015)

<sup>17</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999): *Education, communication and interpretation: towards a critical pedagogy in museums*.

<sup>18</sup> Hein, G. (1999): *The Constructivist Museum*.

<sup>19</sup> Trombley, S. (2011): *A Short History of Western Thought*.

Ideas common to all Enlightenment thinkers are that knowledge is derived from what we experience through our senses, and that we cannot know whether anything is true except through experience and clear, methodical thinking. This principle is known as empiricism. In England, it was central to John Locke's work and influenced his ideas on education. The German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679 – 1754) used it as the basis for works exploring almost all the scholarly topics of his time, and established German as a major language for academic research and debate.

This belief in the power of experience and clear thinking is very much consistent with progressive education theory, and in turn with the goals of heritage interpretation: that through direct contact with the world we can come to know it and understand it.

There are also strands in Enlightenment thought of a delight in learning for its own sake, a belief that knowledge should be open to all, and a conviction that it can lead to profound change. They found expression in the publication of a major encyclopaedia by Frenchman Denis Diderot in 1772, which included articles on a vast range of subjects and had a print run of 4,250 copies: a huge number for the time.<sup>20</sup> Diderot's collaborator d'Alembert wrote in the preface of his hope that "by multiplying the number of true scholars, distinguished artisans, and enlightened amateurs, [the encyclopaedia] will contribute new advantages to society as a whole", while Diderot described how his *Encyclopédie* could "[change] the common way of thinking".<sup>21</sup>

D'Alembert and Diderot could have been writing a manifesto for the ideals that underpin the work of many heritage interpreters. All interpretation is driven by a conviction that the places, objects, events and ideas it presents are interesting, and by a desire to share that interest with others.<sup>22</sup> One hundred and eighty-five years after Diderot, Freeman Tilden wrote that "... the purpose of Interpretation is to stimulate the reader or hearer toward a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact."<sup>23</sup>

The idea that the pursuit of a broad understanding of the world is an essential part of a fully-developed human being is at the heart of the educational concept of *Bildung*: an approach that has been a major influence on education policy and practice in Germany and Scandinavia, but is little known in other European countries and difficult to translate accurately into English. The term originated in 16<sup>th</sup> century theological thinking, when it expressed the duty of an individual to develop their talents and qualities to reflect their relationship with God. Enlightenment ideas extended the concept to include the need not just for a spiritual dimension, but for developing social and political awareness as part of realising ones full potential. (Eldridge, n.d.)

In the *Bildung* tradition, the goal of education is self-determination and autonomy based on reason, combined with mutual respect between human beings. An influential thinker in modern practice is Wolfgang Klafki (1921 – present), whose work aims to combine two approaches within the tradition, one that concentrates on the material to be studied; the other on the process of learning.<sup>24</sup> Other German writers such as Alexander von Humboldt and Heinrich Heine used *Bildung* as the foundation for studying the natural world, as well as relationships between human beings. Their work can be seen as the starting point for modern approaches to nature

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 127

<sup>21</sup> d'Alembert, J.L.R. (n.d.): *Preliminary Discourse*. [Online]. Diderot, D. (n.d.): *Encyclopaedia*. [Online]

<sup>22</sup> Carter, J. ed. (1997): *A Sense of Place*.

<sup>23</sup> Tilden, *ibid*, p. 33

<sup>24</sup> Nielsen, F. V. (2007): *Music (and Arts) Education from the Point of View of Didaktik and Bildung*.

interpretation, and particularly for the goals of education for sustainable development as set out by UNESCO.<sup>25</sup>

*Bildung* theory, with its emphasis on a holistic knowledge of the world, its commitment to a lifelong development of personal capacity, and its vision of mutual respect between people and their environment, shares many of the ideals of heritage interpretation.

### Learning is political

For many Enlightenment thinkers, however, encouraging people to be open minded, think for themselves, and approach issues with a rational, fair perspective is important not just because the world is an interesting place, and one can become a more fully developed human being through taking an inquisitive approach to life. The Enlightenment ideals are also the bedrock of an open, liberal society.

The English writer Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) was one of the first to explore the connection between empiricist, rational thought and a society based on the idea of a contract between a ruler and their subjects, or between a government and its people. John Locke built on his ideas, and they were enthusiastically championed by Voltaire (1694-1778) in France, who used them to challenge established institutions. In Germany, Gotthold Lessing published controversial pamphlets that questioned the “proofs” offered by religion of how the world worked. In an interesting example of how ideas can be expressed through creative presentation – a fundamental skill in heritage interpretation – Lessing used theatre as a way to communicate after his publications were censored.<sup>26</sup>

Informed, independent thinking is a real threat to authoritarian regimes. Locke maintained that government should only be possible with the consent of the governed, and that if that consent was abused, revolution was justified. Rousseau developed this idea more fully into the concept of a “social contract” that must exist between a government and its people; his passionate advocacy for the “general will” of the people was an inspiration for the American and French Revolutions.

In more settled times, the Enlightenment ideals of learning and critical thinking are still an essential foundation for a fair, open society. Schools are of course vital places in which the ability to think clearly can be nurtured, but in a healthy democracy, learning is relevant and must be available at all life stages. The Brazilian Paolo Freire (1921 – 1977) is one of the best-known advocates for this commitment to lifelong learning, and for literacy and education as tools to counter oppression. Freire’s ideas inspired Ivan Illich (1926 – 2002), who argued that formally organised schools could never fulfil society’s educational needs, and that most people drew their most effective learning from life experiences.

It may be too much to claim that heritage interpretation can lay the foundations for revolution. But it does offer opportunities to learn and think about the world outside the structures of formal education, and it aims to appeal to people throughout their lives. Its goals and philosophy are a modern expression of the European Enlightenment ideals of learning through experience and curiosity about the world. Depending on the ethics that drive it, it can also support the goal of encouraging independent thinking and the ideals of an engaged, open society.

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<sup>25</sup> Ludwig, Th. (2011): Natur- und Kulturinterpretation – Amerika trifft Europa.

<sup>26</sup> Trombley, *ibid.*

## Is interpretation always progressive?

Although heritage interpretation seems so consistent with the progressive educational tradition, some aspects of its development sit uneasily with the ideals of a focus on the learner rather than the content of an educational exchange, and with the idea that reality is open to multiple meanings.

The first book to describe the discipline in a European context was *Principles of Countryside Interpretation and Interpretive Planning*, by Don Aldridge, published in 1975. It placed a strong emphasis on interpretation's role as a tool to promote conservation: "the principal aim of countryside interpretation is to assist in conservation."<sup>27</sup> Despite an exhortation that interpretation "must avoid any tendency towards preaching or establishing a classroom atmosphere" (idem p. 8), there are references throughout the book to interpretation's goal being to "explain" the significance of a place, including the reasons why an area of countryside is worthy of special protection. In a later paper, Aldridge maintained that "Interpretation is about encouraging people to think for themselves, not about telling them what to think, or setting society's objectives"<sup>28</sup>, but the overall impression of his work is that interpretation must communicate a given set of ideas and concepts if it is to be deemed a success: an approach more consistent with a formal rather than progressive tradition of education.

Aldridge was writing in the context of a rapidly changing United Kingdom society, where the countryside was seen as under pressure from an increasingly mobile population and a growing number of recreation activities. *Principles of Countryside Interpretation* contains numerous images of scenes such as crowded beaches, piles of abandoned litter, and noisy sports such as water skiing. It sees the countryside as threatened, and establishes interpretation as a key tool in management initiatives that aim to conserve its unique qualities.

Seeing interpretation primarily as a way to support conservation is particularly marked in the field of natural heritage, where it has dominated much thinking and practice. This approach is driven by a justifiable sense of urgency from those who see the environment as threatened, perhaps fatally so, and want to convince others of the need for serious action. At least one commentator explicitly questions the constructivist approach to interpretation, arguing that interpreters should be prepared to communicate with passion their convictions about issues such as the threat of climate change, and only accept that different people have different perspectives "within boundaries" consistent with a clear conservation agenda.<sup>29</sup>

An emphasis on interpretation's role as a support for management goals is also widespread, and is enshrined in some widely-accepted corporate definitions of interpretation. The National Association for Interpretation (NAI), based in the United States, defines interpretation as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource."<sup>30</sup> The "missions" referred to are those of National Parks, museums, historic sites and other places that provide interpretation.

It is inevitable that organisations dedicated to conservation should want as many people as possible to share their objectives; indeed, they often need people to support those objectives through the way they behave. This link between interpretation and conservation is a common strand in interpretation philosophy, whether explicitly in the case of natural heritage subjects, or

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<sup>27</sup> Aldridge, D. (1975): *Principles of Countryside Interpretation and Interpretive Planning*. p. 6

<sup>28</sup> Aldridge, D. (1989): *How the Ship of Interpretation was Blown Off Course in the Tempest: Some Philosophical Thoughts*.

<sup>29</sup> Novey, L. (2008): *Why We Should Communicate, Rather Than Interpret: A Call to Arms*.

<sup>30</sup> National Association for Interpretation (n.d.): *Mission, Vision and Core Values*. [Online]



implicitly at historic sites and museums, which are underpinned by a tacit assumption that evidence of the past is worth preserving and thinking about. Tilden quoted approvingly from a National Park Service manual the mantra “Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection”<sup>31</sup>. But elsewhere, he clearly saw the essential value of interpretation as far less utilitarian: “Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.”<sup>32</sup>

When interpretation is defined in purely functional terms, even in support of missions that are committed to the public good, it seems far removed from the ideals of progressive education and the independent thinking of the Enlightenment. A utilitarian view of interpretation may ignore broader potential goals of personal development; more importantly, perhaps, it risks focussing on the agenda of the organisation concerned rather than on the interests of the audience. At worst, it can lead to insensitive development in which interpretation is seen as an unwelcome intrusion, getting in the way of the experience visitors have come for and telling them things they do not want to know.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, a more open, visitor-focussed approach often appears in comments and extensions to formal, official definitions. Interpretation Canada offers the statement “We create learning experiences and feelings of connection and stewardship”<sup>34</sup>, while the UK-based Association for Heritage Interpretation says simply that interpretation is “the art of helping people explore and appreciate our world”.<sup>35</sup>

It may well be necessary in some situations for interpretation to aim to convince an audience of the need for conservation, or to try to influence their behaviour. But there is strong evidence from cognitive psychology that the progressive approach of getting people to think about the subject for themselves, and finding ways to link it to things they find enjoyable and personally meaningful, are far more effective than telling them what they should do.<sup>36</sup>

### Who owns meanings?

The NAI’s definition raises another aspect of interpretation practice that is potentially inconsistent with progressive, constructivist philosophy. It refers to “the meanings inherent in the resource” (the “resource” being the place or thing which is interpreted). Other definitions suggest a similar tendency to think of a pre-existing set of meanings and ideas, which it is interpretation’s job to transmit. Interpretation Canada defines heritage interpretation as “any communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of cultural and natural heritage to the public, through first-hand involvement with an object, artifact, landscape or site”<sup>37</sup>; Interpretation Australia says interpretation is “a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people understand more about themselves and their environment.”<sup>38</sup>

The issue here is that research into how people learn does not support the idea that meaning is inherent in the thing being studied: instead it is created by the learner. If interpretation is considered as a form of cultural expression (an interesting way of thinking about it, but beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail), similar problems arise. Modern cultural theory, influenced

<sup>31</sup> Tilden, *ibid*, p. 38

<sup>32</sup> Tilden, *ibid*, p. 8

<sup>33</sup> Nyberg, K. L. (1984): *Some Radical Comments on Interpretation: a Little Heresy is Good for the Soul*.

<sup>34</sup> Interpretation Canada (n.d.): *Our Work Defined*. [Online]

<sup>35</sup> Association for Heritage Interpretation (n.d.): *Association for Heritage Interpretation*. [Online]

<sup>36</sup> Ham, S. (2013), *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Interpretation Canada, *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Interpretation Australia (n.d.): *What is Interpretation?*. [Online]

by the ideas of semiotics, suggests that a work of literature, art or music does not have meaning in itself: its only meanings are those we create, and they change with changing historical, political and personal contexts. The same is true of the places, things and events that are the subject of interpretation.

This raises challenges for interpretation practice. Any piece of interpretation, such as an exhibition, needs to present a small selection of what it is possible to say about its subject. That selection will always reflect the ideas of the person or people who create the exhibition, and it will express the meanings they have made about the subject. To use an analogy from culture, an exhibition is like a performance of a play or a piece of music, which represents the performers' *interpretation* of that work at that time. Other performances – and other exhibitions – may be very different.

In some circumstances, this can lead to bitter disputes over which meanings are acceptable. A well-known example is a proposed exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. about the *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. The Smithsonian had planned a display to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War that would critically examine the effects of the Hiroshima bomb and the use of atomic weapons in general. The museum's approach was vigorously opposed by a number of individuals and organisations, who felt that such an interpretation would belittle the role played by war veterans and mis-represent the meaning of the bombing. The controversy was summed up by Smithsonian curator Tom Crouch in the words "Do you want to do an exhibit to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."<sup>39</sup> Other commentators expressed opinions in equally forthright terms. The Washington Post newspaper maintained that the proposed exhibition had been an attempt by "narrow-minded representatives of a special-interest and revisionist point of view ... to use their inside track to appropriate and hollow out a historical event that large numbers of Americans alive at that time and engaged in the war had witnessed and understood in a very different — and authentic — way."<sup>40</sup> The museum backed down, and mounted what was seen as an uncontroversial exhibition, but the argument flared up again in 2003 when the aircraft was re-displayed.<sup>41</sup>

The *Enola Gay* controversy illustrates how heritage interpretation can be political, and how meaning can be fiercely contested. Interpretation practice has sometimes been accused of giving undue prominence to the voices of academics and specialists, or of ignoring the fact that heritage already has meaning for many visitors, who do not arrive as "blank slates"<sup>42</sup>. But many would argue, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, that it is through the work of specialists that different possible perspectives and meanings are developed, and that it is the responsibility of organisations like the Smithsonian to present them and to encourage debate.

