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CONNECTING SEMIOTICS AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE INTERPRETATIONS OF MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS

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Abstract

Monuments and memorials are built forms with commemorative as well as political functions. They articulate selective historical narratives, focusing attention on events and individuals that are preferred by elites, while obliterating what is uncomfortable for them. Articulating historical narratives, monuments can set cultural and political agendas. Thus, elites design monuments striving to reinforce their political power and to legitimise dominant dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, individuals differently interpret and use monuments in ways elites might have never envisioned.

This paper claims that advancing the understanding of the connections between semiotics and cultural geography can be useful to explore how the built environment conveys meanings and how these meanings are variously interpreted at societal levels. To do so, this chapter develops a theoretical framework that conceives the interpretations of monuments and memorials as depending on three interplays: a) between the material, symbolic and political dimensions; b) between designers and users; and c) between monuments, the cultural context and the built environment.

These ideas are explored through a comparative analysis of two monuments in Estonia: the Victory Column, a war memorial in Tallinn, and the so-called "Kissing Students", a fountain-sculpture complex in Tartu.

1. Introduction

Contemporary nation states create and often privilege elites. As part of the state, urban planning can be used to serve the needs of national elites (Yiftachel 1998). This is also the case for the

design of monuments and memorials. National elites have more power and resources to erect monuments and thus to present and reproduce their political and cultural meanings in space (Dwyer 2002: 32; Till 2003: 297). Hence, national elites use monuments as tools to legitimate the primacy of their political power and to set their political agendas.

This is particularly evident in transitional societies associated with regime change (Grava 1993: 19-10). In transitional societies, recently formed elites spend significant resources to shape a society's collective meanings and to establish concepts of nation in accordance with current political conditions. In this context, monuments and memorials are often used as tools to shape specific attitudes toward the past and thus to create specific future expectations (Whelan 2002; Tamm 2013; Till 2003). Nevertheless, individuals differently interpret and use monuments in ways elites might have never envisioned.

This paper shows how a connection between analytical frames developed in the field of semiotics and cultural geography could contribute to a better understanding of the multiple interpretations of monuments and memorials in regime change. Section 2 identifies two key limitations of the geographical and the semiotic literature on monuments and memorials. Section 3 proposes a theory to overcome these limitations. Section 4 highlights the rationale to analyse Estonian monuments and memorials as case studies. Section 5 explains the rationale for a multimethod approach using interviews, observations and the investigation of documents. Finally, Section 6 introduces the context for a comparative analysis between two monuments in Estonia.

2. Two limitations of the geographical and the semiotic perspectives on monuments and memorials

Monuments and memorials have attracted a growing interest in geography and semiotics. Since the mid-1980s, cultural geography has conceptualised landscape as a construction to perpetuate social order and power relations (e.g. Cosgrove 1984). Despite using different perspectives, most cultural geographers converge on two assumptions: landscape has power and it can be seen as a text that communicates meanings (Boogart II 2001: 39). These assumptions have been extended to the built environment as the result of human actions on the "primeval" landscape (Duncan 1990).

In this context, a great deal of geographical research has assessed the role of monuments in perpetuating cultural norms, social order and power relations (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Hershkovitz 1993; Johnson 1995; Peet 1996; Withers 1996; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Osborne 1998; Dwyer 2000; Whelan 2002; Hay et al. 2004; Benton-Short 2006). This research has empirically focused on different built forms and urban areas: monumental buildings, public statues, squares, memorial gardens, civic precincts, war memorials and so on. Moreover, it has concentrated on a vast range of geographical locations and time periods. Despite such variety in empirical analysis, this geographical research has based on two common assumptions: first, monuments play an important role in the definition of a uniform national memory and identity; second, monuments are tools to legitimise and reinforce political power. These assumptions can be seen as interdependent: in practice, the national politics of memory and identity embodied in monuments can legitimise and reinforce political power.

