Doctoral dissertation review

Beyond Sectarianism: the Dynamics of Memory in Northern Irish Muralism

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Gabriella Rava presents us with a thesis that deals with the phenomenon of muralism, which became emblematic of the urban landscapes of Northern Ireland, accompanying the social and political conflict that escalated in the second half of the 20th century. Her approach is both theoretical and empirical and the dissertation is striving to overcome a simplified vision of the said phenomenon when seen solely as an embellishment of the violent sectarian conflict. Through her deep interdisciplinary insight into the mechanisms that produced, reproduced, and transformed Noerthern-Irish muralism mainly since the 1960s (in some relevant cases even from earlier periods) she successfully paints an enticing and engaging picture, which illuminates not only the research object in itself, but also its relation to the realities of Northern Ireland and the globalized and interconnected world. It is already obvious from my previous statement that I highly value the work invested into the research and consider it an example of a dissertation work done exceptionally well for reasons presented in detail below.

The author makes it clear from the very beginning that she puts great emphasis on declaring the conceptual and theoretical basis with utmost clarity. Being quite familiar with the field of memory studies but to a lesser extent with semiotics, which I understand to form the core dyad of the interdisciplinary analytical framework, I appreciate the meticulous definitory work over the concepts and literature which enter the discussion. Rava tends to reflect not only on the items relevant for research in a sense of their positive application while interpreting the sources but opens a broad theoretical discussion which testifies to a literature review done very well. The conceptual aspect on the other hand serves in the first place as a device for interdisciplinary understanding, when even the more complex elements are well defined and explained in an understandable manner (with a few exceptions noted below). Secondly, the

thesis could serve as a reader of concepts especially in the context memory studies for anyone interested in gaining a broader view of the field.

In specific terms I appreciate that in the very beginning (p.4-6) the author defines the key points of departure. She adopts what she calls a "unitary perspective", making no distinction between high-art and people's art. By doing so she avoids some pitfalls of a more traditionally oriented iconographic approaches and makes it clear that primary interest is in the evolution of meaning of muralism over time. That is a crucial decision, as it keeps the empirical dimension of what can and cannot be considered muralism easy to grasp and consistent. In addition, it follows the primary aims of the thesis – to arrive at a conceptualization of trends, which represent the diachronic approach of the author, a vision of the social and symbolic "aging" of the murals. Owing to the chosen research design, the author manages to fill in a major gap in the literature – to emphasize the role that muralism plays in re-imagining of the (post-) conflict cleavage. Rava expands on this idea in the final reflections presented in the conclusion (p.226) when discussing the notion of post-post-conflict imaginaries – owing to its self-referential nature of muralism it was able to transcend several historical periods defined by changing social context and bring about a meta-critical narrative of its own.

The research design had to position itself into an interdisciplinary space – the embeddedness of the analysis in both semiotics and memory studies is manifested equally through the conceptual language and resulting empirical analysis and interpretation. While reading the thesis, it comes to mind that memory studies and their analytical devices are actually generating the strongest effect when applied in such an interdisciplinary conjunction. These aspects represent a contribution of the thesis on both theoretical and methodological level.

Another major contribution of Rava's work lies in the inclusion of the digital aspect, "after-life" of the murals, in her words, in the digital environment. It is rare to find such an integrated analysis of material and digital dimensions of one phenomenon, which would rely on a substantial empirical research as well. I found the authors observations absolutely on the point and producing knowledge which is transferable onto other cases, modalities of artistic or archival work, as these reflect directly onto my own practice of development and usage of digital archives of Holocaust survivor's interviews. To paraphrase the introductory statement (p.11), we cannot ignore the digital space, in which symbolic and social function might undergo a transition into a new form both connected and disconnected from the material-world setting.