The ICOMOS Charter for Interpretation acknowledges the diversity of aspects and perspectives from which heritage can be interpreted. "Interpretation should explore the significance of a site in its multi-faceted historical, political, spiritual, and artistic contexts. It should consider all aspects of the site's cultural, social, and environmental significance and values."<sup>43</sup> How to deal with those multiple meanings and values when they are in conflict, or when they strike at the heart of how

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<sup>39</sup> Gallagher, E. J. (n.d.): *The Enola Gay Controversy*. [Online]

<sup>40</sup> idem

<sup>41</sup> Doyle, D. A. (2003): *Historians Protest New Enola Gay Exhibit*. [Online]

<sup>42</sup> Deufel, N. (2013): *Marking Place - the Role of Interpretation*. [Online]

<sup>43</sup> ICOMOS - International council on monuments and sites (2008): *The ICOMOS charter for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites*. Principle 3.1 [Online].

visitors construct their identity through their engagement with heritage<sup>44</sup> is one of the greatest challenges for interpretation practice.

## Interpretation and transcendence

Although interpretation has clear links with the Enlightenment tradition, it is also strongly influenced by another strand in Western thought: Romanticism. This major source of inspiration shaped art, music and literature throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and although it has become somewhat derided as an aesthetic discipline, it is still a major influence on popular culture.<sup>45</sup>

Romanticism was partly a reaction to the dry logic of empiricism, the Enlightenment's great achievement. A purely rational approach to the world began to be seen as excessively logical, potentially almost inhuman. Rousseau, whose turbulent personality and ideas straddle Enlightenment and Romantic ideas in a sometimes confusing way, became impatient with cold reason and extolled the importance of the individual and of emotional experience, much to Voltaire's disgust.<sup>46</sup>

Romanticism was also a reaction to the growing effects of industrialisation. In response to the horrors of noisy factories and sprawling, dirty cities, poets such as William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850) in England and Novalis (1772 – 1801) in Germany saw the natural world as pure, inspirational and, most importantly, a source of spiritual regeneration. Their vision was continued by writers such as Richard Jefferies (1848 – 1887) whose book *The Story of My Heart* portrays the countryside as a place of mystical revelation. The idea of nature as a source of inspiration, and as something with which an individual can build a deeply personal, meaningful relationship is current today in the work of writers such as Richard Mabey<sup>47</sup> and Robert Macfarlane<sup>48</sup>.

In the United States, the Romantic ideal of nature was developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882), who met Wordsworth during his travels in Europe, and Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862) whose journal *Walden* is still a much-loved text of American literature.

In philosophy, the German Immanuel Kant (1774 – 1804) addressed the limits of empiricism as a way of explaining the world. Kant's challenging ideas included the insight that because we can only know reality through the concepts and structures we have developed, we can never know its true nature. Philosophers such as Johann Fichte (1762 – 1814) and Friedrich Schelling (1775 – 1854) built on Kant's work, rejecting attempts to understand the world through reductive thought alone.<sup>49</sup>

The practice of interpretation is shot through with Romantic ideas. Emerson and Thoreau were both strong influences on Tilden, who refers to them at several points in *Interpreting our Heritage* and makes many references to an experience of heritage, particularly of the natural world, as spiritually meaningful. In a passage that seems far closer to what interpretation meant to him personally than the definition he offered "for dictionary purposes", he describes interpretation as "the work of revealing, to such visitors as desire the service, something of the beauty and wonder,

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<sup>44</sup> Falk, J. H. (2009): *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*.

<sup>45</sup> Blanning, T. (2010): *The Romantic Revolution*.

<sup>46</sup> Furniss, T. (n.d.): *Rousseau: Enlightened Critic of the Enlightenment?*. [Online]

<sup>47</sup> Mabey, R. (2014): *A Brush with Nature: Reflections on the Natural World*.

<sup>48</sup> Macfarlane, R. (2008): *The Wild Places*.

<sup>49</sup> Trombley, *ibid*.

the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive.”<sup>50</sup> This concept has echoes in the “meanings inherent in the resource” referred to by the NAI.

Thorsten Ludwig has identified striking similarities between the way the German poet Novalis saw nature as a repository of meaning and the competencies required of rangers by the United States National Park Service. He also traces how the idea that spiritual meaning can be found in Nature inspired the work of Ernst Rudorff (1840 – 1916), the pioneer of nature conservation in Germany.<sup>51</sup>

Seen in this light, interpretation is a way of expressing spirituality through intuition and experience rather than doctrine. Often, interestingly, that spirituality is mediated by secular state institutions such as National Parks and museums rather than the church.<sup>52</sup>

Like the idea that interpretation's main purpose is to support and promote conservation, the idea that contact with heritage is a potentially transcendent experience is particularly marked in connection with natural heritage, but it finds expression in cultural heritage fields too. This state of mind finds expression in visits to heritage sites as places of pilgrimage, or a desire to feel a deep sense of communion with an event, a culture or a people. John Falk's work on the reasons why people visit museums suggests that contact with heritage feeds and develops one or more of a number of possible senses of personal identity. He describes one of these modes of identity as the “Recharger”, in which people who are looking for “peace and psychological uplift” from their heritage experience.<sup>53</sup>

### **Dangers in the forest**

Romantic ideals are powerful, and it is clear that heritage, both natural and cultural, has strong emotional or spiritual meanings for many people. Emotional connection, not intellectual understanding, is also at the heart of the way we think of our most memorable experiences. Much well-researched advice on effective communication suggests that, if they do not prompt some emotional response, presentations fall on deaf ears.<sup>54</sup>

But dangers lurk in the cathedral forests of Romanticism. If we are intent on feeling a strong spiritual connection with a place, an idea, an event, we tend to ignore inconvenient truths that might loosen that connection or require us to redefine it. If pushed, we may deny that those truths exist and seek to suppress them. In the field of natural heritage, a Romantic approach can lead to a woolly, naïve environmentalism that avoids dealing with present-day reality; in the field of cultural heritage it can create myths that deny complexity and diversity.

Returning to the Enola Gay controversy, the curators who wanted to present an exhibition that would encourage visitors to think about the consequences of using atomic weapons can be seen as working in an Enlightenment tradition; the Washington Post, which portrayed the curators as “narrow-minded representatives of a special-interest and revisionist point of view” who wanted to “appropriate and hollow out ... a very different — and authentic — way” of understanding the event, as Romantics whose cherished myth is under threat.

Note the Washington Post's claim that the established view of the bombing was more “authentic” than one that would have asked questions about its effects, and that asking those questions might

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<sup>50</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>51</sup> Ludwig, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, K. (2005): “The Soul of Things:” Spirituality and Interpretation in National Parks.

<sup>53</sup> Falk, *ibid.*, p. 176

<sup>54</sup> Ham (2013). Futerra Sustainability Communications (2010): *Branding Biodiversity: the New Nature Message*.

render the event “hollow”. The real danger of Romanticism is that once it gives places, things, events and ideas mythological significance, any challenge to that significance can be seen as heresy. It is no accident that Romanticism is often seen as an ideology that, in a twisted transformation, leads to totalitarianism.

## Ethics for heritage interpretation

Heritage interpretation is inspired by the ideals of the European Enlightenment in seeing curiosity about the world as an important part of personal development; learning and debate as things that should be accessible to everyone rather than controlled by an elite; and an informed and rational populace as the basis for open, just government.

It draws on Romantic sensibility in recognising and expressing the powerful meanings that human beings can invest in their surroundings, their history and their culture, and in working with emotional connections and symbolism as powerful mechanisms for communication.

As an educational activity, it reflects the principles of progressive education, aiming to stimulate thoughts and ideas rather than communicate a defined syllabus of facts, and to help individuals find their own understanding and meaning in heritage.

But in a world where different cultures must learn to co-exist and where debates about humans' relationship with the environment are tinged with urgency, interpretation needs some mechanism for balancing potentially competing or even antagonistic meanings. It needs a sense of ethics.

Tilden addressed the issue by referring to Emerson's aspiration for “right education” to establish Man in relationship to Nature. Tilden went further, maintaining that Nature and Man are one, inseparable, and that he hoped interpretation could lead people to realise that “If you vandalize a beautiful thing, you vandalize yourself.”<sup>55</sup>

A sense of interdependence between humans and their environment and therefore of the need to respect that environment is a moral baseline for many discussions about interpretation's purpose and methods. It is also the foundation for UNESCO's goals for education for sustainable development, which Thorsten Ludwig suggests are consistent with the goals of interpretation:

“Education for sustainable development is about learning to: respect, value and preserve the achievements of the past; appreciate the wonders and the peoples of the Earth, ... assess, care for and restore the state of our planet.”<sup>56</sup>

Some might quibble that the notion of “[restoring] the state of our planet” implies a suspiciously Romantic notion that the planet once existed in a state of perfection without human beings, but the underlying principle of respect for the environment is a sound basis for interpretation practice. The UNESCO goals also refer to respect for “the achievements of the past” and “the peoples of the Earth”, and so extend an ethical standpoint to dealing with cultural heritage.

The values established as the basis for the European Union deal more explicitly with issues relevant to cultural heritage and to relationships between people:

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

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<sup>55</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>56</sup> as quoted in Ludwig (2011)

These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”<sup>57</sup>

As the basis for an ethics of heritage interpretation, asking whether any proposed piece of interpretation promotes “pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men” seems like a good place to start.

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# It's philosophy, Tim, but we love the world

Why the world's diversity is so precious  
for meaning-making

(Patrick Lehnes)

## Abstract

This paper reflects upon the essential meaning of heritage interpretation from the perspective of Hannah Arendt's thinking. One of the strengths of heritage interpretation is its attempt to connect first-hand experience of the world's diversity with meaningful ideas. In this respect explanation of scientific facts and findings must be distinguished from interpretation of what an object, place or event means for people. Multiple-perspective heritage interpretation can arouse reflective thinking which examines the meaning of metaphysical ideas and European values such as freedom, tolerance, plurality, dignity etc. The paper aims to show that heritage interpretation, by provoking reflective thinking, can reconcile the Enlightenment's emancipatory education with the Romantic desire for meaningfulness.

## Keywords

Interpretation; diversity; reality; tangibles; intangibles; reflective thinking; conscience

## Introduction

This study aims to consider the potential role, or mission, of heritage interpretation within contemporary European societies. First of all, such considerations need to be based on reflections on the very essence of interpretation itself.

One of the aims of the InHerit project was to embed heritage interpretation in some currents of European thinking about education. For that sake one needs to dig a little deeper for some of the philosophical roots of Heritage Interpretation in European or, rather, Western thinking, and related ideas about education<sup>1</sup>.

Triggered by the composition of the international InHerit partnership, this attempt was confronted with the disturbing heritage in Poland that originated from totalitarian regimes: the Nazi regime during the occupation of Poland by the German Third Reich, followed by the communist regime. This heritage is a challenge for any interpreter and, as extremes often do, it poses disturbing questions to the professional field as a whole. The following questions emerge from the facts that

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<sup>1</sup> For this question cf. the previous study in this publication.

Hitler's NSDAP<sup>2</sup> had been democratically elected by German citizens in the early 1930s<sup>3</sup> and that so many men and women, in Germany and other countries, supported or at least tolerated the Nazi regime:

Could heritage interpretation contribute to learning in a way which reduces the likelihood that citizens follow anti-human leaders?

What is, or rather, what should be our role as heritage interpreters within an open democratic society, which is based on diversity and pluralism?

It is obvious that we cannot find sufficient answers to this question by focusing on technical literature about effective communication skills. In order to approach this question, we must at first try to understand better what the essence of interpretation is. What did Freeman Tilden mean when he stated in 1957 that interpretation was "for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit"? We must understand what the revelation of "meanings and relationships" by an "educational activity"<sup>4</sup> can mean for the mind and spirit of the individual, and finally, what this can mean not only for the single individual, but for a community of diverse individuals, i.e. a modern society.

In order to understand heritage interpretation better and to reconsider its role within modern society we must look more closely at the human mind. How do we perceive things and make meaning out of them? And how do different modes of thinking that can be addressed by this educational activity relate to the competence of citizens to act within a plural and democratic community?

In this respect Hannah Arendt's legacy work "The Life of the Mind" is promising for our subject – even more as it is the result of her lifelong struggle trying to understand better the total breakdown of human values under the Nazi-regime which she had experienced at first-hand.<sup>5</sup> Looking back, Hannah Arendt was puzzled about the fact not only that ordinary people (but not all of them!) had followed the Nazi ideology, but also that many Nazi followers belonged to the educated elites (again not all of them). Even one of the deepest thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Heidegger, whom she highly respected as a philosopher throughout her life, had – at least for a while – supported this dehumanizing ideology.<sup>6</sup>

These questions are not just an attempt to cope with a historic disaster that shook Europe many decades ago. Also today, people feel puzzled, observing how populist movements seem to gain momentum in many Western countries by questioning fundamental values and beliefs in a way that seems to neglect reason. Baffled, not so much by the result of the Brexit vote, but by the kind of misleading arguments, half-truths and outright lies that led the Brexit campaign to win a majority of votes, the Australian-British historian Christopher Clark reluctantly concluded:

"Sadly, men are so stupid that they rather do not learn from history; they only learn from stories which they experienced themselves."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> NSDAP is the "Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei", commonly referred to as the Nazi party.

<sup>3</sup> In July 1932 the NSDAP gained 37 %, in November 1932 32 %. In both elections the Nazi party won by far the most votes. The next most successful party, the Social Democrats, reached only around 21 %.

<sup>4</sup> Tilden, F. (1977 [1957]): *Interpreting our Heritage*. p. 8

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, H. (1978[1971]): *Thinking. The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1. p. 3ff

<sup>6</sup> Prinz, A. (2014[1998]): *Hannah Arendt oder die Liebe zur Welt*. Grunenberg, Antonia (2013[2006]): *Hannah Arendt und Martin Heidegger. Geschichte einer Liebe*.

<sup>7</sup> Original quote in German: "Ja, leider sind die Menschen so dumm, dass sie von der Geschichte eher nicht lernen. Sie lernen nur von den Geschichten, die sie selbst erlebt haben" in the German radio programme of Deutschlandfunk (29.06.2016): URL: [www.deutschlandfunk.de/folgen-des-brexits-leider-sind-die-menschen-so-dumm-dass.694.de.html?dram:article\\_id=358602](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/folgen-des-brexits-leider-sind-die-menschen-so-dumm-dass.694.de.html?dram:article_id=358602) [Accessed 14 July 2016] Christopher Clark is the author of the book "The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914"

Reflecting on the relationship of heritage interpretation and education to the human mind and spirit is therefore more than a purely academic endeavour, but something that might turn out to be highly relevant to European and Western societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following considerations are a tentative attempt to address this relationship. This study is not meant as a mature and coherent theory of interpretation; and in the end it could be questionable whether such a final theory was desirable at all. It is rather an interim result, largely inspired by Hannah Arendt and reflections on what her legacy can mean for a deeper understanding of heritage interpretation in relation to society.

