

Presence of the Pasts: Semiotic and Digital Approaches to Memory and Heritage

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Luca Acquarelli (University of Lille, Gériico)

Difficult heritage in the light of semiotics of culture.

The case of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* from emblem of Fascism to symbol of luxury.

Abstract: The study of difficult heritage is an interesting dimension to see how the temporal mechanisms of culture work, through stratifications of meaning attributions between latency, temporary oblivion and resurfacing. We will focus on the case of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* and its transformation in just over 80 years from emblem of Italian Fascism to the headquarters of one of the best-known luxury brands, Fendi, to the point where its iconic arches are nowadays one of the symbols of this brand.

Some key concepts of the semiotics of culture will be critically discussed: forgetfulness in Lotman, the cosmological vision of history in Uspensky, the mechanisms of the semiosphere and memory (temporal diachrony and dynamic processes between different times, the clash of a culture’s “own” and “foreign” cultural objects etc.) in relation to some theories of structural semiotics such as that of modes of existence. Reference will be made in an interdisciplinary perspective to the theoretical debate on difficult heritage.

Federico Bellentani (University of Turin)

Digital Walls of Faces: an interdisciplinary approach to digital memorial practices

Abstract: With the advent of digital transformation, there have been many research projects at the intersection of computing, digital technology and humanities aimed at digitalising cultural heritage. Their objectives have been various, but foremost among them has been to protect, preserve and pass on cultural heritage for current and future generations. Technologies such as Data, Artificial Intelligence and Extended Reality offer unprecedented opportunities for institutions to create new forms of users’ engagement with cultural heritage.

The digitalisation of heritage has occurred at various levels, also individual: the growing availability on the market of scanners and smartphone apps to digitalise pre-digital pictures and videos demonstrates the urge to create an individual deposit of memory to transmit to the next generations.

If the digital preservation of cultural heritage has received much attention over the last two decades, less research has been done on the increasing embeddedness of the digital into physical monuments and memorials and digital memorial practices.

This paper proposes an interdisciplinary approach to investigate digital memorials, looking at the connections between collective memory and digital technology experience. In particular, it will assess the role of digital technology in promoting online commemorative practices to broader audiences in more accessible ways.

These ideas are explored through the analysis of a case study: the Estonia’s Victims of Communism 1940–1991 in Tallinn, a landscape architectural ensemble that consists of a physical part and an online database where to create, share and search for information regarding people who perished due to communist crimes.

Eneken Laanes (Tallinn University, School of Humanities)

Moving in the Chasm between Languages and Memories: Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*

Abstract: Katja Petrowskaja's family history has found widespread interest in the scholarship in regards the multilingualism of her text and its relationship to European memory archive, but little attention has been paid to the poetics of her text, her treatment of German language and its relationship to remembering. This paper explores the ways in which Petrowskaja writes at the borders of German, Russian and other languages by highlighting the materiality of both oral and written language, using prose rhymes, allegory and association and manipulating idiomatic expressions. The paper argues that the playful erasure of the borders between languages has fundamental consequences also for her poetics and politics of memory.

Lauri Linask (Tallinn University, School of Humanities)

Cultural memory in Lotman's and Vygotsky's semiotics

Abstract: Lev Vygotsky, in his analyses of cultural development in children's thinking, and Juri Lotman, when suggesting various concepts for analysing cultural processes, are both inspired by isomorphism between the workings of culture and an individual mind. Curiously, they approach this isomorphism from opposite directions.

For Vygotsky, the step-by-step development of children's thinking follows the laws of cultural history next to those of biological maturation, as this process relies on children adopting the particular communicative means made available in culture. Vygotsky suggests that these means progressively reorganize the child's cognitive processes, such as attention, perception, etc. – but that the greatest change in cultural development takes place in the functioning of memory. Outlining the cognitive changes by which organic remembering and sign use converge, Vygotsky uses the term “cultural memory” to describe the organisation of individual memory by cultural, collective means.

Conversely, Lotman explicitly draws from the characteristics of the individual memory, identifying memory with one of the primary functions of culture as such. Analogously with the individual mind, the memory of the collective serves to store and process information, which cultures do by means of texts. The memory of a culture does not only mediate the past for the present, but also provides for creative interpretations of the interrelations between the past, present, and future.

In the study of cultural memory, this paper suggests bringing Vygotsky's and Lotman's approaches together on the one hand, and the complementarity of the levels of culture and the individual on the other. Culture is seen as set up to support the individual functioning of memory, while the development of individual memory supports its access to culture. In order to study the intricate interrelations between mind and culture, Katherine Nelson's observations of crib narratives are taken as illustration.

Anna Maria Lorusso (University of Bologna)

Memories, cancellations, censorship

Abstract: As we know, for Lotman forgetfulness was one of the essential forms of the culture's life. According to Lotman, in fact, culture can grow thanks to (i) the quantitative increase in information; (ii) the redefinition of information already in possession; (iii) forgetfulness.

But what forms is forgetfulness taking today, today when we talk more and more often about cancel culture?

Indeed, it seems to us that we are witnessing a sort of paradox: precisely in an era of generalized recording of traces, the need to cancel strongly emerges (now as a polemic and protestatory claim, now as a claim of a right, the right to oblivion).

In my talk I will focus in particular on the revitalization of the phenomenon of censorship that is emerging today (the occasion of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is very rich), with the aim of

delineating its contemporary specificity, in terms of enunciative responsibility, temporal dimension, recipients.

