Hungarian University of Fine Art
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Semantic interpretations and metaphors of memory in the art

Theses of a DLA dissertation

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1. *The two guidelines and the topics of the dissertation*

The dichotomy referred to in the title indicates the main principles of the current dissertation. The semantic components of memory are connected with memory prototypes as important factors of recognition and distinction. Metaphorical images as part of „figurative speech" are illustrations of logical and theoretical interpretations and as such they are mainly related to the act of modelling. The topics of the current dissertation can be defined by the following: a) the changing interpretations of memory as such and its activity, b) the mutually compensative research into natural and artificial memory, c) memory and (artistic) imagination, d) the structure, characteristics and institutional forms of collective memory. I attempted to approach the appointed theme through creative thinking.

2. *Human memory – a general definition*

Memory is the area of man's conscious activity which plays an important role in the preservation, evocation and processing of collective experience. It also represents the basis and guarantee of learning and race preservation. A look into the history of memory allows us to see that the interpretations referring to its activity have altered simultaneously with the current scientific discoveries and technical findings. This change of meaning is then filtered to both the theoretical discourses on memory and everyday language.

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3. *The stylistic figures and the visual metaphors of memory*

The stylistic figures and visual metaphors connected with memory are means of expression typical of theory as well as of the specialized language of discoveries. When we apply stylistic figures and visual metaphors, we make use of an association of images based on similarity, that is, we transfer the meanings of one image/text to a different context. One constituent of memory metaphors is a particular experience or image from the exterior world, while the other one is the imaginary picture (i.e. a conjecture) resulted from some spiritual or mental aspect of our memory in action. Metaphoric speech and imagery links these two pictures for the sake of interpretation projecting the image of our outward-oriented knowledge onto our suppositional

mental picture. The two keywords of metaphoric meaning, namely 'basis' and 'vehicle' refer to the two constituents of the meaning produced in the course of association.

4. *Natural memory and artificial memories – a binary approach in the current studies*

The current research into memory is characterised by a binary perspective and a two-fold approach at the same time. We can speak of research reserved to human or natural memory on the one hand and that engaged in the study of artificial memories on the other. Although the two approaches have often been rivalising in the history of memory, today it has become obvious that they are in mutually compensatory relations, each benefiting from the other's findings. [1]

Scholars involved in the study of natural memory refer to human memory as to an advanced form of neurological activity the cerebral and neural processes of which are controlled by human conscience. The functions of this organism depends on complex psychological, biological, physical and social factors. According to this attitude the memory processes occurring in the brain and in the peripheral neural network can be only partly modelled by the current inventions in the field of artificial intelligence. Firstly, we have few data to produce a 'mechanical design' of the organism. Secondly, the current technology is not yet developed enough to observe and control such an amount of processes of this speed.

The expansion of artificial memories has strongly been motivated by the recognition that human memory has an ephemeral nature, and on the other hand it is inaccurate. That the features of artificial memories are dependent on the development of technical media is justified by the history of inventions in the artificial intelligence. Human intelligence is an entity of the conscience capable of modelling a natural phenomenon/process. Artificial intelligence is a mechanical projection of natural intelligence, in other words, an application or an implementation of models (e.g. via technical objects, tools or machines). Artificial memories are external memory vehicles – methods, technical means, 'memory implantations' – meant to aid or even replace natural memory skills.

Two of the most exciting fields in the study of natural memory are:

 1) the studies of 'electronic memory', that is, interpretations and research on the brain as 'data processor' (with a particular reference to 5th-generation computers – robots and 'organic machines' in interaction). Here the main question is what happens during the interaction between the electronical patterns of information symbols (non-programmed representation) and programmable brain processes.

2) the research into 'holographic memory'. According to this interpretation, the patterns of memory traces stored interfere with the patterns of the 'ghost image' serving as reference (patterns similar to the original memory) resulting in a 'neural holographic' image. Researchers of the neural hologram – starting from the aspects of the technical hologram – assume that a shared storage and recollection of memory patterns can take place within the neural network and that from the memory fragments a complex set (a synaesthesia) of memories can be restored. Also, the principle of double illumination in holography accurately models the associative operation of memory and imagination.

It is frequently quoted among the shortcomings of the studies into natural memory that scholars have not been able so far to determine the material vehicles (carriers) of long-term memory (although in the 1950's and 60's some nucleic acids and proteins were claimed to be the molecules of memory). Neither do we have clear evidence on what logical locking function the cells of neural chains have in passing on information. Furthermore, the transmission speed in neural cells is still unknown as neural current functions with other types of impulse codes than the frequency or interval codes of the computer. Although there have been incredible achievements in the study of artificial intelligence in the past few decades, researchers are making efforts to reformulate the recent development strategies and make a move towards the study of 'organic machines'.