The approach taken in this study starts from the imagined experiences of two hikers who encounter natural and cultural heritage. It reflects upon these experiences as they evolve during their hike in order to approach what can be considered the heart of interpretation – at least from the perspective of Hannah Arendt's work. These reflections shed some light on Freeman Tilden's ground breaking work on the philosophy of heritage interpretation. The final section will then draw some conclusions for heritage interpretation in the context of the pressing questions which follow from Christopher Clark's remark. It is followed by an annex for some side discussions and further considerations which would otherwise interrupt the train of thought in the main piece. As it happens, hikers who take a shortcut risk missing essential views.

## The primacy of appearance

A man invites a woman, a friend living in another city, for a walk uphill to a castle ruin. Halfway they reach a viewpoint above a rock. They sit down on benches and enjoy the view. The woman looks out over the valley where a road leads up through meadows and pastures to a pass between two hills. At the pass something stands out in solid grey from the green slope, but she cannot recognise what it is. Looking around, she notices two butterflies fluttering from flower to flower. She is delighted to see a martagon lily next to the trail.

The man looks down the valley. On the other side of the creek he sees a solitary farmhouse which is built with its rear wall against the slope. Somebody is walking down a forestry road through the meadows and approaching the farmhouse from the back. Then the man looks at his hiking partner and notices the delicate, sweet fragrance of her perfume. He follows the direction of her gaze and sees a flower which has blossoms with an unusual shape: its petals are bending backwards. "A Turks' cap lily" the woman tells him. His curiosity is stilled as she gives him a name for the unknown flower.

Both of them would not doubt for a second that the things they see, hear and smell are real. In our everyday mode of common sense we take things which we perceive while we are awake as a reality. But many philosophers and scientists have questioned whether what we perceive is actually the real world or only a subjective representation of something else. Is what we perceive a mere illusion created by our senses? Isn't what the man smells a result of a biochemical process and isn't the colour of the flower in reality an electromagnetic radiation which only appears because of his sensory apparatus? These are important questions for anybody who wants to understand what we do when we interpret natural and man-made phenomena.

And indeed, in our plot the man and the woman see the lily differently. For him the red tones of the blossom do not differ from the green tones of the leaves and the grass. He has inherited a malfunctioning of the green receptors in his eyes which causes red-green colour blindness.

Furthermore, what appeared to him as the smell of the woman's perfume was a deception. It is the fragrance of the martagon lily. It is obvious that we cannot totally rely on what we perceive.

Long ago, Greek philosophers said that what we perceive are only particular instances of general ideas, e.g. "flower" or "house". The idea or concept is the common entity which appears through these particulars in our physical world of space and time. All these particular things in space and time have accidental properties, while the idea which all particulars of a kind have in common is their true essence. In other words, concepts and ideas have been considered as the metaphysical ground of all things that appear. Plato and other philosophers conceived the world of ideas as invariable entities beyond space and time.<sup>8</sup> Thus the "thing in itself" was considered to belong to a higher reality, and from such a point of view the particular appearances seem mere semblance.

Those philosophers are right in that each singular object appears from a different perspective for every individual. Even if the man was not colour blind, he could only see the flower as it appears to the woman from his standpoint at that very moment. Nevertheless, perceiving the world from a standpoint in space and time, i.e. seeing it only from a limited perspective, does not destroy our *feeling and firm conviction that what we experience is part of the same real world in which we also take part.*

Furthermore, the man's error that the smell appeared to him as the woman's perfume did not destroy his sense of reality regarding the whole situation. He realised this misperception (or misinterpretation of where the fragrance originated from) when he stood up and changed his standpoint. And the woman's inability to identify the grey thing next to the pass did not raise any doubts regarding the reality of all the other things she perceived.

According to Hannah Arendt a threefold commonness guarantees for us the reality of the things we perceive:<sup>9</sup>

First, we can perceive things with our totally different senses and these different impressions fit together. We see the flower, we can smell it, we can move closer and touch it, we can see the cows, hear their "moo" and their cowbells etc. It all fits together, or more precisely, all those perceptions fit with our concepts of "flower", "cow" etc.

Secondly, the world does not appear to a solitary subjective individual only: it also appears to other human beings. In spite of their different perspectives on things, they confirm the reality of those objects. The woman and the man can talk about the flowers. And the farmhouse they both see beyond the creek is the same house that the other person approaching from its rear-side will reach soon, despite the fact that the house, from that other person's perspective, appears very different.

Thirdly, even animals with very different senses, who may perceive things in a fundamentally different way, confirm the existence of those things through their behaviour – such as butterflies visiting the flowers. In an absolutely dark cave, we can perceive the walls only by groping or banging our heads, while flying bats obviously perceive the same walls in a different way without needing to touch them.

The sense of reality relates to the worldly contexts in which single objects appear for us. The castle ruin on top of the hill, the electric fence and the cows in the meadow, the farmhouse, the creek in the valley, the road leading up to the pass etc., all make sense, or better: the whole situation does not contradict what is a possible world according to the hikers' experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> cf. for instance Plato's famous cave allegory. Plato: *The Republic*. Book VII.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, H. (1978), *ibid*, p. 50



This context corresponds with our own changing context as a living person with the faculty to perceive while we move through the world. We act and see other creatures acting and reacting with things that appear to our senses. The spatial perspective has changed for both the woman and the man as they hiked uphill to the top of the rock. At the same time they felt this activity in their bodies as an effort in their muscles, their breath quickening etc.

Although one element or another might turn out to be a deception, this intuitively sensed coherence of the whole situation grants us the feeling and conviction that the things are real.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, philosophers and scientists are right in that it is impossible for us as living beings on earth to perceive a single object simultaneously from all its aspects. It is similarly impossible that the context of things as well as our own context ever appears to us in full.

Even philosophers who are intellectually convinced that all sensual experience is mere illusion will sit down and rest on the "illusion of a bench". They will avoid to walk over the cliff. They also know that falling down the rock face would have a real, fatal effect. And at home the scientist eats potatoes and salad rather than protons, neutrons and electrons.

The world of tangible phenomena<sup>11</sup> is the reality we experience at first-hand as creatures who have been born into this world and who will leave it when we die.

These considerations are highly relevant for our question regarding the role of heritage interpretation as an educational activity in a plural society. *It is first-hand experience which provides us with a strong sense of reality.* First-hand experience reaches much deeper than historical schoolbook knowledge; it comes together with our sensation of personally taking part in the real world. In this respect, Christopher Clark's disappointed remark, that men only learn from stories which they experience themselves, is much more meaningful than it might seem at first sight. People may have a lot of knowledge in history or biology, but what counts in the end is the overwhelming sense of reality based on their own first-hand experience. It is a similar story with the solipsistic philosopher who does not walk over the cliff despite his intellectual convictions that all perceptions are nothing but mere illusions.

This thought might have consequences for our approaches to education.

In contrast to many forms of formal education, heritage interpretation can and should always capitalise on the first-hand experience of original objects. Visitors then *relate* their own reality to that of the object through their perception of the thing itself and its perceived context. Even if an object in a museum has to be displayed in a showcase, one can perceive its three-dimensional existence, seeing it from changing perspectives while approaching and moving around it. Furthermore, original objects which are perceived in their original spatial context, i.e. in their authentic place and environment, can provide an even stronger sense of reality regarding history or nature. While walking through the environment of the historic thing or through an entire ensemble the person connects more intensely with the place and its "theme".

A highly didactic classroom lesson, or an excellent documentary film on TV cannot fully replace such first-hand experiences of the real thing and/or the real place. It makes a difference for our sense of reality whether we sit in our living room in front of a TV screen and see spectacular

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<sup>10</sup> Up to present, this allows us to discern reality from the illusions of virtual reality. But we do not know whether this will still be the case in the future, given the rapid developments in technology in combination with those in neuroscience.

<sup>11</sup> In philosophical contexts and in the context of heritage interpretation "phenomenon" means any thing, property, event or process as it is perceptible to our senses (in contrast to the other meaning of the word which qualifies something or someone as unusual, astonishing or extraordinary).

scenes of wildlife action such as a hawk moth pollinating the Turk's cap lily – which we could hardly ever observe by ourselves in such detail – or whether we are really there, walking in nature, and then see and smell the real lily in its real environment.

We can draw a first conclusion from the above considerations: *heritage interpretation can play a crucial role within the larger field of education by linking learning with the learner's deeply felt sensation of perceiving an aspect of the real world.* In this respect heritage interpretation based on first-hand experience plays an important complementary role to other forms of learning, which are mainly based on second-hand experience communicated by a teacher or through media.

Of course, this does not imply that one should avoid media in interpretation. Any interpretation also relies on second-hand information provided by an interpreter in person and/or through media; the internet plays a decisive role in marketing of interpretive services; virtual reality can add to the learning experience. All this can and should complement, but not replace, the unique value of the visitors' personal experiences of the real thing and the real place.

First-hand experience is the *most basic and fundamental way to relate* heritage and history to a person's reality. This is one of the assets which heritage interpretation contributes to the wider field of general education.

## Generic concepts and the diversity of particular things

What we perceive as a reality with our senses always depends on our standpoint in space, our position in time and the perspective we focus on. Another person cannot perceive the same phenomenon from exactly the same space-time perspective. But such sensual perceptions are often very similar for different people, especially if the thing we focus on and its context do not change quickly, for instance because they are preserved as heritage.

However, if we follow our story we will find out that there is another dimension which is crucial for our perception of the real world.

The man perceived "flowers" when he looked towards the flowers and a "farmhouse" when he looked to the house on the other side of the creek. His perception differed from that of the woman, not only because of the marginally different angle of view, not only because of his red-green colour blindness; he saw a flower, but he was puzzled by its unusual blossoms that bend back their petals, while the woman immediately saw a "martagon lily".

When we perceive tangible things with our senses in our normal common sense mode, we do not have to think what these forms, colours and structures, these haptic sensations etc. mean, but normally we immediately recognise the thing. We do not have to ponder what it is. Nevertheless, what we perceive has to do with the concepts we have readily available. The man does not know many different plant species, but he has the concepts of "flower", "blossoms" and "petals" available. Thus he could not recognize a martagon lily, only a flower. The woman, who is obviously more familiar with plants and insects, has got more differentiated concepts that allow her to recognise different plant species; she saw a martagon lily.

When we perceive things, then the object is constituted by both the impression on our senses and the concept we associate with it. The sensory appearance and the realisation of a fitting concept coincided for the woman in an instant, without any conscious thinking activity. But then the man's interest was briefly aroused as he realised that his particular flower was somehow special: it was

different from other flowers. He grasped a new concept of flowers with the special feature of hanging blossoms with petals bending backwards.

His wondering presupposes a comparison with his vague inner image or scheme of typical flowers, i.e. a mode of thinking. This mental process shaped a new, initial concept of this special flower: a particular kind of flower with distinctive features that separate it from other flowers.

Then the woman gave him a name for the special kind of flower he was looking at: "Turk's cap lily". His mind attached this term to the new sub-concept of "flower", thus adding it to his vocabulary, i.e. the language they both share. She could also have told him another available word for the same concept, "martagon lily", or the scientific name of the plant species "Lilium martagon L."

As soon as he was given a name for these special flowers, he stopped marvelling and added this plant species to his body of knowledge.

For heritage interpreters it is important to understand this effect. Curiosity can significantly drop as soon as an unusual thing is named. Giving it a name is like giving an answer, and such an early answer can provide enough satisfaction for many visitors. As a consequence, interest declines, the visitors' sense of marvel at the real phenomena vanishes. But a word is only a symbol we use to denote the concept. If one stops exploring the phenomenon too early and curiosity is not aroused again, then the learner's new concept will remain thin and its meaning blurred.

For the woman the concept of martagon lily is much richer and more differentiated than her partner's. She would also be able to recognise a Turk's cap lily when the blossoms have not yet opened. She knows where the nectar is hidden in the blossom. And she knows about the relationships of this flower to other things, e.g. to specialised moths that need sophisticated abilities in order to reach the nectar and pollinate the flowers. Thus the concept of the martagon lily, as she has acquired it, is linked to other concepts she has available in her mind. It is richer and more meaningful.

As a consequence the same lily appears differently to the man and the woman, not only because of their different visual apparatus (colour blindness) and the slightly different spatial perspective from which they see the plant; the most important difference is their different mental "standpoints", i.e. the more or less differentiated conceptual system they have acquired in the respective area of biology. Notwithstanding this difference in their physical and their mental perceptions they are both firmly convinced that they refer to the same things in the same real world.

For the woman then the unexpected occurs: she sees a butterfly land on a blossom of the Turk's cap and drink nectar. This contradicts her understanding of what makes the martagon lily special; to her knowledge the vertically hanging, rather smooth petal leaves would not allow a butterfly to hold its position on the flower. This contradiction with what she expected bothered her and aroused her interest again. Only after she examined what had happened, she realised the blossom did not hang vertically but at an angle. This particular real-world instance of the Turk's cap lily did not exactly fit her previous concept of this species as she had previously conceived it. Her concept adjusted to make it fit again with her new real-world experience. The vertically hanging blossoms are still a characteristic feature of the martagon lily, but they are not a defining feature. In the real world we can be confronted with exceptions which do not match the ideal-typical preconceived concept.

All this happens to the man and the woman in their everyday common-sense mode. With their consciousness they are out there in the world; they are at and with the things. Most perceptions, i.e. sensory impression and the association of a fitting concept, occur so quickly that one rarely becomes aware of these processes. Even the process of adjusting a concept according to a new

real-world experience can happen so fast that we do not fully realise it. The woman did not ponder the definition of the concept she had of martagon lily, the adjustment just happened.

*The great value of real-world experience is not only the deep sensation of reality, but it also challenges preconceived concepts.* The real world is diverse and by confronting our ideas and concepts with real world experience they will become more differentiated and refined. In turn, this will result in more precise and more differentiated future perceptions when similar things appear to our senses, triggering the association of richer concepts.

