

**From:**

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**Moment to Monument**

The Making and Unmaking of Cultural Significance  
(in collaboration with Regula Hohl Trillini,  
Jennifer Jermann and Markus Marti)

December 2008, 228 p., 26,80 €, ISBN 978-3-89942-962-6

Why do certain works of art make it into the canon while others just enjoy a brief moment of recognition, if at all? How do moments produce monuments, and why are monuments erased from our cultural memory in only a moment? - Taking into account these cultural processes of creating, storing, remembering and forgetting that are omnipresent and have an immense influence on how we perceive artefacts and cultural events, the articles in this collection analyze the phenomenon of cultural production, transmission and reception from various angles, drawing on approaches from both literary and cultural studies. With its transdisciplinary approach, this book uniquely responds to an everyday cultural phenomenon that so far has not received such wide-ranging attention.

This volume includes contributions by Aleida Assmann, David Morley and Ann Thompson.

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## Acknowledgements

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First and foremost, we would like to thank the contributors to this volume. Their essays, each unique in focus and scope, do more than justice to the fascinating phenomena we have subsumed under “Moment to Monument”, and it has been a great privilege to co-ordinate their work.

We are greatly indebted to the series editors for their efficient support and to the Cooper Fonds at Basel University for the generous funding which made the publication possible.

A very warm thank you goes to Ji Lee (New York) for the inspired cover design.

Our greatest debt of gratitude is to Balz Engler for inspiring the project and for much else. This book is a tribute to a wonderful teacher and friend.

## Introduction

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A simple question: What do a New Orleans jazz funeral, Mount Rushmore and *Hamlet* have in common? A simple answer: They are monuments. Mount Rushmore (like the Pyramids and the Twin Towers) was meant to be one from the beginning; *Hamlet* started as a script of a series of moments on a London stage but has turned into a global cultural monument, and jazz funerals may be momentary but, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, they have served as a more adequate response to a catastrophe of this scale than traditional memorials, which were felt to be too stale. This volume of essays is concerned with the not-so-simple question of how cultural monuments of various kinds come into being, whether they are intended as such by their creators (as are, for example, epitaphs, photographs and certain kinds of poems) or whether they have been turned into monuments by posterity (as for example novels on a school syllabus, a carefully edited and annotated play). What politics and processes are at work in the creation of cultural resonance? Why are certain literary texts canonized but not others? Why do certain paintings become so famous – and valuable, for that matter – that tourists have to queue for hours just to get a short glimpse of a small, intimate painting?

There are different ways of approaching these issues. We can refer to mechanisms of selection: Simple coincidence can trigger the process of canonization of a book, a work of art, a building or a place while similar works do not attract any attention at all. Or we can lay bare the tactical moves employed to establish cultural credit or/and point to the interests tied up with them. A third possibility is to claim that certain works of art are unique and yield a privileged insight into the human condition which lends them both ontological and epistemological merit. This approach invariably poses the question: How do we decide what is unique?

Representatives of traditional criticism might respond by referring to aesthetic concepts, claiming that certain works of art affect us emotionally. The consideration of aesthetic quality may have become anathema in modern criticism, but by banning aesthetic concepts too radically one fails to look into the mechanisms that produce emotional responses to cultural phenomena, be they works of ‘high art’ or of popular culture, and one disregards the fact that the veneration of works of high art has an interesting history, too. There is no need to take sides and to prolong an academic debate that has long become unfruitful, but it would be a serious shortcoming in introducing this book not to give credit to the prominent role the traditional definition of art has played in the popular imagination since the Romantics and to emphasize how – irrespective of whether or not we believe in its validity – it has very effectively been cultivated in fiction. William Wordsworth’s poem *Tintern Abbey* is a good example.

In this poem, Wordsworth uses a tamed and classicized version of the Burkean sublime to establish the poem as monument. The poet relates the impact of the sublime to the human encounter with natural elements – both actual and remembered – and with the “gift” of experience (l. 86) that reveals the truth about the human condition. This encounter is transferred onto the poem as a work of naturally inspired art which allows the reader to share in the experience of the sublime. In the following verses, the poet captures the sudden release into complete understanding that is the effect of his exposure to nature and of its “beauteous forms” (l. 20) in the poet’s memory:

... Nor less, I trust,  
To them I may have owed another gift,  
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened – that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on –  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (ll. 35-49)

The moments of “elevated thoughts” (l. 95) and the insight they produce

are not defined in substance, but are conveyed through the description of the poet's momentary mood. The insight is classified as privileged, but repeated and confirmed in the experience of reading the poem, thus establishing it as a monumental work of art whose power cannot clearly be defined. The poem (like the poet's memories) acquires a transcendental aura that offers nourishment for the here and now ("life and food for future years", ll. 64-65) and does so always already in a position of authority. The reader joins in the experience of transcendence and thereby validates the claim of poetry's sublimity.

