Linear time in symbolic space. The *Poles’ self-portrait* (Polaków portret własny) exhibition (1979–80) and the narrative of cultural nationalism

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**Introduction**

The National Museum in Krakow was created as a ‘national’ museum in Krakow in 1879, in territories that were then part of the Habsburg Empire. Poland as a geopolitical entity did not exist. This however, did not prevent a ‘national’ museum to take shape. One hundred years later, in 1979, an anniversary exhibition entitled *Poles’ self-portrait* (Polaków portret własny)\(^1\) opened at the National Museum in Krakow.\(^2\)

The official one hundred year celebration exhibition at the national museum occurred, however, in an entirely different socio-political context: Poland was ruled by a Communist State-Party. In 1979 like in 1879, Polish culture and its nation were felt under threat. Today, the 1979 *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition is a cultural reference often commonly presented as evidence of a strong Polish cultural stance against

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\(^1\) See Figs. 1–6; 14.

\(^2\) Three exhibition catalogues were produced as part of the exhibition. The first catalogue published in 1979 is a collection of essays by historians and sociologists on the theme of the exhibition with a succinct selection of reproductions in black & white of artworks displayed as part of the exhibition (See Rostworowski 1979). The essays were also published in a series of articles for a Polish newspaper (See Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1979). In 1983 and 1986, another version of the exhibition catalogue was published in two volumes with extensive reproductions in colour and black & white and detailed information for each artwork (See Rostworowski 1983; Rostworowski 1986). A fourth book was published by Janusz Watek who was involved in the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait*. His book partly draws on the research that was undertaken for the exhibition (See Watek 1987).
the communist regime. By opposition the communist regime is portrayed as oppressing Polish culture. In this paper, I mitigate such reading and instead highlight that cultural nationalism was indeed, and as supported by previous scholarly research, an element at stake during the communist period. While also highlighting variations, I suggest strong elements of continuities in the constitution of a national and most importantly cultural We. Considering how such narratives about cultural independence have endured and at times permeate scholarly research today, this paper attempts to shed some light on Polish cultural identity and representation that bridge communist and post-communist periods. The aim of the paper is to investigate the relational dynamics between the heritage narrative of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition and its institutional, curatorial and socio-political contexts in order to ultimately discuss cultural representations, a research interest central to critical heritage studies. By relational dynamics, I mean the potential meanings that emerge from heritage site narratives as sites of interdependence between structure and agency, and from the exhibition narrative and the narratives generated about the exhibition.

In order to do so I undertake a cultural analysis, in the sense of Bal, of the heritage site narratives in focus in this paper by considering at first their visuality and spatiality as much as their textuality. As part of my analysis of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition, I draw, as a counterpoint, on another thematically relevant exhibition entitled Warsaw Accuses which opened in 1945 at the National Museum in Warsaw, Poland. The study draws on original archival research, public documents such as newspapers and literature in historical, political and cultural studies.

**The 1979 exhibition Poles’ self-portrait**

The Poles’ self-portrait exhibition presented circa 755 objects (paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints) in chronological order from the

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3 See Fyfe 1996.
4 See Bal 1992; 2010.
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medieval ages through the year 1979, the year of the exhibition opening, 225 objects were sourced within the museum collections and the 530 remaining objects were borrowed from other Polish museum collections as well as private individuals.\(^5\)

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Fig. 1: Display section (In the circle of European culture) of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait: stained glass projects for the Wawel Cathedral, Krakow, by Stanisław Wyspiański, representing from left to right: Kazimierz Wielki, Święty Stanisław, Henryk Pobożny © Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow. Archive of the National Museum in Krakow.

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5 Archiwum Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie 1979b.
In 1979, the year of the opening of the exhibition, the country was seen as aligned with the USSR and under foreign power since the end of World War II (WWII). In the seventies, however, some reforms took place in Poland and the political and societal atmosphere was perhaps more open than in other countries under the influence of the USSR. Nevertheless, the economic situation was at a stalemate.

The exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* was interpreted at the time as being unprecedented due to both its unusual title and subject. For once, the museum did not present an exhibition ideologically aligned onto
either the East or the West. Nor did it offer a traditional chronological exhibition of a long-time deceased artist, and as such, it was felt that the national museum was reaching beyond the traditional art historical show towards a more sociological and political scenario. The exhibition ambiguity, as revealed by its title – ‘Poles’ self-portrait –, relied on its double meaning: self-portraiture as an artistic genre on

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the one hand; a self-reflexive exercise wherein an individual or a society is both presented and represented on the other hand.

Marek Rostworowski, then chief exhibition curator, remarked in an interview that the exhibition presented a social and “psychological” dimension. In a *mise-en-abîme* of the self-portrait theme, the individual visitor could potentially be summoned to identify with not

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Fig. 4: Last room of the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* dedicated to social realist and contemporary art (People’s Poland). The frame partly behind the painting ‘Polak ’79 (Pole ’79) by Leszek Sobocki is the mirror (here reflecting stairs). Sheet from an official press report. © Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Kraków. Library of the National Museum in Krakow. Photograph Maud Guichard-Marneur.

Cieślińska 1980.
only the Polish past grandeur but also and most poignantly with the contemporary “Polish’ nation” by taking part in it. In an article entitled ‘We’ at the exhibition published in an art magazine in 1980, sections of the exhibition visitors’ book were transcribed. The visitors’ use of the plural first person ‘We’ might have suggested an identification process with the represented. It is remarkable that this exhibition not only draws on the well-known process of building present social cohesion and identity by establishing roots into a common past; most significantly, it draws on the theme of the self-portrait to potentially relegate the division between past and present in favour of a contemporary self-introspection wherein past and present become and define the present.

The exhibition Poles’ self-portrait included artworks from selected living Polish artists, thus merging the museum historical exhibition principle and function with that of a contemporary gallery. As part of the exhibition scenario, the historical and cultural Polish nation is portrayed through its continuity rather than through its upheavals and discontinuities: from a historical being (the historical self-portrait) to the exhibition present time (commissioned portraits) and its visitors (seeing their reflections in a mirror located at the end of the exhibition, just before the exit).

It is safe to consider that the self-reflexive exercise at stake in the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition was made urgent in the given socio-political context and pointedly addressed its contemporaries. The unusual mirror in which visitor could view themselves before exiting the exhibition is a case in point. The question ‘who are we?’ was an art historical, philosophical question (and rendered through the historical self-portrait as a genre), but also as many felt, it was also a political question, a ‘we’ watching ‘us’ in the past and in the present time.

