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## STUDIE/ARTICLES

# INTERPRETING CONTESTED HERITAGE: MUSEALIZATION OF THE IDEA OF RECONCILIATION ON TIKTOK

MILICA BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ

<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2025-1-1>**ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:**

In the domain of heritage governance, interpreting the remnants of the past that we would prefer to forget presents the greatest challenge for heritage managers. Although this issue has gained attention since the end of World War II, civil and inter-ethnic conflicts at the close of the 20th century have further amplified its relevance. These struggles were characterized by the deliberate destruction of others' heritage. If continuity with the past shapes our identity, bestows uniqueness, and differentiates us from others, can these remnants, interpreted from multiple perspectives, foster reconciliation? Who should determine what we will forget and remember, what we will preserve, and how we will interpret it? These are just some of the questions to which, even today, we have no precise answers, despite numerous UNESCO conventions and published works by leading experts. Starting from the premise that it is essential to change perspectives and approach the issue from the grassroots level, through engagement with local communities and universities, this paper aims to explore whether and to what extent it is possible to influence young people's attitudes toward the unwanted legacy of the past; how to musealize the concept of reconciliation, and whether TikTok, as a mode of communication, serves as an appropriate tool for

its heritagization. The research was conducted during the summer semester of 2024 as part of the project *Back to the Future or How to Make Peace with the Past in order to Create a Better Tomorrow Together*, supported through the call *Towards a Culture of Shared Future in Southeast Europe* from the Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe.

**Interpretace sporného dědictví: muzealizace konceptu smíření na TikToku**

V oblasti správy kulturního dědictví představuje největší výzvu pro odpovědné subjekty interpretace pozůstatků minulosti, na kterou bychom nejraději zapomněli. Ačkoli tato problematika vzbuzovala pozornost už od konce druhé světové války, občanské a mezinárodní konflikty na konci 20. století její význam ještě umocnily. Tyto boje byly charakterizovány záměrným ničením kulturního dědictví druhých. Jestliže kontinuita s minulostí utváří naši identitu, propůjčuje nám jedinečnost a odlišuje nás od ostatních, mohly by tyto pozůstatky, interpretované z více úhlů pohledu, být cestou ke smíření? Kdo by měl určovat, co zapomeneme a co si budeme pamatovat, co zachováme a jak to budeme interpretovat? To jsou jen některé z otázek, na které ani dnes, navzdory četným úmluvám UNESCO a publikovaným pracím předních odborníků, nemáme

přesné odpovědi. Vycházíme-li z předpokladu, že je nezbytné změnit úhel pohledu a přistoupit k celému problému z nejnižší úrovně, prostřednictvím kontaktu s místními komunitami a univerzitami, je cílem tohoto příspěvku prozkoumat, zda a do jaké míry je možné ovlivnit postoje mladých lidí k nežádoucímu dědictví minulosti, jak muzealizovat koncept smíření a zda TikTok jako metoda komunikace je vhodným nástrojem pro jeho integraci do sféry kulturního dědictví. Výzkum probíhal v průběhu letního semestru 2024 v rámci projektu *Návrat do budoucnosti aneb Jak se smířit s minulostí, abychom společně vytvořili lepší zítřek*, podpořeného prostřednictvím výzvy Regionální sítě jihoevropských center postgraduálních studií *Za kulturu sdílené budoucnosti v jihovýchodní Evropě*.

**KEYWORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:**

*contested heritage – interpretation – musealization – intangible heritage – reconciliation – TikTok sporné dědictví – interpretace – muzealizace – nehmotné dědictví – smíření – TikTok*

Seen as a process, interpretation encompasses both social and cultural discourse simultaneously. Due to its nature, it cannot be confined solely to definitions, nor can it be mastered only by reading manuals, practicing communication

skills, or through informal learning and examples of good practice. This is particularly obvious when we approach interpretation from a disciplinary angle – then the tasks become even more varied, with explaining being just one of them.

Heritage interpretation, a topic that has been present in the public sphere since the first collections were opened, became the focus of scientific research after Tilden<sup>1</sup> publicized six principles of interpretation in 1957. Although the profession took nearly 50 years to formally address this issue through the *Charleston Declaration on Heritage Interpretation* in 2005, interest in best explaining and effectively communicating the messages that heritage conveys has not diminished. The modern understanding of heritage supports this: the rising interest in studying everything passed down through generations stems from the innate human need to perceive the past as peaceful and stable, while the future remains uncertain. At the end of the 20th century, David Lowenthal eloquently discussed this, noting that dissatisfaction with the present and fear of the future lead people to look back with nostalgia, equating beauty with livability, with heritage being formed through selective (subjective) reenactment and interpretations of history.<sup>2</sup>

1 Freeman Tilden began his career as a reporter, novelist and newspaper columnist writing about nature. When he was invited to work for the National Park Service, Tilden accepted the challenge. After analyzing the work of interpreters in national parks in detail for many years, he shared his findings in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, published in 1957. Although he is often mentioned in the literature as the first interpreter, there was actually his predecessor – Enos Mills, who was one of the most famous mountain guides of the late 19th and early 20th century. He experimented with various interpretation techniques, wrote books and lectured on the art and theory of interpretation. More in NOWACKI, Marek. *Heritage Interpretation*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo AWF w Poznaniu, 2012.

