

Conference Paper

Cultural Assessment: Issues of Methodology

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Abstract

This article gives a brief overview of works devoted to the topic of expert assessment in humanities and cultural studies. It considers cultural assessment from the perspective of the value-normative approach to culture (the corresponding definition is given). The author substantiates the subjective approach to cultural assessment as differentiated from the assessment carried out with the help of special technical methods. The article then explores the key meaning of basic notions "assessment" and "culture" and demonstrates how their synthesis forms the concept of "cultural assessment". This article is an attempt to distinguish cultural assessment from other methods which are carried out in the field of culture and works of art (art, literary and philological assessment). There are five main parameters that should be analyzed. They are: the values inherent to the object; norms immanent to the object; object resistance to foreign cultural influences; alongside with an object's ability object to reproduce and communicate its own value-normative content and be applied to cultural policy by the engaged actors. The author explains how to achieve the objectification of results for this type of assessment. In conclusion, this work proves cultural assessment to be an efficient tool, which also allows specific interpretation of its results in the context of cultural diversity and contradictions between the bearers of cultures.

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1. Introduction

The theme of cultural assessment is new for the culturology and cultural studies as a field of research and as a practice. The term "cultural assessment" hasn't been used broadly in professional discourse. In Russian culturology there are few monographs [1, 2] and even less articles dedicated to the exploration of this type of assessment. Nevertheless, an amount of publications doesn't solve the challenges of discovering the cultural essence of assessment and its difference from other kinds of assessment. Most of the authors shift their attention to the descriptions of potential objects of cultural assessment, the qualities of experts and conditions for carrying out assessment [3–5]. Other authors are looking for alternative ways of using the term through its connection to specific fields of research – linguistic and cultural assessment [6], historical and

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cultural assessment [7]. A similar alternative way is in appealing to interdisciplinary nature of cultural assessment and its synthetic character that covers practically any type of research in the humanities. [8] Some authors stress the necessity of cultural background for carrying out any assessment related to humanities as such. [9, 10] In general, as of the time of completing this paper, the author has found only 40 publications containing keywords “cultural assessment” in their title in the eLibrary database. That proves that this theme is in the initial stage of academic research.

The present article is focused on determining the parameters of cultural assessment, its objects, its inner logic and how it differs from other kinds of assessment in the humanities, defining its origins based on the notion of culture.

2. Materials and Methods

It is crucial to begin with the definition of terms that comprise the notion of cultural assessment based on the meanings pertaining to the humanities. First, our definition doesn't imply expert actions carried out solely with the help of technical means and without the defining role of an individual (for instance, DNA analysis for determining kinship, photo and video streaming of road accidents etc.).

Based on comparing and contrasting other definitions put forward by other authors [11–14], it would be reasonable to define assessment in the field of humanities as a special procedure done from the outside that allows to highlight positive and negative aspects of an object of study within the context of existing circumstances and stipulated requirements by comparing the object with real or hypothetical reference samples chosen by an expert or a customer.

Key words and word collocations:

1. “special procedure” is a conclusion formulating process that goes beyond the amateur practice of evaluating the object;
2. “carried out from the outside” implies independent procedure free of any actors that might be interested in the assessment, including the customer;
3. “comparison” is the main instrument of assessment that helps to define the place that the object takes on the provisional scale of assessment, which implies that the expert (or experts) should obtain enough samples (knowledge, experience) for comparisons or should be able to create a hypothetical comparative set of such samples (analogues);

4. noting down existing circumstances and stipulated requirements stresses that any object should be evaluated within given context, taking into consideration the goals and required results of using it in a certain cultural environment and during a certain time period;
5. a reference to subjectivity underlines, on the one hand, impossibility (or irrationality) of another type of assessment (for example, using technical means), while on the other hand – vulnerability of assessment in the context of the human factor that imposes additional responsibility on all participants of assessment process.

When defining the notion of “culture”, we use value and normative approach. “Culture is a combination of objectively learnt, reproduced and translated models of thinking and activities, as well as subjectively accepted values that shape the content of social life” [15, p. 37].

