

Piet Chielens, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypern/Belgien

## **Media, myths and museums**

### **Making sense of history and creating collective identities**

First of all I would like to congratulate the Westphalian and Rhineland Industrial Museums on their 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, and thank them for inviting me to this congress.

How do we, museums that deal with history, transform historical realities into exhibition themes that might interest a wide public so that not only the members of that public do come and visit us in large numbers, but also take on board our insight in history and let it be part of their everyday existence and cultural identity?

In this paper I will try to answer that question using examples from the historical reality I'm working with, and from the transformations we are using at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper (Ypres, Ypern), Belgium. In the panel discussion I hope to possibly find links to other museums and exhibition themes in order to come to a more general view of a common methodology.

The In Flanders Fields Museum is Belgium's most important museum on the First World War. It deals with the realities of that war, especially from the point of view of the people who experienced it. The core of the exhibition is the transformation of personal testimony into a modern day exhibition. Using modern exhibition techniques such as sound, multimedia environment, CD-ROM etc. we create a modern museum space that attracts over 200.000 visitors a year. This kind of modern museum seems especially able to create empathy between the visitor of today and the generation of 90 years ago. We, as a museum as much as an audience, pretend that we can understand the reasons why people went to war and what their experience was like. Do we really do that? Are we able to grasp the complexities of social, psychological, anthropological and cultural processes by "just" being confronted with anecdotal information about people's personal experiences? Or do we rather adopt stories, of mythical proportions, and walk away with just the mythology, rather than with genuine insight?

In what respect is the dramatised storytelling we have learned to adopt a means of transforming historical reality for a wider public, or has it become a goal all by itself that baffles audiences and creates commercial success rather than genuine understanding? Have the media in museums become the message?

Apart from the personal approach we have taken, there is the general outlook. Historiography itself seems equally unable to move away from a kind of creating myths. Although everybody acknowledges that the First World War was one of the most important events in the history of the European continent, up to this day, historians of all partaking countries seem to be especially concerned with the national impact of that war. What the war meant to Europe in general is still largely underestimated and at best a matter of added up national historiographies of the war experience. A genuine European view is lacking and therefore museums and exhibitions on that subject are naturally different from country to country. As a museum that depends on a largely international audience (Belgian, English, Dutch, French, German) we often feel forced to go back to the personal level, because the genuinely international or European point of view is lacking.

Finally translating historical events for a present day public, one has to tackle the problem of the mentality gap that exists between the time of when the events took place and today's interests and mentalities. How would today's society react to the unconditional sacrifice of human lives which was at the core of most First World War military operations? Would the wide public not revolt much earlier than the people at that time? Do we understand how those people thought and felt? Is there such thing as a different mentality? Should we stick to today's interests and problems when looking at the history of World War I? Are museums, as a part of today's societies, not obliged to look at such matters from a modern point of view? And are we consequently not creating new mythologies about the past?

Straightforward answers to any of these questions are almost impossible to give. Since exhibitions are first and foremost means of communication, the danger of creating myths is inherent to the medium. Raising the question as often as possible is the best we can do, to prevent falling into the traps. Modern history museums must be aware of all of these dangers and try to deal with them as best as they can: by discussing them and exploring the different possibilities at hand. Ignoring or avoiding them is impossible.