2 Ibidem, p. 5.

But let's return to the interpretation of heritage. In the broadest context, we can describe it as an educational activity to establish the meanings of natural and cultural, that is, material and intangible heritage, through the most diverse media. Freeman Tilden saw it as a process in which meanings are formed by using original objects, first-hand experience, and media rather than as the mere transmission of factual information.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it should help heritage users not only to understand its basic meaning but also to develop sensitivity to their environment and understand the importance of history, culture, art, and society as a whole. And while what happened remains a fact forever, its interpretation is subject to change.<sup>4</sup>

### Contested but not contaminated

It seems that our interest in historical content has never been greater, and our excessive appetite for learning about the past is satisfied by a wide range of offers, including YouTube channels and TV series, podcasts, documentaries, magazines, books, and an increasing number of living history museums. Nevertheless, although by its very nature not everything that surrounds us is automatically heritage (or the past), everything can become heritage.<sup>5</sup> This means that heritage is created through a conscious, creative process, deliberately directed to a specific recipient. However, the basic criterion for the one to whom the inheritance is intended is an act of free will, an act of independent choice, that is, a decision to recognize the heritage as one's own.

3 TILDEN, Freeman. *Interpreting our heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977, p. 8.

4 ASMAN, Alaida. *Duga senka prošlosti*. Beograd: XX vek, 2011, pp. 16–28.

5 HOWARD, Peter. *Heritage: management, interpretation, identity*. London: Continuum, 2003, p. 7.

The explanation for this hypothesis is simple: not all we inherited from past generations is something we want to own and take responsibility for.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), even today, we do not have a precise recipe to teach us how to introduce interested individuals to what we have inherited and chosen to preserve for future generations. In times of crisis, the role of heritage interpretation and its potential relevance for fostering public appreciation of human rights and universal values is immeasurable because in such situations, “one person's inheritance is the disinheritance of another”.<sup>7</sup> Such different narratives following the same event can lead to what we call dissonance in the interpretation of heritage, i.e., unwanted, contested, dark, etc., legacy of the past.<sup>8</sup> In other words, and within the context of heritage, dissonance usually means the diversity of meanings attached to it, or the non-existence of agreement in the manner that heritage is remembered, represented, understood and interpreted by different actors.<sup>9</sup> Since dissonance is a quality that exists in every heritage, from that point of view, another question naturally arises – why do we bother to emphasize it?<sup>10</sup> Sometimes that

6 NOWACKI, Marek. *Heritage Interpretation*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo AWF w Poznaniu, 2012, p. 6.

7 TURGEON, Luk. The Politics and the Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage / Les politiques et les pratiques du patrimoine culturel immatériel. *Ethnologies*. 2014, vol. 36, no. 1–2, p. 9.

8 BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. *(Ne)željeno nasleđe u prostorima pamćenja. Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena: Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena*. Beograd: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju, 2015.

9 TUNBRIDGE, John E. and ASHWORTH, Gregory John. *Dissonant heritage: the management of the past as a resource in conflict*. Chichester, New York: J. Wiley, 1996, pp. 20–33.

10 ASHWORTH, Gregory John and GRAHAM, Brian. *Heritage, Identity and Europe*. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*. 1997,

dissonance is vague and not seen as an interpretative problem, because we have a long-term arrangement about what certain heritage is, what it means and represents. But if it comes to the situation that circumstances are changed, that new standpoints are found (whether they are scientific/factual or political/ideological) and some other meanings are detected, it becomes more evident. Then, as a result, we can have discordance which can lead to political struggles, national tensions or regional conflicts.<sup>11</sup> According to Tunbridge and Ashworth, dissonance is really visible when:

- 1) heritage within itself has opposing messages, which consumers need to integrate to create its meaning;
- 2) the message is received in a different way than anticipated;
- 3) we have some political changes, since heritage messages are dependent on the values that certain society has;
- 4) we have dissonance caused by the undesired heritage, or so to say negative legacies from the past.<sup>12</sup>

vol. 88, no. 4, p. 381; SILVÉN, Eva and BJÖRKLUND, Anders. Detecting Difficulty. In: SILVÉN, Eva and BJÖRKLUND, Anders (ed.). *Svåra saker: Ting och berättelser som upprör och berör*. Stockholm: Nordiska museets förlag, 2006, p. 263.

<sup>11</sup> HARRISON, Rodney. The Politics of Heritage. In: FAIRCLOUGH, Graham; HARRISON, Rodney; SCHOFIELD, John and JAMESON, John H. Jnr. (ed.). *The Heritage Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 154–196; BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. Dissonance – a Pretty Harsh Term to Define Towards Understanding the Importance of Safeguarding the Pluralism of Heritage Meanings in Public Spaces. In: TANUROVSKA KJULAVSKOVSKI, Biljana; BODROŽIĆ, Nataša and KACHAKOVA, Violeta (ed.). *Modelling public space(s) in culture: rethinking institutional practices in culture and historical (dis)continuities*. Skopje: Lokomotiva – Centre for new Initiatives in arts and culture, 2018, pp. 218–224.

<sup>12</sup> TUNBRIDGE, John E. and ASHWORTH, Gregory John. *Dissonant heritage: the management of the past as a resource in conflict*. Chichester, New York: J. Wiley, 1996, p. 29.

In the past, the dominant approach was to reduce it and to consult professionals who were going to create the only truth. That kind of approach, but also the fact that dissonance was mainly considered in the context of war legacies, has ascribed to it a negative connotation. An interpretation was often limited to authorized heritage discourse, as defined by L. Smith,<sup>13</sup> and cultivated public appreciation, a phenomenon Tilden wrote about. However, for more than a decade, there has been a tendency to insist on the pluralism of meanings and we are accepting dissonance as a driving force for heritage safeguarding.<sup>14</sup> Silberman suggests that there are three different cultural concepts and interpretive approaches for the management of (contested) heritage. In the first place, he states the interpretation that implies objective documentation, then interpretation which is an expression of collective identity; and finally, an interpretation that serves as a promotion of the universal value of cultural diversity.<sup>15</sup>

UNESCO has long been recognized as an influential force shaping international heritage practice through the prism of respect for human rights. Action policies began with the *World Heritage Convention* of 1972, continued with the *Convention on the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), and finally consolidated through the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the*

<sup>13</sup> SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. *(Ne)željeno nasleđe u prostorima pamćenja. Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena: Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena*. Beograd: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> SILBERMAN, Neil A. Heritage interpretation and human rights: documenting diversity, expressing identity, or establishing universal principles? *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 2012, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 245–256.

*Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005). Yet, none of those conventions gave a clear and precise vision of what exactly human rights are or how their realization is monitored by those dealing with heritage.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, even studies on peacebuilding and reconciliation through cultural heritage have not yielded greater or concrete results globally. The explanation for that is rather simple. If we observe heritage as something related to individual and collective identity, then we can conclude that conflicts between people arise because we are socialized to favor indicators that include us in a certain category while excluding others from our group, as well as us from belonging to their culture. Thus, culture includes and excludes, and the heritage associated with it has the power to impose a certain view of the world. Perceptions of the past are closely related to current hierarchies, and the voices of the ruling elites usually prevail.<sup>17</sup> One of the models to overcome these problems in reconciliation work is Allport's "contact hypothesis" from 1954, which is based on the assumption that encounters between hostile groups can help in reducing antagonisms. Allport believed that ignorance of the perspectives of "the others" was the result of prejudice and fear, and therefore suggested that members of the conflicting parties get to know each other, learn important facts about each other, and so on to mitigate mutual disagreements, develop positive emotions and attitudes.<sup>18</sup> However,

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> HARRISON, David. Introduction: Contested Narratives in the Domain of World Heritage. *Current Issues in Tourism*. 2004, vol. 7, no. 4–5, p. 288.

<sup>18</sup> HAJIR, Basma. Between Idealism and Realism: Critical Peace Education in Divided Post-Conflict Contexts. Online. *Cambridge Open-Review Educational Research e-Journal*. 2019, vol. 6, p. 83. Available from: <https://cerj.educ.cam.ac.uk/archive/v62019/CORERJ-Journal->

it is worth mentioning that Allport also envisaged some prerequisites for effective contact in these encounters, such as equal status, support from institutions and the wider public, etc. Later researchers added discussions on controversial issues, then an introduction to the concept of multiculturalism, and the focus was also on methods of learning about provocative events from history. All of this together was ultimately supposed to lead to the development of critical awareness among citizens.<sup>19</sup>

Most of today's scholars do not believe that history can be reduced to a simple story of the progress of civilization – about good people doing good things and bad people doing bad things. The events of the past are not fiction – they are real life. And real life is rarely one-sided. Thus, our past, on the one hand, is rich in narratives of heroism, courage, and innovation; valuable buildings, monuments, movable heritage; and achievements that we can rightly be proud of. At the same time, this does not exclude the possibility of being critical and questioning certain aspects of it. That is why it is important to discuss the value of heritage in schools to systematically and adequately manage its potential in reconciliation processes. Getting to know “others” and avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping, finding points of unity, building cultural bridges, and integrating our own with the culture of others to open a common symbolic space for action are possible directions in which interpretation should move.<sup>20</sup>

Volume6-05-BetweenIdealismAndRealism.pdf. [accessed 2025-05-28].

19 Ibidem, p. 85.

20 SALACUSE, Jeswald W. Intercultural Negotiation in Intercultural Business. *Group Decision and Negotiation*. 1999, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 217–236; as well as BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. Opšti pogled na stanje i sudbinu disonantnog kulturnog nasleđa drugih u Evropi i svetu. In: VOJVODIĆ, Dragan (ed.). *Zaštita*,

Otherwise, the interpretation of dissonant heritage can be a source of new contestation.<sup>21</sup>

### Socialization for musealization: microlearning for macro impact

Social networks are web services that allow individuals to build public or semi-public profiles, create digital content, publish it online, and choose other users to connect with and view their content. In its original form, new media represent virtual spaces for social interaction and maintaining relationships with friends and colleagues, but also for public affirmation of one's status in a group.<sup>22</sup> With 1.1 billion active users worldwide, TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social media platforms. The lockdown in 2020, due to the coronavirus, also partially contributed to this.<sup>23</sup> Unlike other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, where the audience is primarily users who follow a certain page, the TikTok algorithm works differently. When a video is published on TikTok, its algorithm shares it on the feeds of people who have shown interest in videos with similar content, regardless of whether they follow the creator of the clip or not. So, the content has a huge, predominantly young audience. Another aspect that sets TikTok apart from other social media apps is the platform's anonymity. Unlike

*očuvanje i afirmacija srpskog kulturnog nasleđa na Kosovu i Metohiji*. Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2023, pp. 65–84.

21 HUANG, Shu-Mei. World Heritage Interpretation and Reconciliation. In: SILBERMAN, Neil A. (ed.). *World Heritage: 50 years of moving forward. An Anthology of World Heritage Interpretation and Presentation*. Seoul: International Centre for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites under the auspices of UNESCO (Korea), 2022, pp. 126–145.

22 BOYD, Danah M. and ELLISON, Nicole B. Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 2007, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 210–230.

23 CHESTERTON, Eleanor. *The Power of TikTok to Engage Young People in Museums*. Yorkshire: Ignite, 2021.

Facebook, where your comments are linked to an identifiable public profile, TikTok profiles do not need to be related to a user's identity. This anonymity has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it allows asking questions that individuals would never have the courage to ask in real life. On the other hand, it also creates an environment full of potential abuses. When it comes to the topic of misuses, it should be mentioned that TikTok has faced scrutiny regarding its data collection practices and how user data is stored and shared. Studies indicate that TikTok collects extensive user data, including location and browsing history, raising significant cybersecurity and privacy issues. This leads to fears among users regarding their personal information being misused or inadequately protected from breaches.<sup>24</sup> There is also concern with the addictive nature of TikTok, characterized by its endless stream of short videos, which can lead to compulsive usage patterns, particularly in young users. The platform's design encourages uncritical consumption and sharing of content, which can normalize harmful trends and behaviors. This exposure can influence young users' perceptions of reality.<sup>25</sup>

The creators of the TikTok platform made a significant move by encouraging the creation of educational content through the #LearnOnTikTok initiative. However, while TikTok presents opportunities for informal education and cultural

24 ACQUISTI, Alessandro and GROSS, Ralph. Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook. Online. In: *Springer Nature Link*. 2006, pp. 36–58. Available from: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/11957454\\_3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/11957454_3). [accessed 2025-05-28].