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8 Sztuka 1980.
9 See Sztuka 1980.
Fig. 5: Ground floor (museum main hall) and last exhibition space dedicated to People’s Poland. An imagined portrait of John Paul II entitled Pole ’79 (Polak ’79) by Leszek Sobocki was commissioned specifically for the exhibition. Adjacent to it is a mirror in which people could see their reflections (the photographer is reflected in the mirror) © Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow. Archive of the National Museum in Krakow.

**Historical context of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait and its contemporary cultural relevance**

The 1979 *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition occurred in such a political context that the museum exhibition was retrospectively interpreted as being ‘of its time,’ meaning that of the transition, the time of Solidarity (Solidarność), a sign that the country was on the road towards freedom symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall.\(^{11}\) Prior to and at

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\(^{11}\) See Murawska-Muthesius 1995; Bik 2004; Halawa 2013. In a newspaper article by Journalist Renata Radłowska (2004), it is reported that a Polish expatriate in the USA,
the time of the exhibition opening, significant events had occurred in the whole of Poland. The Party-State in Poland was weakened and people’s demands were increasingly made in the open. During that same the year the first visit of John Paul II to Poland (2–10 June 1979) in his role of Pope of the Roman Catholic Church occurred. The former Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Krakow, a Polish citizen, had been elected Pope on 16 October 1978. Pope John Paul II appeared, for many in predominantly Roman Catholic Poland, as their true leader, a leader who, moreover, had power across state borders. On the last day of the Pope’s first grand tour of Poland, on the 10th of June 1979, John Paul II gave a holy mass in honour of St Stanislaus. The mass was celebrated in the open on the green common of Krakow, known as Blonia Krakowskie, and located adjacent to the National Museum in Krakow. In his address to the three million people present he pronounced the following:

My fellow-countrymen, with the greatest warmth I again give thanks, together with you, for the gift of having been baptized more than a thousand years ago in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.\[^{12}\]

John Paul II referred to the baptism in 966 of Mieszko I, considered the first historical ruler of Poland. This statement was reinstituting the history, strength and tradition of a Roman Catholic Poland in counterpoint to the communist Party-State in power. Later in his address he encouraged his fellows to be strong, thus alluding to a state of weakness (e.g. lack of human/political/religious rights).

You must be strong, dear brothers and sisters. You must be strong with the strength that comes from faith. You must be strong with the strength of faith. You must be faithful. Today more than in any other age you need this strength. You must be strong with the strength of hope, hope that brings the perfect joy of life and does not allow us to grieve the Holy Spirit.\[^{13}\]

Further in his address, the following sentences are often referred to, but also remembered among Poles:

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\[^{12}\] John Paul II 1979, 173. The italics are reproduced from the same text published on the Vatican website (The Vatican 1979).

\[^{13}\] John Paul II 1979, 173.

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“There is therefore no need for fear. We must open the frontiers. There is no imperialism in the Church, only service.”

If there is no imperialism in the Church, it may exist in Poland, outside it. This may have been interpreted as a barely muted reference to the Polish communist regime.

Three years earlier, in June 1976, strong protests had occurred in response to a sudden major increase in food prices announced by the government in a country where “independent estimates showed that almost a third of the population was living below the officially defined ‘social minimum.”

Facing massive disruptions and mounting claims, the government eventually backed out, discrediting itself then, if not already. In September of the same year, a Committee for the defence of workers (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR) was formed and issued open letters to the government. KOR provided medical and financial support as well as legal help to individuals and their families involved in the protests and tracked by the communist regime. The initiative spread. Committees were organised. Publications were distributed. In retrospect, the movement has been considered the embryo of the Solidarity movement, a movement that culminated in the creation of an independent trade union (from the Party-State) at the Gdańsk shipyard in September 1980, eight months after the closing of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait at the National Museum in Krakow and nine years before the fall of the communist regime.

In comparison to such major events initiated by and impacting on the Polish people, what can be the relevance of such a temporary exhibition as the Poles’ self-portrait? Indeed, it barely lasted three months; it was confined to the exhibition rooms of a museum, not even in the capital city; ultimately, it had no bearing on people’s daily life (work, subsistence, freedom of speech). In comparison to such an exhibition, the word pronounced by the Pope in the open on the common urban green of Błonia on that day in June 1979 in Krakow

14 John Paul II 1979, 174.
15 Kemp-Welch 2008, 208.
may have had a much wider impact factor on the Poles. Nevertheless the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait in particular, as well as its theme, are still referred to today. Why?

Fig. 6: Waiting in the cold for an art exhibition: a different sort of queue in front of the main building of the National Museum in Krakow for the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait (Polaków portret własny), 1979-1980. The exhibition banner on the museum’s façade reads POLAKÓW portret własny (Poles’ self-portrait). The visual emphasis is on the genitive (possessive form) of the substantive ‘Pole’ in the plural form: POLAKÓW. Cover of an official press file © Janusz Podlecki, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza (Krakow)/Bibliotek Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie. Photograph Maud Guichard-Marneur.
It attracted, if we accept the archived reports, 350,000 visitors in three months (5 October 1979 – 3 February 1980). The visitor numbers for this sole exhibition is impressive in comparison to yearly visitor numbers during the seventies. The sight of long queues outside shops for staple foods such as meat and sugar were common scenes and experience, but not in front of museums. People were indeed queuing in the cold not for food but to see an art exhibition. For many it was their first time in a museum. People travelled from the capital Warsaw and from all over Poland to visit the exhibition. The exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* benefited from significant media coverage. In 1981, a twenty-four minute documentary film about the exhibition was produced. In 2004, the national newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* published in its Krakow edition two articles dedicated to the twenty-five year anniversary of the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition. More generally, the expression ‘Poles’ self-portrait’ has become a key phrase used throughout the transition period in Poland: *Poles’ self-portrait* became the title of a TV programme that ran during the nineties on channel 2 of the Polish television (TVP2) which aimed at offering a reflection on the life of Poles and on Polish society as a whole. Slightly fewer than 150 shows were broadcasted on themes such as, the national anthem, the truth of the mirror image, the self-portraits of politicians, the European Union. In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw offered a three-month programme of workshops and debates under the key theme ‘Polaków portret własny?’ (*Poles’ self-portrait*), with the aim of answering the following complex question: which and how specific art collections in Poland relate to Polish society and the kind of stories they generate. On a more marginal note, I encountered individuals who, when told

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16 See Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1979b.
17 Fig. 6.
19 See Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1979.
20 See Kwiatkowska 1981.
21 See Błażejko 2004; Radłowska 2004.
22 1989 onwards.
23 See Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie 2013.
about my PhD research topic at the time, almost immediately referred to the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait*, often with a reference to the mirror at the end of the exhibition. As a result and in spite of the exhibition lasting three months, its rational about both finding and defining the Polish nation has become a present cultural fixture. I would now like to show how the exhibition narrative of the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition has been framed within a narrative of Polish cultural resistance and existence.

