Conference Paper

Cultural Assessment of Commemorative Practices: Methodological Aspects

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Abstract

This article explores the theoretical-methodological and instrumental-methodical foundations of contemporary professional cultural assessment of commemorative practices. Today cultural expert assessment is an indispensable tool to interpret various objects and processes, as well as providing practical advice. Cultural assessment is in demand due to the increasing complexity of contemporary cultural processes. Memory practices constitute a highly relevant, ubiquitous and important part of this cultural production. Cultural examination of commemorative practices is carried out on two main levels – the institutional and security level (identification, description, classification, protection of monuments and memorial culture) and cultural (the study of the causes and of the inner mechanisms of the development of memorial processes, forms of their objectification, identification of trends in their development, their socio-cultural and functional capacity etc.). The second level, which the main content of this article, is implemented within several levels: methodological, empirical, procedural, interpretative and symbolic, analytical.

Keywords: assessment, cultural assessment, past, memory, cultural memory, commemoration, commemorative practices.

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1. Introduction

Today cultural expert assessment plays a crucial part by allowing us to systemize, verify and interpret sociocultural objects and processes, evaluate their axiological status, establish their correlation with the legal system etc. Among the innovative assessment (including gender, ecological, political, religious assessment, etc.) that have emerged quite recently and are still in the process of molding their theoretical and methodological tools, we find cultural assessment to be the one that holds a special place. According to A.P. Sadokhin, there is a high demand for cultural assessment, because "the role of culture in social practice has been boosted by growing sophistication of social and cultural processes, an increase in all levels of human life and amplification of uncertainty and ambivalence". [1]

2. Materials and Methods

Today the concept of "cultural assessment" is defined in various ways. Within the framework of this article cultural assessment is defined as a process and a result of diagnosing different social and cultural objects, processes and phenomena based on the theoretical, methodological, instrumental and categorical potential of cultural research. The author of this article believes that the main goal of this diagnostics is attribution of the object of assessment and definition of its value-based status, its place and role within the system of social and cultural interactions.

Cultural assessment in the field of memory politics (the concepts commemorative assessment, or assessment of commemorative practices, are used here as synonyms) is no different. According to the classification of cultural assessment proposed by O.N. Astafyeva, this type of assessment can be classified as "an assessment of cultural values" which includes "the entire spectrum of problems related to creation, storage, promotion, replication and functioning of art market and its individual segments as part of the system of government institutions and cultural organizations" [2, p. 9]. In this context, we consider memorial heritage and, more broadly, cultural memory to be the value.

3. Discussion

Commemorative assessment by itself is structurally uneven; it is represented on two levels:

i. Institutional and conservative level (identification, description, systematization and preservation of memorial culture monuments). This level of assessment is provided by the work of institutions and organizations in charge of preservation of cultural and historical heritage monuments. The goal of assessment at this level is formulated in the Russian Federal Law *On the Objects of Cultural Heritage (Historical and Cultural Monuments) of the Peoples of Russian Federation* (articles 28–32) [3] and in general can be summarized as identification of objects and their status and provision of appropriate support according to the legislature of the Russian Federation.

In terms of how the methods are used, this level of commemorative assessment can be described as a highly formalized process: according to G.L. Tulchinsky, it "uses rigorously streamlined procedures (algorithms) as solutions: instructions, programs, all the way to formalized mathematical methods" [4, p. 41].

ii. This is a level of cultural research (the study of causes and inner logic of memorial processes and their development, forms of their objectification, identification of their development trends, social and cultural potential etc.). This level, according to G.L. Tulchinsky's typology, can be considered intuitive, since it is based on the use of personal professional experience of the expert in the situation when no strict algorithm regulating his/her activity has been suggested [4, p. 41].

As a result, we can identify several stages in the assessment process (this methodology is described in more detail in [5])

3.1. First stage: methodological

Before beginning expert work in the commemorative field, as in any other field of cultural assessment, it is crucial to ground the conclusions in fundamental philosophical and culturological concepts, to see the Zeitgeist as a non-material context, to adjust abstract and theoretical tools of contemporary humanities to the goals of an expert [6, p. 4], to agree upon the basic notions and their definitions.

"Commemoration" is defined in this article as a set of collective practices aimed at shaping values and models of behaviour through ritually expressed retention and repetition of symbolically meaningful notions about the past by the members of a group in the present-day culture.

Structurally, commemoration consists of three parts: the core, the commemorative symbol and the commemorative function.

"Commemorative core" creates a certain theme for the commemorative act. An example of such theme would be an individual, an event or a combination of events, a place etc.

Commemorative core can be viewed as the central point of a broader symbolic field – a "commemorative symbol". In this case, it is important that it is a symbol and not the commemorative core model values and attitudes and types of social behaviour.

