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## How to Read a Monument as a Narrative in Class – a Suggestion [unfinished draft]

I.

The following suggestions for addressing monuments in history education are based on a conception of monuments as proto- or abbreviate narratives<sup>1</sup> by a present actor about a certain past and its relevance. Even though in many discussions about the removal of monuments, people deplore the removal of their “past”,<sup>2</sup> what is at stake, is not the past itself, but a specific and often privileged communication of a certain interpretation of some past context, personage or event.

As such, they also address someone (mostly a specific group) – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly only. These “addressees” need, however, not be identical with those really exploring the monument. But these (the actual “audience”) will also feel addressed, and since they might (will) be diverse, in quite different ways. This communicative shift is far from being an exception – it might even be the rule in times of change and of increased diversity of our societies. Consider, e.g., a monument hailing some hero of an imperial war addressing its audience with a reference to “our empire” visited by an immigrant British citizen. This applies not only to monuments depicting a group’s (e.g. nation’s) “own pride and pain” but also to critical memorials addressing a group’s actions in the past which are considered as problematic (to say the least) in retrospect. Consider, e.g., Germany’s memorials at former places of concentration camps. In most cases, they are called “Gedenkstätten” – “sites of remembrance”. As such, already, they (have to) express their narrative logic in diverse from, given that the society they address is not only sociologically and culturally diverse but also with respect to the past they refer to. For survivors and dependants (of both survivors and fatal victims), they are (mainly) a place of commemoration *their own* loss and also victimhood. In many cases these places tell a story of “we have this place for remembering what they (the Germans) have done to us”. But even within this group, there are many who are and still consider themselves Germans. For them, the narrative is quite different. And of course there is a difference between mourning a loss and remembering a survival or even own resistance. An inscription on the 1965 monument at Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial in Hamburg, e.g., reading “Euer Leiden, Euer Kampf und Euer Tod sollen nicht vergebens sein” (“Your Suffering, Your Fight and Your Death Shall Not be in Vain”) does prominently address a group of prisoners who actively resisted. But what is more, most of these places respectively monuments there are also known as “Mahnmale”, i.e. “monument” in the literal sense of “admonishing” someone. Who can or should be admonished there? Referring to the Nazi Crimes, they can (and have to) do it in two different ways: Towards surviving victims and their dependants they may be read as “Never let that be done unto you again” – but addressing the German society as such they refer to “Remember” (publicly, that is) “what you have done” (both to “others” and to “some of your own”, that is) – “and make sure that this never happens again”. Germans among the victims of NS-crimes (Jewish Germans, Communists, Social Democrats Jehova’s Witnesses, and many others), then, will specifically have to select (not choose) how they are addressed.

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1 Cf. Rüsen et al. 1991, 230f. Cf. also my comment on Lévesque 2018, *ibid.*

2 Cf. Lévesque 2018.

All these considerations also hold true for the “speaker’s position” in a memorial or monument’s narrative: Let’s take the same example: Who is it, admonishing the victims not to be victimized again, and (more prominently) the Germans not to become perpetrators again? In fact, one can even detect another layer in such monuments. The fact that (belatedly enough) the German society today designates and supports these “Gedenkstätten” (or even hosts them institutionally) can also be considered a message to both the survivors, their dependants and to the world at large: “See and that we address this past” – possibly also with a call for support: “By witnessing this commitment of ours to remembering this past – help us to resist and even fight tendencies to abandon it and to return to a socio-centric way or commemoration” again.<sup>3</sup> But is it “the German Society” speaking here – or some specific group (e.g. the government, a political faction, ...) speaking “for” the German people or *in lieu of*? Just like the targeted audience of a monument seldomly is just the one really visiting it (and trying to make sense of it), the position of “authorship” needs to be differentiated.

Given all this, the conventional questions of (1) *who* erected a monument (2) *to (remembering) whom*, (3) *for what purpose*, (4) *with whose money*, and to what effect (e.g. of appraisal, critique), are still necessary, but need to be complemented.

As a result, a monument’s “message” or “meaning” is neither fixed nor arbitrary, but rather a spectrum of narrative relations between a range of perceived-“authors” or “speakers” and a similar range of targeted and factual addressees.

Furthermore, their interrelation is of utmost interest and may strongly differ: Does (and if so: in what way) the monuments message imply the author and the addressee(s) to belong to the same group? It is “intransitive” in that it at least seemingly expresses the fact of “remembering” (“We both know that we have knowledge about this past and we express that it is of importance to us”), while in fact it serves either as a *transitive* reminder (“I know that you know, but you must not forget”) or even as a first-time introduction of the addressee into the subject at hand (which will be the mode in most cases of visiting monuments with students). So where “remembering” and even “commemoration” is suggested and meant, “telling” is the factual mode.