In a conference proceeding paper published in 1995, Polish-born art historian Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius reflects about the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* that she visited at the time in those terms:

> In the late 1970s the temperature of the *national debate* was raised again. [...]. A series of important exhibitions explored in different ways the imagery of *national identity*. The public’s spontaneous approval confirmed a widespread socio-psychological need for such enterprises. The ‘image of the *nation*’ was subjected now to exhaustive analysis, based more on multidisciplinary kinds of academic research. The exhibition *Self portrait of the nation* in Krakow demonstrated an entirely new, almost psychological approach to the national question. It took on the phenomenon of *Polishness* by assembling a vast array of ‘images of national identity’ – hundreds of portraits of Poles from all centuries, from all classes and professions. Tightly covering the walls, the portraits of Polish kings, aristocrats, and *viri illustres*, as well as images of nobles, were followed by those of artists and intellectuals, of the urban elite and the workers, the ‘average Pole of the 70s’, and, finally, images of Stalinist heroes. [...]. This last exhibition stirred national emotions to an unprecedented extent. The mirror which constantly reflected a new portrait of every visitor leaving the exhibition provoked, as was intended by the organisers, a search for self-identification [...].

The scholar then interprets the exhibition as follows:

> Did this exhibition [The faces of Socialist Realism postponed to 1987], as well as the Self-Portrait of the Nation, foreshadow the events of the late 1980s? Even if we do not rush to answer this question, we might say that both exhibitions [The faces of Socialist Realism and Self-Portrait of the Nation] reflected a new style of *national debate*, a new political atmosphere, free, for a while, of prejudice, resentment and derision.

The translation of the exhibition title which renders ‘of the Poles’/‘the Poles’ (Polaków) with the term ‘nation’ may be symptomatic of a patriotic flare that requires questioning. In the cited paragraph I literally highlighted the recurrence of the term ‘nation(al)’ and its de-

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rivatives. The above cited final rhetorical question draws a link between the exhibition event and the Solidarity movement that led to the transition and the political independence of Poland. Such a reading of the significance of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition implies that under the communist regime, the nation was repressed in its right of cultural (and political) expression. It also suggests that with the Solidarity movement and the transition, national debates, national feelings and emotions could at last be expressed. Kunakhovich, in his comparative study of socialist culture in Krakow and Leipzig, notes that “scholars of Poland […] typically see socialist policy as an attack on national cultures. They construe the socialist as the antithesis of the national, and frequently associate it with the Soviet. […]. Any deviation from the Soviet model is seen as the triumph of national cultures […].” Kunakhovich comments further that from the perspective of Poland, “socialist culture looks like a form of control, meant merely to restrain native traditions.” Research over the last fifteen years has studied and shown the instrumental use of nationalist/patriotic feelings as propaganda in the establishment and maintenance of the communist regime in Poland. Indeed, the national, the socialist and the Soviet were not clearly compartmentalised as one may have wished. Below, I expand on and discuss the notion of cultural nationalism during the communist regime.

The We/They dichotomy: National polity under the communist regime

The use of a nationality policy instrumentalizing nationalist/patriotic feelings to both legitimize and assert one’s power has been documented by the historian Marcin Zaremba with regard to the constant legitimisation process of the communist regime in Poland. In his book entitled *Communism, legitimacy, nationalism*, Zaremba dedicates
one chapter to the period between 1970 and 1980 entitled *Party, Poland, Party, Gierek, Poland, Gierek (1970-1980)*. During this period the importance of the combinatory triad: Party/Gierek/Polish nation was constantly at play. He remarks: “Despite the fact that the main importance was on the emphasis of the successes of the socialist economy and its capacities as a way to validate its legitimacy, this did not prevent the authorities from using a nationalist repertoire.” Indeed, the political decision in the seventies of rebuilding the Royal Castle in Warsaw was fully part of the Party nationality policy of that period as highlighted by Zaremba. He notes: “The reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw was to become a typical example of the authorities’ concern for the national imponderables.” Zaremba expands on the Royal Castle case with the following: “It is not only on the occasion of the reconstruction of the Royal Castle that we spoke of national unity, a unity that was meant to be symbolic. Rather, it remained a key element of the propagandist vision of the seventies that developed around the ideas of national development and civilisation progress, for which the condition of final success was to be this national unity.” Zaremba characterises the nationality policy of the seventies as follows: “National unity was not only being strengthened through the creation of an atmosphere of national emergency, which was so typical of communist rule at the beginning of their existence.” Indeed, national feelings were of central importance to the communist governance in the seventies.

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29 Zaremba 2001, 357. “Wyznaczenie pierwszego miejsca w systemie uprawomocnień legitymizacji polegającej na uwypuklaniu sukcesów i sprawności socjalistycznej gospodarki nie oznaczało rezygnacji władzy z posługiwania się narodową frazeologią.”
Fleming addresses the establishment of the communist regime in Poland during a restricted period between 1944 and 1950 and draws interestingly on the concept of the transparency of power to frame his analysis, a point that I will further draw upon. Fleming shows that “nationalism and nationality policy were fundamentally important in the consolidation of communist rule, acting as a crucial nexus through which different groups were both coerced and were able to consent to the new unfolding social and political order.” Fleming’s work “attempts to redress the balance, not by dismissing the crucial role played by coercion in the establishment of communism in Poland nor through some quixotic attempt to suggest that communist domination was welcome throughout society, but by demonstrating how sufficient consent to the emerging communist hegemony was constructed by the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR) and the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) through the manipulation of nationality policy, national myths and tropes, and the linking of land reform to the new national and territorial configuration.” Fleming shows how the convergence of the PPR/PZPR interests with those of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland over a similar ethno-nationalist Poland (often to the detriment of minorities) allowed the Church to manoeuvre with greater freedom and this until 1947. Fleming, drawing on David Ost and ultimately on Carl Schmitt, considers as a point of departure the principle that the political power of established communist systems is transparent because of, principally but not exclusively, the lack of democratic participation and the proclaimed totality of Party hegemony. Consequently and as part of this configuration, the Party-State appears as directly responsible for the decisions that are made. “Because of power transparency and the relatively automatic organizing of social

