Altervia Multivox in Croatia: Heritage Interpretation through Multiple Narratives and Performative Practice

Norma Fressel[1], Gentiane Désveaux[2]

1 Nature Park Vransko Jezero, Kralja Petra Svačića 2; 23210 Biograd n/m, Croatia

2 Compagnie du Théâtre des chemins, 4 Rue du 4 Septembre, 07200 Aubenas, France

Keywords: Heritage interpretation, multiple narratives, ethnography, performative art

Abstract

Altervia Multivox is an Erasmus+ transnational project that explores heritage interpretation through itinerant, bicycle-based residencies combining ethnographic research, performative art, and informal learning. Across rural and protected landscapes in France, Belgium, and Croatia, young European participants collect oral histories from local residents and transform them into site-specific performance-walks. By embodying multiple narratives within the landscape, itself, the project highlights heritage as a plural, lived, and dialogic process, fostering ecological awareness, intercultural exchange, and critical reflection on identity, belonging, and sustainable relationships between people, place, and environment.

Introduction

Heritage Interpretation as a Dialogical Process

Heritage interpretation has increasingly moved beyond the traditional model of transmitting expert knowledge to passive audiences. Contemporary heritage theory emphasizes participation, community engagement, and the recognition of multiple perspectives in the construction of heritage narratives. Rather than presenting heritage as a fixed set of facts, recent approaches conceptualize it as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between people, places, and memories (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

Within this context, artistic and participatory methodologies have emerged as powerful tools for exploring heritage as a lived experience. These approaches emphasize storytelling, embodiment, and sensory engagement with landscapes, enabling participants to experience heritage through dialogue and shared exploration rather than through authoritative interpretation.

The Erasmus+ project **Altervia Multivox** represents an example of such an approach. The project combines ethnographic research, performative arts, and informal learning through itinerant bicycle-based residencies that take place in rural and protected landscapes in France, Belgium, and Croatia (Figure 1.).



Figure 1. Location of Vransko lake Nature Park.

During these residencies, young European participants explore local territories by bicycle, conduct interviews with residents, and collect oral histories that reflect everyday life, cultural practices, and historical transformations.

The collected narratives are later transformed into **site-specific performance walks**, where participants embody and perform the words of local inhabitants while guiding audiences through the landscapes in which the stories were originally experienced. In this way, the project creates a dialogical encounter between past and present, between local knowledge and external perspectives, and between narrative memory and physical landscape.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the methodology of the Altervia Multivox project and to examine its transformative impact on participants, local communities, and audiences. (Figure 2.) The analysis focuses particularly on the role of narrative, embodiment, and landscape in the interpretation process.



Figure 2. Collective warm-up in the landscape above Vransko jezero Lake before the performance.

Participatory Heritage Interpretation

Traditional heritage interpretation often relied on hierarchical models in which experts produced knowledge that was subsequently transmitted to visitors. This model reflected a broader perception of heritage as a collection of monuments, artifacts, and historical facts managed primarily by institutions.

However, heritage scholars have increasingly criticized such approaches for overlooking the role of communities and lived experiences in the construction of heritage meanings. According to Smith (2006), heritage should be understood as a cultural process through which societies negotiate values, identities, and memories. Rather than existing independently of social practices, heritage emerges through acts of interpretation, narration, and engagement.

Similarly, Harrison (2013) emphasizes that contemporary heritage practices increasingly involve multiple actors, including local communities, artists, activists, and visitors. These actors contribute to the ongoing reinterpretation of heritage sites and narratives.

Although these ideas may appear relatively recent, they resonate with earlier principles of heritage interpretation. Freeman Tilden, whose work remains foundational for the field, argued that interpretation should not simply present facts but should provoke emotional and intellectual connections between visitors and the meanings embedded in heritage places (Tilden, 1957/1977).

The Altervia Multivox project builds upon these principles by combining participatory research and artistic performance. Instead of presenting historical information through

explanatory panels or guided tours, the project creates opportunities for participants and audiences to engage directly with stories shared by local inhabitants.

Narrative, Time, and Experience

Narrative plays a central role in shaping human understanding of time and experience. According to Carr (1986), human experience is inherently structured through narrative forms that connect past events with present interpretation and future expectations. Narrative is therefore not merely a retrospective way of organizing historical events but a fundamental dimension of lived experience.

Within heritage interpretation, storytelling becomes a powerful means of connecting individual memories with broader historical processes. Personal narratives reveal how historical transformations are experienced at the level of everyday life, allowing listeners to perceive history not as an abstract sequence of events but as a series of lived experiences.

Oral history research has demonstrated the importance of narrative in revealing emotional, social, and cultural aspects of the past that are often absent from official archives. Portelli (1991) emphasizes that oral testimonies are valuable not only for the factual information they contain but also for the meanings and interpretations that narrators attach to their experiences. Similarly, Thompson (1978/2000) argues that oral history can democratize historical knowledge by incorporating the voices of individuals who are often excluded from institutional narratives.

In the context of Altervia Multivox, narrative becomes both a research method and an artistic medium. Interviews conducted with residents provide the material for storytelling, while performance walks transform these narratives into embodied experiences shared with audiences. (Table 1.)

