



Stephanie Jacobs:

„Future - Needs - Provenance“

or: The Importance of Provenance History for
the Self-Understanding of Modern Societies

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It is no coincidence, that - at a time, when the concepts of "origin" and "homeland" are booming, the question of the provenance of cultural property is also on the agenda of politics - and society.

When - a war on our doorstep not only kills people and reduces cities to rubble, but also destroys - cultural identities through targeted bombardments of museums and libraries: thus: erasing - a piece of home - in this moment we know about the importance of material tradition for people's understanding of themselves.

In war: Identity and origin are - literally - under attack.

Odo Marquard, one of the most famous german philosopher of the 20th century, says about destroying cultural heritage:

„Those, who are robbed of the iron ration of the familiar, lose their homeland.“

This is the background for the social relevance of provenance history:

Only when libraries, museums and archives clarify - the origin of their holdings, they do justice to their responsibility to society.

The central questions in this context are:

- In what historical and ideological constellations and with what intentions did the holdings come into the museums and libraries?
- What history do they bring with them?
- Who acquired what? And why?
- Are there traces of relocation, robbery, persecution and destruction?

The answers to these questions and the results of provenance research subvert traditional narratives about collecting as a neutral, apolitical act, and focus on the normative character of stock building as an interest-driven action.

Because - trust in the authority of memory institutions sometimes blinds us to the constructive character of libraries and museums collections and carry the risk of perpetuating - hegemonic structures.

The analysis of origin stories illuminates the interpretive power of memory institutions.

Society has a right to take a look behind the facade of seemingly sober catalog data.

This search for traces, to which the Museum of Books and Writing of the German National Library in Leipzig is currently devoting an extensive study to, is proving to be particularly difficult, when it is not about books or other cultural-historical artifacts, but about data: metadata or digital objects.

While provenance research of analogue cultural property is well practiced, the question of the origin of digital artifacts we are only at the beginning.

The aim of this project is: reconstruction, preservation, analysis, and interpretation of historical data. The problem - in facing digital data: In contrast - to analogue historical artifacts, data have an aura of timelessness and objectivity. Digital sources are much more likely to be "set", to be "objective" and not as artifacts of a tradition. The problem with the provenance research of data: Data do not carry their historicity as openly as, for example, books.

A great challenge for us - as a museum of media history - is posed by those data and data sets from the "digital early history of mankind" in the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, which do not yet follow - any standards. The securing and provenance research of data - from the beginning of the digital age confronts us with a paradigm shift:

From the analysis of historical sources to a - technically driven media archaeology.

Occasions, to think about media archaeological instruments, are - for example - the digital bequests, which reached us more and more frequently in recent years.

In the so-called „new media“ within these bequests are slumbering very special - and hitherto scarcely exploited „stories of origin“. Technology itself is becoming an active archivist.

The media-archaeological perspective makes a contribution to the current concept of provenance research: It shifts to the apparatuses themselves. Concepts of cultural "transmission" are replaced by diagrams of data transfers and data migration.

These digital „provenance-stories“, these diagrams and technical experiments prevent dark ages of tradition, comparable perhaps to the largely scriptless epoch of the early Middle Ages in Europe; or comparable to the attempts to destroy national identity through warelike destruction.

Such a memory catastrophe can be avoided, if the technical analysis and the curatorial treatment of cultural heritage recognize the radical technical transformation as its own. Technic will become a part of curation, not only an instrument of it.

The dependence of provenance research that focuses on digital artifacts, on instruments and tools suggests that libraries, museums, and archives perhaps could cooperate more intensively with stakeholders from other research fields:

Especially with those sciences that already have decades of experience in analyzing and interpretation of large data sets: for example climate research, astrophysics or medicine.

Perhaps memory institutions still remain too much "among themselves", when we think about the "future of our data-origins". Lets talk - for example - with the astro-physicians, when we think about future visions and strategic priorities of memory institutions.

They know, how to handle and to reconstruct huge masses of data and their provenance. They just have instruments to analyse the provenance of data.

Our study about provenance – research in the German Museum of Books and Writing in Leipzig takes a close look at the origins of our museums-collections of nearly one million objects. The world's oldest book museum does not only write about its collections, but also about a contemporary history of cultural transmission.

Whether it is the collection of US—american underground comic or the Gutenberg Bible, the blocked stock of the early German National Library, a collection of Hollywood photographs, our bizarre collection of book bags or the early digital bequests: Our publication - titled „Depth drilling. Another Provenance History“ is dynamically updated in the web. Because provenance research and the science of the origin of our cultural property is never really finished...

We try to focus in our study the provenance of our heritage – analogue or digital -, because:

Culture heritage needs its origin stories.

Or:

„Future needs Provenance.“ (Odo Marquardt)

To tell these provenance story is the responsibility of memory institutions towards a society that is also becoming more and more diverse.