34 See Fleming 2010.
35 Fleming 2010, i.
36 PPR (1942-1948).
37 PZPR (1948-1989).
38 Fleming 2010, 1.
39 See Fleming 2010, Chapter 5.
40 See Ost 2005.
41 Fleming 2010, 55.
anger against the Party, it is absolutely essential that the common target (the Party) finds or creates alternative targets for the expression of negative emotions and passions in order to sustain a modicum of legitimacy.” 42 For the purpose of his analysis, Fleming stresses the “centrality of the We/They dichotomy to the political.” 43 Indeed, the author shows how Polish ethno-nationalism that defines the nation as ethnically homogeneous was promoted on the international level (and was accompanied by both the redrawing of frontiers and the transfer of vast populations from the end of WWII onward) as well as by the Polish political elite (in London, Moscow and Lublin). 44 The use of ethno-nationalism as a way to guide anger meant that the Party had to appear ‘Polish.’ 45 In that respect, Fleming points at how important it was for the PPR to show its role in the ‘liberation’ of Poland from Nazi occupation. 46 As a result, the PPR/PZPR endeavoured to appear as not only siding with the Poles, but more so as saving them from a common enemy: Nazi Germany. Zaremba in his earlier work concurs: “From the outset of the communist regime in Poland this way of dealing with national history was not discussed. The liberating and progressive character of national uprisings, the ‘right’ policy of the first Piasts, national martyrdom and the ‘fight against the occupying Nazis’ were emphasized.” 47

**Exhibition narratives: constituting a We**

I would like to propose a reading of the event of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition, not solely as a sign of the end of communist rule in Poland with the rise of Solidarity, wherein Polish nationalism and culture could freely express itself, but as an ambiguous event that in

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42 Fleming 2010, 55.
43 Fleming 2010, 52.
44 Fleming 2010, 62.
45 See Fleming 2010, 63.
46 See Fleming 2010, 64.
47 Fleming 2010, 359. 360. "Od początków władzy komunistycznej w Polsce w ten sposób o narodowej historii się nie mowiło. Podkreślano wyzwolenie i postępowy charakter narodowych zrywów, "sluszną" politykę pierwszych Piastów, martyrologię narodową i "walkę z hitlerowskim okupantem."
turns questions the societal representation of a cultural nation as a coherent whole fighting against oppressors. I argue that the discrepancy between the exhibition narrative and its reframing at reception allowed for a powerful ambiguity that seems to have proven satisfactorily operative for all parties involved. I do not make, however, the quixotic claim that the communist party might have had a specific agenda and/or particular influence on the exhibition project *Poles’ self-portrait*. Neither, can I possibly claim that the National Museum in Krakow was, as a state funded body, totally free from the communist authority.48 Rather, my point is that the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition and project was nothing out of the ordinary, in terms of both its planning at the museum and its narrative. Indeed, at the level of the museum, the planning of a thematic exhibition on a national self-portrait was not a première, but the fact that the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* was exhibited in Poland was. If one looks at the exhibitions scheduled by the National Museum in Krakow during the middle of the seventies it appears that the theme of the self-portrait was common and that exhibitions on one given nation exhibiting national artists (self-portrait) was circulating not only within the Soviet Bloc but more generally also in Europe and beyond. For instance, during the years 1974–1976, four exhibitions were prepared by the National Museum in Krakow to be exhibited abroad, often as a response to having hosted an exhibition curated by a museum abroad. Hence, the National Museum in Krakow prepared an exhibition entitled *Polish graphic since 1900* to be exhibited in Berlin in exchange of the exhibition they received that was entitled *German Expressionist graphic art*. In the autumn 1974, the museum sent the exhibition *Masterpieces of the Polish Culture* to Japan. The Ministry of Culture and the Art took that initiative at the occasion of the thirty years of the People’s Republic of Poland. In 1975, the exhibition entitled *Polish Portrait* was shown in Bucharest, Romania. Another version of the *Polish Portrait* exhibi-

48 See Kunakhovich 2013.
tion was sent to the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1976, the museum sent the exhibition entitled *the four seasons* to Bulgaria.49 As mentioned above, an exhibition entitled *Polish portrait* had already been assembled and circulated as a travelling exhibition. Such a themed exhibition became the exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* when exhibited in its own country of origin, Poland. Members of the exhibition team Janusz Walek and Krystyna Moczulska as revealed in an interview published in 2004: “We had not planned any political provocation.”50 The published interview celebrated the twenty-five years of the event of the exhibition.

Within such analytical framework, I would like to introduce the 1945 exhibition entitled *Warsaw accuses* and this for two main reasons. First, it presents a fantastic case in point to Fleming’s pertinent reading of the play on ethno-nationalism to redirect anger away from the Party while playing the Polishness card. Second, by taking into account the exhibition narrative at stake in the exhibition *Warsaw accuses* it allows me to establish a counter-point from which I can fruitfully put into perspective and discuss the 1979 exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait*. Both the *Warsaw accuses* exhibition and the exhibition entitled *Poles’ self-portrait* are of interest because they are exhibitions produced during the communist period and they are openly concerned with a national/cultural *We*; and this as part of both the exhibition narratives and the narratives produced about the exhibitions. In the title *Warsaw accuses*, Warsaw may be understood as a metonymy for both the regime and the people. The exhibition *Warsaw accuses* is concerned with Polish cultural tangible heritage, past, present and future. Likewise, the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition addresses the history of the Poles up to the present time in a self-reflexive manner.

**The narrative of the Warsaw Accuses exhibition**

The exhibition entitled *Warsaw Accuses* opened at the national Museum in Warsaw on 3 May 1945 and was to remain up until June

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49 Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1980.
50 Bik 2004. “Politycznych prowokacji nie planowaliśmy, ...”
1945, but instead was prolonged until 28 January 1946 due to its proclaimed success. It is reported that in 9 months it was visited by 435,012 individuals. The exhibition is said to have travelled in different countries such as Russia and the USA. The exhibition pamphlet was translated in French, English, and Russian. It may come as a great surprise to find that such an exhibition was organised in a ruined Warsaw. World War II was barely over. Meanwhile, one may ponder over the reason for and the purpose of such an exhibition presenting the obvious to potentially everyone in Warsaw in the spring of 1945: the destruction of the capital city. In May 1945 Warsaw was mostly erased from the map. The National Museum building was still standing, but it had been gutted. The damage to the fabric of Warsaw was so considerable that the city resembled chaotic masses of rubbles. The damage in terms of war and civilian casualties had indeed been tremendous.