Table 1. Different audiences in different phases of the process of co-interpretation in Altervia Multivox project.

Phase	Audience	Role
Immersion	Experts + Artists	Co-creators of interpretation
Collection	Local residents	Bearers of memory
Collection	Young participants	Researchers + recipients
Performance	Young participants	Interpreters
Performance	Locals + Tourists	Participants in the experience
Entire process	Landscape	Active interlocutor

Methodology of the Altervia Multivox Project

The methodology of Altervia Multivox combines ethnographic research, artistic practice, and experiential learning. The project unfolds through three interconnected phases: immersion in the territory, the collection of oral narratives, and the performance walk.

Cycling Residencies as Research Method

One of the distinctive features of the project is the use of cycling as a means of exploring the landscape. Cycling allows participants to move through the territory at a pace that encourages observation and interaction. Unlike faster modes of transportation, bicycles allow participants to experience environmental features such as terrain, weather conditions, and distances in a direct and embodied way.

Cycling also creates opportunities for spontaneous encounters with local inhabitants. These encounters often play an important role in the research process, opening conversations that might not occur within more structured research frameworks.

Furthermore, cycling introduces an element of vulnerability and unpredictability. Mechanical problems, weather conditions, or unexpected detours can become moments of discovery. For example, during one exploration in the Vransko lake region in Croatia, a flat tire led to an encounter with a local resident who initiated a conversation about the surrounding landscape. Such chance encounters illustrate how the methodology embraces both planning and improvisation.

Immersion Time

The first phase of the project involves immersing participants in the local environment. During this period, participants explore the landscape, meet local experts, and learn about the ecological and cultural characteristics of the region.

Local experts such as park rangers, historians, and community members provide insights into the environmental and historical features of the territory. At the same time, artists and participants explore the landscape intuitively through cycling and walking.

This dual approach creates a dialogue between expert knowledge and sensory experience. Participants not only learn about the territory but also develop personal impressions through their encounters with the landscape.

Collecting Time: Oral Histories

The second phase involves collecting oral histories from local residents. Groups of young European participants conduct interviews, often working in pairs to facilitate conversation and reflection.

These interviews frequently take place in informal settings such as homes, farms, or village squares. The conversational nature of the interviews allows participants to explore a wide range of themes related to everyday life.

Common topics include agricultural work, livestock farming, community relationships, childhood memories, romantic encounters, and the social dynamics of rural life. Interviewees often recall experiences of collective labour, seasonal migration, and economic transformations brought about by mechanization or tourism.

In addition to everyday life stories, many interviews also address more difficult historical experiences. In the Croatian context, several testimonies refer to the war of the 1990s and its lasting impact on local communities.

The intergenerational nature of the interviews plays a particularly important role. In many rural regions younger generations have migrated to cities or abroad, leaving older residents with limited opportunities to share their experiences with younger people. Encounters with young international participants therefore often carry strong emotional significance.

Performance Time: The Walk

The final phase of the project consists of a performance walk through the landscape The walk usually lasts several hours and includes multiple stops where participants perform excerpts from the collected testimonies (Figure 3.).



Figure 3. Walk performance in village Vrana.

These performances may involve reading narratives, singing songs, or inviting moments of silence and reflection. The route of the walk is carefully designed to connect specific stories with particular locations.

Audiences typically include both local residents and visitors. The presence of these different audiences creates a layered interpretative experience. Local residents may recognize familiar places and memories, while visitors encounter the landscape through narratives that reveal its hidden histories.

Discussion

Narrative Construction and Transformative Processes

The Altervia Multivox project demonstrates how heritage interpretation can emerge through narrative interaction rather than through the presentation of fixed historical information.

During the collection of oral histories, researchers often observed recurring motifs across different interviews. For example, several residents described similar experiences of youthful encounters in the hills where sheep were grazed. These stories initially appeared as individual anecdotes, yet as more testimonies were collected, common narrative structures began to emerge.

Such repetitions suggest the presence of shared cultural narratives embedded within collective memory. Rather than treating repeated motifs as redundancy, the project recognizes them as expressions of a shared cultural imagination.

This observation resonates with Carr's philosophical analysis of narrative and experience. Carr argues that narrative is not simply imposed retrospectively upon events but is already embedded in the way individuals experience their lives (Carr, 1986). In other words, people naturally interpret their experiences through narrative forms that connect past, present, and future.

Within the Altervia Multivox project, personal stories shared by residents reveal this narrative structure of lived experience. Memories of work, youth, or family relationships are told not merely as isolated events but as meaningful episodes within broader life stories.

The project also illustrates how narrative interpretation evolves through encounters between different participants. For local residents, the process of sharing memories often produces a sense of recognition and validation. Many interviewees express joy when recounting anecdotes from their youth, particularly when speaking with younger listeners who demonstrate curiosity and respect.

For the young participants conducting the interviews, the process often triggers reflections about their own identities and cultural backgrounds. Some participants report experiencing a sense of dissonance when interpreting testimonies rooted in cultural contexts different from their own.