Some cultural geographers have recognised that unexpected practices could challenge the meanings of monuments and memorials as intended by elite (Hershkovitz 1993; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). Nevertheless, geographical research has mostly focused on the elite intentions.

While national elites design monuments to convey dominant meanings, their interpretations are never enclosed once and for all. Once erected, monuments become "social property" (Hershkovitz 1993: 397) and thus they "can be used, reworked and reinterpreted in ways that

are different from, or indeed contradictory to, the intentions of those who had them installed" (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Monuments and memorials embody the agency of generations and assume different functions in different time periods. Monuments legitimising elite power can turn into sites of resistant political practice (Hershkovitz 1993; Whelan 2002; Benton-Short 2006). For example, after the fall of Communism, popular movements suddenly used Communist monuments to demonstrate against the same regime that installed them. In other cases, monuments sacred for an elite become the object of scorn and ridicule (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). In less spectacular way, monuments of a bygone era can turn into neutral urban landmarks.

Cultural geographers provided a methodological basis to understand the ways in which monuments could reproduce social order and reinforce political power. Moreover, they have developed tools for unveiling the geographies of power embodied in monuments and memorials. Nevertheless, the geographical approach to monuments has grounded itself on two key limitations:

1. There has been no extended discussion of how the material and symbolic levels of monuments and memorials actually convey political meanings and thus of how they can effectively reinforce political power.

2. Little attention has been paid to how monuments and memorials are interpreted at the societal level.

By inviting questions on readership, semiotics has sought to overcome the restricted focus on the designers' intentions that has characterised the geographical approach. Inspired by the debate around the conflation between memory, history and place (e.g. Nora 1989), semiotics has begun to analyse places of memory as communicative devices to promote selective "discourses on the past" (Violi 2014: 11, my trans.). Discourses on the past always present a "partial vision" focusing attention on selective histories while concealing others (Eco 1976: 289-290). As a consequence, discourses on the past can affect present and future identity as well as the ways in which individuals represent themselves and relate to each other (Violi 2014: 18).

Several semiotic analyses have aimed to explain how monuments and memorials can establish specific understandings of the past addressing the effects a given material representation of memory has had at the societal level (Pezzini 2006; Sozzi 2012; Abousnnouga and Machin 2013). Despite the efforts to focus attention on readerships, the key limitations identified in the geographical perspective persist in the semiotic analysis of monuments and memorials. In fact, semiotics has rarely discussed how the materiality of monuments and memorials actually conveys political messages and thus reinforce political power. Moreover, despite the efforts to focus attention on the readership, semiotic analysis of monuments and memorials has overlooked the interpretations of monuments and memorials at societal levels.

3. A holistic perspective on meaning-making of monuments and memorials

As seen in the section above, the geographical and semiotic perspectives on monuments have grounded themselves on two distinctions: 1) between the material, symbolic and political dimensions and 2) between designers and users. This section aims to overcome these distinctions connecting analytical frames developed in the fields of semiotics and cultural geography. To do so, it develops a theoretical framework that conceives the interpretations of monuments as depending on three interplays: a) between the material, symbolic and political dimensions; b) between designers and users; and c) between monuments, the cultural context and the built environment.

As for a), the material, symbolic and political dimensions of monuments and memorials always function together and influence each other through continuous mediations. These dimensions equally contribute to the creation and development of a better understanding of how

the meanings of monuments and memorials are constructed and negotiated. There is the need for a theory that conceives the material, symbolic and political dimensions as interacting in the interpretation of monuments.

As for the interplay between designers and users, the meanings of monuments and memorials originate at the intersection between the designers' and the users' interpretations. A set of "semiotic resources" is available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of monuments (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 57). Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' stated intentions. Unforeseen interpretations and practices thus play a critical role in the meaning-making of monuments. As for textual interpretation (Eco 1990: 50), the interpretation of monuments lays on an intermediate position between the designers' intended meanings and the users' interpretations. Hence, there is the need for a theory that conceives the interpretations of monuments and memorials as originating at the intersection between designers and users.

