

Image, History and Memory. Genealogies of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe

6-8 December 2017, Warsaw

CONFERENCE REPORT

IMAGE, HISTORY AND MEMORY

Genealogies of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe

Akademia Sztuk Pięknych
Wybrzeże Kościuszkowskie 37/39
Warszawa
www.enrs.eu/genealogies

The seventh conference Genealogies of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe took place on 6 – 8 December in the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. During this three-day event a wide range of scholars discussed the relationships between image, history and memory and the various roles of images concerning memory.

On the first day, Mieke Bal started with a keynote that was connected to her exhibition. She addressed two failures of cultural memory; dis-remembrance and mis-remembrance. Bal related the former form of memory failure to the silencing and forgetting of the consequences of violence by societies, which can lead to madness. The second form of memory failure, mis-remembrance, was linked to the negligence of thinkers from the past that have been marked as obsolete, like René Descartes. When societies do not reflect on the past in order to draw lessons from it, remembrance becomes insufficient. The subsequent panel continued to discuss several theories and cognitive perspectives of the relationships between remembrance, history and images. The panellists addressed different aspects of these relationships, varying from the re-evaluation of the Romanian socialist past on the basis of family albums to the problematisation of the construction of a pan-European memory and identity on a historical basis in a post-truth context.

Next Wojciech Suchocki analysed the painting *Rejtan* of Jan Matejko as a historical painting in his keynote. The historical painting does not portray just a distinct moment; the captured moment draws up all the historical forces within one frame. Suchocki emphasised the importance of Matejko's painting for the current iconography of the Polish history. The following panel, 'Image and Historiosophy: Artistic Reflection on the Subject of History and Remembrance', also focused on the artistic interpretation of history through images. The presentations highlighted the two-folded role of images in this regard; images as products of history, while simultaneously being active agents of the production of history. The images discussed varied from Greek vases paintings and art to 'hobbled images', like sketches, cuttings in trees and dropped drawings on newspaper.

Ernst van Alphen began the second day of the Genealogies conference with his keynote, in which he discussed the transgenerational discontinuity and disconnection of the remembrance of the trauma of the Gulag. Van Alphen detected in cultural expressions, like literature and films, feelings of shame for the self and social isolation concerning the first generation of the trauma, while the second generation is depicted by shame and suspicion towards the first generation. Later generations even expressed nostalgia. The first panel of the day then discussed the contribution of images to the construction of national memory and identity. The panellists addressed the importance of photographs of the Winter War for the Finnish identity, art exhibitions that needed to contribute to the legitimation of the socialist rule in Poland and the discrepancies between the German political memory and the cultural and individual memory concerning the German Democratic Republic.

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Hereafter, Tadeusz J. Żuchowski provided some introductory remarks for the second panel of the day. He elaborated on the definition of monuments, public space and the relation of the monument to the collective memory. Moreover, Żuchowski discussed the antonym of collective memory, non-memory, and the related counter monument. From this starting point, the panel discussed monuments as physical images of remembrance. A broad geographical scale was covered during this panel that moved beyond the territories of Central and Eastern Europe to Turkey and Japan. The monument was identified as a political tool for contested memories and the enforcement of identity policies, but also as a political instrument to improve diplomatic relations and the manipulation of a country's image.

The day finished with a curatorial tour through Mieke Bal's exhibition entitled *Dis-Remembered: A Long History of Madness, Mis-Remembered: Reasonable Doubt*. The exhibition can be visited until 19 December in the Academy of Fine Arts.

The last day of the conference concentrated on the image as a fabric of history. The opening keynote lecture of Robert Hariman discussed the role of images in the formation of thought in modern and contemporary societies with a special focus on public photographs. He argued that in order to understand the relationship between photography, public culture and collective memory, a paradigm shift is needed. Through the reconsideration of the photograph as a public image a revision of historiography becomes possible as well. The subsequent panel focussed on the relation of photographic images and memory within public culture, for example by discussing the features of the mythologisation of Stalin's images in Russia's cultural memory. The role and function of photographs to influence the memory were discussed in the context of the Yugoslav war and the Polish 'museum boom' as well. While on the other hand, contested 'Holocaust selfies' were considered as expressions of the ludic identity.

The second half of the day evolved around films. Constantin Parvulescu examined in his keynote three films of the Romanian filmmaker Mungiu and how his work proposes a critical approach to the discourse of danger that marks the Central and Eastern European political imaginary. The cycles of abuse in Mungiu's films and the interruption of these cycles reflect on how the memory narratives and cultural emancipations of the Central and Eastern European countries should be defined differently. The last panel discussed how certain historical events are represented in films. The presentations varied from the ways in which mute visual documentary sources are transformed into films that perform memory work to the ways in which Czech creators of films and television used representations of history to play a consolidating role for the Czech democracy.

Jolinke Golbach

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