

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2018 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857551654, DOI 10.7413/18258630035

MONUMENT

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(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Monumento*; Fr. *Monument*; Germ. *Denkmal*; Span. *Monumento*. In the purely etymological sense of the term, a monument is an object that has the function of reminding the community it addresses of something important, something that is not to be forgotten. However, in the ordinary use of modern language, the concept acquired a far more limited, though implicit, extension, so that when we speak of a monument, we usually mean a work of sculpture or architecture, of imposing size and appearance, placed in a public space, intentionally endowed with a declared commemorative or votive character.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the attempt to make the delimitation of the concept both less “elitist” and more rigorously normative risks making the very application of the concept problematic in principle, precisely because the concept turns out to be too extensively inclusive – as it is the case with legal definitions produced in the context of modern heritage protection legislations (Lipps 1993, Debray 1999a, Melot 1999). If a monument can be any object, material or immaterial, artificial or even natural (for example a historical landscape, the Marathon plain or the like), which is of historical or cultural interest, then it is difficult to establish what *is not* a monument.

MONUMENTS AS INSTRUMENTS

The interest in the study and conservation of monuments has acquired considerable importance in conjunction with the achievements of the philological disciplines of history and archeology, at least since the end of the 19th century. In this positivist perspective, the notion of monument has been closely connected to a conceptual constellation in which the instrumental value prevails for the specific purposes of historical research. Already Droysen (1868: 14; 1943: 50ff.) defined monuments, under the heading of “heuristics”, as a combination of what he called “remains” (*Überreste*) and “sources” (*Quellen*), namely the material of historical work. But even more recently, the notion of monument has tended to be assimilated by a sort of documentary inflation within an “economy of traces” (Merzeau 1999: 48). As Paul Ricoeur has

pointed out in his extensive work on memory and history (1988, 2004), the role of monuments is best explained in relation to the coordinated notions of trace, testimony, and clue, that is as documentary instruments.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between monument and document has often been conceived in terms of reversibility and even identity. In the well-known account of Panofsky (1955), the document is an auxiliary means, or a "secondary material", of which the historian makes use for the study of his object of investigation, the monument, or the "primary material". But for a different historian, that same secondary material can become primary, and thus, as Panofsky observed, "everyone's 'monuments' are everyone else's 'documents', and vice versa" (1955: 10). Starting from a different viewpoint, but always against the background of a similar instrumental interpretation, Jacques Le Goff has also come to the conclusion that every "document is a monument" (1978: 46), since, from the standpoint of historical criticism, the documents are no less "construed" and ideologically conditioned in conveying a certain representation of historical reality. Whether the reason is disciplinary reversibility or the need for ideological demystification, the equation between document and monument nevertheless reduces the latter to a purely functional dimension. Therefore, if it is true that with the modern "patrimonial inflation" (Heinich 2009: 15) and the advent of the "patrimonial religion of the West", as Régis Debray wrote (1999a: 29), "in the night of the laws of protection, everything can become a monument", it is no less true that even the creed of a documentary "religion" of history, "its superstitious esteem" and "its veneration of the trace" (Nora 1989: 13) produce the same consequences.

THE RISE OF THE AN-AESTHETIC MONUMENT

Just to escape from the darkness of such a Hegelian night, or to limit an endless expansion (Sauerländer 1975), Debray (1999a) proposed to rearticulate the category of monument subdividing it into three sub-categories, three distinct yet connected ideal types: the "monument-message", the "monument-form", the "monument-trace". The first one, the closest to the common-sense meaning of the term, addresses the "civic *morality* of the *participant*" (1999a: 30), it does not necessarily have an artistic or antiquity value, but rather a cultural meaning to be intentionally handed down to posterity. The second type, on the other hand, is constituted by "the aesthetic *pleasure* of the *observer*" (1999a: 30), it is an "architectural object [...] that stands out by its intrinsic aesthetic or decorative qualities, regardless of its utilitarian functions and its witness value" (1999a: 31). The third type, finally, is directed rather to the historical *interest* or curiosity of the *visitor*, "it is a document without ethical or aesthetic motivation" (1999a: 31), devoid of monumental intentionality, but linked to a place, an environment, an age or a tradition. Examples of this third type could be a restaurant, a street, the home of a famous historical figure or the like.

Debray's proposal has the merit of taking into account the essentially public dimension of the monument and the various regimes of fruition through which it refers to its ideal audience. However, some aspects remain less convincing or insufficiently qualified. In fact, what excludes that "the intrinsic, aesthetic or decorative qualities" of any object can appear as a "monument-form" to some observer? Do a painted portrait, a homily or a funeral eulogy count as monuments-messages in the same way as a cenotaph? And

again, what should limit an indiscriminate application of the monument-trace status, as it is just the case with the legal definitions that Debray rightly criticizes? As a matter of fact, the examples suggested by Debray presuppose, although tacitly, an exemplary range of “focal” cases (in the sense the psychologist Eleanor Rosch gave the term) which privileges practically the tradition of architecture, large-scale commemorative sculpture and city planning. However, the properties that actually define such a focal scope are not explicit, perhaps because they are considered to be too normatively restrictive. But if even the “Biscuiterie Pernot” in Dijon can be a monument, it is no longer clear what the criterion for delimiting pure “historical interest” is.

The real problem, once more, is the intersection and the tension between aesthetic value and historical value. As such, the problem was already perfectly clear in the famous and still much discussed study by Alois Riegl (1982), one of the first modern and systematic treatment of the topic. According to the relativistic (or historicistic) aesthetics, which Riegl considered an expression of modern culture, the “art-value” (*Kunstwert*) of a monument depends on contemporary taste and therefore ceases to be a “commemorative value” (*Erinnerungswert*) and “becomes a contemporary value instead” (Riegl 1982: 22), but precisely for this reason such an art-value “will have to be excluded from the notion of the monument itself” (Riegl 1982: 23). Indeed, for Riegl, in accordance with the results of modern art historical research, “one may no longer speak of ‘artistic historical monuments’, but only of ‘historical monuments’” (Riegl 1982: 22). More precisely, “intentional monuments” fall within the broader class of involuntary historical monuments, and both types are inscribed in the even more comprehensive group of monuments that have commemorative value or, better, “age-value” (*Alterswert*). But, in fact, the latter category “embraces every artifact without regard to its original significance and purpose, as long as it reveals the passage of a considerable period of time” (Riegl 1982: 24). Thus, the neutralization of the distinctive aesthetic presence and salience of the monument is accomplished. In order for an object to be considered as a monument it is sufficient for it to show the signs of time.

Such a conclusion has been generally received as a groundbreaking achievement (Choay 1992, Scarrocchia 1995). However, apart from the latent contradiction that leads Riegl to exclude the art-value, as an allegedly modern one, on the basis of an equally modern aesthetic conception, it is still unclear how historical value can actually work as a value, for in the all-encompassing horizon of history there cannot be objects that are more “historical” than others. Of course, there may be objects that are factually more ancient than others, but in order to establish if these are also more significant, expressive or important, we must rely on values other than those of pure historicity, which remains just like a starless night that embraces everything without distinction.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

M. Di Monte, *Monument*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/Monument.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630035.

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M. Di Monte, *Monument*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 1, Milano, Mimesis, 2018.