Classroom educators have to facilitate the acquisition of general concepts; in order to introduce such new concepts teachers usually illustrate them through ideal-typical examples or abstract models. However, concrete reality does not always appear in the ideal-typical manner but in a variety of forms.

There is a saying in German: "Man sieht nur was man weiß" - one only sees what one knows. But at the same time, as we have seen above, the opposite is also true: one only knows what one sees (or rather what one perceives).

Heritage is about significant natural or man-made things, persons or events that appear or have appeared as particulars in space and time. Because heritage things are special they often challenge us to adjust our preconceived general concepts and ideas. This ability to refine our preconceived concepts is closely related to the ability to overcome prejudice – a key competence in plural societies. At heritage sites people can train this ability even in the common-sense mode of mind which deals with tangible things and their physical relations. In other words, the educational activity of heritage interpretation can and should facilitate such learning processes that help to refine and differentiate concepts and ideas which have been acquired at the classroom.

Within the field of general education heritage interpretation offers great opportunities for lifelong learning beyond general education at school. We will see later that the lifelong provocation to challenge one's preconceived concepts and ideas plays a crucial role for democratic societies.

## Concepts beyond what we can perceive

The protagonists' common-sense mode of consciousness is entirely "out there in the real world as it is given to us by perception". What we are doing, provided you are following, is a different mode of thinking: we discuss such common-sense experiences from a meta-level, an activity every interpreter is probably familiar with.

We have mentally jumped from the man's mental standpoint to the woman's and back; we have tried to imagine how they perceive the world from their different perspectives. A good heritage interpreter, as any good educator, is well trained in changing from his or her own mental perspective to that of another person. Otherwise he or she could easily fail in the task of facilitating learning which is meaningful for those to whom the interpretive service is offered.

But before we enter the field of meaning making from the perspectives of our protagonists in order to discuss its significance for lifelong learning, we need to look more closely at the mode of scientific thinking.

### Scientific thinking: tangibles and sub-tangibles

The man suggests they continue their hike to the castle ruin. He is more interested in cultural heritage. Just before they reach it, at the rock underneath the ruin, they see a large rock shelter. A

panel informs them that this is a Mesolithic site where archaeologists found the remains of a camp which had been used by a group of hunters. In clay layers, the archaeologists found organic material. Radiocarbon data revealed that the camp dates back to around 8500 years BC.

The man and the woman can perceive no more than the clay floor and the overhanging rock which opens towards the valley. They cannot see any visible trace from the early hunters who used this shelter. All information about the people who lived thousands of years ago comes from reading the panel. Nevertheless, neither of them doubts that this information is true because it claims to be based on scientific evidence.

Modern science first developed methods to systematically observe and differentiate tangible phenomena. By separating things, inorganic and living things, into their parts scientists investigated how these parts interact and function.

But science crossed the limits of the tangible world of our human common-sense perception. Human intellect developed new concepts such as "molecules", "atoms" and "isotopes" and investigated relationships between them. These concepts refer to *sub-tangible* entities that are too small or in other ways beyond what human beings can perceive with their senses. No human being will ever be able to perceive these invisible objects directly with the senses.

Nevertheless, the human intellect can investigate the sub-tangible sphere, create hypotheses and theories about physical laws, chemical knowledge etc. Scientific thinking relates those ideas of the sub-tangible to the world we can perceive, and proves their reality through scientific evidence. Researchers build instruments for experiments based on a hypothesis, and then they predict a tangible result, such as data on a screen, in order to test or falsify this hypothesis.<sup>12</sup>

This happens in the realms of science, in laboratories or field work. Only few witness the experiment first-hand and even fewer fully understand the often complex theories which are implied in the set-up of the experiments, including understanding all the details of how the instruments function. Modern science is highly specialised and to a large extent based on mutual trust in the findings and truthfulness of other scientists. Therefore the scientific system has established sophisticated systems of intersubjective control of research findings.

But trust in the published data of scientists and their theories about the non-perceptible reality, probably would still be rather weak if we had no other evidence. Engineers successfully use this knowledge about the invisible, e.g. wavelengths of light and electric currents, to create new man-made things which we can perceive with our senses, such as solar panels and lamps. In general they function as predicted when we use them. They become part of our common-sense reality.<sup>13</sup>

## Description and imagination

In the case of the archaeological site, science was used to explore data and facts which are beyond what we can see at present. The panel mainly describes things and facts of what happened a long time ago at this very place. If we had been there at that moment we could have seen the scene with our eyes, and we could have heard the people talk in their language. But all this has disappeared. Descriptions bring things and events to our imagination. As long as a panel or a guide only describes, vividly describes, what happened in the past, it does not go beyond what we could have perceived as external spectators.

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 56

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

The same is true for reconstructions and re-enactments of the past. The local museum could display a diorama of the hunters' scene under the rock shelter, or it could re-enact the hunters' preparation of weapons and furs with a stone blade through first-person interpretation. These "stone age hunters" might even involve visitors in their performance; the visitors will still remain foreign outsiders, and they will always be aware that what they experience is only a play and not real life. Reconstructions and re-enactments are a means to help visitors to imagine more precisely and more vividly. But these imaginations are not sensed as the visitor's own reality. That's evident when one thinks about an extreme example: taking part in the re-enactment of a historic battle is fundamentally different from taking part in a real battle with really injured people, real corpses and the real threat of losing one's own life.

However, a vivid imagination of the situation elsewhere in space and time can be an important precondition for the development of a feeling of empathy. And heritage interpretation anchors imaginations in our real-world perception by linking the imagined past to our present first-hand experience of a real site or object. The imagination, and the feeling of empathy resulting from it, thus become more powerful. The panel aroused only a vague imagination of the prehistoric hunting. But the two hikers still see and touch the overhanging rock, they see the clay soil, the real context which the prehistoric people used for their camp.

Nevertheless, imagination, aroused by description, reconstruction and/or re-enactment, is only a substitute that compensates our inability to perceive ourselves what appears elsewhere in time and space. Neither mere perception, nor imagination, regardless how vivid it is, is necessarily self-explaining and meaningful for a visitor.

## Explanations

Beyond these descriptions, the panel also explains briefly how those people made blades for their weapons from flint stone. Furthermore the panel explains how the factual knowledge has been researched, based on scientific data such as radiocarbon dating and scientific research.<sup>14</sup>

Explanations deal with the functioning and interaction of things and their parts, with the causes and effects that change things and their contexts. Common-sense reasoning generates knowledge which is communicated through explanations.

Science extends this way of explanatory thinking from the tangible world of common sense (in this case, the making of stone blades) to the sub-tangible world of invisible parts (in this case, radiocarbon dating). However, the scientific mode of thinking is still similar to the common-sense mode, it "is but an enormously refined prolongation of common-sense reasoning"<sup>15</sup>. Similar to the common-sense, the scientist is normally focussing his or her consciousness on things, physical objects and their interactions. But these sub-tangible things, objects and interactions are imagined entities and described as models, hypothesis and theories. Theories and models explain cause-and-effect relationships and the influence of framework conditions. Theories have been tested in experiments which produce predictable and reproducible empirical, i.e. tangible, evidence.

Common-sense thinking and scientific thinking are activities of the *human intellect*.

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<sup>14</sup> Such reference to the scientific data and how it was generated makes information more credible, but it also distracts visitors from their imagination of the past scene. It is a matter of good practice to make the scientific basis of an interpretation easily available, e.g. through the internet, for visitors who are interested in the factual basis of the interpretation. But such information should try to avoid undue interruptions of the story-line of a good interpretation or a mood of empathy.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54



Heritage interpreters normally master advanced communication skills which enable them to explain complex scientific findings in simplified ways which non-scientists can understand. Such visitor-tailored explanations can satisfy visitors' curiosity regarding the question of how our natural and man-made world functions, and they also provide information about things which we cannot experience first-hand due to our place in space and time. Through imparting knowledge of factual, scientific information, interpreters can also contribute to lifelong learning.

## Intangible meanings: the essence of interpretation

If we follow Tilden, then neither description nor scientific explanation is the essential aim of heritage interpretation, although all interpretation is based on factual information. He first defined interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”<sup>16</sup>

In order to avoid misunderstanding, he offered another concept which “is more correctly described as an admonition, perhaps: Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.” And he offered a third attempt to hint towards what he means: “Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact.”<sup>17</sup> And still another attempt to indicate the direction of what he means with interpretation: “the work of revealing (...) something of the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive.”<sup>18</sup>

It is obvious that in his book from 1957 Tilden struggled hard to find appropriate words to express what he meant while “ploughing a virgin field so far as a published philosophy of the subject [heritage interpretation] is concerned”<sup>19</sup>.

So let's follow our two hikers up to the summit where they reach the castle ruin, and let's explore meanings that lie behind what visitors can perceive with their senses and behind any statement, or explanation, of facts.

At the entrance gate to the ruin they find an old-fashioned panel that provides a lot of factual information about the castle: the date when the oldest part was built and the dates when it was extended, the names of the noble families who lived there, the date when the castle was destroyed. It also gives information about the significance of this site which is protected by state law. The ruin is listed as an architectural monument “due to its rare combination of Romanesque and Gothic architectural elements”.

The hikers do not bother to read all the information; most of it is meaningless to them.

But the man, who loves this place and has read a lot about the former castle, tells his friend what he finds significant: that a regional noble family lived here. While they believed in the virtues of knighthood, they also engaged in bloody feuds as they tried to secure their power and widen the territory under their control. The only son, who was supposed to inherit the castle and its lands, followed the call of the Pope and joined other knights on a Crusade to liberate Jerusalem. This venture was very expensive and the family had to pledge significant parts of their possessions.

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<sup>16</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*

<sup>18</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>19</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 8

Fighting for his highest beliefs in the Holy Land, the knight lost his life. Some years later the castle fell to another knight who held the pledge. The new owner neither respected the old rights of the serfs, nor the town charters that had confirmed the freedoms of town citizens. In order to end the oppression, town citizens and farmers joined forces, attacked and killed the last knight of the castle. In anger and revenge they set the castle on fire. The new lord's family had to flee their hideout in the belfry, which one can still see today, and were driven away by the angry insurgents. For several weeks the villagers and the town citizens governed the territory themselves until the Duke's army took over and established a local administration of civil servants in the main town. The castle was never rebuilt. This event is considered as one of the earliest instances of liberation and self-government in the country.

The woman asks whether engaging in feuds and killing other people did not contradict with the virtues of knighthood. This question opens a discussion on the virtues of medieval times...

It is obvious that, from the perspective of the man, the ruin is not significant because of its Romanesque and Gothic style elements. The latter might be meaningful for an arts historian for whom these concepts are much richer, with relations to meaningful ideas.

From the man's mental perspective the ruin matters in terms of struggles for liberation, resisting oppression and injustice, and the tragedy of the lords' families. And his partner's interest is aroused by what seems to her to be contradictions in the meaning of knightly virtues in her own preconceived understanding.

This story about the castle's history uses a type of concepts that belong to a sphere different from those we considered before: "liberation" and "oppression", "justice" and "injustice", "virtue", "religious beliefs" and "holiness": these words point to concepts which do not refer to tangible things human beings can perceive with their senses. They are also substantially different from those things that interact physically but are not perceptible by human senses, which we called sub-tangible. They do not belong to the physical world of common sense, science and technology which can be scientifically tested and proved. They belong to the sphere of *intangible concepts*.<sup>20</sup>

Strictly speaking, all concepts are intangible, including the concept of "flower", which must be distinguished from the particular flower which appears in the physical world. The expression "tangible concept" is an abbreviation for "concepts that refer to tangible things and processes in the physical world", while "intangible concept" refers to entities which do not appear in this physical reality. For human beings these intangibles are meaningful in a deeper sense than tangible and sub-tangible concepts, which denote material things. In philosophical terms we may talk about "*metaphysical*" ideas.

Interestingly, intangible concepts and ideas like those the man referred to were just as relevant to the ancient Greek thinkers and to people in the Middle Ages as to modern people. And many of them are meaningful for people regardless their very different cultural backgrounds. Some philosophers therefore call such concepts "*universals*", an expression which is also used in the field of interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Scientific thinking explains how the tangible world of common sense things functions, which can include sub-tangible causes and effects. But *interpretation* moves in the other direction: it refers to what a thing, an event or an act of a person *means*. In other words, interpretation relates the

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<sup>20</sup> David Larsen introduced the important distinction between "tangibles" and "intangibles" to the field of heritage interpretation. Larsen, D.: Meaningful Interpretation. 2011[2003], p. 73ff

<sup>21</sup> Larsen 2011[2003], p. 91. See also discussion in the appendix: p. 52

physical appearance to these intangible concepts and ideas which are meaningful for human beings.<sup>22</sup> This is the essential meaning of "interpretation" in the strict sense.

### **Interpretation in the strict sense and "heritage interpretation"**

The educational activity of "heritage interpretation" applies the activity of interpretation to heritage. Interpretation must not be confused with explanation. Explanation aims to grasp knowledge about a thing or phenomenon and interpretation aims to understand what it means. Interpretation in the strict sense begins only when we link heritage to intangible meanings.

This essential meaning of interpretation must be distinguished from the activity or profession of "heritage interpretation" which includes all activities that are required to prepare the core activity of revealing meanings and relationships. A heritage interpreter must arrange the settings and/or set the stage first. This can include facilitating access to first-hand experience, providing information and facilitating a vivid imagination, explaining scientific findings etc. in order to prepare a mood and facilitate a knowledge which makes the activity of interpretation in its strict sense relevant for visitors. Sometimes it happens that a heritage "interpreter" gets stuck in these preliminary activities. Some even do not attempt to reach the level of interpretation, i.e. he or she performs heritage interpretation without interpretation. This is, from a logical and semantic perspective, of course a contradiction in itself.

From this background, one might consider to name such heritage related educational activities which do not include interpretation differently: e.g. "heritage education" as a term which covers heritage interpretation but also other non-interpretive activities, or "heritage instruction", "heritage information service" for activities that shall be deliberately distinguished from heritage interpretation.