As for c), monuments and memorials cannot be analysed separately from the cultural context. Culture can mould the designers' and the users' interpretations and even influence actions and interactions within the space of monuments. In turn, monuments convey cultural meanings in space contributing to the shaping and reshaping of culture. Finally, monuments and memorials cannot be analysed separately from their interrelations with the surrounding built environment. As texts reinterpret other texts (Eco 1984: 68), newly erected monuments actively affect the interpretation of the existing built environment. Post-structural geography has used the term "intertextuality" to describe the relations that built forms establish between them (Duncan 1990: 22-23).

The conceptual scheme below symbolically represents the three interplays here identified (fig. 1). The scheme presumes that a relationship is established between the material, symbolic and the political dimensions of monuments and memorials. An arrow links the two rectangles representing the terms "designers" and "users" to visualise their interaction. A polygon visually representing the term "culture" is added at the top of the scheme. The dashed oval including monuments and memorials symbolically represents the built environment.
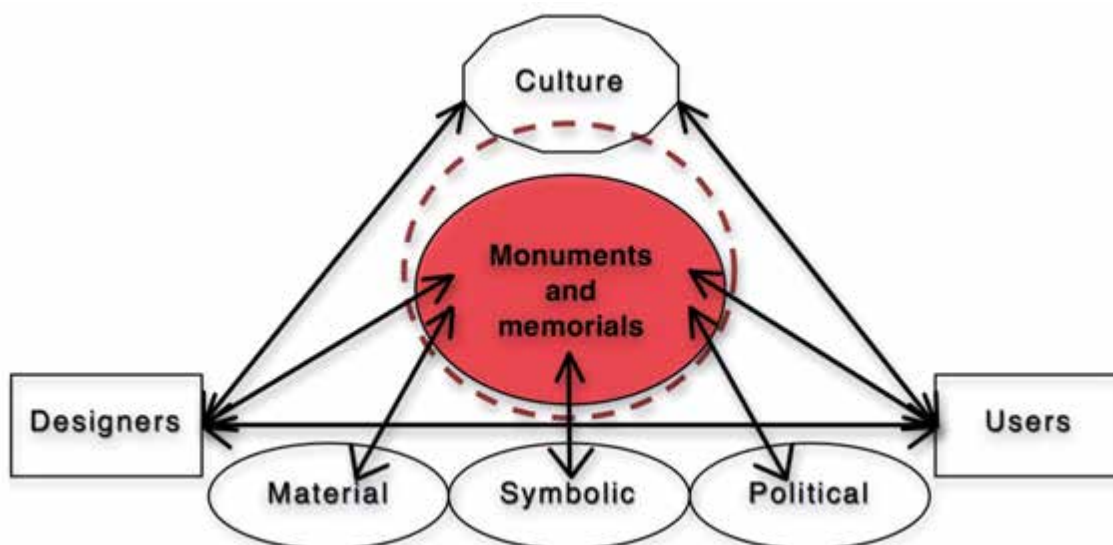

Figure 1. The theoretical framework conceiving the interplays a) between the material, symbolic and political dimensions; b) between designers and users; and c) between monuments, the cultural context and the built environment

4. Identifying the case study: the multiple interpretations of monuments in Estonia

A case study research strategy is used to develop the theoretical framework identified in the previous section (Yin 2009). The selected case studies analyse the multiple interpretations of two monuments in Estonia: the War of Independence Victory Column in Tallinn (hence, the Victory Column) and the so-called "Kissing Students" in Tartu.

Estonia restored its independence from the Soviet Union on 20 August 1991. Ever since, a cultural reinvention of the post-Soviet built environment has evolved through two distinct but concurrent practices: the redesign of the inherited built environment created by the Soviets and the simultaneous establishment of a new built environment reflecting the needs of post-Soviet culture and society. Cultural reinvention is the process of filling the built environment with specific cultural meanings through practices of redesign, reconstruction, restoration, relocation and removal.