25 DACKA, Monika. Social media challenges among adolescents – unconscious danger or peer pressure? Dangerous consequences of modern adolescents' games. *Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna*. 2024, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 79–88.

dissemination, it simultaneously encounters significant limitations, i.e., the potential for misinformation is high, given the platform's algorithm-driven content curation. Users may engage with poorly validated information or pseudoscience under the guise of learning. The challenge lies in ensuring that educational content is credible and that young users develop critical thinking skills to discern reliable information from misleading updates.<sup>26</sup>

Since one of the roles of the museum is to educate the audience, in the virtual world, this is even simpler. New media are more interactive, have a wider audience, are faster, and enable feedback from the audience. Communication can be done at any time and from any place, and in addition to giving people certain information, it also creates the habit of following specific content. Moreover, thanks to them, heritage can be seen by those who would not even be aware of it in reality. By passing on this data, each individual can become a popularizer and guardian of heritage.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the use of TikTok for promoting cultural heritage and musealization must also be approached critically. While it democratizes access to culture, this method risks oversimplifying complex narratives or commodifying cultural expressions. Additionally, the tension between entertainment value and educational integrity poses a challenge for effective cultural mediation. To sum up, if the use of TikTok is approached cautiously and critically, it can be a unique contribution to education about the

importance of cultural heritage, as well as its musealization.

The creation of new online memory communities through social networks can be provided by methods such as microlearning. We could define it as a strategy of independent learning of short, clearly defined content to acquire specific knowledge and competencies concerning the set learning goal. According to researchers who studied microlearning, it is an excellent way to engage and motivate students who have grown up with digital technologies, instant information, and social networks in the learning process. Still, when we talk about microlearning, it is important to indicate that it is not based on the mere division of larger units into smaller parts to shorten the length of the educational content. For example, a few hours of a classic "ex-cathedra" lecture, when divided into shorter units, do not represent microlearning. The activities on which microlearning is based mostly refer to short lessons, projects, or courses, which are created so that students get short, key information.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Case study: remembering (not) to forget**

How the patterns of remembrance and memory form identity and the relationship to the past through their transmission, invention, suppression, and forgetting, both in science and collective memory, are studied by the culture of memory. As a discipline, it stood out at the end of the 20th century, and unlike the art of memory, which is individual, the culture of memory

refers to a group.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, collective memory constitutes a series of patterns and contents that people learn, interpret, and change in order not to incorporate them into their own identity. Since the same event will be seen and interpreted differently by numerous people, collective memory does not represent the sum of individual memories. It is an expression of the needs of a group at a certain moment and is formed in the constant tension between private and official politics of memory.<sup>30</sup> As the group aspirations change over time, such memory is not static, and when that group framework disappears, forgetting will occur.

In the Western Balkans region, changes in political climate are frequent and can easily be traced in the culture of remembrance and heritage as one of its representatives. Erasing the traces of the past and forgetting becomes even more evident when it comes to an unwanted legacy of the past. Answers to the questions of why certain contents from the past persist, and others disappear, why we are preserving contested heritage, and for whom, pale in front of the fact that what we choose to cherish is much more important than how we will interpret it later.<sup>31</sup> In addition, questions are raised whether, through musealization, interpretation, and heritagization of those remains of the past, we can contribute to reconciliation processes in multi-ethnic communities that have gone through wars or civil conflicts; who should deal with it and which

<sup>26</sup> WINEBURG, Sam and MCGREW, Sarah. Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information. *Teachers College Record*. 2019, vol. 121, pp. 1–55.

<sup>27</sup> QIU, Yuheng. New Media and Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Communications in Humanities Research*. 2023, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 358–364.

<sup>28</sup> CONDE-CABALLERO, David; CASTILLO-SARMIENTO, Carlos A.; BALLESTEROS-YÁNEZ, Inmaculada; RIVERO-JIMÉNEZ, Borja and MARIANO-JUÁREZ, Lorenzo. Microlearning through TikTok in Higher Education. An evaluation of uses and potentials. *Education and Information Technologies*. 2024, vol. 29, pp. 2365–2385.

<sup>29</sup> BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ, Milica. Pamćenje spornih legata prošlosti ili kad kultura sećanja ustukne pred kulturom poništavanja. *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Prištini*. 2022, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 259–275.

<sup>30</sup> ASMAN, Alaida. *Duga senka prošlosti*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2011, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, pp. 6–10.

media are suitable for presenting the newly acquired knowledge.

From these doubts arose the project *Back to the Future or How to Make Peace With The Past in Order To Create a Better Tomorrow Together*, supported through the call *Towards a culture of shared future in Southeast Europe* of the Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe.<sup>32</sup> This research project was designed as a university course, during which students were supposed to become familiar with the phenomenon of heritage dissonance in general, the unwanted heritage of Kosovo, as well as the role of education in the reconciliation processes. The main hypothesis was based on the assumption that focused and continuous work with students can contribute to building lasting peace, and that their further engagement through knowledge dissemination in local communities, but also on social networks, plays a substantial role in the promotion of reconciliation. A means that has been recognized as a tool in those procedures is learning about contested cultural heritage.