Key words and word collocations:

1. “objectively learnt” implies a latent and prolonged nature of the process that allows norms to penetrate and settle into individual’s mentality and a lack of rational control (automaticity) of their manifestations.
2. “subjectively accepted” refers to values. It also accentuates the way people choose from a great variety of all material and non-material world phenomena only those ones that have personal significance;
3. this definition pinpoints an obligatory repeated reproduction of norms and accepted values acquired by an individual in the majority of everyday situations. Thinking and behavioural models that are based on normative and axiological imperatives typically dominate (and without forceful coercion) over competitive models that can be applied at the moment.
4. using the term “translated” implies an objectively expansionist essence of culture. Any individual consciously or subconsciously shows the others those ways of thinking and acting in everyday situations that are characteristic of him/her.

Hence, cultural assessment is a specialized procedure that uncovers axiological and normative features of an object, its potential or actual influence on cultural environment in which it was introduced or is to be introduced, as well as its ability to be preserved in this environment.

3. Discussion

The main parameters of an object established during the cultural assessment are:

3.1. Object-immanent values and norms

Any social object (an individual, community etc.), or engineering and technical object, or a project, embodies and translates values and norms that are immanent to it (for detailed analysis of essential features of cultural norms and values see [15, p. 31–37]). The fundamental meaning of cultural assessment is, in the first place, to define what values and norms are translated or will be translated in the future. Consequently, we can determine what type of culture and what derivatives of its ways of thinking and acting are being formed in real time or will be formed right after the object is implemented, or the project is finished. For example, let's take a look at the two alternative projects suitable urban environment: "food market" and "music school". It is safe to assume that "food market" will facilitate development of business values, values of self-reliance and norms that foster autonomy and self-employment among the population. If the "musical school" project goes forward, the priority will be given to values connected with the musical taste, sound aesthetics and the norms of polite behaviour and paternalism. Hence, every implemented project will objectively promote emergence of cultural environment optimal for its existence, which is bound to change its locality (for example, a city district), shape its future economy, type of communal interactions, appearance, image, etc. Every project can have its own groups of interests – a fact that would most likely lead to the opposing assessments of its relevant axiological and normative implementations.

3.2. Object's stability regarding foreign influences

Taking into consideration the fact that cultures co-exist and compete with each other, it is reasonable to assume that if an object (project results) with different cultural features is to be implanted into a traditional (stable) cultural environment, it will undergo assimilating influence. Therefore, vitality of an object (efficiency of the project) will depend on its inner cultural potential, on the one hand, and the power of assimilating influence, on the other hand. It is here that cultural assessment should provide answers to the following questions:

1. can an object (project result) be preserved in its initial format and under what conditions it can happen? The options here can be, for example: "It can be

preserved autonomously”, “It can be preserved with partial external support”, “It can be preserved only with systematic protection and guardianship”;

2. how long does an object (project result) need to get to the level of autonomous existence? The last point is crucial as an indicator of the fully formed cultural environment with new features.

3.3. Object's ability to reproduce and translate its own norms and values

The rate at which the object's own norms and values are reproduced and translated, the size of its areal of influence are the main indicators of its cultural stability, the effect it has on cultural situation and its power of shaping cultural environment. Cultural assessment has to identify this areal of translating activity and its intensity that can be “high”, “medium” or “low” (criteria for these indicators are designed specifically). As a rule, this assessment is necessary not only for the newly created objects (project result) that is being implanted in the existing cultural environment but also regarding the cultural environment itself (its norms and values become an object of assessment as well). For instance, cultural environment can be characterized by transiency of culture or, oppositely, by its stability. Understanding the features of environment can help to formulate cultural priorities more precisely, to implant new cultural objects or projects more effectively, or to neutralize the influence of the existing ones.