The Estonian EU and NATO memberships in 2004 provided opportunities to gain symbolic capital through the redesign of the built environment and the erection of new monuments and memorials (Ehala 2009: 152). Hence, Estonian elites have taken various initiatives to marginalise Soviet monuments and memorials while establishing new monuments signifying specific future expectations. In Estonia, the marginalisation of Soviet monuments and memorials and the erection of new ones have often sparked broad debates and resulted in civil disorder. For example, the 2007 relocation of a memorial to the Soviet Army in Tallinn – the so-called Bronze Soldier – resulted in two nights of disorders, during which a 20-year-old Russian was killed.

The controversies over monuments and memorials have been so intense that scholars have used the terms "War of Monuments" or similar terms to refer to a series of small-scale conflicts over the interpretations of monuments and memorials starting from the early 2000s (e.g. Pääbo 2008: 5; Smith 2008: 419; Bruggemann and Kasekamp 2008). For this reason, Estonia was selected as a relevant case to address the multiple interpretations of monuments and memorials.

5. The methodological framework for the study of the multiple interpretations of monuments in Estonia

The analysis of the selected monuments and their multiple interpretations is based on data collected during fieldwork in Estonia, between February and October 2015. The data were collected through a multi-method approach using interviews, observations and the investigation of documents.

The investigation of planning documents provided an account of the researched monuments as envisioned by their designers. Documents available in English were collected through visits at archives and libraries.

The analysis of the users' interpretations, actions and interactions was based on primary data collected through interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews aimed to collect a range of interpretations on the researched monuments. Interview data derived from sixteen interviews with respondents that resided in Estonia their entire life or that had only left Estonia temporarily. Respondents varied in terms of ethnic origins, age, gender, education and profession.

A suitable balance of Estonians and Russophones was guaranteed: eight respondents were Estonians and eight belonged to the Russophone community. The term "Russophones" refers to Russian speakers that are in possession of Estonian citizenship, including ethnic communities that speak Russian as first language and do not define their ethnic identity as "Estonian". After Estonia regained independence, the Russophone community suffered status decline; conversely, Estonians found new economic opportunities and political power (Ehala 2009: 147).

In Estonia, the relations between Estonians and Russophones have not always been peaceful and this antagonism has often resulted in conflicts over the interpretations of memorials.

Participant observations concentrated on the actions and interactions of users who daily cross and use the space of the monuments. Observations were arranged at different times of the day and on different days of the week, including weekends and public holidays. They were carried out during the day and occasionally at night, under range of environmental conditions.

6. Introducing the context for the comparative analysis between the Victory Column and the Kissing Students

The selected case studies analyse the multiple interpretations of the Victory Column (fig. 2) and the Kissing Students (fig. 3). These monuments have different appearance, but both have contributed to create a built environment in accordance with the current political and cultural agendas of the Estonian elites. Besides this, the rationale for comparing these monuments is twofold: first, they show different ways of conveying cultural and political meanings; second, they present different ways in which these national politics are interpreted at societal levels. This section presents and discusses the preliminary findings of the analysed monuments.

Figure 2. The War of Independence Victory Column. Picture taken 5.10.2015.

Figure 3. The Kissing Students. Picture taken 1.6.2015.

6.1. The Victory Column of Tallinn, a memorial to promote an ideological understanding of the past for a select audience

The Victory Column is a large, column-shape memorial erected in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, in 2009. It commemorates those who served in a war against Soviet Russia and Baltic German forces between 1918 and 1920. The war ended with the first recognition of Estonia as an independent state. For this reason, Estonians refer to this war as the "War of Independence" (in Estonian *Vabadussõda*) and link it with ideals of freedom and sovereignty. The memorial stands in Freedom Square, a large square on the southern edge of Tallinn's Old Town. Freedom Square has been used as an arena where the different regimes that ruled Estonia have tried to assert themselves via architecture, monuments and public rituals (Kalm 2014).