The main goal of commemorative symbol is to generalize the core and make it archetypical: to translate its specific content into the language of mythologems. That is the reason why the core itself provides only an excuse for commemoration, while the symbolic shell takes part in representative public action.

The number of commemorative symbols is quite small and correlates in general with the most common values, attitudes, norms acceptable in this or that society. Symbols of roots, founding-fathers, victim, hero, trauma, victory or serving as well as others can become the symbols of such kind.

Commemorative practices are always functionally charged and always fulfil a certain power and/or social contract. Among the most important "functions of commemoration", we can list: integrative (maintenance or restoration of social unity), identification (providing a sense of collective belonging), socialization (engaging member of the group with the contents of cultural memory and corresponding value-oriented behavioural attitudes), compensational (ensuring there is an opportunity of interaction with the meaningful past through its ritualized resurrection) etc.

3.2. Second stage: empirical.

At this stage, an expert assembles a collection of specific empirical material – the researcher's database. Depending on the type of commemorative practices subject to assessment, it may include street names, a list of memorial boards and statues erected to commemorate a historical figure, a calendar of memorial celebration, etc.

3.3. Third stage: procedural.

This stage is where the main methodological procedures take place. Their implementation is the key to systematization and initial interpretation of the analysed commemorative objects, i.e. commemorative cores.

Here I suggest the following classification of commemorative cores based on several principles:

1. territorial localization: regional, national or worldwide;

2. chronological localization: post-Soviet period, 20th century, before the 20th century;

3. typical distribution: personalized type (the object of commemoration is an individual), topographic type (the object of commemoration is a place, a city, an area, a district etc.), event-based and process-based type (the object of commemoration is an event or a series of events);

4. themes: presentation of different spheres (sphere of culture, social sphere, political sphere etc.)

The results of this classification of commemorative cores should be broken into tables enabling to analyse commemorative content measuring the parameters of every index.

As an example, here are the tables combposed by the author of this article during the assessment of commemorative practice regarding Chelyabinsk streets (table 1).

TABLE 1: Territorial localization of commemorative locales (streets)

The scale of localizations			Examples
Regional (local)	Global		
	National	Worldwide	
Number of objects			
48	12	0	
Teacher Klein	General Brusilov		
Sculptor Golovnitskiy	Marshall Tchuikov		

3.4. Fourth stage: interpretative and symbolic.

As part of this stage, the commemorative symbols are identified based on the analysis of commemorative cores. The identification procedure of commemorative symbols is very difficult for formalizing and fitting within a certain algorithm (that is the reason why it is exactly this level of cultural assessment that was called intuitive by G.L. Tulchinsky). According to A. Assman, "symbolic aftermath existing around certain commemorative practice is quite easy to read, but very difficult to verify" [7]. In other words, its definition is a challenge to the scholar's observation, experience and intuition.

At the same time, the process of identification and fixation of commemorative symbols can be partially formalized. Thus, in the process of ongoing commemorative assessment of Chelyabinsk street names based on the analysis of commemorative cores, I could identify two commemorative symbols – a heritage and a hero (table 2). Symbol of heritage was linked to the idea of historical roots and common past within a group. It was divided into two subtypes that reflect the different aspects of the same idea – historical and cultural – which allowed to specify the essence of this symbol. For example, a symbol of a hero could be described as an image of socially active person whose biography is tied to significant achievements and successes. The sphere of these achievements could include the sphere of peaceful transformations, or military service, also identified through heroic death.

3.5. Stage: analytical

At this stage an expert performs interpretation of information obtained during the previous stages of assessment. Its main goal is to identify the dominant functions of

TABLE 2: Commemorative symbols (streets)

Commemorative symbol					Examples
Heritage		**Hero**			
Historical	**Cultural**	**Transformations**	**Military service**	**Heroic death**	
Number of objects					
28		**32**			
17	**11**	**16**	**11**	**5**	
Sarapulskaya	Shmakov	Peter Sumin	General Brusilov	Hero of Russia Molodov	
Sogra	Bunin	Professor Blagikh	Marshall Tchuikov	Hero of Russia Rodionov	

commemorative practices and to understand, what sociocultural mission (function) they are grounded in: unification of group members, contraposing members of one group with another, glorifying the past, stylising past as a dramatic experience, etc.

4. Conclusions

In general, cultural assessment of commemorative practices allows us to determine not only the main directions of the state's ideological strategy, i.e. the memory politics, as well as to define its specific contents and forms of implementation but also to understand the symptoms of culture's development, its values, and priorities and to forecast possible scenarios of its development in the future. The role of such professional assessment is becoming especially more significant in case of pseudo-expert intervention carried out and supported by the Internet and television.

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