Related to the meaning "to warn" of the Latin *monere*, monuments can be signifiers of mortality, used to intimidate and to evoke a feeling of awe of a completely different nature from the one mentioned above. Monuments can refer to something other than themselves; they may be created to commemorate a person or an event, as is the case with war memorials or epitaphs. Since they replace a person or a thing that is no more, they radiate an air of solemnity. They contextualize the past and affect the present and the future. In that sense, they function as ideological signifiers; they judge and evaluate and thereby coerce viewers to adopt the normative belief systems they stand for. Monuments are rigid, both in their physiognomy and in terms of their limited capacity to represent change. Monuments have a social character, and societies change, as do the ways in which events are perceived. Because of their rigidity, monuments may after a while fail to represent the changing perception of the events they are supposed to commemorate and of the people responsible for such acts of commemoration.

A monument or a monumental space strengthens the sense of communities by offering its members an image of their membership. Monuments create social spaces by evoking feelings of identity and belonging. City halls or cathedrals can be monuments which, apart from their aesthetic value, make the citizens feel 'at home'. Culture, of course, does not only consist of works of art, i.e. books, paintings, buildings, music etc.; it also comprises everyday customs, rituals, ceremonies and other practices that are meaningful in a community. Just like tangible monuments, such communal practices help the members of a community to create a sense of identity because it is through these practices that people articulate their affiliation. Attending a national celebration or a local festival defines and confirms the social ties that connect people to a specific community. The monumental also erases traces of violence and death that are inherent to social practices; it often survives violence, natural or human, and therefore offers a space that radiates power and resistance.

However, as 9/11 has reminded us, the hope of an eternal existence which monuments project is precarious. Events may alter our sense of

security and well-being as well as our sense of space and time. In the media- and technology-saturated world we live in, a world which cultivates the illusion that we can participate in any event worldwide (provided we have internet access), and where media events may themselves acquire monumental status, this is an important dimension to consider. What are the dynamics caused by the transmission of events through the media? How can the brief and fleeting moment produce the monumental? Why do certain events have the power to change our perception of the world?

These are the issues pursued in this collection of essays which seeks to define the processes by which monuments – in the widest sense of the word – are created, preserved, forgotten, destroyed and even reconstructed. Taking different scholarly approaches to a range of materials including literature from different periods and cultures, architecture, urban geography, photography, and popular culture, this multiperspectival and interdisciplinary collection explores the tension sketched by its title. In so doing, it reveals some of the possibilities and limits of trying to come to terms with a phenomenon we rarely try to explain because we take its manifestations for granted.

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The first section of this collection, *exegi monumentum*, looks at examples of writers who, at different times and in different cultural contexts, have tried to claim cultural significance in their quest for transcendence, to initiate, as it were, a canonization process from the moment of writing. *Andrew Hui* begins by exploring the origins of the word ‘monument’, which refers to both a tomb and a text in classical Latin and Greek texts. This double meaning plays a central role in the traditional topos of the competition between literature and the visual arts by which poets establish the superiority of textual over material monuments in the battle against time. Hui’s review of different versions of this claim through classical literature of the East and West reveals the spectre of decay which paradoxically haunts so many declarations of textual imperishability and concomitant hope of personal fame. *Aleida Assmann* is concerned with much later texts (dating from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century), which were however strongly influenced by the Ovidian and Horatian concepts of textual immortality discussed by Hui. Her essay traces canonization processes from their creative beginnings to their establishment ranging from the theme of male ambition for literary fame in the writings of Milton and his contemporaries to twentieth-century attempts of female and black writers to disturb such exclusive monumentalizing rhetoric in order to

fight their own way into cultural memory. Péter Dávidházi's discussion of Jonathan Swift's self-composed epitaph again focuses on a text that exploits the double meaning of *monumentum*, tomb and text. By contextualizing the epitaph with classical and biblical traditions as well as with Swift's own eighteenth-century English tradition, Dávidházi illustrates one man's attempt to establish his relation to God and his role in history or, to speak in spatial terms, to reach beyond his grave in St Patrick's Cathedral. In the last essay of this section, *Patrick Vincent* presents two very different Romantic responses to post-Napoleonic reality. In *Childe Harold*, Byron seeks to preserve history's revolutionary force by reifying it into a self-contained "fearful monument" that will immortalize him as a Bonaparte-like poet. By way of contrast, Wordsworth's *Memorials* offer a more critical reading of the Continent's monuments, which is inflected by an acute awareness of historical loss and contingency. Wordsworth focuses on the "living moments" of the present, which he seeks to express in a communal rather than individual voice. Unlike the Latin authors discussed in the first essay, these two poets struggle with the material uncertainty of the sign in the face of the mutability of history.

