

Atmospheres, Ghosts and Shells to Reform our Memorial Cultures

Authors : Tomas Macsotay

Abstract : If monument removal and monument effacement may call to mind a Nietzschean proposal for vitalist disregard of conventional morality, it remains the case that it is often only by a willingness to go “beyond good and evil” in inherited monument politics that truthful, be it unexpected aspects of our co-existence with monuments can finally start to rise into fuller consciousness. A series of urgent questions press themselves in the panorama created by the affirmative idea that we can, as a community, make crucial decisions with regard to monumental preservation or discontinuation. Memorials are not the core concern for decolonial and racial dignity movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM), which have repeatedly shown they regard these actions as a welcome, albeit complementary, part of a reckoning with a past of racial violence and injustice, slavery, and colonial subaltern existence. As such, the iconoclastic issue of “rights and prohibitions of images” only tangentially touches on a cultural movement that seems rather question dominant ideas of history, pertinence, and the long life of the class, gender, and racial conflict through ossified memorial cultures. In the recent monument insurrection, we face a rare case of a new negotiation of rights of existence for this particular tract of material culture. This engenders a debate on how and why we accord rights to objects in public dominion — indeed, how such rights impinge upon the rights of subjects who inhabit the public sphere. Incidentally, the possibility of taking away from monuments such imagined or adjoined rights has made it possible to tease open a sphere of emotionality that could not be expressed in patrimonial thinking: the reality of atmospheres as settings, often dependent on pseudo-objects and half-conscious situations, that situate individuals involuntarily in a pathic aesthetics. In this way, the unique moment we now witness — full of the possibility of going “beyond good and evil” of monument preservation — starts to look more like a moment of involuntary awakening: an awakening to the encrypted gaze of the monument and the enigma that the same monument or memorial site can carry day-to-day habits of life for some bystanders, while racialized and disenfranchised communities experience discomfort and erosion of subjective life in the same sites.

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