Furthermore, commemorative modes are manifold. Monuments can not only call for neutral “remembering”, but also for revering or condemning, for feelings (pride and pain) – and they can appeal for action, e.g. for following an example. In culturally diverse societies, the specific linguistic and artistic modes of expressing may not be clear to all students, possibly leading to misunderstandings, but possibly also to identifying alternative readings which are worth considering.

## II.

On the backdrop of all these considerations, the following guideline therefore does not venture to help students to perceive the “true” “meaning” of a monument, but rather to foster communication

<sup>3</sup> That this danger is far from being hypothetical can be seen in the light of a speech by the right-wing (AFD)-politician Björn Höcke in Dresden on 18 January 2017, where he called for a “U-turn” in German memory culture, giving up the politics of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”. In the same speech, he reproached the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (the “Holocaust-Memorial”) as a “monument of shame”, which of course it is, but in a different sense: What Höcke meant is a “shameful” monument, but for the current German memorial culture he attacked, to address one’s own (in group’s) “crime and shame” is nothing shameful, but a necessity. Cf. the documentation of the speech in “Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes” 2017 (as of 28.8.2019). Any sense of pride, however, based on the development of this “critical” and even “negative” memory culture would be at least problematic – it would undermine the mind-set. The question remains of how to address this as an achievement without resorting to concepts of “pride”.

about what is perceived as its “message” and meaning by possibly different people. Some of these perceptions will be affirmed by being shared among several and possibly quite different users, while others might be different. This, however, does not necessarily render them wrong or nonsensical (which, they might be, however). Comparing different answers might both sharpen the individual’s perception and broaden it to perceive relevance and meanings of memorials to people with different background, interest, culture, interest, and so on. These forms of relevance might (often will) differ from that intended by those who erected the monument. What does that mean? Is a monument dysfunctional if people feel addressed by it in a way differing from that originally intended? Or does it keep relevance but change significance?

These questions do not replace but complement other approaches to analysing monuments. It might be sensible, though, to not apply them after more direct approaches, but to use them as a start, resulting in more specific (and possibly also more) of questions to explore.

The questions can be used in different ways. It will be rather tedious to just answer them one by one – especially including all bullet points. The latter are rather meant as suggestions for formulating an answer to the main questions above them.

To work individually is possible, but because of the concept explained above, it might be more fruitful to apply a “Think-Pair-Share” -system and first work independently, then compare suggestions in small groups in a way which does not only look for common solutions, but also explores and evaluates differences, and then share both insights and remaining or newly arisen questions with the whole group.

**Task:**

- I. Respond to the questions 1-6, using the bullet points below as directions and suggestions. Try e.g. to complete the given sentences, but formulate your own answer to the main questions. If you are unsure or have additional ideas, formulate your questions (instead)!
- II. Compare your notes with your partner(s). Don’t standardize them! Instead: Formulate (a) a new version of those aspects which were similar and (b) on your differences! In what way did/do you differ? Make a suggestion why that might be! Keep your original notes! They will be valuable in further discussions!
- III. Report on your findings from II to your class! Compare with insights and questions of other groups!

1. Communicative Explicitness:

In how far does the monument (seem to) ...

- ... present or suggest a specific person or group in a speaker position? (e.g. “We, <...> erected this monument”?)
- ... address a specific person/group or suggests to be directed towards a specific group? (“You, <...>...” / “to <...>”)<sup>a</sup>
- ... address a third-party as some kind of witness as to the fact of remembering?<sup>b</sup>
- ... refer to some third party as involved in the past which is narrated? (e.g. “what they have done to us”)

2. Narrative Explicitness:

In how far does the monument (seem to) ...

- ... presuppose that the recipient/addressee has sufficient knowledge about the context referred to?
- ... explicitly construct a specific context (explicitly tell a story),
- ... rely on a certain amount of *common* knowledge of *speaker and addressee*?<sup>c</sup>
- ... introduce actors, contexts and events?
- <other aspects>?

3. Transitive/Intransitive communication:

In how far does the monument (seem to) ...

- ... embrace the *recipient/addressee* as a member of the same group (“we”) as the (purported) *speaker*?
- ... address the *recipient/addressee* as a member of a different group (“you”) as the (purported) *speaker*?

4. “Mono-” or “Heterogloss” communication:

In how far does the monument (seem to) ...

