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Cultural Memory as Semiotic Mechanism in Art

Memory, culture and interdisciplinariness

In my report I would like to illustrate introductory theoretical postulates with a set of concrete examples.

Reinforcement of cultural memory is a crucial goal of European cultural strategy. Following Iury Lotman[1], I understand culture as an indispensable precondition for the existence of any human community. The phenomenon of human community in itself rests on the presence of certain verbal texts, certain models of behaviour and certain situations with cultural functions. Therefore, we can use the concept of culture to denote the sum total of acquired rather than genetic information, a product of human memory that stores and accumulates information. Struggle for memory is an inalienable part of the intellectual history of mankind and, conversely, the destruction of culture starts with the destruction of memory, obliteration of texts and oblivion of ties.

The preservation of the common cultural past and dissemination of knowledge about it are thought to be a priority in Europe today. The importance of preserving traces of the past, which Francis Haskell[2] wrote about in his *History and its Images* citing the 19th century as an example, has become obvious. Now that European identity is evolving and incorporating countries that, although not members of the European Union, nevertheless have a common cultural heritage with Europe, there is a burning need for

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[1] See Iury Lotman and Boris Uspensky, "O semioticheskom mekhanizme kultury" (On Semiotic Mechanism of Culture) in "Trudy po znakovym sistemam" (Writings on Semiotic Systems), V, Tartu, 1971, pp. 144–76.

[2] See Francis Haskell, *History and Its Image*, Yale University Press, Yale, 1993.

retaining cultural memory. Born of social shifts in the contemporary world, the need for identity results in present-day intellectual and scholarly debates focussing on the link between memory and identity (individual and collective), and between memory and history.

No other period in the history of humanity seems to have shown as much concern over the problems of memory as ours. Although there are different reasons for this phenomenon, all of them can in fact be reduced to two general ones. One is, as has been mentioned above, the need for identity due to social changes in the contemporary world. The reverse is what Tsvetan Todorov[1] called the "abuse of memory", that is, some attempts or others to create a gradual and deceptive alternative to History, as a rule, in search of a tradition (more or less invented) that could serve as the groundwork for new group identities. Yet another highly interesting link between memory and history is closely associated with the authorities' attempts to control or misappropriate cultural memory.

The plethora of studies of memory that take different approaches to developing the pioneering and unsurpassed observations of Maurice Halbwachs, for many the chief sociologist of memory who was the first to consider collective memory as a living product of social interaction, is understandable under the circumstances. It was Halbwachs who explained, among other things, the existence of the so-called social framework of memory that indicates to the individual what is worth remembering and what is not, the framework that develops in accordance with social changes. The 1980s witnessed a veritable boom in memory studies, which in the Anglo-Saxon tradition led to the emergence of a new field of research, *Memory Studies* (the need for coining a new term is indicative in itself). This sphere is developing so vigorously, in intensity and extension, that there appears the double risk of banalization of the very concept of memory or, on the contrary, its sacralisation[2].

Memory studies in the time of mass media and virtual reality enable us to understand the role of memories in constructing personal and group identities and thus proceed from memory culture to that of attention[3]. However, the study of cultural memory does not boil down to large-scale research into the way the past is preserved. The digital revolution has dramatically changed the conditions in which cultural memory exists. On the one hand, data processing is becoming an increasingly simple process, yet, on the other, the fragility of data storage devices poses a threat to long-term storage. In this new context one cannot but recall the forms and mechanisms that regulate the formation and social transmission of cultural heritage. What leads to the emergence of cultural memory that is so important for the formation of personal and collective identities? How do initially purely

[1] See Tsvetan Todorov *Gli abusi della memoria*, Ipermedium, Napoli, 1996.

[2] See José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007.

[3] See Alberto Oliverio, *Memoria e oblio*, Rubbettino Editore, Catanzaro, 2003.

personal memories transform into collective memory? What is the difference between the ways a printed book, photograph or electronic document influence memory structure and quality? How does cultural memory function, what are its storage tools (writing, representations, location, bodies); and what are the forms of its archiving and cultural heritage conservation processes in contemporary art?[1]

"Interdisciplinary study is no longer a matter of good will, but a consequence of adequate interpretation of text." With this statement Wolf Lepenies[2] formulates in a clear-cut way a new comprehensive orientation of knowledge and simultaneously points to the need to attain syntony with Internet hypertext and the ability to bring together the various aspects of the investigation of the phenomenon of memory and remembrances so as to make the multitude of diverse approaches especially effective.