On 1 August 1944, barely 9 months before the opening of the exhibition, the Warsaw Uprising was launched by the Polish Underground Army (Armia Krajowa) loyal to the Polish Government in exile. The aim of such an operation was to overthrow the Nazis who occupied the capital city and to re-establish local power. The planned two-day insurrection lasted in fact sixty-three days and by October 1944 the Underground Army had capitulated. These two dreadful months were followed by both a massive looting of anything considered of value and the undertaking of systematic further destruction of the city’s fabric by the Nazis. On 31 December 1944, the Soviet-backed Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) declared itself the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland. In January 1945 the Soviet Army and Berling’s Polish First Army entered the ruins of Warsaw. In February 1945, Stalin, Roosevelt and

51 See Kaczmarzyk 1976.
52 Snyder 2014.
54 The exhibition catalogue Warsaw Accuses traces the preparation phase of the destruction and looting of Warsaw back to the thirties. The section in the catalogue dedicated to this phase is entitled The preparation of the crime. (Office of Reconstruction of the Capital – National Museum in Warsaw 1945).
Churchill redrew the frontiers of Poland at the Yalta conference. In May 1945 the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses* opened to the public.

The Director of the National Museum in Warsaw at the time, Prof. Stanisław Lorentz, wrote about how in mid-February 1945 he came up with the idea of having such an exhibition as the *Warsaw Accuses* exhibition. When he attempted to register the museum on the priority list of buildings considered for the rebuilding plan drafted by the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital (Biuro odbudowy stolicy, BOS), he was at first unsuccessful. He thus decided to strengthen his request by stressing strong associations between the museum and central (political) issues at stake at the time, mainly: the interpretation of the destruction of Warsaw in particular and of the Polish culture in general as a deliberate and barbarian gesture perpetrated by the Nazis. By reframing the status of the museum within a given political agenda, Lorentz successfully convinced the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital to consider the museum as a priority and to support his exhibition project idea. The exhibition *Warsaw Accuses* and its accompanying pamphlet were produced by the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital, together with the National Museum in Warsaw, under the patronage of the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art and the Ministry of Reconstruction of the Country. Lorentz wrote about the incredible sight of the functioning fountain in front of the museum for the opening of the exhibition at a time when Warsaw and its inhabitants were deprived of running water.

55 Lorentz 1976, 583.
56 Lorentz 1976, 584.
Fig. 7: Warsaw Accuses exhibition poster that is said to have been displayed on ruins (houses and holy places) in Warsaw. Three white crosses in a red background surrounded by laurel and oak leaves. © Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie, 1976. Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie/ Univeritätsbibliothek Heidelberg.

Such an emphasis on cultural policy initiatives, barely the war over, reminds one of the centrality, in practice and theory, of the belief and interest in the role of heritage in general and museums in particular to shape society and its future. Such line of approach and understanding is found at stake in reports published under the guise of the cultural authorities after the war.
In *Muzealnictwo*, a publication overviewed by the Central Authority of Museums under the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art, an article published in 1952 presents a retrospective overview of the state of museums in Poland from 1945 until 1952. The paper opens as follows:

> From the first moment of existence of the Socialist Authority in Poland, we have been witnessing a constant and unforeseen development of culture and the Art. Full of theatres, cinemas, concert halls, increasing attendance at museums, the growing interest of the working masses in all areas of cultural life: all this is a positive symptom of the victory of a cultural revolution in our country.\(^{57}\)

In an unstable time when the Party was in need of legitimization, playing the ‘Polish culture’ card was indeed a way to instrumentalize the nationality policy in order to increase popular support. The author of the report continues:

> An analysis of the attendance rate at museums allows us to draw conclusions about the concordance between the museum apparatus and the degree of culture. In this project museology fulfils one of the main tasks of building Socialism in Poland, and this especially in allowing to build a worldview and raise socialist awareness. In this way, the museums in Socialist Poland serve in the fight for peace and socialism. An analysis of visitor attendance allows us to confirm effectively how this action works among the mass at large.\(^{58}\)

In the report cited above, the degree of activity in the cultural and museum sectors is highlighted not only by showing an increase in visitor numbers, but also an increase in the number of museums, temporary exhibitions and travelling exhibitions. The importance of outreach work towards schools and the work force is highlighted. In 1945, the National Museum in Warsaw was reported to have had

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\(^{57}\) Muzealnictwo 1952, 46. "Od pierwszej chwili istnienia władzy ludowej w Polsce jesteśmy świadkami nieprawdopodobnego wprost rozwoju kultury i sztuki. Pełne teatry, kina, sale koncertowe, rosnąca frekwencja w muzeach, coraz większe zainteresowanie mas pracujących wszystkimi dziedziniami życia kulturalnego – to radosny objaw zwycięstwa rewolucji kulturalnej w naszym kraju."

\(^{58}\) Muzealnictwo 1952, 46. "Analiza frekwencji w muzeach pozwala na wyciągnięcie wniosków dotyczących zagadnienia sprawności aparatu muzealnego i stopnia kultury. W akcji tej muzealnictwo spełnia jedno z głównych zadań budowy socjalizmu w Polsce, zwłaszcza na odcinku przebudowy światopoglądu i podniesienia świadomości socjalistycznej. W ten sposób muzea w polsce Ludowej służą walce o pokój i socjalizm. Analiza frekwencji pozwala stwierdzić z jakim powodzeniem wśród szerokich mas przebiega ta akcja."
275,937 visitors.\textsuperscript{59} In comparison, that same year, the National Museum in Krakow was reported to have had 19,904 visitors. In 1946 the visitor numbers are estimated to have increased to 441,707 and 109,544 for the National Museum in Warsaw and the National Museum in Krakow respectively.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, in 1945, twenty-two museums were under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, they were one hundred and seven in 1952. An additional five museums were not directly under the Authority of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts in 1945, and these were increased to twenty by 1952. In the report those figures are drastically compared with the pre-war figures to demonstrate the purported “development of the Polish culture.” It is reported that in 1945, 19 temporary exhibitions were organised, included the exhibition \textit{Warsaw Accuses}.\textsuperscript{61} Within this framework, the opening of the temporary exhibition \textit{Warsaw Accuses} in a ruined Warsaw may be better comprehended.

