

REVIEW/EVALUATION

***What is to Remember: Construction of Cultural Memory at the Ravensbrück Memorial* by Šárka Kadlecová**

a. Importance of the Dissertation for the Field of Ethnology

The thesis sets out to investigate the construction of the cultural memory at the Ravensbrück Memorial, in order to reveal the dominant discourses manifest in the exhibitions. While museum anthropology, and visual anthropology have become well-established fields by now, as are ethnographic approaches to both exhibition making and critique, the author – while citing a limited number of references in the field – does not really engage with this literature. Neither theoretically – in the sense of actually engaging with literature, and utilizing it in her own argument, rather than merely uncritically citing it – nor methodologically. Instead, the author uses the methods of discourse and visual analysis (of a very limited set of data!), accompanied by a couple of interviews. The thesis is thus more of a discourse analysis, or rather a comparative review of two exhibitions at the Ravensbrück Memorial. In this sense, the thesis does not in any way advance the discipline of ethnology/anthropology. Moreover, while the thesis proclaims a desire to understand cultural memory, there is very little analysis of it per se. The only argument present, is the author identifying three discourses that run through the exhibitions: the discourse of nationalism, the discourse of individualism and the discourse of the struggle for recognition. This is neither very surprising, nor particularly innovative – but most problematically, the argument and analysis is extremely superficial. Again, as the author writes repeatedly, “The research questions concerned four areas – the narrative about the past as particular or universal, the representation of various identities and their experience, the construction of suffering and agency in the memory work. The discourses identified were the following: the discourse of nationalism, the discourse of individualism, or else the discourse of multiple perspectives, and the discourse of the struggle for recognition.” However, none of these points are sufficiently developed or analyzed. Across the whole text, we are just given superficial snippets. Nationalism, for instance, is here defined in the most primitive way: “by the discourse of nationalism, I simply refer to the type of thinking in which the nation is central, however problematic the definitions of both terms are” (p. 59). Author’s relation to academic literature is also deeply problematic. The first half of the thesis reads like an endless stream of citations (largely from a very limited number of sources), where the author takes every cited statement at face value. There is a complete absence of critical distance. Cultural memory, for instance, is not something that she aims to investigate, but something that is simply defined beforehand through an assortment of citations from other’s work. The author does not aim to contribute theoretically to existing literature, hence, we are left with an extremely superficial discourse analysis of exhibition materials and pictures taken during six visits, and a few interviews. The material analyzed is not even sufficient for a master thesis. There is no theoretical contribution to the field. *The thesis cites only 43 references on its 125 pages (5 more than the minimum requirement - and that too, only due to extensive repetition, we read almost identical sentences over and over) – which is less than most master theses I have ever evaluated; it is even difficult to consider this submission seriously for a PhD degree. The overall academic contribution to the field is close to nil.*

b. On Methodology

As mentioned earlier, the amount of data collected is very limited, both in amount and scope – normally, this amount would be appropriate for an exhibition review or a not very extensive article. This is certainly *insufficient* for a PhD thesis. One would expect ethnographic fieldwork to be conducted with the visitors, and within the exhibition space – no less because cultural memory is not simply imposed by the memorial and by curatorial choices, but emerges in the meeting with the visitors; more detailed data collection with the curators; a further comparative cases – one

memorial site is hardly enough. Moreover, there is no solid contextual framing for the cases – cultural, political, socio-economic context; no overall discussion of politics of memory in Germany pertaining to the Nazi era and so on. There is more the thesis ignores than it engages with.

c. Research Results

As stated above, the research results are questionable, and are reduced to identification of three discourses that run through two exhibitions. There is no sustained cultural analysis, no original argument, no theoretical contribution.

d. Language and Organization of the Thesis

While the organization of the thesis is sensible, no chapter has a conclusion or for that matter a clear argument. Except for chapter 5, all chapters are very short and underdeveloped, not to mention that the content is incredibly repetitive and it reads like the author was merely trying to repeat the same few paragraphs to fill the pages with words. The English is not properly copy-edited, there is numerous grammatical mistakes, and no less many words are used completely nonsensically. E.g. One does not “decompose” an exhibition, but dismantle; artifacts are exhibited, not “exposed” and one could go on. Some sentences make little factual sense and leave the reader wondering if the author actually knows what she is writing.

e. Recommendation

The goal of a PhD thesis is to produce *original research*, and a *significant contribution to theory*, while pushing the field forward. Here, the author fails in all respects. The thesis relies on endless quotations, without any theoretical or critical contribution of the author, it merely summarizes – and that too insufficiently – existing literature (ignoring a significant amount of relevant literature), taking statements for granted and at a face value, mixing and matching theories uncritically. The thesis is submitted for a PhD degree in ethnology and yet, there is nothing in the method or results that would push the field of ethnology forward. The thesis cannot be defended in its current form. Recommendation: **reject**.



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