- ... embrace the recipient/addressee as *undoubtedly* having the same perspective/sharing the evaluation (“monogloss”)? e.g. by being implicit about it,
- ... address the recipient/addressee as *not necessarily* sharing the same perspective and evaluation (“heterogloss”)? e.g. by being explicit in statement, evaluation, etc.

5. Communicative Intent:

What is the relation of authors'/addressee(s)/third-party's role in the (proto-)narrated story?, e.g.

1. Generic

“<...> want(s) <...> to <know/remember/acknowledge/accept/judge> <a group/a person/an event/ ...> as <...>”

2. Specific:

- “‘We’ <...> want ‘you’ <...> (and others) to know what ‘we’ <...> have achieved!” (as e.g. in “Stranger, tell the Spartans ...”)
- “‘We’ <...> want ‘us’ <...> to not forget what ‘we’ <...> have achieved!” (as e.g. in Monuments to Unification)
- “‘We’ <...> want ‘us’ <...> to not forget what ‘we’ <...> have caused!” (as e.g. in German Concentration Camp Memorials)
- “‘We’ <...> want ‘you’ <...> to know that ‘we’ <...> submit ourselves to not forgetting/remembering!”
- “‘We’ <...> want ‘us’ <...> to not forget what ‘they’ <...> have done to ‘us’ <...>!”
- “‘We’ <...> want ‘you’ <...> to know that ‘we’ <...> acknowledge what ‘you’ <...> have done to ‘us’ <...>!”

6. In how far does one (or several) of the following forms describe the communicative intention of the monument?

- to *inform*, e.g. if it introduces and details the past incidents, contexts etc.;
- to *confirm*, e.g. if it almost tacitly – without giving details – refers to a past context which both author and addressee share knowledge about; intending to secure acknowledgement of factuality;
- to *commemorate*, e.g. if it almost tacitly – without giving details – refers to a past context which both author and addressee share knowledge about, intending to express a certain evaluation;
- to *mourn*, e.g. if it refers to a past context which both author and addressee share knowledge about, intending to express a feeling of loss of someone/something valued);
- to *remind*, e.g. if it refers to a past context which both author and addressee *should* share knowledge about, intending to
  - prevent forgetting;
  - secure a certain evaluation which is supposed to have been shared before?
  - appeal, e.g. if it asks (invites?/requests?/summons?) the recipient/addressee to feel/identify/act in a certain way, e.g. by
    - referring to (a) person(s) as responsible for something, admonishing the addressee to evaluate this/these persons in a certain way, but *not to follow her/his example*, either
    - heroizing: presenting (a) person(s) as responsible for a special achievement and therefore to be revered;
    - giving thanks: presenting (a) person(s) as responsible for a special achievement and expressing gratitude;
    - condemning: presenting (a) person(s) as responsible for a special achievement and therefore to be condemned;
    - to present examples / role models, e.g. if it by presents (a) person(s) as responsible for something and addresses the recipient/addressee as possibly being in a similar position and having similar capacities, urging her/him either
      - to follow the example (e.g. of taking action, of resisting);
      - to *not* follow the example (e.g. of going along ...);
    - to express gratitude, e.g. if it presents *the addressee and/or his group* as responsible for something good, expressing gratitude;
    - to accuse, e.g. if it presents *the addressee and/or his group* as responsible for something bad, expressing contempt;
- other (specify) ...

## References

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- a As e.g. in a Hamburg monument commemorating the town's dead of WW1: "Vierzig Tausend Söhne der Stadt ließen ihr Leben für Euch" ("Forty Thousand Sons of [our] Town Gave Their Lives for You").
- b As e.g. in the verse of Simonides of Ceos (556–468 BCE) on the Spartan defenders at the Thermopylae, which Herodotus (VII, 228) reports to have been erected on the spot: "Oh stranger, tell the Lacedaemonians that we lie here, obedient to their words." (transl. by Ioannis Ziogas). The original did not survive, but in 1955 a modern plate was erected bearing the Greek text again. For this and different translations of the inscription see the English Wikipedia-article: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Thermopylae#Epitaph\\_of\\_Simonides](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Thermopylae#Epitaph_of_Simonides) (as of 27/8/2019). For a discussion of the wording see Ziogas 2014.
- c A monument in Oslo, on the premises of Åkershus Slot, near the Norwegian museum of resistance against German Occupation in WW2 (the Hjemmefront Museum), e.g. states „de kjempet de falt – de gav oss alt“ (literally: „They fought, they fell – they gave us everything“), or rather: „they gave (sacrificed) everything for us.“ Even though the monument depicts tools and devices which can be used in resistance operations, the monument clearly requires knowledge of the whole context of Norwegian resistance. Körber 2014, p. 87.