The space of the \textit{Warsaw Accuses} exhibition was comprised of six rooms, each dedicated to a specific theme as follows:\textsuperscript{62} destruction room (1)\textsuperscript{,}\textsuperscript{63} Egyptian room (2), documentation room (3), the castle room (4), the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital room (5)\textsuperscript{,}\textsuperscript{64} and the museum objects room (6). In the destruction room (1) the display is sparse with groupings of objects: a pile of paintings on the floor propped up on the wall, all the paintings slashed,\textsuperscript{65} Nazi air fighters painted on the wall and a simulated fall of cherubs,\textsuperscript{66} most definitely

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} The visitors number quoted in 1952 (Muzealnictwo 1952, 47) drastically contradicts the visitors number quoted in 1976 (Kaczmarzyk 1976, 599) for the number of visitors to the National Museum in Warsaw for the year 1945.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Muzealnictwo 1952, 47.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Muzealnictwo 1952, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{62} The exhibition catalogue with a description of the rooms and a detailed list of objects was only published in 1976 by the National Museum in Warsaw (See Kaczmarzyk 1976).
\item \textsuperscript{63} Figs. 9–12.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Fig. 13.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Fig. 9, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Fig. 11.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
remnants of church sculptures. A minimum dramatization of the artistic/heritage remnants, a few painted scenes, some photos of the Warsaw of before as well as some catchy phrases painted on the wall such as: “They destroyed – Here is what remains;” “On the cornerstone of the Sigismund column we will build new walls,” constituted the exhibition curatorial line. In the room dedicated to the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital, Nazi plans for the capital (plans of destruction) as well as the Office reconstruction plan which claims to be anchored in Polish history and culture were presented as opposite pendants. In the Egyptian room, on the wall, one could read:

67 The Sigismund Column was/is located between the Royal Castle and the ‘old’ town of Warsaw. It commemorates King Sigismund III Vasa who transferred the capital from Krakow to Warsaw in the sixteenth century.
68 “Niszczyci;” “To po nich zostało;” “Na zygmuntowskim kamieniu węgielnym nowe wzniemy mury.”
69 Fig. 13.
“Preserved for forty centuries – destroyed by the German hand.”\textsuperscript{70} From December 1944 until as late as 1994, the Polish Film Chronicle (Polska Kronika Filmowa) broadcasted twice weekly a circa ten-minute newsreel in Polish cinemas before the start of a film, and on 31 July 1945, a short broadcast about the exhibition was produced.\textsuperscript{71} This short newsreel certainly extended the communication capacity and the audience of the temporary exhibition \textit{Warsaw Accuses}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{View of ‘destruction’ room in the exhibition \textit{Warsaw Accuses} held at the National Museum in Warsaw, May–June 1945 (prolonged until 28 January 1946). Still image from the newsreel excerpt entitled \textit{Wystawa w Muzeum Narodowym ‘Warszawa oskarża.’} © WFDiF. Repozytorium Cyfrowe Filmatki Narodowej /Polish National Film Archive, PKF 20/45.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{70} “Czterdzieści wieków przetrwało –zniszczyła ręka niemiecka.”
\textsuperscript{71} See the short film produced about the exhibition, now available online as part of a digital archive of documentary films (Wytwórnia Filmowa Wojska Polskiego 1945).
Fig. 10: View of a pile of heavily vandalised paintings in the ‘destruction’ room in the exhibition Warsaw Accuses held at the National Museum in Warsaw, May–June 1945 (prolonged until 28 January 1946). On the wall, above the painting (and not visible on the still image), is written “They destroyed.” Still image from the newsreel excerpt entitled Wystawa w Muzeum Narodowym ‘Warszawa oskarża.’ © WFDiF. Repozytorium Cyfrowe Filmoteki Narodowej /Polish National Film Archive, PKF 20/45.

Fig. 11: Children watching the fall of the cherubs. Above the cherubs, painted on the wall, are Nazi airplanes represented in the act of bombing the city. The editing of the moving images establishes a parallel between the Nazi air attack on Polish tangible heritage and Polish culture symbolised by the cherubs on the one hand and the children (the future of Polish living culture) on the other. Two still images from the newsreel excerpt entitled Wystawa w Muzeum Narodowym ‘Warszawa oskarża.’ © WFDiF. Repozytorium Cyfrowe Filmoteki Narodowej /Polish National Film Archive, PKF 20/45.
Fig. 12: On top of a pedestal, the head of Adam Mickiewicz, a remnant of the destroyed sculpture commemorating the Polish literary man. Above the head, hung on the wall, two photographs of the column before its destruction. Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie, 1976. Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie/ Univeritätsbibliothek Heidelberg.
As Zaremba pointed out, the Party was eager to interpret the recent past in the guise of a national martyrdom and the “fight against the occupying Nazis,” hence establishing the communist regime as a saviour. This is within this context that the vindictive title of the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses* must be read. The accompanying pamphlet to the exhibition enumerates the deeds (crimes) of the Nazis, the necessity to return stolen heritage and ends accusingly with grandiloquence. Excerpts read as follows:

The exhibition proves that the Germans have no moral right to keep these objects in the future. That is why Warsaw does not complain by means of that exhibition, but

**WARSAW ACCUSES**

Before the tribunal of nations.°°

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Nevertheless, this focus on recent history was in fact a way to impose the future, as transpires in the first paragraph of the exhibition booklet:

The spectator, entering the newly-opened Museum in Warsaw, in particular if he is by birth a child of this martyr-city, will be – as we think – doubly moved and excited. The building itself of the institution, raised very rapidly from degradation and ruin, which it was driven into by German violence, is a real token foretelling the rise of a new, more beautiful capital; [...].