### **Intellect versus reason**

Hannah Arendt, referring to Kant, shows that different modes of thinking refer to the spheres of common sense and science and to the sphere of intangibles. Science produces knowledge about the tangible and sub-tangible world which can be tested. A scientific statement can be falsified through contradicting data, i.e. perceptions in the physical world which are accessible for our senses. Common sense and science rely on the *human intellect* which is Arendt's translation of the German word "Verstand".<sup>23</sup> It denotes the analytic capability of discerning things which appear in space and time, and of explaining physical causes and effects which connect these things. We can call the corresponding activity of the mind "intellectual thinking" through which we can explain the physical side of the world – or anything which we imagine in analogy to the tangible and sub-tangible things.

This does not apply in the same way for meanings of intangible ideas. They do not provide knowledge. We apply intangibles when we make sense of something. Kant uses the German word "Vernunft", which is usually translated by "*reason*", for this faculty of the human mind which is capable of meaning making.<sup>24</sup> However, these words are a bit tricky because both "intellect" and "reason" are often used as more or less interchangeable synonyms. In our context they mean very different thinking modes of the mind.

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<sup>22</sup> For the double-meaning of "meaningful" cf. the appendix: p. 52

<sup>23</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 13f and p. 57f

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The criterion for the intellect is the *truth of a statement based on irrefutable evidence* and lack of error or illusion. The criterion for the human faculty of reason is the *meaningfulness of speech and thought based on coherence* and lack of contradiction.<sup>25</sup>

When the man tells the story of the noble family and their engagement in bloody feuds, this story can be true or false. The woman's question about the relationship between knightly virtues and bloody feuds is neither true nor false, but it is meaningful. Fairy tales are meaningful, but not true. The sentence "the river changes direction and flies over the mountain range" is meaningless or non-sense, even though all its words refer to tangible concepts. "Justice longs for the victory of evil" would be an example for a meaningless statement dealing with intangibles.

For interpreters this difference between intellect and reason is significant, regardless which words are used to refer to these different modes of the mind. Reason's quest for meaning can be applied to all concepts and ideas, regardless of whether they refer to tangibles, sub-tangibles or intangibles. But the sphere of intangibles is not accessible to the intellect. Its criterion of truth based on factual, i.e. physical, evidence is not applicable to metaphysical concepts ideas and thoughts dealing with intangibles. On the other hand, reason can examine the meaning of all concepts, ideas and thoughts. In this respect the human faculty of reason is more fundamental than the intellect.

Most intangible ideas are also loaded with value. All the values on which the European Union is founded according to Article 2 of the Lisbon treaty belong to the sphere of intangible concepts: respect, dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human rights, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity.<sup>26</sup>

We designate natural or cultural things as "heritage" and protect them because they are considered in some respect as significant. Therefore heritage, beyond functional explanation, usually bears the potential for interpretation, which sheds light on deeper meanings of the significant thing and significant place.

These considerations can help to better understand Tilden's third principle which seems to pose difficulties for many interpreters: "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable."<sup>27</sup> His distinction of heritage interpretation as an art from science corresponds with the difference between mere intellect and reason.

Hence, interpretation is much more than mere artisan craftsmanship of communication techniques. An interpreter needs to develop the art of finding and revealing meaningful perspectives which shed new light on what we perceive with our senses and on the facts which scientists have established. Of course the interpreter as an artist must master his communication tools and skills.

The art begins where the story is shaped by arranging perceptible phenomena, facts and explanations in a way that inspires human meaning making.

At this point, the question can arise here whether this is just *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake).

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 57ff and p. 98

<sup>26</sup> European Union (ed.) (2012): Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union. p. 17

<sup>27</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 26

## The power of intangible concepts

In order to illustrate the strength of people's desire to associate themselves with the historic past, Tilden uses an unusually long quote. It is not the dates and names that drive the desire, but, as the quote reveals, it is the making of a connection with such intangible ideas. Tilden quotes C. E. Merriam's book "The Making of Citizens":

"The underlying design is of course to set up a group of the living, the dead, and those who are yet unborn, a group of which the individual finds himself a part and of which he is in fact glad to count himself a member (...). All the great group victories he shares in; all the great men are his companions in the bonds of the group, all its sorrows are by construction his; all its hopes and dreams, realized and thwarted alike, are his. And thus he becomes although of humble status a great man, a member of a great group; and his humble life is thus tinged with a glory it might not otherwise ever hope to achieve. He is lifted beyond and above himself into higher worlds where he walks with all his great ancestors, one of an illustrious group whose blood is in his veins and whose domain and reputation he proudly bears."<sup>28</sup>

All the greatness, the glory, the "higher worlds" point to the sphere of intangibles. Intangible concepts and universal ideas resonate with something inside us. They are not as cold as intellectual thoughts tend to be, but they touch human emotions.

Tilden adds to the quote that

"generally speaking, certainties contribute toward human happiness; uncertainties are a source of spiritual loneliness and disquietude. Whether or not he is conscious of it, Man seeks to find his place in nature and among people."<sup>29</sup>

Intangible concepts and universals provide orientation in the mental and spiritual sphere.

If people in Europe could experience that the European Union was really founded on the values which are stated in Article 2, then the EU might not find itself in such a deep identity crisis. General education could certainly play a more significant role in connecting the idea of a European Union more intensely with the sphere of intangible meanings. General education in this sense would aim for the development of the personality which should be distinguished from instruction imparting the knowledge and skills one needs for employability and workaday life. And heritage interpretation, as a discipline within general education, could link powerful intangible ideas with the power of reality that people experience first-hand in combination with trustworthy scientific findings.

In some respect heritage interpretation reconciles the inheritance from the Enlightenment with that from the Romantics.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand it is based on first-hand experience and scientific explanations, on the other hand interpretation responds to the urge for deeper meaning, for what makes sense beyond the ordinary usefulness.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century interpretation must not stop with such revelations and affirmations of deeper meanings and relationships in the intangible sphere. The certainties which interpretation creates can surely contribute to happiness and a sense of belonging. But the power of such intangible concepts and the feeling of becoming uplifted can also turn out to be very dangerous.

For Hannah Arendt it was most puzzling that Adolf Eichmann, who organised the transports to Auschwitz, did not appear to her as a kind of monster, a spawn of evil. Instead, Eichmann

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<sup>28</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>30</sup> c.f. James Carter's study in this publication.

appeared as a rather average man who, and this was the disturbing observation, just did not think.<sup>31</sup> This statement might come as a surprise. Eichmann was certainly an intelligent person who was so knowledgeable and skilled that he was able to efficiently organise the demanding logistics of large-scale industrial mass murder. But his knowledge, skills and intelligence did not lead him to reflect on the meaning of what he was told to do.

In the context of the quotation from "The Making of Citizens", a disturbing question emerges: could it be that Eichmann felt good because he believed in belonging to a "great group"? Did he believe that Arian blood was flowing through his veins, so he belonged to an illustrious group which he had been told was superior to all other races? The Nazi ideologists, after all, made extensive use of intangible concepts. They re-interpreted history in order to support their ideology.

Meaning making can be powerful. Meaning making can be very dangerous. And meaning making can indeed have disastrous impacts. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the deep human desire for meaning.

## Reflective thinking: the aim of modern interpretation

Let's go back to the friends enjoying their day out at the castle ruin. We remember, capitalising on the woman's mere curiosity about the castle, the man interpreted what the castle meant to him. While they experienced the ruin with its still standing belfry, he told his interpretive story based on historic facts that linked the place with intangible concepts such as oppression, liberation etc. For our question the important thing is that the man, by mentioning the "virtues of knights" and "bloody feuds" stimulated the woman to question the coherence of the meanings.

They begin a short dialogue about the virtues of nobles in medieval times; the man points out that bravery in fighting was considered a very high virtue for the knights, as well as generosity and restraint. She answers that today this seems to have changed for many people. For her, "restraint" and "bravery" which involves killing do not match. But they leave this topic and decide to have their picnic.

Later, when they hike down the hill towards the pass, she begins to reflect about "bravery". Is it a virtue in itself, or could it be something negative in certain contexts? It seems evident to her that a brave firefighter does something good, but what about the bravery of wing-suit jumpers who risk their lives for nothing? Or perhaps not for nothing. The base jumper enjoys the adrenalin kick, and maybe even more the admiration from his friends. But isn't this plain vanity? And how "brave" is a man who takes the risk to attack two rich but strong men in order to rob them?

There is a difference between the woman's thinking while she is engaged in the dialogue with her friend and her reflections while walking. In dialogue with someone else, we usually jump back and forth between our own position and perspective and that of our dialogue partner while checking what we agree or disagree with. In good and open dialogues we listen to the other in order to understand his or her perspective. Our consciousness iterates between the other person "out there" and our own preconceived concepts, ideas and beliefs, i.e. our own mental position. We engage in *dialectic thinking*, ready to adjust our own understanding of the issue.<sup>32</sup>

However, it often happens that a dialogue is not so open: we try to persuade the other that our own convictions are right and we want to defend our standpoint. Then we also use our thinking, but not

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 4f

<sup>32</sup> c.f. Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 117

in an open-minded way. We quickly, often un- or halfconsciously, check which of the other's arguments we will ignore and which ones we can attack by a counter-argument. We can call this activity *persuasive thinking*.

But when we engage in true *reflective thinking*, we are in a soundless dialectic dialogue *with ourselves*.<sup>33</sup> It is our self who answers; it is our second inner voice who checks the coherence of a thought with our own preconceived concepts and ideas. This is a fundamentally different state of mind. We do not jump back and forth between the outside world and our standpoint but we are entirely with ourselves. We try to integrate a new or revised concept coherently into our inner cosmos of intangible concepts and ideas, which is multiply connected with our inner treasury of experiences and knowledge.

This inner self we talk with in reflective thinking is the one who awaits us when we come home, as Socrates put it; it is the one with whom we have to come along after we act in the world or talk with others. It is our conscience.<sup>34</sup>

In reflective thinking we consciously interact with our conscience. We cannot cheat ourselves while active in this mode of thinking. Otherwise we would consciously contradict ourselves, which is not quite possible.<sup>35</sup> We would deliberately try to betray ourselves while being conscious of this betrayal. But a betrayal cannot work if it is done openly, and is obvious to the one who would be betrayed. There is only one way of escape: to stop reflective thinking.

It is evident that Hannah Arendt, when she wrote that Eichmann did not think, did not refer to the use of the intellect: she meant that he did not engage in reflective thinking. Without this type of thinking, avoiding the "quest for meaning" as she put it, a person can live and act without conscience perfectly well. But before we discuss the consequences of such a lack of reflective thinking, we need to look more closely at some of its characteristics in the context of intangibles and meaning-making.

Reflecting on the meaning of concepts and their relationships to other concepts is pure thinking. The meaning of one concept is illuminated through its relationships to other concepts and ideas. This reasoning is an extraordinary state of mind. The thinking person is not with his or her consciousness "out there" in the world of things, objects and their interactions, but entirely in the sphere of concepts and ideas, which is beyond the ordinary reality of space and time.<sup>36</sup>

Many who engage in reflective thinking about intangibles find that this activity does not necessarily lead to clear-cut answers. But it can clarify our preconceived concepts and identify misconceptions. It can broaden the mental or spiritual horizon, but at the same time thinking almost inevitably produces new questions – which then destroy other preconceived certainties. Thus the quest for meaning may arouse the urge to examine more of our concepts in order to discover inner contradictions with other concepts and their relationships.<sup>37</sup>

In the higher consciousness of reflective thinking concepts become "fluid", they can change and adapt to their "conceptual environment". The life of the mind – in contrast to that of the soul – is sheer activity.<sup>38</sup> At the same time the soundless dialogue with oneself is felt like an awakening from sleepwalking or becoming fully alive<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Arent, *ibid.*, p. 75

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186ff

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202ff

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174f

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

We also know the same process of reflective thinking in the field of sciences. Thomas Kuhn, in his book on the structure of scientific revolutions, distinguished “normal science” from “extraordinary science”. Normal science applies the established rules and concepts of a discipline and develops new knowledge. Extraordinary science questions the meaning of those fundamental paradigms. Such a venture can lead to a paradigm change which opens new horizons and new ways of perceiving the scientific subject.<sup>40</sup>

What remains from this thinking activity is a *thought*, a fixed relationship between concepts which might have changed their shapes, i.e. their meanings. Such a thought, as well as other available concepts, can be compared to frozen shadows of the active thinking process. Consequently, when reflective thinking is aroused again, it is likely to also question this, then preconceived, thought.

In thinking we may experience what Tilden calls “a larger truth”, but as mortals we cannot grasp *the* entire and final eternal truth. Instead, new insights from thinking reveal a new aspect of the intangibles.

When we can get hold of an innovative thought in the realms of the intangible, it can still be difficult to express such a new insight in the words of our languages. All human languages “borrow their vocabulary from words originally meant to correspond either to sense experience or other experiences of ordinary life”.<sup>41</sup> Hence, Arendt states that all philosophical language and most poetry is metaphoric.<sup>42</sup> Such metaphorical roots of abstract concepts and ideas can often traced back in the etymology of words.<sup>43</sup>

Every metaphor is an intuitive perception of similarity in dissimilars. It highlights relationships between things<sup>44</sup> which are dissimilar. Metaphors linking the intangible to familiar, tangible things and common-sense relations can bridge entirely dissimilar spheres. Kant stressed that the insights of metaphysics are “gained by *analogy*, not in the usual meaning of imperfect resemblance of two things, but of a *perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things*”.<sup>45</sup> According to Aristotle, such metaphors and analogies are a sign of genius, “the greatest thing by far”.<sup>46</sup>

Many heritage interpreters are familiar with the power of analogies and metaphors to bridge what is unfamiliar to the visitor with familiar things. They can also be used to *explain* scientific findings<sup>47</sup> by linking the sub-tangible sphere with the experience of common sense, and to make a topic relevant for visitors. For *interpretation* in its strict sense, metaphors seem to be indispensable. However, metaphors can only highlight an aspect of a meaningful relationship, even if it is an essential aspect. When we examine the metaphor from another mental perspective it will likely not fit any more. And interpreters using metaphors should always examine their appropriateness and their limitations through critical reflective thinking.