Since the course was attended by students, mostly born in 2002, or to be precise by the generation that does not remember the Kosovo crisis and all of its controversial events first-hand but has formed its stance on them through family stories, education, and the politics of memory promoted by the elites in power, the first step was to determine their knowledge. The students filled out an entry survey designed as an open-ended questionnaire. This type

of questionnaire was used so that students would not be led to certain answers, but also because further narrative analysis of the responses allowed the course to be fully adapted to them. The narrative analysis was chosen because it “examines and understands how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and how and where they occur through growth”.<sup>33</sup> As none of the students were familiar with the problem of heritage dissonance, that only 10 percent of them had been to Kosovo, that more than half of them had prejudices against the Kosovo Albanians who live there, and that they recognized only monuments related to the Serbian Orthodox Church as the heritage of this multiethnic region, working with them on this course included a thorough theoretical and practical part. The theoretical part was based on historical, geographical, and sociological context, as well as familiarization with the heritage of Kosovo, and basic postulates of dissonance in heritage. The frameworks of critical, or transformative pedagogy, as well as service learning, or learning through engagement, were chosen for the implementation of the project. Although it is not easy to define a concept such as critical or transformative pedagogy, we can say that it refers to the theory and practice of learning and teaching that seeks to change existing narratives of everyday life by creating a solidary society, and that it is primarily linked to the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and representative of the Frankfurt School. It emerged as a reaction to a system that did not respond to the real needs of man and society.<sup>34</sup>

By learning to think critically, each individual, through dialogue with other people, perceives both personal and social reality and begins to engage with it critically. This means that it is not a matter of mere criticism of the environment, but of understanding why circumstances are the way they are and what we can do to change them. Another key determinant of critical pedagogy is certainly the revision of the relationship between teachers and students. Namely, the dominant concept of the so-called banking education, as Freire calls it, sees the teacher as an omniscient being, and students as passive recipients of knowledge. Such a system creates disenfranchised and adaptable citizens. But when the classroom becomes a place where teachers and students are in dialogue, where problem-based education is enforced and where new knowledge is produced, education for liberation is born.<sup>35</sup> In this way, we treated reality as a challenge, and knowledge as a process, and the activities of professors and students were unified. We replaced the standard education that implies “one correct answer” with education that seeks to encourage asking questions. By favoring pluralism in understanding the world around us, we allowed students to doubt the single interpretation of events from the past that we are ashamed of. The method of service or engaged learning, which involves specific social intervention that helps to meet the real needs of a community, was also used while working with students.<sup>36</sup> We motivated the course participants

vol. 132, no. 3, pp. 268–295.

<sup>35</sup> FREIRE, Paolo. *Pedagogija obespravljenih*. Zagreb: Odraz. 2002, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> KEPEŠ, Nusreta. Servisno učenje u predškolskim ustanovama i njegov utjecaj na građanski odgoj djece. Online. *Društvene i humanističke studije*. 2022, vol. 7, no. 1(18), pp. 487–508. Available from: <https://www.dhs.ff.unizb.hr/index.php/home/article/view/672/547>. [accessed 2025-05-28].

<sup>32</sup> This project had three research directions. One concerned the role of dissonant heritage and education in the reconciliation process. The second included the perspectives of art history students on the unwanted legacy of the past, while the third focused on the lessons we learned by investigating the first two phenomena. This paper focuses on the first segment. (author's note)

<sup>33</sup> MOEN, Torill. Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach. Online. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2006, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 56. Available from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/160940690600500405>. [accessed 2025-05-28].

<sup>34</sup> VICAN, Dijana. *Koncepcija odgoja i obrazovanja Paula Freirea*. Napredak. 1991,

to learn outside the school walls, informally, from family members, peers, and the media.

During the course, students had frequent research tasks, but for this paper, we will focus on surveying their fellow citizens about Serbian-Albanian relations. This task came as an utmost achievement of previous work with students and was inspired by the following assumption. Namely, we have already mentioned that students acquired knowledge about the course topic “second-hand”. Through lectures and project assignments during the course, they realized that they were misinformed about many events. So, the idea was to check the current situation within the local communities from which they come and to see if there is a space for mutual knowledge exchange. Interviews were organized with 26 focus groups in 26 municipalities, with 260 respondents from four target groups (children, young people, the generation of students’ parents, and the generation of their grandparents). The obtained data were processed by thematic analysis. The goal of a thematic analysis was to identify themes, i.e., patterns in the data that were important or interesting, and use them to address the research. When it comes to this type of analysis, we distinguish two levels of themes: semantic and latent. We chose latent, since this method looks beyond what has been said and “examines the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data”.<sup>37</sup> Among other things, we concluded that education has no direct connection

with negative attitudes towards Kosovo Albanians. Moreover, the most antagonism was shown by the highly educated population. On the other hand, the oldest respondents are at the forefront in tolerance and openness. Those who are originally from Kosovo show significant intolerance. Most respondents presented poor knowledge of history. Namely, although more than half said that Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian state, they could not state exactly when it became part of the Serbian state. A third of those surveyed were unaware of how prone they are to discrimination. Additionally, 40 percent of the respondents do not recognize the term Shiptar as derogatory. Although knowledge of cultural heritage in Kosovo is modest, in the sense that they do not know how to list it precisely, the view that Albanians are “appropriating” and even “robbing” Serbian monasteries was very present. When asked in what sense they do this, the explanations went in the direction of physical appropriation and the impossibility of use by the Serbian Orthodox Church. False interpretation, as well as the carelessness of the competent authorities, which is more than present, was not mentioned in any of the answers. The biggest surprise was the children. Most of them stated that: “Albanians are bad because they took Kosovo from us.” That kinds of information were received at school. What is certainly encouraging are the attitudes of young people. More than half of their answers, which emphasize that individual guilt is key, showed that not everything is so bleak.