Paolo Martinelli (University of Bologna)

The Work of Art in the Age of Non-Fungible Token

Abstract: Drawing from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and within the theoretical framework of Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*, the present investigation will attempt to assess some of the implications of the so-called Non-Fungible Token (NFT) phenomenon in its application to the work of art. The first part of the present analysis will focus on the NFT phenomenon as an emergent change in the mode of sign production of the work of art, thus suggesting a possible risemantization of some capital concepts as "authenticity" and "uniqueness". In the second part – using born-digital manuscripts as example – particular attention will be given to NFT as possible players in the preservation of digital cultural heritage collections.

Francesco Mazzucchelli and Mario Panico (University of Bologna)

Digital memory battlefields: uses and abuses of historical documents and narratives in social media platforms

Abstract: In our paper we will focus on the impact of digital technologies on archives and processes of construction of collective memory. Instead of considering how digitization has triggered diverse transformations on the archive-as-institution (its nature, functions, and conditions of accessibility), we will rather address how new digital languages, especially those typical of social media, have incorporated the archive as a semiotic form, used to represent, construct, and negotiate narratives of memory.

Moving from some assumptions proposed in the new research field of Digital Memory Studies, that announces a new ecology (and ontology) of memory triggered by the advent of digital era and connectivity (Hoskins 2018), the paper will explore how new "realms of memory" – discursive spaces in which memory is re-elaborated and processed – are appearing in digital environments. We will focus especially on YouTube, considered as a "quasi-archive" and a digital semiosphere. We will propose the notion of "digital memory battlefield" in social media: polyphonic arenas in which conflicting narratives encounter and clash. Such digital discursive spaces become lieux de mémoire to the extent that they stage a memory adopting the style of historical discourse, to cement a memory narrative.

The paper will present some lines of a research that is still in progress and that will analyse a corpus of videos related to Yugoslav Wars and Russo-Ukrainian War, proposing some preliminary analytical categories to trace the semiotic strategies on which processes of textualization of memory in digital platforms are based.

Daniele Monticelli (Tallinn University, School of Humanities)

Toposymbolic dissonances: Rethinking contested memorial sites with Juri Lotman

Abstract: Monuments are ways of inscribing values into space. But what happens when a monument survives the rejection of the system of values it was conceived to embody? This creates a tension between place and values which calls for a solution. A good example of such tension is the Soviet World War II memorial in Tallinn, better known as the 'Bronze Soldier'. Inaugurated in the center of the city in 1947, the monument survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and regained independence of Estonia in 1991. It was ignored and disdained by the new Estonian authorities, but became a point of reference for the local Russian community. The dramatic solution to this tension arrived in 2007 with the removal of the monument from the city center and its relocation in a military cemetery, which provoked violent riots in the Estonian capital.

Juri Lotman's dynamic spatial models (e.g. the "semiosphere") are a useful tool to study not only the semiotization of space, but also the complex dynamics of continuity and change in culture and

society. Taking as an example the Bronze Soldier story, the paper will ponder potentials and shortcomings of a Lotmanian approach to contested memorial sites. Is the structure of the Lotmanian semiosphere with its internal heterogeneity – center/periphery/border – and heterochrony – different components of the semiosphere moving at different speeds and in different times – an adequate model of the Bronze Soldier’s ‘monument war’? What does Lotman tell us about the articulation and disarticulation of places and values? How does this help to explain the toposymbolic tension described above? Which kind of solutions does a Lotmanian perspective invite for contested memory sites?

Merit Rickberg (Tallinn University, Juri Lotman Semiotics Repository)

Dealing with incompatible pasts in history education: Three models of cultural recollection based on Lotman’s semiotic theory

Abstract: Juri Lotman argued that the essential requirement for the occurrence of new information is the situation of incompatibility, which enables a non-trivial and unpredictable shift of meaning in the process of communication (Lotman 1981: 5). Following a similar line of thought, many semiotic approaches to education have viewed the conflict situation as a starting point of the process of learning which ‘creates a breakdown in existing meaning that produces the space where new meanings can occur’ (Semetsky 2015, p. 1075; e.g., Kull 2018, English 2013). In history education, integrating conflicting perspectives into the process of learning as means of developing students’ ability to think historically has been a common practice already for decades supported by various influential institutions like EuroClio, UNESCO, and OECD. However, the ways incompatibilities are presented in history education vary greatly depending on the type of historical pedagogy. In this presentation, I will aim to explicate how different approaches to teaching history can enforce diverse strategies for dealing with memory conflicts on personal as well as collective levels of culture. In order to do that, I will analyse three types of historical pedagogy as different models of cultural recollection differentiating myth-type model, scientific model, and play-type/artistic model based on Juri Lotman’s theory of semiotics of culture.

Marek Tamm (Tallinn University, School of Humanities)

Digital Historicity

Abstract: Having spread extensively all over the world in but a few decades, digital technology has forcefully reshaped our relations with the past. This paper argues that digital technology does not merely serve as a new vehicle for historical research (the so-called digital history); it also shapes our basic relations to time, history, and memory, i.e. it gives rise to a new digital historicity. This digital historicity is characterized by a number of aspects, most notably by datafication, algorithmization, platformization, and digitization of our sense of the past. The digital historicity means also a radical shift from the culture of scarcity to the culture of abundance, the important data flows are becoming the ontological basis of our sense of the past. A further development is a shift from the human-centered historicity to the new situation where history is no longer solely a reflection of human creativity but also encompasses the impulses of a wide range of other-than-human actors. Finally, the digital historicity brings along a shift from traditional questions of historical representation to issues of sensory immersion that redefine history as the real-time experience of the virtually past. In our new digital condition, the past is incessantly being remixed, reimagined, rescripted, and reappropriated in unexpected ways (not least in digital game industry).