Reflective thinking happens in an extraordinary state of mind. This thinking activity is fundamentally different from merely applying and connecting preconceived, frozen concepts through the normal thinking of the common sense or in science and technological engineering.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, Th. (1962): *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 102

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Readers might have noted: “roots” is an obvious metaphoric expression itself, along with “highlight”, “reflective”, “insights”, “focus”, “fluid concept” and “frozen thought”.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104f

<sup>44</sup> Shelley. In defence of Poetry. *cit.* according to Arendt, *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Kant. Prolegomena to Every Future Metaphysics, *cit.* in Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 104

<sup>46</sup> *cit.* in Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>47</sup> For example Ham, S. (1992): *Environmental interpretation*, p. 13



## The relevance of reflective thinking

Reflective thinking about intangible meanings is rather far away from our workaday life and common sense. Nevertheless, despite the fact that reflective thinking about intangibles often produces no immediate tangible results, it can play a vital role in how we as human beings live together.

One does not need to be a philosopher or a leading scientist to be confronted with the “quest for meaning”. Everybody is confronted with it. This extraordinary mode of consciousness can be invoked in extraordinary life situations, “boundary situations”<sup>48</sup> such as birth and death, life changing incidents etc. that occur to oneself, close family or close friends. And everybody can deliberately stop his or her everyday business to find room for contemplation and reflection. But of course not all do.

The Eichmann trial revealed to Hannah Arendt that people who do not think, who do not have the quest for meaning, can function perfectly well in normal, everyday life.<sup>49</sup> But they are like sleepwalkers. She stresses that such people are often those who are keen to follow the established rules. Yes, they can be “most respectable pillars of society”.<sup>50</sup> People who avoid reflective thinking tend to stick to the concepts, ideas and values which have been handed down to them. They have acquired them and integrated them in their minds, but this process happens below the level of full consciousness. These people just apply their available concepts and ideas which they have somehow conceived.

This is quite normal; we are all “these people” in our workaday life. It is our common sense mode of consciousness “out there”. In everyday life we cannot afford to opt out from our daily business to begin reflections; we need preconceived concepts, rules and habits in order to swiftly act and react.

But those who *never* engage in the soundless dialogue with their self to examine the meaning of significant concepts do not develop their own conscience. This can become dangerous for society because such people are not prepared for extraordinary situations.

When somebody appears in a community and establishes new rules, a new ideology and new “values”, then the “sleepwalkers” will also be the first to obey those new rules because they are the least likely to indulge in thinking. Their world view and value system can be reversed rather easily. This idea leads Hannah Arendt to a disturbing interpretation of what happened in Germany:

“The ease with which such a reversal can take place under certain conditions suggests indeed that everybody was fast asleep when it occurred. I am alluding, of course, to what happened in Nazi Germany, and to some extent, also in Stalinist Russia, when suddenly the basic commandments of Western morality were reversed: in one case, ‘Thou shalt not kill’; in the other, ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.’ And the sequel—the reversal of the reversal, the fact that it was so surprisingly easy ‘to re-educate’ the Germans after the collapse of the Third Reich, so easy indeed that it was as though re-education was automatic—should not console us either. It was actually the same phenomenon.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jaspers, K. (1932): Philosophie. cit in Arendt, *ibid.*, 192

<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

This should be most disturbing in the context of our investigations: From Arendt's observation follows that uplifting people through interpreting, or re-interpreting, historic facts in the light of "good values" is not a real solution.

We might succeed to re-interpret history in Europe by making it meaningful for the people in the light of "European values". When people, while in the common-sense mode of sleepwalking, are being told by interpreters and others how to interpret the world in the light of the new ideas in a new European framework, this would provide new orientation for them. Most would adopt those new concepts and ideas on the fly without examining them. Such sleepwalkers are, again, easy to rule as they tend to follow the new rules and values without much questioning.

That's why re-interpretation could be very powerful as we have already seen above. To be clear: to date Europe has not nearly achieved such a re-interpretation of history from a European perspective and its fundamental values. There are only timid attempts in this direction such as the European Heritage Label, but these attempts are far too small to have an impact. They are almost invisible, compared to all the EU's efforts relating to the functioning of markets and industries.

But let us imagine that the EU together with its member states had used the recent decades to undertake a really big campaign to foster European values through re-interpretation of heritage and history for the broad population. Let us assume that such a venture is a wild success. Then, that's the lesson to learn from Hannah Arendt's observation, such a success "should not console us either". Such people whose ideas and beliefs have been changed in this way would still be vulnerable to somebody else who offers a comfortable ideology, an ideology which makes it more easy to feel part of a "great group" – maybe an "outstanding group" – which looks down upon the mainstream. The leaders of such groups promise happiness through certainty, and certainty by providing simplistic answers to great questions.

On the other side are those people who have developed a habit of questioning important concepts, i.e. who are frequently in touch with their conscience. They examine their own preconceived meanings. They examine what others told them while they mentally digest how they understood the other. They employ this habit of exercising reflective thinking, the soundless dialogue with oneself, when they feel that a theme is significant.

Such thinking individuals are not so easy to govern. Thinking people can be difficult and unreliable within a given order. They do not always function smoothly and their thoughts are often considered subversive – Socrates was sentenced to death for that reason. But those who are used to reflective thinking are also the ones who are most likely to question totalitarian ideologies and their implications.

Let's return to our two hikers who arrive at the pass. Now the woman realises what the grey thing is, which she had not been able to recognize from a distance: a concrete bunker. Next to it stands a column with many names and dates, and the title says:

*In Memoriam*  
*To our heroes who sacrificed their lives for our great nation*

This resonates with her, and her inner dialogue is stimulated again: have they really been "brave" as "hero" implies? Have some of them been forced? Some were very young. Have they rather been indoctrinated and used? But then by whom? By the great nation? What does "great nation" actually mean?

And she continues: could it be that the idea of "great nation" is only a mirage, a will-o'-the-wisp luring people into dangerous swamps? But then, what did people who fought against the oppression of their national identity strive for? There must be something...

She does not find clear-cut answers, but she finds striking questions. These questions wake her up to perceive an area in the world of intangible ideas in a new light. It is rather a spotlight, as thinking threads cannot provide the full and simultaneous overview of the mind's totality of concepts, ideas and digested experiences. But a desire has been sparked off to discover more questions and examine them from different perspectives, in order to conceive new aspects of the idea of a "great nation". The quest for meaning is an urge to find out what might be misconceptions of the naive mind; and to move forward towards clearer and more essential meanings.

This experience has consequences for the future: when she comes across the mention of "great nation" she will never be able to apply it as naively as before. The flame of reflective thinking might be sparked off again and again as it will shed new light on future experiences. Furthermore, this flame of active thinking, in contrast to merely having thoughts, is likely to spread, i.e. to provoke new questions of meaning.

Instead of finding final answers, she has found a kind of new inner sense which helps her to "perceive" in the intangible sphere of concepts, ideas and their relationships. It feels to her like having woken up. She feels more alive in this mode of reflective thinking. At the same time, she does not need to borrow her self-esteem from "a great group".

From this perspective the highest end for heritage interpretation is to provide food for the reflective thinking process, that is to feed the fire which sheds light on the meanings of intangible concepts and universal ideas. Interpretation can be a means to help people experience pure thinking, the active and conscious dialogue with oneself which inevitably leads to the growth of conscience.

## Some conclusions

Let's look back at the hike through different modes of mind and how they relate to heritage interpretation.

At first we must remember that heritage interpretation is an educational activity, and hence interpreters must be aware of the plurality of learners. For the two hikers, though they were friends, the experience of nature and culture was rather different. The man enjoyed sharing with his friend what he finds significant about the castle ruin. As always when he came there, he enjoyed the atmosphere of the ruin and the landscape. There was nothing new for him about the castle as he knew the place. But for a moment, he felt the beauty and wonder of the flower and its astonishing relationship to these moths. This was a rare experience for him, because he does not consider himself a nature boy.

### Learning from history through interpretive experience

For the woman, the theme of virtues and bloody feuds struck a chord. This had been only an aside in the man's interpretation. It was not the message he intended to get across. But it triggered her to reflect while she was walking. In the beginning this thinking was a rather subtle experience, a soundless dialogue with herself, wondering about what seemed to her incoherent. However, these reflections, as subtle as they appeared, had an impact. She became more sensitive to the explicit and implicit use of the idea of "bravery".

The really unsettling questions appeared later when she read the headline of the war memorial – unsettling because this notion of “great nation” obviously is powerful and impacts life and politics in various ways. She will never again be able to treat the idea of “great nation” as naively as she had done before. Up to that moment she had applied this unexamined concept as it had been passed on to her. She used it to connect common sense experience with something meaningful and uplifting. She then applied this idea like a sleepwalker, similar to many others. She woke up when she started to give account to herself what “great nation” actually means. She began to examine it in the light of other concepts which she had available in her mind, and in the light of experiences to which this idea was attached in her mind, e.g. her first-hand experience of how an unknown writer used “great nation” at the war memorial.

But what if the hikers had not descended via the pass and the memorial? Then this quest of meaning might have appeared to her in another situation later. Provided a matching situation occurs, such a striking question for meaning can be triggered by the conscience even years after an interpretive experience. Therefore it is probably very difficult, or rather impossible, to measure and validate this kind of “learning outcomes”. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to consider *the stimulation of reflective thinking as the highest achievement which heritage interpretation can aim for*.

From this perspective, encouraging reflective thinking about intangible concepts through first-hand experience of heritage also appears as probably the most powerful form of learning from history.

Remember Christopher Clark's puzzled remarks in response to the Brexit vote, i.e. one of several present-day victories of populist movements. Once a sensitivity for the quest for meaning with regard to significant key concepts is aroused, a person cannot any more naively apply them, or adopt them from others, without questioning them. Those who have developed a habit of reflective thinking are certainly much less vulnerable to, or rather immune to, populist slogans with their simplifications, half-truths and stupid lies, which usually appeal to basic emotions. Typical simplistic we-against-them dualistic constructions dissolve into meaninglessness when one examines their conceptual incoherence and reflects on the rich diversity of real world experiences.

Hence, it can be decisive for plural, democratic societies that people develop the ability and habit of reflective thinking. And this needs to be linked to their own treasure of first-hand experiences which are connected to their sensed reality. The latter immunises against lies and conspiracy theories – but only after people have digested these experiences through a thinking process. Heritage interpretation can do both: provoke reflective thinking about significant intangible ideas and provide first-hand experience in combination with reconstructions of aspects of past realities on the basis of reliable second-hand scientific information.

So, do we have a clear-cut answer to the opening question of whether heritage interpretation can contribute to learning in a way which reduces the likelihood that citizens follow anti-human leaders? Yes, it certainly can *contribute to reducing the likelihood*, but of course there is by no means a kind of automatism that works for everybody.

### **Heritage interpretation for everybody**

We must take seriously what Tilden wrote: people are made happy by certainty; uncertainties are a source of spiritual loneliness and disquietude. That's true – at least from the perspective of a person who has not experienced the inner power of the soundless dialogue with one's own self. These people long for certainties. But of course certainties do not provoke reflection. Instead, real thinking is encouraged by deep questions, i.e. by uncertainties. Here is the dilemma.

As interpreters we must take into account that reflective thinking cannot be forced and that many people try to avoid it. Doubt is uncomfortable. Questioning the meaning of intangible concepts can challenge the fundamental beliefs one holds. It can dissolve a person's identity construction, for example if the person identifies him- or herself through belonging to a "great group". Therefore no interpreter can predict who will respond positively to such a challenge, and who will ignore it, turn into a position of self-defence or walk away offended etc.

One of the most interesting aspects in Tilden's book might be his deep respect for the dignity of visitors in their diversity. He was a fine observer with a lot of empathy:

"The visitors who come for his [the interpreter's] service (...) come frequently with mere idle curiosity, or to kill time, or from boredom. It is for us to understand, and affectionately to weigh, not the ignorance, for that is apparent, but the reasons for the ignorance. Compared to the usual fate of humans, we who are engaged in preservational work, daily in contact with what we most like and admire, are fortunate indeed. (...) Do you really think this is common experience in the workaday world? Are you unaware of the fact that most people often feel that they are travelling the wrong road, and bitterly conclude that it is too late to return to the distant fork?"

You cannot change this, but you can understand it; and thus you can account for the poor conditioning of those whom you would delight with an introduction to the treasures in your custody..."<sup>52</sup>

He also stressed that visitors are in very different moods when they arrive at a heritage area. In this context we must also be aware that heritage interpretation is a holistic visitor service, i.e. as a profession, it comprises more than interpretation in its narrow sense. We remember, interpretation is essentially about embedding things into meaningful contexts of intangibles and it should aim to arouse the inner activity of reflective thinking. But to get there, heritage interpretation as a visitor service needs to take into account all the different modes of mind which have been discussed along the hike up to the summit.

#### - First-hand experience

It starts with the provision of access to tangible phenomena which can be experienced first-hand. Some visitors might just seek relaxation and an aesthetic experience, not wanting to be bothered by any interpretation at all. And this must be respected. The mood can change after a while and thus their receptiveness and desire can change as well. But it would not make sense to confront people with an interpretation about deep meanings, while they want to be left alone.

#### - Reconstruction of past or distant situations

Others might come to immerse themselves in a past situation. This desire is often connected with a desire for nostalgia. These visitors will appreciate descriptions which arouse a vivid imagination. They might expect reconstructions and re-enactments that allow them to perceive or even to take part, as if they themselves were at another time and another place. At the same time imagination and immersion can arouse empathy to "experience" the world from the position of other people, or other living creatures.

#### - Explanations

Other people, or the same people at another moment, are curious to learn how something functions and seek for a simple explanation.

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<sup>52</sup> Tilden, *ibid.*, p. 91

## - Interpretation

All this has to be respected and dealt with. Nevertheless, Tilden would surely advocate to lead the interpretive service to the core of heritage interpretation: to interpret the meanings of heritage in a way that responds the need for spiritual uplift, the desire to find one's place in nature and among men.

Heritage institutions – suspicious of the dangers that are involved in meaning making – might be tempted to refuse to serve this need; they could restrict their visitor service to descriptions, reconstructions and explanations of scientific findings. But then others will serve the desire for meaning making. And those others will do it for their own agenda; they will provide orientation by imparting their ideologies.

However, we must be fully aware of the dangers which can result especially from any *one-sided* interpretation that only reflects *one* “great group's” convictions, e.g. that of the ruling parties which govern the management of a heritage site. The leaders of authoritarian regimes or so called “guided” or “managed democracies” use this type of interpretation for their purposes. Therefore, from the perspective of the ideas outlined here, it will be important to develop adequate professional ethics.