However, this dissonance frequently becomes a source of deeper reflection. One participant described how listening to stories about attachment to land reminded her of the way her own parents spoke about their homeland. In this way, narrative encounters can reveal unexpected connections between different cultural experiences.

The performative phase of the project further intensifies these narrative dynamics. As participants rehearse the route of the performance walk, they repeatedly move through the landscape while speaking the words of local residents. Through this process, the stories gradually become embodied experiences. Performance theory provides useful insights into this process. Pearson and Shanks (2001) argue that performance in landscapes can function as a form of embodied interpretation, allowing participants to engage with historical narratives through movement and sensory perception. Similarly, Taylor (2003) emphasizes that cultural memory can be transmitted not only through written archives but also through embodied practices such as storytelling, performance, and ritual.

The Altervia Multivox performance walks exemplify this embodied dimension of heritage interpretation. Participants do not simply recite narratives; they physically inhabit the landscapes described in the stories.

Environmental conditions often play a significant role in shaping the performance. For example, when participants read testimonies about strong winds such as the **bura** or **jugo**, the wind itself may affect their voices, forcing them to project their speech more strongly. In such moments, the environment becomes an active participant in the narrative (Figure 4.).



Figure 4. Illustration of “Bura” from the story of captain Mile (inhabitant), created for the lantern included in the performance.

Landscape scholars have emphasized that landscapes contain traces of past human activity and social relationships (Ingold, 2000). By performing narratives within these landscapes, the project creates a dialogue between memory and place.

Another striking example concerns testimonies related to the war of the 1990s in the Vrana region. When participants realized that they were standing on a former frontline while reading war testimonies, the emotional impact of the landscape led them to modify the structure of the performance. Instead of the originally planned musical transition, the group introduced a silent departure that allowed the audience to reflect on the stories in relation to the surrounding environment.

Conclusion

The Altervia Multivox project illustrates how heritage interpretation can function as a transformative process that connects narrative memory, artistic practice, and environmental experience (Figure 5.).



Figure 5. Drawings of local stories on lanterns, moving in the landscape during the performance.

By combining ethnographic research with performance and slow mobility through cycling, the project creates opportunities for meaningful encounters between participants and local communities. These encounters allow stories of everyday life, cultural practices, and historical change to be shared across generations and cultural backgrounds.

The project also demonstrates how narrative can serve as a bridge between personal memory and collective heritage. Through storytelling and performance, individual experiences become part of a broader narrative landscape that connects people with places.

Moreover, the embodied nature of the performance walks encourages participants and audiences to engage with heritage through physical and emotional experience. Landscape becomes more than a setting for interpretation; it becomes an active participant in the narrative process.

Ultimately, the Altervia Multivox project suggests that heritage interpretation can move beyond the transmission of information to become a space of dialogue, reflection, and transformation. By bringing together oral history, artistic practice, and participatory

exploration of landscapes, the project offers a model for innovative approaches to heritage interpretation in rural and cultural landscapes.

Acknowledgments

We warmly thank the project participants and collaborators whose creative engagement and fieldwork shaped the research and performances: Raphaël Faure, Laura Filipović, Lana Tomašević, Gabrijela Martinić, Ema Pintarić, Marija Spajić, Ivelina Ivanova, Anaëlle Abrial, Pierre Bornand, Nicolas Simonoff, Frédéric Vannoucci, Marion Duvignaud, Catherine Veillon, Dora Šmit, Millie Gioia, César Viricel, Mia Gabelica, Victoria Coupat, Fanch Binet, Nawel Zarhouni, Laura Belde, and Ivona Papac.

We are also deeply grateful to the local collaborators, community members, and cultural practitioners who shared their time, memories, and hospitality, enabling the collection of oral histories and the creation of site-specific performances. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of Mario Katić, Danijela Birt Katić, Marija Kragić, Ivana Štulina, Tony Vrankulj, Josip Barišić, Marija Oštrić, Laura Melvan, Ana Zirojević, Nikolina Šapina, Ivana Rašica, Tea Pavičić, Lucija Hrehorović, Karla Kalauz, Rebecca Hynes, Marina Šišak, Mathilde Roubin, Albane Morel, Ingrid Poncet, Lilian Benenati, Fleurine Bruyere, Justine Pataa, Rachel Brahy, and Pietro Varrasso.

Special thanks are extended to the cultural associations KUD Pakoštane and KUD Branimir for their collaboration and for preserving and sharing local cultural heritage that greatly enriched the interpretive work of the project.

The authors are particularly indebted to the residents and communities of the project locations who generously shared their stories and experiences. Their voices and perspectives form the core of the interpretive narratives explored in this research.

Finally, we acknowledge the support of the Erasmus+ programme, which enabled the transnational collaboration and learning environment that made this project possible.

References

Carr, D. (1986). *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment*. London: Routledge.

Pearson, M., & Shanks, M. (2001). *Theatre/Archaeology*. London: Routledge.

Portelli, A. (1991). *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.

Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Thompson, P. (1978/2000). *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tilden, F. (1957/1977). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.