1. Narratives of cultural heritage

Aim
This preliminary input aims at opening a discussion of “the narratives of cultural heritage” in relation to ongoing changes in society and to the increase in scientific knowledge. The narratives of cultural heritage are here taken in a broad sense; they can be traditional folklore, film, literature, dance, craft traditions, music, religion and eating habits. In this broad field there is extensive research at the University of Gothenburg and the aim is to work towards bringing together research environments from different traditions within the frame of a number of central problem areas.

Problem inventory
Due to the “de-industrialization” that has been going on since the 70's and to criticisms of all things modern, research has been faced with new challenges where traditional theories and scientific bases have been called in question. For example, a situation has risen where the “analogue” knowledge tradition is challenged by digital conversion. This development forms a specific challenge for the narratives of cultural heritage. One consequence is that the difference between various disciplines has a tendency to decrease since the “logic of distinction” that is built into the medium is also dissolved. One side of this development is that cultural heritage is democratized and practical knowledge about the collections at archives and museums is no longer well hidden and exclusive. With digital conversion various archive and object locations have become accessible to the general public and do not differ significantly from other data bases. Accordingly, older rules for provenance principles and so on have been questioned when the material no longer is “place-bound.” What signification does this have for cultural heritage? Many say that “the medium is the message.” What does it mean for our way of looking at cultural heritage and what can we do about our object locations?

In Sweden, as well as in many other countries, it is noticeable that urban and rural folklore movements in the light of social changes co-operate in reproducing an imagined common cultural heritage. Local folklore societies - one of few vital popular movements today - play a significant role in the production of cultural heritage and systematic historical usage. Besides local folklore societies we see today several new actors on the scene, including the tourist and event trade. This is one of the new economy's most expansive industries and is a place where cultural heritage has a fundamental role in commercialization and economic exploitation.

What attitude should research have to this development?
From a political point of view it has been observed more and more that cultural heritage and its narratives have strong performative strength. One does not have to look at the forces let loose in the former Yugoslavia in order to find examples of strong influences of cultural heritage on people's minds.

The issue is especially important in the many conflicts that arise in a multicultural society where social and political conflicts are embedded in conflicts of cultural heritage.

Procedure
The above problem inventory shows research putting new demands on researchers' abilities to be creative and to think methodologically along new lines. At the university of Gothenburg several disciplines deal with the roughly shaped problem description above. The field is central to subjects such as ethnology, social anthropology, cultural studies, conservation and art. Besides there is a considerable group of researchers in archaeology, history and language history working within this field. As a result of the development and increase of the cultural
heritage area, disciplines that were earlier a bit to the side of traditional cultural heritage research, such as economics and political science, have become increasingly important in an overall view of it. Apart from the university there are also cultural heritage institutions like folklore archives, museums, and other archives where this field is important.

Examples
There are several interesting inputs within the field. Here follow some ideas that try to take advantage of the diversity at the University of Gothenburg.

Cultural heritage and the future
It is perhaps trivial to say that we “shape” tomorrow's history and cultural heritage by the decisions we make today, but those decisions nevertheless present us with great challenges. What should be saved and what should be sorted out is after all a very delicate task. This problem is of immense importance in the archive and museum world and a co-operation with cultural heritage research is probably both an urgent and a fruitful action.

A digital Western Swedish cultural heritage centre
There are a great number of completed and ongoing digital documentation projects in university and cultural heritage institutions. Most of these often ambitious projects have a relatively limited and practical purpose. In the archives it may be about protecting documents from wear and tear and in the museums about creating an overview of artefacts. In the research world there are today a great number of “infrastructural ventures” such as population projects, documentation of rock-carving texts, text databases within the framework of language and dialect studies where great amounts of raw data are digitalized. In the folklore movement there are also extensive activities, though it is rather difficult to get an overview of them. A co-ordination of all these infrastructural projects and the establishment of a digital Western Swedish data base where the material would be accessible to both researchers and the general public would create new conditions for increased knowledge within the field of cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage as creative and “performative” force
Today there is an increasing awareness of how important cultural heritage is for our view of society. Here the visual arts, literature and perhaps to a higher extent the cinema play decisive roles. Other actors such as the folklore movement and the tourist industry are also of great importance in the production of images of our society. Research has probably also a “performative” role in this process, and research about this “performative force of cultural heritage” is both interesting and important.