Despite the above-mentioned praise, I would like to briefly bring attention to several items (indeed only items, as these are not numerous), which I found conceptually problematic and unnecessarily interrupting the otherwise smooth flow of the main narrative. In the introduction and first chapters, the author defines several "inadequacies" of commonly used terminology. Specifically (p.17), she opposes the usage of the term "community" in terms of sides of conflict in Northern Ireland. One might oppose, whether that is indeed inadequate, if the "communities" still construe and label themselves in this sense? For instance, the example on page 42, commenting on artists alleged neutrality while representing some concrete "community" documents well, why it might be analytically irrelevant to implant a substitute term to avoid malign groupism. One can relate to the already almost 30 years old exchange between Rogers Brubaker and Richard Jenkins on the topic, where I personally side with Jenkin's less rigid approach to taxonomies and labels in social identity analysis. Similarly, the author does not explain right at the first mention (p. 17) why and how is the concept of "collective memory" inadequate – the inadequacy is only addressed in detail on page 190, and I would agree with such a view in this context. However, it would be worth to present even a shortened a justification for this statement in the fist place.

Further reflecting on the identity labels, there is the slightly problematic usage of the multinominal group signifiers – "catholic/nationalist/republican" and "protestant/loyalist/unionist". It is clear, that author's convention to nominate communities with multiple attributes is there to represent internal heterogeneity within these groups, however, the reader does not get a full explanation of what heterogeneity in the first place, which occludes the author's motivation for doing so. In addition, the usage is inconsistent and thus confusing, as these mostly appear as "nationalist/republican" and "loyalist/unionist". It is not clear, whether this is a pattern selectively relevant to the respective context, or a random stylistic choice. I do believe that defining and using one-word moniker instead of the composite would be beneficial for the clarity and flow of the text.

In the later part of the dissertation (p. 183), the discussion turns to the issue of legality and illegality of street art, while the author further uses the terms of legitimacy and illegitimacy; the latter two reemerge again in the text. It would be worth defining or discussing usage of both pairs. This is a non-trivial matter, as it closely relates to the issue of authenticity, which is one of the key points and arguments of the thesis, as discussed in the next section of this review.

I will conclude reflection on the conceptual aspects with two predominantly technocratic points related to the last chapter. Being aware that the author discusses two modules in an online digital archive frontend (p.203), I would like to note that "Google maps" is an implementation and set tools of a broader GIS methodology, which is a "sub-discipline" of

computational science developing other similar methods that tools. Therefore, the latter is hierarchically superordinate term of the first. Similarly, within the same discussion, a model user / user model is already a standardized term in Computational Science and human-computer interaction studies. I would claim, that typically, these models involve a typology, producing archetypes of users interacting with a software and do not rely on a single-type situation.

As Gabriela Rava's dissertation presents the reader with a profound narrative in both the theoretical and empirical sense, it is hard to provide a complete summary of all key claims and arguments made throughout the whole text. Instead, I would like to pinpoint what stood out from my point of view and what in my opinion ties the thesis together.

Already on page 23 we are confronted with the observation about the self-referential and hetero-referential quality of muralism. Throughout the text, the author gradually reinforces the specific understanding of notions of visuality and signification, endogenous and exogenous mechanisms which are at play in the "life and death" cycle of the observed instances. In the individual iterations empirically or conceptually relevant to each of the six chapters, we arrive at variations of these principles. However, I found especially well formulated and poignant the characterization in Chapter 4 on page 146 referring to the essentially "anarchival" nature of muralism. As Rava states, it is not only the visual/textual semantic dimension of the mural, it is also the social "life" of the artifact that defines its full meaning. Therefore, the tension between memorialization and temporal and spatial actuality seems to be a key paradox, while simultaneously a key defining property of murals, that the author emphasizes.

The cornerstones of the claims presented above overlap into the other very important discussion Rava develops – the tension between authenticity of the mural seen as an expressive tool of a community and, to paraphrase, a narrative/mnemonic management device (reflected in depth p.201, p211, p. 227). The "authenticity" and its assessment are among the key concerns the author raises, both in the context of layers of interpretation of preserved murals as well as the imagined future of muralism. In each of the chapters, she touches upon tendencies and threats of both physical and metaphorical expropriation of muralism from the authentic-local to other contexts and meanings. This approach is extremely important and informative as it adds to overall analytical framework, including the context of digital archiving, where, as the author points out (p.192), the artefacts which represent collective memory, when turned into digital objects are subjected to transformation into the scope of "multitude memory".