The second section, *questioning canon politics*, focuses on the reception politics of the present, with canonization processes firmly established. *Ann Thompson's* contribution turns to the text T.S. Eliot has called the "Mona Lisa of English literature" to explain the rationale of the controversial new Arden *Hamlet*, which she co-edited with Neil Taylor in 2006. Rather than constructing an authorial master-text, it offers the three earliest extant versions of the play separately. Thompson discusses the critical and partly fierce reactions which this 'act of heresy' provoked among many Shakespeare scholars and reflects on the importance of stable texts for the literary canon despite the increasing focus on performance and its prominent role in the genesis of dramatic texts. *Lily Saint* looks at literary production and canon formation in a globalized market where geographical and cultural affiliations are subject to negotiations and market demands. She questions J.M. Coetzee's endeavours to align his work with the mainstream literary establishment and become part of the Western canon. According to Saint, such endeavours offer a prime example of how allegiances with Western literary traditions underscore the ongoing centrality of global capital in postcolonial canonization processes: Successful postcolonial novels use depoliticized local flavours to stimulate the palate of Western consumers agreeably, without embroiling them in local conflicts. With *Lizbeth Fuisz's* essay, the emphasis shifts to the reception of literary works. She analyzes an educational programme which the Bush Administration directed at schoolchildren from the age of 5 to 17 to the proclaimed end of combating a supposed lack of knowledge of U.S. history and culture. The programme

offers lists of set books with interpretive keys, which construct a literary canon and domesticate it with the aim of forming model citizens endowed with American key virtues. In its aestheticized ethnic diversity, this canon offers a form of multiculturalism that avoids conflict while ostensibly celebrating American diversity.

The essays in *negotiating the past – imagining the future*, focus on trauma and on the question how traumatic events can be overcome and remembered at the same time. Memorial practices play a vital part in the construction of national identity, and the contributions address relevant phenomena from the Ukraine to Beirut and to the United States of America. *Ihor Junyk* considers street signs and cafés as well as private interiors in post-Soviet L'viv (Western Ukraine), which show features that hark back to the Austro-Hungarian empire. He interprets this phenomenon as an instance of Habsburg Nostalgia with the function of negotiating trauma and constructing identity. Yet according to Junyk, the phenomenon calls for a more complex model of nostalgia than those readily at hand. Rather than reifying history by insisting on the continuity of past and present, this instance of nostalgia is fundamentally antimonumental and playful in its relationship with history. In the second essay, *Christoph Lindner* discusses the earthwork project planned to commemorate the Twin Towers and the victims of 9/11, which includes plans for a new public parkland emerging from the dead space of Fresh Kills landfill, the world's largest domestic waste dump. By invoking a vision of the New York skyline as described by Michel de Certeau and Jean Baudrillard as well as many New York artists, writers and filmmakers, the project is devised simultaneously to conceal and to reveal the mutability of the urban landscape. With the construction of the earthwork monument, the Twin Towers will acquire an undead afterlife. *Benjamin Morris* focuses on another major traumatic site on the North American continent: He reviews the wide variety of memorial practices emerging in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Ranging from official monuments through improvised memorials by returning residents to the transcendent, intangible memorials of jazz funeral performances, all these forms of memorializing share fundamental problems of semantic stability and clarity. Morris suggests that old ways of remembering and performing collective memories of trauma are no longer adequate, nor are they marketable across geographical and cultural boundaries as the memorial design corporations may claim. The last essay in this section turns to the Middle East: *Nour Dados* explores the processes involved in ascribing meaning to contested sites of cultural memory by examining textual and aesthetic practices that aim to represent Beirut's "Martyrs' Square." More than fifteen years after the official cessation of hostilities marking the end of the civil war, the square (named for the

leaders of the independence movement executed there) continues to be a place with contested meanings in a continuous process of re-inscription. Dados locates and analyzes the processes through which this monument is inscribed with national significance in the movement between history and memory.

The concluding section of our collection, *reterritorialization*, shifts the focus from serious and playful commemorations of traumatic events to delimitation and transgression of territories. *Peter Burleigh's* contribution discusses photography, the technology that so essentially captures the transformation of moment into monument. He adopts Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "reterritorialization" to understand how photography rearticulates appropriated moments and spaces in a new type of territory: the flat image. This transformation is acted out in differing ways by different photographers, including Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," the uniformity of time in Bernd and Hilla Brecher's work and the way in which Wolfgang Tillmans turns the everyday into a precious moment and thus makes the personal monumental. As discussed by *Nicola Glaubitz*, the work of the American underground comic artist Robert Crumb offers an interesting example of building cultural memory in the field of popular culture. Crumb's concern with defining his artistic identity puts him in line with the more traditional aspirations to fame discussed earlier in this book. He is also eager to maintain his independence from the institutionalized world of art and its canonization processes. Glaubitz argues that the distinction between popular culture and established art market often proves quite rigid, with the latter insisting on privileged access. The essay which concludes this book widens the focus to include issues at stake in the entire collection. *David Morley* looks into transformation processes such as globalization and the rise of new technologies and considers the emerging forms of canonization within the academic disciplines which debate these issues. He explores the ways in which these transformations have been reflected in the consolidation processes (within both media and cultural studies) as a particular set of orthodoxies that have already come to define our understanding of these changes. Drawing on the concept of the 'technological sublime', Morley questions the notion of 'newness' with regard to the so-called new media theory and other areas of culture, and shows how such notions inscribe old inequalities in new guises.