## **Multiple perspectives heritage interpretation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Maybe for a start one could consider that no heritage interpretation should contradict the “European values” and intangibles which are highlighted in articles 2 and 3 of the Lisbon treaty or in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and similar documents. They are based on the same philosophies that inspired the *universal* human rights which have in common the respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals and the appreciation of diversity and plurality.

Diversity implies diverse physical and social positions of past people in space and time, and a plurality of mental perspectives from which things, places, events and historical characters may be meaningful and significant in various ways. As a consequence, in many cases interpretation from several different perspectives could be an appropriate approach for plural societies.

One perspective would highlight meanings as they are significant for a dominant group of visitors, e.g. from a national perspective, which many visitors feel they belong to. This will allow those visitors to attach emotionally. They feel that their world view is taken into account and thus they will become receptive. But such an interpretation should probably always confront the visitors with one or more differing perspectives, such as the views of a minority or another social group for whom the same thing, person or event means something else.

Multiple-perspectives interpretation that applies meaningful concepts can help to combat inhuman ideologies – provided it illuminates a theme through the above-mentioned universals. It provides the normal thinking with alternative views. These alternative views are empowered through their connection to first-hand experienced reality as well as through empathy for other people or creatures. Many visitors may then adjust their preconceived concepts and ideas subconsciously “on the fly” in the common-sense sleepwalker mode, i.e. they will not be fully conscious about these adjustments. However, that's already an achievement.

But we must be clear that we only operate on the same level of normal consciousness, on which the other ideologies work, too. Therefore these people will still be vulnerable to the attraction of simplistic world-views which promise less complicated, effortless certainties in combination with emotions that boost the ego.

However, the art of ethical, *multi-perspectives* interpretation will certainly have another effect: it increases the likelihood that more visitors will be encouraged to reflective thinking. Probably not during the visit, as visitors are busy with their consciousness “out there” immersed in the story. Often there is no room for soundless contemplation, especially when one is part of group, for example on a guided interpretive tour. But a multiple-perspective interpretation which is constructed in a way that implies deeper questions may arouse reflective thinking later – maybe even much later. These different perspectives, adjusted concepts and the real-world experience will be stored in visitors’ minds. Provocative interpretation from multiple perspectives contains potential food for thought, or better, material for future reflective thinking activity. And we never know when life will lead a person to a situation that sparks off such material for the soundless dialogue within the self.

It is not clear whether Tilden was fully aware of the extraordinary mode of reflective thinking and its role for meaning making. However, the above quoted text passage, about the visitors’ “poor conditioning” when they come from their workaday life to a heritage site, continues with an emphatic exclamation. It could point in such a direction:

“...There is the challenge! To put your visitor in possession of at least one *disturbing idea* that may grow into a fruitful interest.”<sup>53</sup>

We could fully subscribe to this as a mission statement for heritage interpretation, if we further elaborate what “fruitful interest” should mean in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe:

A fruitful *uncertainty* which may provoke a person to engage in the soundless dialogue with the self. A fruitful question seeking for growing clarity of the meaning of intangible concepts in coherence with its relations to both other concepts and ideas as well as to the diverse appearances in the real world. In other words: a disturbing idea that may provoke reflective thinking which will engage and nourish conscience.

Could it be that in a future time the ability and habit of reflective thinking might be considered as a core competence for citizenship in a plural and democratic society?

## Heritage interpretation: provoking thinking that loves the world

A deep gap between philosophy and ordinary life characterised European culture for more than two millennia. Hannah Arendt identified a tipping point when Socrates was sentenced to death.<sup>54</sup> He had been a thought-provoking thinker who confronted people with inconsistencies in their understanding of the meaning of fundamental ideas. In order to do this, he went to the market place of Athens where he talked to ordinary people.

After Socrates’ death philosophers withdrew from the world. They practised pure, reflective thinking about the “final questions” within their own circles. From the perspective of non-philosophers, philosophical thinking was an idle ivory tower activity which was not related to real life.

Hannah Arendt, who always rejected being defined as a “thinker from profession” – a philosopher – made two most important achievements which are highly relevant for heritage interpretation. She made clear that pure reason, reflective thinking which examines the meanings of intangible

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Emphasis by PL.

<sup>54</sup> For the following: Arendt (2016): Sokrates. Apologie der Pluralität.

concepts and ideas such as justice, tolerance, virtue, freedom etc. is fundamentally different from intellectual thinking of common-sense and science. Secondly, she made clear how important the world of phenomena is, the world of real things and other people appearing to our senses in space and time.

From her observation that the language of thinking in the realms of intangible ideas is essentially metaphorical, it follows that the world of appearances inserts itself into thought.<sup>55</sup> Thus the realm of facts and the realm of meanings are connected; they are but two sides of the one world.

This implies that our thinking experience benefits from our wealth of experiences in the world that appears to us in time and space – the real world. A twofold transformation by the mind “de-senses” the particulars that are given to the senses. Imagination transforms a visible object into an invisible image which can be stored in our memory. These images are only the condition *sine qua non* for the second transformation. During its thinking activity the mind recollects and selects from the memory whatever arouses its interest sufficiently to induce concentration. It actively and deliberately remembers relevant images and transforms them into thought-objects.<sup>56</sup>

Interpretations of heritage are also based on recollections and selections of (collective) memories. Interpreters facilitate imaginations of the past. Aspects selected by the interpreter as well as by the visitor can provoke questions of meaning and confront preconceived meanings. At the same time, real world heritage provides a rich source for content that may be useful for thinking that seeks to find successful metaphors in order to express the intangible.

Consequently Arendt also stresses that there is nothing in the ordinary life of man that cannot become food for thought. All the metaphysical questions regarding intangibles such as concepts, ideas, categories and the like “that philosophy took as its special topics arise out of ordinary common-sense experiences; ‘reason’s need’ – the quest for meaning that prompts men to ask them – is in no way different from men’s need to tell the story of some happening they witnessed, or to write poems about it.”<sup>57</sup>

This philosophy reconciles the urge for freedom from doctrine and the appreciation of the factual world as it is given to our sense, which we inherited from the Enlightenment, with the human urge for deeper meaning, the driving force of the Romantics.<sup>58</sup>

Heritage interpretation based on this philosophical foundation is very well suited to put these insights into practice. If it succeeds in arousing reflective thinking which is genuinely similar to philosophical, or metaphysical thinking through first-hand experience of heritage it will lead to a desire to discover more.

Interpretation will then contribute to reconcile philosophical thinking with love of the diversity and plurality of the world; and by doing this it will facilitate the development of conscience.

This goes far beyond the role sometimes advocated for heritage interpretation: a mere communication technique used to persuade people of the missions of organisations that run heritage sites.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78

<sup>58</sup> For the split between the Enlightenment and the Romantics and its significance for heritage interpretation see James Carter’s study in this e-book.

<sup>59</sup> c.f. Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman: “We have written around the assumption that *interpretation must add value to achieving the mission of the organization.*” (in Brochu & Merriman (2002): *Personal Interpretation*. p. ix. Emphasis in the original). This led to a new definition of heritage interpretation by



Instead, according to the philosophy outlined here, heritage interpretation has rather its own purpose. If it aims to provoke reflective thinking and genuine interest in the world's plurality, then it pursues an educational goal which is an end in itself, that is to facilitate the actualisation of human dignity.

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This study on philosophy of heritage interpretation is based on reflections provoked by two thinkers, Freeman Tilden and Hannah Arendt, and on questions that evolved from doing heritage interpretation in a European context. It is clear that it will need to be substantiated by further research and further thinking. The brevity will certainly lead to many questions, and there is some risk of misunderstanding.

If this study succeeds in showing that there is a real value in examining the basic concepts that constitute the professional field of heritage interpretation, and that it is very worthwhile to reconsider its educational purpose in the context of European history and European values, then it has achieved its goal. Maybe it can also spark off more progressive thinking in general educational at schools in order to foster European societies that appreciate diversity and pluralism based on sound critical reflection.

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NAI as “a mission-based communication process” which significantly differs from Tilden’s original definition (see Ham 2013, p. 7). The problem of this new definition becomes evident in the context of European history. One only needs to imagine heritage organisations run by the Nazis or other totalitarian regimes. See also James Carter’s discussion of such functional definitions of heritage interpretation (p. 12f in this e-book).

## Annex: Reflections on terminology

### Terminology matters. Really.

Terminology is about how we use words to communicate concepts. A term is a word or an expression that is given a specific meaning within a specific context. Such specific meanings may differ from the meaning of the same word in other contexts or in everyday language.<sup>60</sup>

For a discipline or a professional field it is important to be clear about the terminology used. Otherwise communication within that discipline enters into difficulties. For a professional field which is based on an applied discipline requiring a lot of communication with other people it is important to be aware of how its terms are commonly used as words of everyday language. Furthermore for an applied discipline which is interconnected with various other disciplines it is important to take the terminology of those disciplines into account when coining or redefining its own terms. Hence it follows for the field of heritage interpretation that its technical terms should try to stay close to everyday language and to neighbouring disciplines, whenever this is possible.

Besides the question of which name, i.e. which word or expression we use to denote a concept, the more fundamental aspect is to clarify the meanings of the concepts themselves. This involves differentiating and discerning what needs to be distinguished in the context of our discipline, and it involves checking consistency and coherence of the discipline's terminology. That is an ongoing development process which reflects the progress of the discipline. It will probably never be possible to fix a binding terminology for an entire discipline, as there will always be different schools of thought and new findings. Nevertheless, a relative clarification can be achieved, at least for a period of time.

The following sections are an attempt to contribute to differentiate some key concepts that have been used and further developed in this study. One needs to keep in mind that it is neither based on a sound examination of the use of words in everyday language, nor on a systematic evaluation of the technical literature and schools of thought in the field of heritage interpretation or neighbouring disciplines. Therefore, the following should be taken as heuristic proposals which aim to incite a discourse on terminology and the philosophies that underlie heritage interpretation.

These philosophies and fundamental concepts structure the way how we perceive the reality of our professional life and how we approach our work and research. They structure our thinking and are paradigmatic for the discipline. Therefore the terminology of fundamental concepts is not a mere academic venture: it really matters.

### The tangible, the sub-tangible and the intangible

David Larsen deserves the credit for having discovered or at least first published the importance of intangibles for heritage interpretation, i.e. concepts that refer to "things" which do not appear and disappear to our senses. And he discovered the importance of connections linking tangible things to intangible meanings for heritage interpretation. "All successful interpretation can be described as linking a tangible resource to its intangible meanings. Effective interpretation is about connecting one to the other – tangibles and intangibles exist together."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> cf. Wiktionary "Terminology" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminology> [Accessed 15 August 2016]

<sup>61</sup> Larsen, David: Meaningful Interpretation. 2011[2003], p. 73

But Larsen's use of "intangibles" partly differs from the one here, as he also lists processes, systems, etc. under "intangibles".<sup>62</sup> He drew the line between the spheres of the intangible world and the tangible differently, and this line is obviously blurred. Larsen deliberately subsumes "wilderness" under both the concepts that refer to tangibles as well as to intangibles. He does not want to argue about which category "wilderness" belongs to, and he elaborates:

"Some people see wilderness as a real and specific place. Others see it as an abstract idea. It might seem a little complicated at first. In its simplest form, a tangible resource is a specific object, place, or person. But a tangible resource can also be any group of these tangibles, like all wilderness or all battlefields or the Navajo people. In larger groups the tangible resource becomes more abstract. Nevertheless it can be used as the tangible, the thing the interpreter wants the audience to care more about. (...)

You could use that place to provoke intellectual and emotional connections about the intangible meanings of wilderness."<sup>63</sup>

This passage is revealing as it makes an important point that not only the singular, specific object, place or person belongs to the sphere of tangibles, but also abstractions. However, not the "group of resources" becomes more abstract, but the *concept* that defines the group of tangible particulars can be more or less abstract. Therefore the abstract concept of "wilderness" denotes a group of rather diverse tangible places. The *concept* of "wilderness" belongs to what we called in short "tangible concepts" or just "tangibles", i.e. (actually intangible) concepts that denote a class of tangible things etc. which appear in time and space.<sup>64</sup> But why did he also mention it as an example for intangibles? The last sentence is the only hint he gave. However, it only states that a particular wilderness place or all concrete wilderness places or the concept of "wilderness" can be connected with intangible meanings.

Such a connection of tangibles with intangible meanings, however, is exactly what interpretation essentially is all about. That we can interpret wilderness in the light of intangible concepts and ideas, such as harmony, beauty, cruelty, freedom, purity and so on, is no argument that the abstract concept of wilderness itself denotes something genuinely intangible. The same applies for battlefields and the like.

Arendt's distinction between "concepts of reason" and "concepts of intellect" which goes back to Kant<sup>65</sup> can help to draw a clearer line in order to establish a more coherent terminology. The intellect (*Verstand*) desires to grasp what is given to our senses. The intellect asks what something is or whether it exists at all and how it functions and interacts in the physical world which appears to our senses. Reason takes existence, e.g. of wilderness, for granted and asks what it means for it to be. If we parallel the intangibles – the concepts that refer to intangible meanings – with concepts of reason and tangibles/sub-tangibles with the concepts of intellect, then it should be evident that wilderness belongs to the tangibles. Humans can travel to a wilderness place and enjoy it. They can participate in an interpretive programme there.

The same is true for highly abstract concepts such as "process" and "system" in scientific contexts. They then refer not only to tangibles but also sub-tangibles, parts or elements that interact with each other, e.g. the processes involved in the carbon-cycles and energy flows of ecosystems that exist and change in time and space. But the fact that carbon atoms are invisible to our senses

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 179f

<sup>64</sup> c.f. p. 32 in this e-book

<sup>65</sup> Arendt (1978), p. 57, see also p. 33f.

does not qualify them for the metaphysical category of intangibles. However, “system” is so abstract that it can also be used for philosophical and other metaphysical systems of interrelated intangible concepts and ideas.

### **Symbols and icons – tangibles which are linked to intangible meanings**

Larsen’s temptation to subsume “wilderness” also under the category of intangibles is nevertheless founded in experience. For many people wilderness is very closely linked to the sphere of intangibles. The source for this confusion becomes more evident with other, more concrete concepts. Sam Ham lists “blood” and “family” in a list of universal concepts and defines “universal concepts” as “intangible or symbolic meanings that hold special significance for humans”.<sup>66</sup> We will discuss “universals” later.