Here I would like to comment more in-depth on the critical archival approach that Gabriella Rava develops. I do believe it is an intentional choice that the last chapter of the

whole analysis is dedicate to this issue and thus concludes the story of Northern-Irish muralism. Despite the fact that, as the author successfully proves, muralism is not a temporarily limited accompaniment or side-product of a sectarian violence of a mostly (hopefully) bygone era and it is continuously being produced in an authentic manner in the post-post-conflict phase, it has also predominantly become an object of institutionalized and non-institutionalized archiving. One might even pose questions of what will augmented and virtual reality proliferation mean for muralism in the future. It is therefore another key contribution of thesis that it raises methodological awareness of these issues.

I fully agree with the statement on page 202 that: "More than transnational, many digital archives risk to appear as repositories in and through which a global memory, growingly alien to the communities' experiences and recollections, is practiced and lastly consumed." If any individual or institution endeavors to create a digital archive of any sorts, they must be fully aware of what representation are they creating in, predominantly, liberalized online environment, as this representation cannot form a simple "clean slate" source by making it devoid of any interpretive background information. Archive creators make technological, hierarchical, and aesthetic choices which in turn carry semantic functions and even, inadvertently, feed into positionality of the users (or the creators), as the author observes as well. However, I would stress the key term of awareness in this context, as that is a starting point for any productive work, which I do not consider impossible. On that point I agree with the author as well, as the last chapter (p. 190) demonstrates positive elements on the example of Extramural Activity purposefully engaging in representing both the visual and mnemonic substance, thus attempting to overcome the "anarchivability" syndrome of murals.

I would slightly disagree with two related claims of the author. In regard to the fallacy of archival "neutrality" in the Western tradition (p.202) – I would argue that this view has been largely overcome especially in the relation between archives and contemporary historical research and it has been replaced by a much more self-aware paradigm of archival knowledge production. The traditional positivistic "rule of law" of the archival source remains a rather archaic approach. On a similar note, with the Western tradition of "narrative dominance" in source and archival hierarchies (p. 156), I would argue that the multi-modality of Holocaust survivors video-testimonies has brought about the already standardized effort of accompanying them with photographs (commented by the narrator or associated through metadata, e.g. in USC SFI VHA), and further expands on the multiple dimensions of such an archival effort by linking the testimonies to other sources (such as in USHMM case).

Lastly, I would like to present a few considerations on the formal aspects of the dissertation. Mostly in the first part of the thesis, I struggled a little to understand the organizing principle of

the sequence of the individual chapters. Despite the declaration on page 14 it remains a bit unclear to the reader what motivated the internal narrative structure and chapter ordering. I would recommend revising the initial signposting in a more explicit manner and put forth why the chapters representing the declared concepts should follow one another like this. A related cosmetic issue is that the numbering of subchapters is missing – while a little unusual, it is not a mistake, but I would have appreciated it. In terms of the language usage, the stylistic quality of the text, the way in which it engages and communicates with the reader, the lack of typos made it a great reading experience and I consider the current form practically impeccable (as much as a non-native speaker can). In terms of other formal aspects, I would recommend revising the reference system – the author-date typically does not employ "Ibid.", as it makes the referenced literature difficult to find and reflect on in the flow of the overall text. The second issue is the footnote references made to websites, which should also retain the "bracket" formatting throughout the text. However, those are indeed marginal issues.

To conclude, I highly enjoyed reading the text and consider it to be an outstanding effort for a dissertation at the Charles University. Gabriella Rava managed to produce academically sound thesis which as a design successfully answered posed research questions and brings real contributions to both the topic-specific and broader theoretical discussion.

I fully recommend the dissertation for a successful defense and simultaneously hope the author will proceed further toward publishing the text as a monograph.

In Prague, 12th January 2024,

PhDr., Jiří Kocián, PhD