

Conference Paper

“Examination of Memory” and the Formation of Modern Socio-Cultural Space

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Abstract

This article analyses the contemporary Russian sociocultural space, exploring the degree of influence of memories of the past on modern society, the use of images of the past in the formation of actual culture. Cultural memory is a major factor in modern socio-cultural space: it contributes to the way people experience their surroundings and their identity through chosen images and artefacts of the past. Professional assessment by the experts is an important tool in understanding how cultural memory works and how it is utilized in socio-cultural experience. This article presents an attempt to reveal the mechanisms of interpretation of the content of cultural memory and the representation of its meanings by means of culture. The article discusses such problems as the process of preserving, transforming and transmitting cultural memory, as well as the possibility of humanistic knowledge in matters of “memory examination”, analysis and forecasting of the development of the socio-cultural sphere.

Keywords: culture, cultural memory, collective memory, commemorative practices, cultural assessment

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1. Introduction

When talking about assessment of art valuables, historical and cultural heritage, there is an understanding in general of what is the subject of our conversation. As a rule, assessment is an assessment of authenticity, authorship or price of art objects or objects of material culture. In this case experts are specialists that have a degree in, or an extensive experience of, the art objects, monuments of history and culture – historians, art historians and gallerists. In the sphere of art, an extensive practical experience of carrying out assessment has already been gained, mechanisms of carrying out assessment have been perfected and a set of tools used to assessment have been determined, while the sphere of cultural studies is where this process has just recently been launched.

Cultural assessment is one of the types of expert and analytical work in the humanities. It is a “special subfield of theoretical modeling and forecasting cultural dynamics, its

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goal is identifying the main vectors and perspectives, developing criteria and principles of communicative interaction between different social subjects that are involved in cultural creativity" [1]. Communication between the subjects of culture, as a rule, is founded not only on personal experience but also on social experience, a bundle of historical knowledge, collective notions about culture, society and the conditions. Expert analysis of exactly these "aggravating circumstances" allows us to unravel the context of human existence in culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This article focuses on the subject far more complex and eluding the assessment process – cultural memory and the forms of its representation in contemporary culture. In this regard, it is crucial to determine several key issues that are an integral part of the "assessment of memory".

First, what is the goal of cultural assessment, whose subject is the representation of cultural memory images? The goal of any such assessment is to learn something new about the mechanism of collective memory, as well as about the challenges of preserving and transforming images of the past as the core of culture. Moreover, assessment can be used as an applied practice that is aimed at studying the public mood, the attitudes of social groups to history and their willingness to accept different forms of culture, thus defining the most effective scenarios of cultural policies.

Second, what are the contents of materials undergoing the expert assessment which can be representations of the images from the past: national holidays, works of art and their meanings, museum collections etc. For this purpose, assessment can take different directions, one of which is evaluation of authenticity of memories that have become the foundation of this or that form of culture. In this case, an expert can study the origins of some images of the past and compare them with the "objective" facts. Taking the word "objectivity" into quotation marks stresses the impossibility of having an absolutely objective statement about culture. Another direction of assessment is exploration of sociocultural context, in which memory representations emerge without the necessity to evaluate how objective the images of the past are. As part of this approach, "wrong" memories are just as valuable for assessment as those that seem to be more objective. It may be assumed that in the course of assessment we can stumble upon an accompanying issue of the human factor. It is quite likely that images of the past can be transmitted in the wrong way (accidentally or intently), and in this case an expert gets them in a distorted way from the very beginning.

3. Discussion

Assessment of non-material components of culture has to be based not just on the knowledge of specific field but on an overall understanding of sociocultural development, as well as the mechanisms that shape collective memories, preserve them and transfer. All forms of collective memory are two-folded; they consist of personal memories that have been part of the historical context, along with acquired memories based on what we heard from other people, read in documents and saw later in images. That said, it is not right to consider acquired memories to be untrue. Very often people experience such memories as even more realistic than if they had witnessed them with their own eyes. M. Halbwachs [2] wrote about it when discussing resurfacing images of the past in the modern context. In this case, expert assessment of images of the past should be based, first and foremost, on researching the social group to determine how images of the past have become real memories within this group. Reconstruction of the past and reconstruction of memories are determined, as a rule, by a public order, a way of life mixed with a certain share of personal experience.