Memory studies are active in neurobiology, communications research and different fields of philology and psychology, ranging from the philosophers' historical interest to the practical interest of the educators. This is an example of how a common subject can be found in diverse disciplines and studied with the help of various methods.

This growing interest in the theme of memory has resulted in specialisation of individual aspects that is fruitful in every respect and all sorts of paradigms and discourses. The conviction that there can be no integral theory of memory does not interfere with quests for points of contact between different perspectives[3].

Memory studies exemplify a field of research in which specific cognitive approaches of different disciplines explain only certain aspects of this phenomenon. Could it be that in reality we have here structural analogies between different phenomena under the blanket term of "memory"? Could it be that knowledge of individual sectors helps clarify and define gaps in one's approach? Perhaps it would be more productive to speak not about memory itself, but about memory studies, which in every case involve a general tentative presupposition irrespective of discipline, methods applied or cognitive interest, and about phenomena being significant if with respect to them a link can be identified between the past and the future.

Aleida Assmann adds that with all its multiple aspects memory is not only an interdisciplinary phenomenon, that is, a subject matter investigated by many disciplines, but at the same time a moot and controversial subject within any discipline taken separately.

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[1] See Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002.

[2] See Wolf Lepenies, *Gutenbergs Reisen: Über die fortdauernde Faszination des Buches in den Zeiten des Internets* // «Süddeutsche Zeitung» [SZ am Wochenende]. No. 208. 9–10 September 2000.

[3] See *Globalization, cultural identities and media representations*, edited by Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer, State University of New York Press, New York, 2006.

TO VISUALISE THE TIMES: SANDRETTI COLLECTION

For several years the CSAR (Centro di studi sulle arti della Russia di Ca' Foscari), which I head, has been working on several research projects connected with huge Italian collections of Russian art. The first project aimed to organise chronologically the collection amassed by Alberto Sandretti in the course of more than fifty years. Thanks to its qualities, this collection became a fruitful groundwork for a pilot project to work out a prototype for successful future use, a prototype that we called "a house of memory". If memory is culture, it requires interdisciplinary approaches and acknowledges that the artistic or, more broadly, visual sign possesses a unique potential for restoring and transmitting fragmented memory. It is precisely for this reason that the multifarious documents collected by Sandretti, his unshakeable belief in the emotional charge and memorial potential of an iconic sign, as well as his unswerving striving that these signs serve above all to visualise the times, the 20th century, are the underlying elements of our large-scale cultural project. Add to this an exceptionally beneficial circumstance enabling a study of material of top artistic quality straight from the source.

Proceeding from the Warburg method of using visual evidence as documents containing historical information and studying the Sandretti collection, we therefore managed to identify the relationships which existed and continue to exist between culture and society and to show that the phenomenon of reception always takes place at the meeting ground of different cultures, which makes it possible to understand the "otherness" of a strange culture and the essence of one's own.

Ilya Repin
Postcard. 1898
Published
by Community
of St. Eugene

Within the framework of the project that I headed and Matteo Bertele curated we have of late studied, made an inventory of and scanned most of the postcards collected by Alberto Sandretti (see http://www.russinitalia.it/cartoline.php). Most of the over 10000 art postcards of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries date from the Soviet period. In the course of decades Sandretti bought postcards at museum kiosks, antique shops and flea markets in the Soviet Union and Russia. The first of the sections we studied consists of 3139 postcards reproducing artworks, primarily paintings, drawings, designs, sculptures and photographs. From the chronological point of view the section is divided into two groups, one comprising reproductions of prerevolutionary art (748 postcards) printed before and after 1917 and the other reproductions of art of the Soviet period (2391 postcards).