Based on the result of the thematic analysis of the survey, nine topics were chosen for further project development. When discussing the best way to share gained knowledge with their peers and other interested parties, and with the idea that it

can contribute to reconciliation processes in the region, students unanimously chose TikTok. Using the microlearning method, nine scenarios were created for the TikTok platform under the title *Cultural good – Cultural Bad*, to share the knowledge they have gained. The topics were clarifying the derogatory terms people use to call each other; common problems of young people in Kosovo and Serbia; connecting through music and Eurovision; the consequences of demolishing and destroying the cultural heritage of others; changing street names; inter-ethnic friendships depicted in fine arts and on film; stories about old crafts, especially confectionery; romantic, love stories between Serbs and Albanians, etc.

### From musealization to reconciliation

Whether in the online or offline world, museums are not only places that collect, preserve, document, research, and present heritage but also serve as important points for interpreting the present and creating future heritage, including invented traditions, which over time become widely accepted norms in collective consciousness. Since the Post-Industrial Revolution period, “they seem to fall into three overlapping types: a) those that establish or symbolize social cohesion or group membership, real or artificial communities, b) those that establish or legitimize institutions, statuses or identity relations, c) those whose basic goal was socialization”.<sup>38</sup> Here, we enter the realm of “unstable” identities and the past that we inherit in various ways, which is constantly re-created,<sup>39</sup> allowing for a broad range of possible interpretations of heritage.

<sup>37</sup> BRAUN, Virginia and CLARKE, Victoria. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> HOBBSOM, Erik and REJNDŽER, Terens (ed.). *Izmišljanje tradicije*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2011, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> POULOT, Dominique (ed.). *Patrimoine et modernité*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988, p. 126.

In this sense, one crucial question raised concerns the position of power of the museum, and thus the interpretation of its collections – to what extent and in what ways do they formulate the universal truths and values of a society? However, museums do not create cultural policy guidelines but implement them, and in that process, the politicization of their functions can take socially unacceptable forms. Conversely, there is an increasing debate about the need to introduce participatory work models. Given this context, it was believed that the Internet would democratize our societies. Nonetheless, we are currently discussing opposing processes, and various digital tools have also led to the amateurization of the professional field. If we hold that museums should entirely relinquish their positions of power, they need to create emancipated social narratives both professionally and in response to the needs of social communities. In this regard, one must be cautious and consider to what extent participatory models are “so-called terms” and what may follow if social communities take on the roles of museum curators and experts. This concern has led to the need to test the musealization of the idea of reconciliation on social networks.

In the context of this research, the TikTok platform is viewed as a cyber museum,<sup>40</sup> with the

<sup>40</sup> For the purposes of this research, a distinction is made between the terms cyber and virtual museum, based on the division given by T. Šola in 2002, in his book *Marketing in museums: On Virtue and how to publicize it*. According to this division, a cyber museum exists exclusively outside of reality, while a virtual museum has its embodiment in reality as well. However, it should be pointed out that in the scientific community, this division is not final. Thus, for example, Ljiljana Gavrilović states: “*The museum is by itself a virtual entity. It is a human-created, constructed space (physical, cultural and perceptual) where some objects are purposely chosen and separated from their cultural or natural environment to be presented to the public as cultural markers. Thus, a museum is artificial. There is no possibility whatsoever of forming a cyber-museum as something that does not correspond to something in physical reality. Namely, all objects that would find their*

*Cultural Good – Cultural Bad* profile serving as a thematic exhibition on reconciliation, and the uploaded videos representing selected parts of the collection. The starting point was the hypothesis that there exists a parallel between the selection of materials for videos that musealize the idea of reconciliation and the handling of museum objects in the collection. The museum object serves as the source and carrier of information, with its selection, transmission, and presentation being pivotal. In other words, it acts as a document in time, a message in a specific space, and information within a particular society.<sup>41</sup> The sources for the selection of museum objects that comprise the collection are typically diverse, highlighting the complexity of the musealization process, especially in relation to phenomena and events. The very idea of reconciliation, as well as some of the heritage from the (video) collection, can be interpreted as part of the corpus of intangible heritage. However, in the interpretation of heritage, the link between tangible and intangible heritage is unbreakable, dynamic, and pluralistic. These phenomena complement each other, integrating meanings and values, and thus constructing public memory. With this approach, the museological aspect has transitioned from mediation to the creation of discourse, while the cyber museum evolves from a place of contemplation into a field of two-way communication. Indeed, the increasing use of digital and

*place in such a museum exist somewhere; they are not placed in the same physical space, but that doesn't diminish the possibility of their mutual co-existence in the same/joint perceptual space.”* GAVRILOVIĆ, Ljiljana. *Cyber Museum: Tools For Heritage Protection*. In: POPOVIĆ-ŽIVANČEVIĆ, Mila (ed.). *Condition Of The Cultural And Natural Heritage In The Balkan Region: Proceedings of the regional conference held in Kladovo, Serbia from 23th to 27th October 2006*. Belgrade: National Museum, 2007, p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> MAROEVIĆ, Ivo. *Uloga muzeologije i njezin doprinos temeljnim znanstvenim disciplinam*. *Informatica Museologica*. 1992, no. 1–4, p. 94.

online applications has transformed heritage interpretation into an increasingly powerful medium for fostering dialogue and conveying heritage values. The participation of individuals and communities in the interpretation process has become increasingly prominent in the public sphere.<sup>42</sup>