One of the most promising approaches is research of commemorative practices existing in a concrete social group or another. It is through commemorative practices that we can learn more about how people remember things, what meanings they attach to the images of the past and how important are memories that circulate in society. In this respect, it is not only commemorative practices that become important but also practices of obliteration or suppression of certain images from memory. Obliteration can be caused by a subconscious desire to forget certain traumatizing memories (negative experience, war traumas etc.) or by a focused memory policy that, in most cases, is an essential part of state cultural policy. Both kinds of practice can be traced using as an example transformations in the national holiday calendar, where introduction of holidays can be explained as an attempt to fix key historical moments in the form of a national holiday through regular repetitions and celebrations (anniversary of October revolution 1917) or as an attempt to slowly obliterate past points of view and traditions from people's memories and by doing that shape a new layer of culture (Day of National Unity that refers us not to what happened in historically recent past but rather to the historical period before that past). The process of culture transformation through commemorative practices takes a long time and expert assessments can also play a crucial part in following how these changes are reflected in society.

Documentary photos and films can provide one more source for assessment of the past images. The name of this genre by itself makes a claim of authenticity, impartiality

and objectivity. The moment captured outside of context can become a representation of a whole age or just a few events. Nevertheless, images that were captured by a photographer or an operator always have an additional meaning that was left off screen – a context that is one of the most essential parts of any research into cultural forms.

The third aspect of the assessment of commemorative practices is the expert community. The main question is formulated the following way – what specialist can become an expert? The level of the expert himself/herself, the degree of his/her authority in this specific field of knowledge becomes one of the key factors when discussing the reliability of research. Since in this article the focus not just on expert assessment of a specific artefact but rather on its non-material components – images of the past – it is not enough to specialize just in one field. Consequently, assessment should have a fundamental approach and be grounded in theory that is beyond doubts.

The second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century can be called the age of studying images of the past. The amount of theoretical works devoted to memory research is growing in numbers. Besides Maurice Halbwax there is a long list of names whose works are a classical example of research into collective memory: Ya. Assman [3], A. Assman [4], P. Nora [5], P. Ricœur [6], Yu. M. Lotman [7] and others. Each of these authors unravels the ways in which images of the past are shaped and transmitted in modern culture and also suggests their own methodology for studying commemorative practices of different ages.

The fourth aspect of “memory assessment” is the impact that images of cultural memory have on shaping modern culture and forecasting the sociocultural situation. Contemporary culture is a present-day culture that meets the needs of society at a certain moment in history. At the same time, the degree of relevance of one culture form or another can vary from one social group to another. In similar fashion images of the past can have a different degree of relevance. More often than not we can observe the following tendency: the most relevant images of the past that meet the modern needs of society and (or) the power structures are used very often and are represented in the commemorative practices, while less relevant images are used and shared by the minority or have been completely obliterated. That doesn't imply that they cannot be reanimated and taken out of the storage facilities of culture some time later. Let's return to the example of the National Unity Day (November 4th). The foundations of this holiday were laid using the images of the past whose relevance decreased in the Soviet times but was reanimated by the new state formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, because they seemed in tune with its ideology.

There are examples from the history of culture when archetypical images are often used since they never lose their value regardless of ideological components. For instance, an image of warrior is typical for Russian culture with little nuances that appear in different time epochs. F.B. Shenk wrote specifically about that when analyzing the image of Alexander Nevsky in Russian culture [8]. Talking about popular images of the past that have a great potential for expert assessment and also influence present-day culture, we can name images of the leader, enemy, saint and others. As a rule, intrinsic and extrinsic factors can simultaneously influence the relevance of images.

4. Conclusions

Potential of cultural assessment in general, and memory assessment in particular, is enormous. Results obtained in the course of this assessment can become the foundation for shaping cultural policies, preserving cultural heritage, forming museum collections, regulating sociocultural dynamics and supporting the mechanism of identification in society.

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