3.4. An opportunity to use an object in cultural policy

An object may be used in cultural policy by stakeholders (as an instrument or a model), or a cultural policy can have an impact on the object (with a purpose of changing or transforming it). Taking the notion of culture as foundation, we define cultural policy as “results, long-term activities that provide development of society (or part of it) within reasonably selected and artificially implanted cultural norms and promoted values” [15, p. 73]. Obviously, any assessment, including cultural assessment, is carried out with the purpose of making well-grounded decisions and taking optimal steps to implement them. Consequently, this type of assessment is important, first, for developing and implementing cultural policies aimed at preservation or modernization of existing cultural state of society, just as at radically changing the cultural paradigm. Decisions that were made under the influence of economical or political interests of different actors might have long-term negative consequences for the society. For

example, construction of cheap housing districts is likely to attract buyers with low requirements not just for the housing itself but for the infrastructure as well, which is bound to result in diaspora settlements. As a result, we can forecast an upcoming change in cultural landscape of this housing, pushing out the locals and traditional culture with them etc. Understanding negative consequences of projects that seem attractive at first glance requires top managers to use cultural assessment before making any serious decisions, even when formally they don't seem related to culture.

Therefore, the objects of cultural assessment are:

1. cultural values;
2. cultural norms;
3. reproduction and translation of cultural norms and values;
4. axiological and normative context of implementing managerial decisions;
5. cultural policies on different stages of its development and implementation.

Other social, engineering and technical, programming and project phenomena (for example, educational programs, theatrical performances, objects of cultural heritage etc.) are nothing but transmitters of cultural features, and in cultural sense they exist only as their combination.

In the light of the above, by applying the principle of congruency it is possible to identify differences and common features of cultural assessment and more specialized types of assessment – art assessment, literary assessment, etc. It is obvious that the differences relate to the object of analysis itself. In specialized assessment there is a combination of individual features – authorship, style, genre, expressive means, technique used, attribution to a certain school of art or artistic movement, authenticity, history (the fact of an object being owned by different people) etc. In other words, specialized assessment has to attribute works of art in accordance with whatever field of art they belong to.

Specialized assessment also has interpretative or explanatory function by translating the author's hidden position to the audience. Having special knowledge about the author of the work, his/her biography, the history behind the idea of this work and its creation, the experts – art historians and literary critics – can interpret the author's ideas expressed in the work of art. It is exactly this interpretative function of specialized assessment that formalizes the axiological context of the artwork; it borders and sometimes even partially coincides with similar function of cultural assessment.

4. Conclusions

Based on the everything mentioned above, we can make the following conclusions:

1. Cultural expert assessment requires institutional features and occupies unique place on the market of expert assessment. It deals with such universalities as norms and values, and consequently encompasses an unlimited number of phenomena (from the legal system to engineering decisions).
2. Methodologically, cultural expert assessment is rooted in three principles: historicism, contextuality and futurism, by providing comprehension and optimal design for the development process of objects under cultural analysis (cultural norms and values) in the chosen area.
3. Based on the concept of cultural pluralism, it is reasonable to assume that the conclusions of cultural assessment can be evaluated in terms of suggested circumstances and specified requirements, both positive and negative, proposed by different social and political actors (different groups of interests).
4. The purpose of cultural assessment is twofold:
 - (a) Universal, for assessment of any managerial decisions that have significant impact on the society's future;
 - (b) specialized, to be used in development and implementation of cultural policies.
5. The competency of experts in cultural research should be backed up by their significant personal experience of analytical work in sociocultural sphere (systematic participation in professional communications on different levels, preparation of analytical materials etc.), as well as special training that involves mastering methods and technologies of expert assessment work. More detailed information on the requirements for specialized experts can be found in the work of O.N. Astafyeva [16, p. 7–29].
6. Specialized types of assessment – for example, art assessment, literary assessment, cinematic assessment etc. – cannot be considered cultural as such. At the same time, interpretative conclusions from specialized assessment can be used in cultural assessment for better understanding the place that the work of art takes in the existing system of culture, and how it can be used in cultural policies.

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