By musealizing the idea of reconciliation, we aimed to create a repository of knowledge for further heritagization. This process occurred through the following functions: cognitive, communication, information, and memory functions. The cognitive function was critical for forming a collective fund, determining the meaning of individual objects or phenomena within that fund. The communication function pertains to disseminating and distributing knowledge, which was implemented in this cyber museum through the placement of clips, essentially parts of the exhibition on reconciliation. The information function relates to knowledge selection; it accumulates all existing knowledge. Lastly, the memory function manifests in the protection and storage of all knowledge elements.<sup>43</sup> This entire process is heritagization or nurturing the inherited, which involves collecting, preserving, maintaining, researching, and presenting evidence of the past. Viewed from this perspective, knowledge, as a product of museology, is no longer merely a representation of reality but rather a means of preserving and fixing reality.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> SILBERMAN, Neil A. *Heritage interpretation and human rights: documenting diversity, expressing identity, or establishing universal principles?* *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 2012, vol. 18, no. 3, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> MAROEVIĆ, Ivo. *Uloga muzeologije i njezin doprinos temeljnim znanstvenim disciplinam*. *Informatica Museologica*. 1992, no. 1–4, pp. 92–95.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

This raises the logical question: why was it necessary to carry out the interpretation of heritage and musealize the idea of reconciliation? One involves formatted knowledge derived from documentation found and stored in museum objects or created based on the processing of museum objects, while the other is contextualized knowledge, which will be formulated at exhibitions or in additional forms of museum reality in depots, etc. The relationship between formatted and contextualized knowledge can be achieved precisely through museology as a discipline that, in the selection process, chooses objects based on specific characteristics, separates them into the museum, and then studies them as elements that will participate in certain communication processes.<sup>45</sup> As a result of all these procedures, the profile *Cultural Good – Cultural Bad* was created to help its audience understand why Kosovo, with all its monuments, belongs to the heritage of the local community, state, nation, humanity, and above all, every person. The objectives of the interpretation, beyond informing the general public, included engaging them in interpreting the phenomena discussed, inspiring them on how to care for heritage, helping them understand their neighbors, learning about the members of the Albanian nationality, and fostering cooperation and support for heritage professionals. The goal was also to inspire a shift in attitudes and behavior among visitors, as well as help them develop friendly attitudes towards others.

On the very first day, after publishing the inaugural story, it garnered 80 thousand views and sparked intriguing comments from viewers. Each subsequent video further expanded the network of

follower comments and shares of earlier videos. As the topics grew more complex, so did the volume of negative comments, along with reports from fake profiles. One video was even temporarily removed. To address the issue of false reporting, supporting literature and sources were provided in a separate document alongside the video clips, demonstrating to users that the content was not merely superficial information but well-researched material backed by well-reasoned positions. The thematic analysis of the collected comments indicated that TikTok is a viable model for the heritagization of the idea of reconciliation. We categorized audience reactions into three groups: the largest share comprised viewers who strongly opposed the material we presented. Lacking valid or scientifically based arguments, many resorted to personal insults aimed at the students. They were labelled as traitors, ignoramuses, and faced unpleasant sexist remarks and threats. Most such comments came from party activists and were written in Cyrillic, emphasizing national interest. These profiles were often pseudonymous, some established solely to target us, and all prominently featured the Serbian flag. Their sharing across other platforms significantly increased our visibility, albeit not their intention. The second category consisted of undecided, sceptical individuals who were not inherently dissatisfied with the content but believed we should not engage with the heritage of others. Some altered their views after engaging in dialogue and sharing materials with students. The third group were the people that supported our standpoints and found our research inspiring. Students took inspiration for managing comments and addressing sensitive topics from the profile of the

Black Country Living Museum, one of the most successful British museums on TikTok. By following their example, project participants learned the distinction between expressing an opinion and resorting to insults made possible by anonymity. The students' approach to researching the topic, their dedication to completing tasks, as well as the in-depth discussions they engaged in, both online and offline, along with the caution and (self)criticism they applied in interpreting sources, all represented a small but significant victory over dominant narratives in the predominantly intolerant world we navigate.

#### A view into the future

*“I have always thought about Kosovo in the context of our<sup>46</sup> monasteries only. It never occurred to me that there was some other heritage there, particularly not one linked to Albanians. Especially outside my focus was the question of how cultural heritage can influence or if it can even contribute to overcoming ethnic conflicts and bringing young people closer together. I was born in 2002, and Kosovo was never a topic in my family. Not because it is some kind of taboo but because it has nothing to do with us. We live in the present, and it brings us a series of current obstacles. I knew next to nothing about events that took place before and after 1999. It was only this course on the dissonance of heritage that made me ask myself why it is so, and the interviews with my peers, both from Belgrade and Kosovo, were also helpful. I came to understand that when you live in Belgrade and study Art History, it is like you are in a bubble, a safe place where there is no room for ugly and unpleasant topics. You do not have a realistic idea about how bitter and enraged some individuals are. The things I heard in the interviews*

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>46</sup> Serbian. (author's note)

*and the information I read in polls disillusioned me. And that hatred that reigns is a consequence of a lack of education – now I am certain of this.”*

This comment was left on the TikTok channel *Cultural Good – Cultural Bad* by a student who participated in the course. It is a first-hand testimony of the possibilities offered by the interpretation and musealization of unwanted heritage on social networks.