Prerevolutionary postcards are for the most part reproductions of well-known pictures of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, mostly by Russian artists and members of other national schools. Such postcards were intended above all for enlightenment purposes and enabled the public to see artistic treasures kept at that time in private collections, serving as an analogue
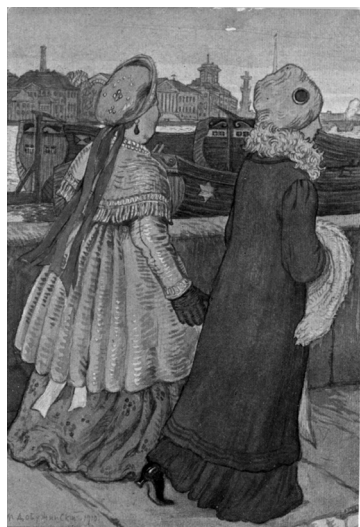
of an accessible art museum. This type of postcard, which can be associated with the development of Russian tourism between the 19th and 20th centuries, has another offspring with the representations of theatre sketches, and also ethnographical series, including, for example, "national types" illustrating the life and customs of the colonised peoples.

In the Soviet period postcards acquired an important ideological role. In Socialist Realism paintings gained priority due not so much to their uniqueness, originality or painters' characteristics as to their potential ability to be reproduced and educational potential. Most of the paintings made in the Soviet Union under government commissions and on prescribed themes, after getting ephemeral publicity at exhibitions and government awards, found themselves in Culture Ministry storerooms, from where very few of them ever re-emerged into the public light. The memory of them survived only in postcards printed in tens and hundreds of thousands of copies and distributed in a capillary way throughout the country. Thanks to their pocket size, low price and easy accessibility art postcards became hugely popular and widespread. Among the frequently reproduced genres were historical paintings with the obvious preference for military themes, portraiture reproducing the images of socialist leaders and Soviet citizens, be they famous or ordinary, and finally genre paintings of a narrative and didactic nature.

A significant portion of artworks reproduced on the postcards from the Sandretti collection are now lost and gone. The only trace left by them is on these art postcards that thus have a special part to play: they are not only objects of artistic and collection value, but visual documents and evidence of Russian and Soviet art of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Zinaida Serebriakova
Young Girl.
From the Kursk Gubernia
Types series
Postcard, published by
Community of St. Eugene

Carrying on this approach, we have recently launched another research project to create an active database and virtual museum of Russian art in Italy (20th century works)[1]. As part of the research context of memory studies, this project aims to restore the contours of the cultural history of nations and the interrelationships between the cultural experiences of different nations. The overall purpose is to facilitate the reconstruction of a complicated picture of 20th-century Russian art, including that part of Russian artistic culture which

[1] Data base attivo e museo virtuale dell'arte russa in Italia (opere del XX secolo).

Mstislav Dobuzhinsky
Wet-nurse.
From the Petersburg
Types series, 1910s
Postcard, published
by Community
of St. Eugene

Samuil Adlivankin
Our Heroes. 1930
State Tretyakov
Gallery, Moscow
Postcard, Sovetsky
khudozhnik
Publishers

Pyotr Konchalovsky
*Coming
from Haymaking*.
1948–51
Directorate
of Art Exhibitions
and Panoramas
Postcard, Sovetsky
khudozhnik Publishers

Yuri Pimenov
Arrived for Practicals.
1954
Postcard, IZOGIZ
Publishers, 1959

for different reasons and in different ways developed or found itself outside Russia. Another special aim is to pinpoint the exact coordinates which determined the presence of Russian art in Italy in the 20th century, to construct its iconographical repertoire and promote its Internet publicity.

Let me stress the specifics of the phenomenon investigated in this project. It is not a matter of describing the normal circulation and movement of artworks in the international environment of the 20th-century art market, but of making a reconnaissance study of comprehensive cultural value.

There are two major aspects to this study:

a) to reconstruct the repertoire of works by Russian artists that made their way to Italy (as a final destination or in transit to other countries

Eliy Belyutin
Pasternak. 1969
Private collection

Otari Kandaurov
Proteus. 1970
Private collection

of Europe) on the wave of emigration triggered by the Russian revolu-
tion of 1917 and lasting throughout the period between the two world
wars;

b) to reconstruct the phenomenon of collecting Soviet art (official
and non-official) in Italy in the Thaw period and up to the disintegration
of the Soviet Union.