5. *Memory and artistic imagination*

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[1] See table: A history of memory – the main stages of the study and inventions in the Appendix

'Memory is a frame inside which imagination links the events that belong together, leaving space for the play of the connecting points'.[2] This definition offers a broader interpretation to man's act of remembering in that it states that in the course of recollection there can occur new meanings between the connecting points.

Memory does not comprise only the acts of 'memorizing' and 'recollecting' but also involves the virtual establishment of new meanings through associations between various memories on the one hand and memories and the currently perceived exterior world on the other. Imagination plays an active role in producing new meanings between linking points. The activity of our memory is a vivid mental function, and as such is not compelled to recalling dead 'mummies of memory', but is a continuous interactive transfer of ideas and images between recalled images and the 'ghost images' they refer to.

The process of artistic formation in particularly models the interactive encounter between memory and imagination and its role in creating new meanings. Artistic imagination by means of free associations communicates between the various layers of both individual and collective memory. The artist picks out memories from their chronological time and uses them as elements of his/her conceptions and imagery. To illustrate and justify the theoretical statements of the thesis, I quote as examples the works of several artists.[3] I have selected the works of some contemporary artists who offer a specific perspective on the images of their own individual as well as collective memory in its large and at the same time give these views a particular conceptual and sensuous expression.

6. The institutional forms of collective memory

The above mentioned relation between memory and imagination is true also for the morphology and functioning of collective memory. I analyse two emblematic forms of collective memory: the museum and the monument. The activities of **the museum** model the characteristic aspects of collective memory in operation (e.g. the collection of cultural relics, the 'recollection' of archived materials by means of

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[2] Tjebbe van Tijen: Ars Oblivivendi, Ont he Structure of Collective Memory in: BULDÓZER médiaelméleti antológia, 1997, Bp./ Source: http://mek.oszk.hu/00100/00140/html/01.htm#cim4

[3] See table: Artists/memory-reflexion-medium/media in the 2nd appendix to the DLA theses táblázat anyagát

presentations, hitorical research work or future-orientated museal enterprises). A step forward in the perception of the museum as spiritual space was made following Malraux's idea of 'imaginary museum', a particular example of which is 'the virtual museum' of the web. A question related to this is the relation and role of the real public exhibition place and the virtual cyber space. I quote several examples to illustrate my assumption that real exhibition and public places are important even in the case of electronic art recognising, of course, the major role of their online representation. The use of electronic media in art creates new representations devoid of memory, the presentation of which is important as this latter can be occasions of self-definition for electronic media in a particular place. It is important that the available public spaces (galleries, museums, cultural and arts centres, libraries etc.) keep up with the new technologies and be able to present the new genres using them. In this way, they can accustom the public to the means of expression of electronic multimedia works.

The museal presentations offered by both on-line and off-line network services, digital multimedia works, the engagement of public in use of the computer's operating surfaces are still a curiosity at public presentations. Museums and galleries do not always have the necessary electronic equipment at their disposal, so these kinds of presentations often meet with obstacles. Furthermore, it is not only the production or display, but also the administration, storage and (either digital or analogue) archivation of electronic art works what requires this type of equipment. **Monuments** are also emblematic forms of collective memory. The culture of monuments in the Middle- and East-European region is closely associated with the practice of historizing commemorations. Consequently, the element of commemoration which reflects on the present is less evident. Often, certain monuments have a particular connotation in the collective memory, because they are filled with actual political content and symbolic meanings not consensually accepted by the public opinion of this region. In an even worse case they can be used as means of propaganda or political opportunism. In contrast with this, we can see a much more liberal perception and interpretation of monuments in the Western cultural and

art world. I quote one example worthy of immitation as opposed to the above mentioned practice[4].

7. Conclusion

My preliminary DLA studies had grounded my scientific and artistic knowledge in the subject which in the course of writing was tinged by new perspectives as well as suggestions from both the consultant and the opponents. As a result of this, the text and body of image bound together would require some editing in case it was submitted for publication.

The thesis gives commonly accepted considerations for the approach of memory. I regarded the general theoretical foundation essential for a further, more detailed development of any segment of the thesis. My university notes are one field of application particularly benefiting from the findings of the dissertation.

The theoretical foundation also proves useful for the systematization of my own artistic activity around certain criteria as well as for the self-evaluation which I am proposing to do in the near future. Following the dissertation, the ways of implementing an 'active archive' of individual and/or collective memory have also become more evident.

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[4] *Antoni Muntadas'* interpretations of monuments and projects for monuments as well as his works for public domains. His interpretations on monuments are in a freer relation with representations of history and memory than the already mentioned perception of historizing monuments.