The emphasis is on the new and the coming as revealed by the references to newness, birth and rise. David I. Snyder analyzed the alternative vision of post-war reconstruction in Poland and inscribed his analysis in the general reading put forward by Zaremba and Fleming. As part of his analysis on the reconstruction planning of Warsaw, he investigates the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses*. He states: “[…] reconstruction plans were developed for Warsaw that, in tandem with the incremental ascent of the Soviet-backed socialist government, subtly infused the projected image of the rebuilt icon of national resistance and martyrdom with new, ideologically driven meanings.” Snyder is interested in the use of photography within the exhibition as a means to create a distanciation effect but also as a way to eventually transform the ‘before-images’ (before the destruction of WWII) into ‘after-images’ (the planned reconstruction). In this scenario, the future is anchored in a national heritage while nonetheless being entirely created from the ground up. The pairing of photos (and models) in the exhibition rooms tends to present the ‘before image’ as the ‘after image’ and the ‘after image’ as the ‘before image.’ This may create a distance from the destruction (perpetrated by ‘Them,’ the Nazis) while rendering more immediate the vision of reconstruction and completeness (proposed by the Party). This distanciation from the destruction and the projection

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75 See Snyder 2014.
76 Snyder 2014, 161.
77 Fig. 12. Photographs by Zofia Chomętowska and Maria Chrząszczowa were exhibited as part of the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses*. Their photos of Warsaw taken between 1945 and 1947 were exhibited in 2011 at the History Meeting House, Warsaw (culture.pl).
onto a rebuilt Warsaw collapses the distance between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be.’ In other words the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses*, through spatial displacements and juxtapositions, renders real - maybe in an illusory fashion - what is not: an intact and even enhanced Polish capital both historical and modern (reborn). The blatant discrepancy between the ruins of Warsaw and the foreseen rebuilt and proud capital projected by the Party is disregarded. Instead the vindictive tone of the exhibition attempts to bridge the obvious gap.

The narrative of the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition

In 1979 Poland, the Party-State had been securely established. The economic difficulties of the country, however, among other issues, had opened up a flare of contestation. The Party-State legitimacy was endangered since it was held directly responsible for the situation of economic stalemate in the country (among other important issues) that severely impacted on the daily life of the Poles (See Fleming’s transparency principle). As can be sensed through the press clippings relative to the Polish cultural and artistic life in the year 1979, the historical narrative that constituted a de facto alignment of the Party with the Polish people as its defender against the Nazis had remained active, very much in continuity with the vindictive tone at stake in the 1945 exhibition *Warsaw Accuses*. In 1979, the People’s Republic of Poland was celebrating thirty-five years of existence; and that same year, the communist regime was also commemorating the forty years of the battle of Warsaw (September 1939). The same newspaper article about the ‘losses of Polish culture’ (Straty polskiej kultury) was published in periodicals with some variants in the title and the for-

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78 Snyder 2014, 167.
79 A clip from a newsreel produced in December 1946 is also entitled *Warsaw Accuses*. At the beginning of the video clip the clip title is superimposed to an image of Warsaw in ruins. The video clip is not about the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses*, but about the prosecution of individuals (Ludwig Fischer, Ludwig Leist, Josef Meisinger, Max Daume) formerly involved in the Nazi regime in occupied Poland (Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe Film Polski 1946).
matting. A recurring illustration was a photograph of a Nazi circulating among ruins. The opening paragraph of the article read as follows:

Implementing the planned extermination of the Polish nation, the German invader attempted to kill its national consciousness, destroy its cultural heritage, murder its scientists, artists, educators; it sought the total extermination of the Polish intelligentsia.

September 1939 was already an ominous prelude to what was to be the Polish cruel daily reality during nearly 6 years of occupation.

The closing paragraph reads as follows:

The Nazi occupiers did a miscalculation. Despite their prevision, Polish culture is alive. It emerged from the war with deep wounds, but it survived the reign of the ‘brown’ barbarians. Already a year after the war, the combined circulation of books published in Poland was higher by 10 million than the total circulation of 1937. Moreover, unprecedented work on a world scale was undertaken: the rehabilitation and reconstruction of monuments which the invader turned into rubble. Culture has become a common good in a re-born Poland and it lives today its heyday.

The pro-active attitude of the Party towards Polish culture was advertised further through newspaper articles. For instance, the nomination of Prof. Stanisław Lorentz, Director of the National Museum in Warsaw, for a national prize delivered to celebrate the thirty-five years of the People’s Republic of Poland was covered by the press.

The opposition between a We in defence of Polish culture and a They (the Nazis) appears, at the time of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait in continuity with the rational at stake in the exhibition Warsaw Accuses. During that same period, the trial of Pieter Menten, a busi-

80 See for instance, the following publications of the paper (Gazeta współczesna. Magazyn 1979; Gazeta południowa 1979).

81 “Realizując plan zagłady narodu polskiego niemiecki najeźdźca starał się unicestwić jego świadomość narodową, zniszczyć dorobek kulturalny, wymordować ludzi nauki, twórców, pedagogów, dażył do całkowitej eksterminacji inteligencji polskiej. Już wrzesień 1939 roku był złowrogim prologiem tego, co miało być dla Polski okrutną codzienną rzeczywistością przez blisko 6 okupacyjnych lat.”


nessman and an art collector who was a member of the Nazi SS involved in manslaughter and art robbery in war time Poland was re-opened and was also widely commented in the press. Indeed, the pairing Party/Polish people against the destruction of the Polish culture (with the Nazi occupier as principle actor and enemy) in favour of a Polish renaissance (e.g. the emphasis on the reconstruction plan of Warsaw and the publication of books among other things) is in 1979 still an active element like in 1945. Fleming writes:

The amalgamation of traditional communist support for the working and peasant classes, and an uneasy and frequently ambiguous ethno-nationalism, framed political discourse within post-war Poland. Those who supported this programme and were of the right background were the ‘We’; those who opposed and were of the wrong background the ‘They’. And since the We/They dichotomy bifurcated society both along contingent identities (class) and essentialized identities (ethnicity), tensions in society could not be, and were not, resolved but were (re)directed as class antagonisms played out in the register of nationality.  

However, the We/They dichotomy referred to by Fleming and active in the narrative of the Warsaw Accuses exhibition may be subject to a translation process later on as revealed through the case of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait. In the seventies the socio-political context had changed significantly. In face of many previous workers’ protests, the self-granted role of the Party as the defender of the Poles and of Polish culture (against the Nazis) may have become tenuous when confronted to a de facto growing dichotomy between the Party and society on the ground of economic and socio-political rights. This meant that ‘We’ may have become the Party, while They had become by opposition the Polish society. I argue that the narrative in and about the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition play on these ambiguities. Below, I investigate the positioning of a We/They dichotomy by discussing the narrative of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait and the narratives that it generated.