Ernst Neizvestny
Crucifixion. 1971
Bronze
Private collection

Boris Sveshnikov
First Snow. 1971–2
Private collection

Vladimir Weisberg
Still Life. 1969
Private collection

Both aspects are connected with different stages of Russian history, in which the development of culture of necessity went two separate ways, independent of and incompatible with each other. In one case a split happened between Russia and the émigrés resulting in two cultures, each with aesthetics of its own and its own cultural institutions (magazines, publishing houses, schools, academies and art galleries). In the other, it was a matter of inner stratification within the Soviet Union and two artistic processes, one official and the other non-official. The latter, forced to exist in the underground inside the country, won recognition among gallery owners, critics and collectors outside the Soviet Union.

The innovative nature of the project is ensured by the methods of data collecting and forming an interactive database that can become an open source for the scholarly community (and many Italian collectors) that would be conducive to the understanding and contextualisation of artworks, among other things, owing to data collection through verified crowd sourcing.

The main result we expect from this project is the appearance of an accessible online database of digitised images of all sorts of Russian pictorial art on the territory of Italy. In fact, it is a matter of organising a virtual museum of Russian art in Italy. This database will comprise an image of every work of art, supplied with a reference note including its name (given by the author or attributed to it), date of production, technique, size, place of storage, provenance, type of acquisition, critical reviews and exposition history (if any). Every entry will also provide essential information about the author and artwork description from the historical and critical points of view. The database will enable a search by one or several of the parameters mentioned above. We hope eventually to attain an even more significant result,
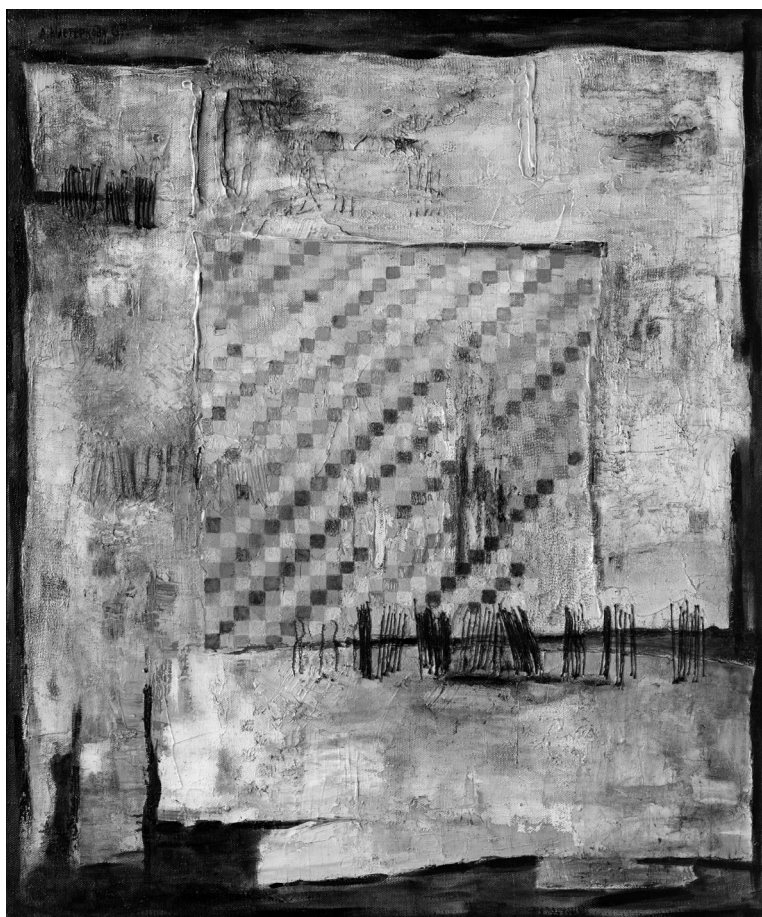
Dmitri Plavinsky
Red Drapery. 1967
Sandretti collection

Oscar Rabin
Rural Life. 1970
Private collection

Lydia Masterkova
Composition. 1967
Sandretti collection

such as helping to accomplish a more precise and substantive periodization of 20th-century Russian art history – a problem that seems to be unsolvable at the moment on the basis of works stored in the major museums of Moscow and Saint Petersburg.