Here, the important point is that Ham rightfully separates intangibles from symbols. They are not the same. When humans talk about “blood” this can be done in order to denote a very tangible liquid substance. In medicine blood is sampled and examined in order to identify the reason of an illness. But “blood” can also be used as a symbol that refers to intangibles such as life or sacrifice. It can also symbolise something very different which is not an intangible but a tangible such as biological kinship. Remember so-called “blood relationships” such as family, clan, tribe, people and race, i.e. groups identified through common ancestors which can be treated as “great groups” and somehow related to intangibles (e.g. the Nazi concepts of “Aryan blood” and “racial defilement”). Also race, people and family are tangibles, or concepts of intellect. But in some belief systems these tangibles are closely linked to intangibles such as superiority and inferiority, solidarity, love, struggle (of a people) for survival, or god’s chosen people. These tangible concepts of biological kinship are then themselves loaded with symbolic connotation and they lend their symbolic meaning in some contexts to blood. There are various symbolic meanings of the tangible liquid “blood” which can play an important role for many ideologies and most religions.

A symbol is not an intangible in itself, but it is a tangible which is not used according to its actual tangible meaning but to represent intangibles. Thus symbols are tangible/intangible links themselves and are subject to interpretation. The same tangible concept can therefore be connected with very different and even contradictory intangible meanings. It depends on culture and tradition which tangible things are used as symbols in order to represent certain intangible meanings in certain contexts. Wilderness is for many people a symbol for freedom, beauty and harmony. For others it is linked to threat, danger, loneliness and mercilessness.

Larsen was clear about such tangible/intangible links when he introduced the concept of “icon”. An icon is a particular tangible thing that can be interpreted in the light of intangible meanings. He then showed that abstract concepts that denote a group of physical things, as well as events, can be tangibles (i.e. concepts that refer to a group or class of tangible things). An abstract tangible concept is not an icon, as it is not a singular thing but denotes a class of things; but it can be a symbol. Thus an “icon” refers to a particular thing and a symbol is an abstract concept referring to a class of tangible things which reason then treats as a tangible/intangible link in order to represent intangible concepts of reason.

From this point of view, we need to look briefly at Sam Ham’s glossary definition of “intangible meaning”<sup>67</sup>:

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<sup>66</sup> Ham (2013), *ibid.*, p. 33ff

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252

“An attribute of something that cannot be objectively verified through one of the senses. Intangible meanings are symbolic; they describe what something represents to a person, and they rely more on metaphor and subjective association than logic.”

The first sentence fits very well to our definition of intangibles as “concepts of reason”, in contrast to “concepts of intellect”. But an *intangible concept or intangible meaning of reason* such as freedom, understanding, love etc. *is not symbolic in itself*. These are meta-physical concepts in their own right and categorically different from the tangible concepts. They are accessible to logic in that they are meaningful and we can examine those meanings for their coherence or inconsistencies. Ham is right that our ability to express intangible concepts and ideas often relies on metaphors. For example, human reason can think of light and enlightening (i.e. something belonging to the physical world) as a metaphoric symbol for the mind's understanding. But then, the tangible concept of “light” is used to refer to the intangible concept of “understanding”. Light is then treated as a symbol. But the proper intangible in this example is “understanding”. And the concept of “understanding” is not symbolic.

### Intangible heritage

Another possible source for confusion is the more recent use of “intangible” in order to qualify a certain type of heritage. The UNESCO defines “intangible cultural heritage” as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”.<sup>68</sup>

This use of the word “intangible” as part of the technical term “intangible heritage” differs significantly from the word referring to “concepts of reason”. Larson made clear that events and people from the past also belong to the sphere of tangibles as well as natural events such as rockslides or geological periods.<sup>69</sup> They all appeared in time and space. They are gone, but they have been incidents in the physical world. The same applies to most of the “intangible heritage” which UNESCO refers to. A practice, a representation, an expression, all are happening in the physical world and can be perceived by humans with their senses. A piece of music is tangible for our ears while it is performed and a religious ritual is tangible. However it is also highly symbolic and linked to intangible, spiritual meanings.

The “intangible heritage” of the UNESCO Convention belongs to the physical world but often, maybe always, refers to intangible meanings or is taken as a symbolic representation of an intangible idea. In contrast to built heritage and artefacts from the past, most of it is rather ephemeral, it appears only while it is performed by humans. Nevertheless contemporary or past events belong to the world of appearances, similar to natural events which might even last only for seconds such as a lightning or a thunder.

Probably, all kinds of heritage are part of the tangible world of appearances. And probably all heritage which is considered significant and worth to be preserved is at least for some people in some way linked to intangible ideas. Otherwise nobody would care about it. Consequently all heritage can be subject to interpretation.

<sup>68</sup> UNESCO (2003): Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Article 2 – Definitions

<sup>69</sup> Larsen, *ibid.*, p. 180

## Universals

Unsurprisingly concerning the concept of “universals” we can find another variant of the same fundamental problem. Larsen defined a “universal concept” as an *intangible* meaning that has significance to almost everyone.<sup>70</sup> And we already saw, that Ham follows him in his short definition of “universals” as “*intangible or symbolic* meanings that hold special significance for humans”. Also the longer glossary definition refers only to intangibles and symbols.<sup>71</sup> We already saw that symbols are not a certain type of concept but tangibles that are used to represent intangible meanings. They are a special kind of relation between two concepts that belong to different spheres.

Still intangibles – and only intangibles – would remain as the class of concepts to which universals belong. Or in other words, according to those definitions universals would be a sub-set of intangible concepts.

Such a definition of “universal concept” as a technical term in the field of interpretation is possible; it is neither true nor false. But one should take the meanings of “universal” and “universals” in other disciplines and common language into account.

In the context of metaphysics – i.e. in our context – the noun “universal” means something very similar to our notion of “concept”.<sup>72</sup> Traditionally, universals were the opposite of the particular, the singular concrete thing in time and space as it is given to our sense perception. Therefore the notion of ‘universals’ has always been applied also to what we called “tangible concepts”. In order to avoid confusion it is therefore better to define “universals” more broadly as “all kinds of concepts that almost every human is familiar with, independent from cultural background”. In other words, “universals” would be concepts for which words or expressions exist in almost all languages.

In common language the adjective “universal” means “common to all members of a group or class” and “common to all society; world-wide”.<sup>73</sup> The expression “universal concept” would then also be understood in the wider meaning referring to intangibles as well as tangibles and sub-tangibles. “Water”, “fingernail”, “tree”, “lightning” many tangibles would be subsumed by non-experts, as well as by philosophers under “universal concepts” or “universals”.

In order to avoid misunderstandings or the necessity to always define the special meaning of the word as a technical term within heritage interpretation, one could just use the phrases “universal intangibles” or “intangible universals” in the context of heritage interpretation. Both would say the same.

## The different meanings of “meaningful”

The concept of “meaning” in the context of this study and Tilden’s work about the philosophy of interpretation must not be confused with the term Sam Ham introduced to the field of heritage interpretation.<sup>74</sup> “Meaning”, in the sense Tilden used the concept, obviously means that an intangible idea is revealed which is – or can be – linked to a heritage object, event or place. In this way the word “meaning” refers to “the symbolic value of something” or “the significance of a thing”

<sup>70</sup> Larsen, *ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>71</sup> Ham (2013), *ibid.*, p. 257. (Emphasis by PL)

<sup>72</sup> cf. Wikipedia: Universal (metaphysics). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_\(metaphysics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_(metaphysics)) [Accessed: 11 August 2016]

<sup>73</sup> Wiktionary: universal. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/universal#Adjective> [Accessed: 11 August 2016]

<sup>74</sup> Ham, S. (1992): *Environmental interpretation*. p. 12. And Ham, S. (2013): *Interpretation – Making a Difference on Purpose*. p. 31

for example “the meaning of life”.<sup>75</sup> For this notion of meaning talking about a “deeper meaning” makes sense. We can, for example, ask what the fall of the Iron Curtain means for the European Union.

Ham uses “meaningful” in a very different sense when he explains that “information is meaningful (...) because we’re able to connect it to something already inside our brains.” This refers to what the word “meaning” means in the discipline of semantics: “the objects or concept that a word or phrase denotes, or that which a sentence says”. In this semantic sense, the dimension of depth does not make much sense in connection with meaning. Semantic meaning refers to the definition and denotation of a concept.<sup>76</sup>

This problem of different meanings of “meaningful” is again related to the problem of intangibles as concepts of reason versus tangibles/sub-tangibles as concepts of intellect.

Any factual information that uses words and concepts the reader is already familiar with is meaningful in this semantic sense. In our example walk, the man might say to the woman “the farmhouse on the other side of the creek is built against the slope”. This statement would be a meaningful sentence in the semantic sense Ham refers to. The woman would perfectly understand the sentence and would be able to apply it to what appears to her senses. Nevertheless for Tilden it would be mere factual information in contrast to the revelation of a significant, i.e. deeper, meaning that lies behind any statement of fact. And such a mere factual statement, although she is able to decode the words, would be meaningless in the sense of significant deeper meaning for the woman. It would be irrelevant despite being communication that is perfectly easy to understand in terms of semantic meaning.

Mere facts, mere explanations of scientific facts are – as such – not relevant. They may be relevant when they play a role in a meaningful context.

We already discussed the underlying problem that every concept is essentially intangible.<sup>77</sup> All *concepts* belong to the sphere of the human mind and spirit. However, a certain class of concepts denotes tangible things, events, processes etc. that are accessible through our senses. Others are shaped in a similar way, refer to the sub-tangible sphere and are verifiable by empirical data. Both belong to the realms of intellect and are fundamentally different from concepts of reason that refer to intangible entities and ideas. And only the latter are meaningful in the deeper sense Tilden used the word in contrast to factual information.

## Modes of thinking

When Arendt writes that Eichmann did not think<sup>78</sup>, then she refers to a specific meaning of the word “thinking” which is narrower than in common use. It can take a while until one discovers that her notion of thinking is what is called “reflective thinking” in this paper.

**Reflective thinking** is the soundless solitary dialogue in which the I engages with itself<sup>79</sup> when we actively examine our understanding of the meaning(s) of concepts, ideas and thoughts. It is at the same time *pure thinking*. Every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by

<sup>75</sup> cf. Wiktionary “Meaning” <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/meaning> [Accessed 15 August 2016]

<sup>76</sup> Both meanings of “meaning” have been used in this paper, too. See above the discussion of why terminology matters, p. 48, for the semantic context. Normally the context indicates which meaning of the word “meaningful” a speaker refers to.

<sup>77</sup> p. 32

<sup>78</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 74f

practical needs and aims is “out of order”<sup>80</sup>, an extraordinary state of the mind. It requires an interruption to any ordinary activities of daily life and “demands a *stop-and-think*”.<sup>81</sup> All mental activities, pure thinking but also willing and judging require a deliberate withdrawal from our involvement in the present world as it appears to our senses.<sup>82</sup> However, the objects of thinking, the mind’s subject matter, are given in the world and arise from one’s life in this world.<sup>83</sup>

**Ordinary thinking** connects *preconceived* concepts to thoughts in order to create knowledge or to meet practical needs and aims. It takes these preconceived concepts for granted and does not question what they mean. Intellectual thinking is not an inner dialogue, but a dialogue with the world, i.e. with what can be perceived by the senses, with models of the physical world that explain what can be perceived or with descriptions and thoughts that another person communicates through language.

It seems as if reflective thinking was related with the sphere of intangibles (concepts of reason) while ordinary thinking was linked with the tangibles and sub-tangibles (concepts of intellect). But there is a complication: in ordinary life we also employ our ordinary thinking to connect preconceived concepts that refer to intangibles, e.g. when we consider a concrete behaviour as “unfair”. On the other hand, we can also reflect on the meaning of concepts which refer to tangible things such as “house”, “barn”, “tent” etc.

Even children who probably never reflected on the meaning of “fairness” may have a concept of fairness available and can apply it to respective situations. Probably all of us acquire all concepts more or less unconsciously in ordinary thinking, i.e. in sleepwalker mode, when we learn a language and apply our concepts to the world that appears to our senses. This includes talking with other people or reading books. In a similar way we more or less unconsciously adjust concepts according to our experience, usually without giving account to ourselves of what we are doing. We can only reflect upon what we have already available, i.e. preconceived concepts and ideas.

In interpretive thinking we also connect preconceived intangible concepts of reason with tangibles. Thus interpretive thinking is also a kind of ordinary thinking. But, as we have seen<sup>84</sup>, it can lead to questions of meaning which can arouse reflective thinking.

The different modes of thinking have consequences for our self-awareness and identity. In sense perception, normal common-sense reasoning, normal science and interpretive thinking, our consciousness follows something or someone in the world and responds to this outside world as it appears to the mind. This results in a very basic state of self-awareness, sheer self-awareness which achieves nothing more than an awareness of the sameness of the I-am. In ordinary, non-reflective thinking “I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am”.<sup>85</sup> According to Arendt, this basic awareness of the I-am guarantees the identical continuity of the self throughout the manifold representations, experiences, and memories of a lifetime. In the mode of common sense and ordinary thinking, this sheer self-awareness is not an activity, but it accompanies all other activities thus guaranteeing an “unconsciously conscious” altogether *silent* I-am-I.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Heidegger cit. by Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 78

<sup>81</sup> Arendt, *ibid.* (emphasis by H.A.)

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56 and p. 75f.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70

<sup>84</sup> Cf. p. 36ff.

<sup>85</sup> Kant (1963): Critique of Pure Reason. B151. Cit. in Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 74

<sup>86</sup> Arendt (1978), *ibid.*, p. 75



This silence is probably the deeper reason why people who have not developed a habit of reflective thinking are seeking to establish their identity through belonging to a distinguished “great group”. Heritage interpretation that does not arouse reflective thinking, but offers one meaningful interpretation satisfying this need of belonging, remains in this mode of unconsciously conscious, silent I-am-I. Maybe, this way of identity-making is a kind of surrogate for a deeper need.

On the other hand, reflective thinking can be understood as the actualisation of the original duality of the me and myself which is inherent in all consciousness. The inner dialogue of reflection is *soundless, but not silent*.<sup>87</sup> This reflective thinking is sheer activity<sup>88</sup>, and in comparison to normal thinking it is like an awakening from sleepwalking.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 74f.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 191

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