In 1979 as part of the exhibition launch, a few exhibition posters were displayed in the direct surroundings of the museum and in the city-centre. Likewise, the title of the exhibition was advertised in big

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84 Fleming 2010, 67.
85 It is reported that the exhibition poster was considered rather enigmatic and that it did not state what the exhibition was ‘really’ about (See Radlowska 2004).
letters in the front facade of the museum.\textsuperscript{86} The exhibition poster is a collage of portraits of well-known defunct Poles in the art of government, the arts and sciences. Only one truncated portrait in the bottom centre right of the poster shows the upper part of an unknown stylized (female?) face. This stylized face was extracted from a poster designed by artists Wojciech Fangor and Jerzy Tchórzewski.

\textsuperscript{86} Fig. 6.
for the youth and students’ fifth festival in Warsaw in 1955 and re-positioned among the other portraits for the exhibition poster. This youthful character symbolizing the young communist promising generation may be imagined to be both looking up to the future (and to the Party?), as well as to its past, in an interesting visual looping effect. The particular articulations between past and future and the representation of Polish society are meaningful and require further analysis.

The exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* was comprised of fourteen rooms over three floors. The visitor path started on the second floor and ended up in the museum ground floor hall. A mirror, located not far from a portrait of John Paul II entitled *Polak* 79 which ambiguously represents at once a Pole and the Pope, constituted the last displayed piece before exiting the exhibition and museum. The objects (paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints and photographs) related to Polish history were organised chronologically and in five distinct themes which were as follows: In the circle of European culture (1); The Republic of the nobility (i.e. Fifteenth century – 1795) (2); August recognition of the nation (3); Between tradition and revolution (4); In People’s Poland (5). Famous literary citations were scattered on the walls throughout the exhibition. Religious art constituted an ample section of the exhibition and some of the artworks had been painstakingly gathered from a significant number of cloisters.

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87 The poster by Wojciech Fangor and Jerzy Tchórzewski is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue (See Rostworowski 1979, illustration 68).
88 Fig. 4. 5.
89 w kręgu europejskiej kultury (1); Rzeczpospolita szlachecka (2); "uznawanie się narodu" (3); między tradycją a przewrotem (4); w Polsce Ludowej (5).
90 Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1979b. For a detailed comment on the exhibition rooms and the art displayed in different sections (See Cieślińska 1980b).
91 In the museum archive an abundant correspondence can be found between the chief curator of the exhibition, Marek Rostworowski, and religious bodies with regard to the possibility of borrowing artworks for the exhibition. Often, the religious body would defer to the regional authority for the decision of lending an object (See Archiwum Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 1979c).
The fifth section of the exhibition dedicated to People’s Poland may have been thought to be spatially in high disproportion compared to the other sections which occupied most of the exhibition rooms. However, as argued by Rostworowski himself, the fifth section of the exhibition dedicated to People’s Poland covered only 35 years when other sections covered centuries. The last section dedicated to People’s Poland was significant in many respects: the space it occupied was indeed not negligible in comparison to the timeline covered in the space of the rest of the exhibition; it constituted a section of its own; it occupied a strategic space which was the main hall of the museum with high ceilings; it was concerned with the people’s present instead of being about the past (e.g. the portrait of John Paul II entitled Polak 79); visitors’ faces were reflected in a mirror among the other portraits on display; last but not least the display regime was at odds with the rather traditional display of the first four sections.

In the museum hall, the paintings and posters of the People’s Poland section are not shown on the wall one after the other. Instead, one entire wall was covered nearly floor to ceiling with paintings and posters. The floor space of the museum main hall was partitioned in an a priori unordered fashion by self-standing artworks placed at different angles. They were all about people both famous and ordinary. Visitors circulated among these ‘object-people,’ oscillating between the figure of the Pope and the ordinary Pole (e.g. Polak 79) and the mass of workers or passers-by. This was People’s Poland, and visitors were taking part in this tableau vivant. Such self-representation and identification process was further reiterated by the visitor’s own portrait being inscribed, even shortly, in the mirror. The narrative of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition operated two translations in the process of defining a We. The first translation, is a definition of a present We, that of communist Poland, in direct continuity – rather than in rup-

92 See Cieślińska 1980.
93 Fig. 4.
ture – with a historical and cultural Poland. Such a cultural and historical timeline provided the roots necessary to legitimize the regime at the time. The second is a definition of a We that encompasses the society as a whole, the worker, the catholic Pole, as well as the casual museum visitor under the firmly reiterated reality of communist Poland. The ambiguity of the event of the Poles’ self-portrait exhibition occurs in that it both played the national cultural card while at the same time reiterating a political status quo. Indeed, the message seemed satisfactory to both the people and the Party. For Poles, it was a celebration of the nation against the oppressor. For the Party, it was a reiteration of its historical and cultural legitimacy and of a communist We. In the end, it may have just been a balance and check exercise. Indeed, the narrative of the exhibition Poles’ self-portrait succeeded in construing continuity between past and present, Roman Catholic Poland and communist Poland, building a linear time that emphasized fluid relationship, natural succession of events and commonality between historical cultural Poland and People’s Poland. The fact that it occurred at the National Museum in Krakow, a symbol of Polish cultural independence (despite past and/or present oppression) could only add savour to the ambiguity.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have highlighted how cultural representation may be negotiated through the lens of heritage sites. The studied heritage narratives are rooted in an understanding of heritage sites as sites of interdependence wherein heritage sites are understood to function between agency and structure.

In this perspective, I have shown how a cultural study of such heritage narratives can yield an understanding of and allow for a critical approach to cultural representation. By analyzing the narratives themselves and contextualizing them, I discuss the negotiated ambiguities between presentation (exhibition) and representation (both in the exhibition and the reception). I investigated two exhibition narratives in counter point, the exhibition *Warsaw Accuses* (1945) and the
exhibition *Poles’ self-portrait* (1979). Both exhibitions were curated during the communist era and both are concerned with defining a We. Such counterpoint analysis supports existing historical research according to which a strong nationality policy was at work under communist time.

Most importantly, I show how the principle of the We/They dichotomy was translated differently according to shifts in the socio-political context. The narrative of the *Poles’ self-portrait* exhibition was strikingly bringing the communist present time in direct continuity with the Polish past grandeur and this in the symbolic space of the national museum in Krakow, a symbol of Polish (cultural) independence. The result of multiple compromises, such narrative offered a commonality satisfying to all parties. The Poles saw to it a celebration of their cultural existence and independence, an evidence of strong cultural nationalism. The communist regime reinstated its direct continuity to a historical timeline and therein confirmed its cultural as well as political legitimacy in Poland. Such expressions of cultural nationalism, far from being solely proof of the existence of a strong cultural national independence, as commonly put forward, were also partly the result of an instrumentalized national polity under the communist regime.

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