Regarding the attitudes of students, after the semester ended and the research tasks were completed, interviews were conducted with course participants to determine whether any changes had occurred in their knowledge and beliefs. Critical pedagogy suggests that transformation in learning occurs when individuals become aware of their current reasoning and develop new points of view. In this sense and based on the comparative analysis of the entry questionnaire and final interviews, it was possible to track the change in each student. It revealed that only one student, who was among the most active during the semester and also had the most rigid views, had not changed his opinion or developed tolerance. Two students admitted that they were not interested in the topic at all and that they had been working on the papers. Five students chose the subject because they were already interested in the heritage of Kosovo, while a third of the participants were reserved about the topic but changed their views over time. Most students noted that their greatest revelation came when they saw how facts are manipulated and to what extent ignorance breeds hatred. In addition, course partakers noted that the topics covered made them question their identity. Students also said that interacting with the diverse materials in the course – textbooks, articles, and

videos – positively influenced their views on the use of heritage in the reconciliation processes, and that TikTok comments showed them to what extent the situation is complex. All of them pointed out that although information is easily available, the main problem is a lack of education, which further leads to uncritical access to content. The participants not only identified gaps in education and development, but also demonstrated new knowledge, understanding and changes in perspective on society. In other words, interviews showed that educating students about dissonant heritage can lead to a change in their attitudes about the contaminated past, as well as motivate them to share the newly acquired knowledge further, in a way that is close to them. Moreover, knowledge did not just remain shared but was in some way improved. Namely, as well as network users were given the opportunity to question personal beliefs through the offered content, literature and argumentative dialogue, so were the students. As the channel moderators, while reading observations and talking to viewers, they were able to polish their approaches.

### Concluding remarks

*“Culture is manifested not only in what a society has but also in what it thinks (tradition, beliefs) and how it behaves (ritual, recreation, behavior).”<sup>47</sup>* Interpreters everywhere want to effect changes in how their audience thinks, feels, and possibly behaves concerning the places, features, and concepts they interpret. This is not unusual, as interpreting involves imparting knowledge. It is also a common assumption that if an interpreter

can increase a visitor’s awareness of something, it should also influence their attitudes. Furthermore, a corresponding behavior change is expected if the attitude is influenced. However, the hypothesis that “learning leads to liking” has not been proven correct. According to numerous studies, whether and how much interpretation can affect feelings: specifically, visitors’ attitudes toward something depend mainly on how much the interpretation prompts the visitor to think about the presented information, and of course, on the visitor’s prior attitudes. This perspective aligns with Tilden’s advice that interpretation should aim to encourage visitors to think for themselves rather than merely teach them facts (i.e., “provocation” versus “instruction”).<sup>48</sup>

Working on this project revealed certain shortcomings in the concept that should be addressed in future research. For example, the creation and sharing of content produced on TikTok play only a partial role in positively changing the attitudes of course participants. A greater contribution to the development of tolerance stemmed from the opportunity to engage deeply with the topic through the course. Keeping this in mind, it should be emphasized that there is a difference in the impact of the research process and preparation of materials for TikTok on the students who participated in it compared to the students and the general public who engaged with the virtual collection. While there is a noticeable change in attitudes and an increase in empathy and tolerance among content creators, we were not able to perceive this

<sup>47</sup> RODWELL, Dennis. The Historic Urban Landscape and the Geography of Urban Heritage. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*. 2018, vol. 9, no. 3–4, pp. 192–193.

<sup>48</sup> HAM, Sam H. Can Interpretation Really Make a Difference? Answers to Four Questions from Cognitive and Behavioral Psychology. In: *Proceedings of the Interpreting World Heritage Conference*. Vancouver, Canada, March 25–29, 2007, p. 42.

fully in the case of consumers. Nonetheless, the exchange of arguments and experiences with a broad audience, lively discussions, and the ability to convey knowledge while motivating the TikTok audience to ask questions and explore additional sources cannot be overlooked. Despite the high number of likes and shares, negative comments dominate. Analyzing these comments revealed that the vast majority did not thoroughly watch the clips but were triggered by captions and keywords, highlighting significant deficiencies in educational programs. This led to another conclusion: the necessity of changing educational policies and textbooks and educating teachers about the interpretation of contested heritage. While we cannot influence the information children receive at home, we must send them different messages in public spaces. This opens opportunities for informal education through changes in cultural policies and the content being marketed. Publishing positive examples of preserving the heritage of others on social media, promoting inter-ethnic cooperation in solving ordinary life problems, and a joint struggle for a better everyday life are just a few of the avenues. TikTok, viewed as a cyber museum and as a model for sharing acquired knowledge and communicating among youth, has proven to be a viable solution. Specifically, students considered the creation of video recordings and their musealization on platforms they resonate with as an additional incentive for their research, evidenced by their careful selection of audio and video materials. The added value of the course can be seen in the fact that even after fulfilling the mandatory components, the students continued to reflect on dissonance in heritage and regional reconciliation. They remain engaged in discussions and

share thoughts and texts about current events on TikTok, as well as Google Classroom.

TikTok is likely to continue holding its place in the educational system, especially in higher education, primarily because it offers fast, engaging, and accessible information that lends itself to microlearning. It also encourages critical thinking and can initiate constructive dialogue. Of course, one must always remain aware that an uninterested viewer will quickly swipe up to see what follows, and educational institutions are challenged to keep pace with current trends while creating attractive content without sacrificing the fundamental values they wish to promote. The goal of interpreting dissonant heritage is, on the one hand, to close historical trauma and, on the other hand, to pave the way for building peace and reconciliation.

Since the dawn of time, the pursuit of peace (while preparing for war) has been a long-standing aspiration of humanity. However, regardless of how elusive this goal may seem, education remains a glimmer of hope in all efforts connected to addressing the past.

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Milica Božić Marojević completed her bachelor, master and PhD studies in Art History at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, where at present she teaches as associate professor. For the past 15 years she has been intensively engaged in regional and international museum cooperation, as well as organising art festivals, visiting exhibitions and programmes. Because she believes in lifelong education, she created and implemented various educational projects for staff in cultural institutions and the civil arts sector. She publishes scientific and expert articles in English, French and Italian, in leading journals in her areas of interest which include: critical museology and heritology, museum education and communication, heritage protection, interpretation and presentation, contemporary curatorial practices, and art history teaching methodology. Since 2019, she has been the director of the Centre for Museology and Heritology of the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Philosophy.

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