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Language of heritage commodification: Construction of national identity through the discourse of cultural heritage



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The past has a great appeal in (post)modern societies characterized by relativism, globalization and a rising sense of alienation. Heritage of past cultures is often idealized as more authentic and true, symbolizing an era of absolute values and stable meaning. Under the influence of critical cultural studies, in the last several decades heritage has been recognized as a fundamentally discursive phenomenon, a particular discursive formation created by the European social elite and thus reflecting the dominant bourgeois ideology increasingly characterized by the commodification of all aspects of social life. In the contemporary Croatian society, heritage may be said to be commodified in different ways. On the one hand, commodification of heritage is aimed at gaining financial profit, e.g. when heritage is used for creating tourist attractions or as a resource for product branding. On the other hand, heritage is also used as a resource in the process of symbolic identification, (re)creating the Croatian national culture by discursively appropriating the perceived values of past times and cultures. The paper argues that both aspects of the process of commodification of heritage are a part of post-industrial capitalist production, or more specifically of “new capitalism”, in which language and signification play a central role as the increasingly dominant, non-material form of production. The analysis is carried out using qualitative research methods, primarily critical discourse analysis, on a sample of texts from contemporary Croatian media.