The function of the Victory Column has gone beyond commemoration. The memorial has helped to reflect and sustain the cultural and political agendas of the Estonian Government that took the initiative for erecting it. In particular, it has aimed at putting an end to the controversies over the interpretations of monuments that characterised Estonia from the early 2000s and, in consequence, at turning a new page in the construction of the national memory and identity.

However, the significance the Victory Column has assumed for the Estonian political elite has not been widely recognised at non-elite levels. During interviews, Tallinn citizens expressed disapproval of the material and the symbolic design of the memorial. Its iconography featuring a military decoration has created discontent due to resemblance with totalitarian aesthetics. This military iconography is highly hermetic and not many users knew what it represent - visitors as well as Estonian citizens themselves.

Criticism also regarded the modern-looking design of the Victory Column as inappropriate and disconnected from the adjacent medieval built environment of Tallinn's Old Town. Moreover, respondents expressed discontent also toward its size, too resonating and grandiose to commemorate ideals of freedom.

The Victory Column does not facilitate comfortable interactions. Raised up on an elevated platform, users remain literally at the feet of the memorial. Consistent with this, it is very rare that users climb the staircase to approach the memorial. Observations did not register any commemorative practice around the memorial, if not during the formal commemorations periodically arranged by the Estonian Government and its affiliates. For the rest of the year, the memorial attracts only unexpected practices that are different from those intended by its designers: due to flat ground and sharp curbs, skaters and bikers use the space of the memorial for their tricks during the warmer weather.

6.2 The Kissing Students of Tartu, a fountain-sculpture to promote an everyday narrative for the general public

The so-called "Kissing Students" is a circular fountain with a sculpture featuring two kissing young people under an umbrella. The statue was unveiled in 1998 to improve the appearance of Town Hall Square, the central square of Tartu. The several regimes that ruled Tartu have used the present-day Town Hall Square as the seat of government and venue for public rituals and celebrations of days of national and local importance.

The Kissing Students does not openly express direct political purposes. Avoiding confrontational political messages has been a typical cultural policy of post-Soviet Estonia, which has been largely used in the context of the transition to democracy. In Tartu, the general aim of this policy has been to establish a built environment free from direct political meanings and not directly related to the political storm characterising Estonia throughout the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the Kissing Students as every built form presents specific cultural and political positions. The fountain-sculpture dedicates an important location to a significant part of Tartu's population: the students. Estonian citizens consider Tartu and its students as crucial in creating the ground for the Estonian national awakening and independence (Salupere 2013: 6). Located right in the central square, the fountain-sculpture recognises the significance students have for Tartu, as bearers of an Estonian national consciousness.

The Kissing Students reveals a case in which the interpretations of users match with the designers' stated intentions to a great extent. Design strategies such as easily understandable iconography, life-sized dimensions and continuity with the surrounding built environment facilitate the interaction between the fountain-sculpture and users. The positive attitudes of citizens are symbolic of the general approval of the fountain-sculpture at the societal level: during interviews, the totality of respondents acknowledged and endorsed its everyday narrative; they expressed general approval toward its iconography and its material design.

Altogether, the Kissing Students has been largely assimilated into the everyday itineraries of Tartu citizens. Only occasionally it attracted some practices that are different to the designers' expectations, especially playful practices of young students. The Tartu local authorities have not spent much effort to discourage these practices. Therefore, they have become integrated into the symbolic and material dimensions of the Kissing Students.

7. Conclusions

The preliminary results that emerged from the analyses indicated that elites use monuments and memorials as a form of discourse to construct and spread meanings in space. Designers use complex semiotic strategies to channel users' interpretations, but users interpret monuments and memorials in ways designers may have never intended. The holistic perspective connecting semiotics and cultural geography can be very useful to understand what strategies designers use to design monuments and how these are variously interpreted at societal levels. These findings highlight a number of research directions that will be explored in future papers.

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