Issue 12:
Digital Mnemonics –
Towards a New Research Agenda
in Slavonic Studies

EDITORIAL

The issue was guest-edited by Alexander Etkind (European University Institute, Florence) and Dirk Uffelmann (University of Passau) in collaboration with the Digital Icons editorial team who prepared the book review section of the issue.

The special issue aims to explore how cultural memory – a subject of much productive research in recent decades – is going online. Transposing Jay Winter's famous concept, the World Wide Web features a 'memory boom online'. These essays focus on online memory in several Slavonic languages – Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian – which, taken together, constitute a large part of the rapidly developing internet of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. Though politically, various parts of this vast area are moving increasingly farther away from each other culturally, mnemonically and especially electronically, they are all interconnected. In the virtual space of the internet, different Slavonic areas and cultures, from Siberia to the Balkans, interact more profoundly than they do in the 'real world' of economics and politics. Different Slavonic countries, as well as various communities within these countries, are engaged in 'memory wars', which debate, from different or even antagonistic perspectives, such historical subjects as memories of the two world wars, the socialist past, the Soviet terror and the post-socialist ordeals.

A growing body of research literature has been addressing post-socialist memory wars. Our double purpose is to investigate the current state of Slavonic online memories and to establish a new methodology of internet research that could be applied to this part of the virtual world and, possibly, to its other parts as well. We call this emerging methodology 'digital mnemonics'. In pursuit of these two goals, we organised the Spring School *Digital Mnemonics in Slavonic Studies* (March 2013), which was generously supported by the Volkswagen Foundation. Envisaging new standards for the study of digital memory and the communication genres of the World Wide Web, we combine the traditional, interpretative

methods of the humanities, such as narrative and genre analysis, with the quantitative approaches that are based on computer linguistics and internet statistics, including a big data approach. Relying on the diverse knowledge of its participants, the Spring School gained insights into the digital representations and political conflicts of cultural memories in East Central Europe and Russia.

The internet has produced new, historically unprecedented methods of representing human subjectivity. Memory is part of this great game. Visual, verbal, musical, positional and other aspects of these methods emulate and document the complexity of the modern life-world. The new technical methods of representing data – transmodal platforms such as *Facebook* or *YouTube*, visual networks such as *Instagram*, blog systems such as *Twitter* and *LiveJournal* and myriad specialised technologies compete in representing modern subjectivity in its rich and minute details. These digital methods change the pace and complexity of communication; they also change the depth and breadth of memory.

We distinguish between three types of 'memory formations': *sites of memory*, *memory events* and *memory models*. Since Pierre Nora's large-scale study of French memory, it has become common practice to analyse public memory via *sites of memory* – monuments, memorials and museums. Yet digital technologies have largely de-territorialised cultural memory. Modern memory is generally structured by time rather than space. Its temporal units are *memory events*, which we define as acts of revisiting the past that create ruptures with its established cultural meanings. Memory events unfold in many cultural genres: from funerals to historical debates, from museum openings to court proceedings, from the erection or destruction of a monument to the launch of a website. These events are simultaneously acts and products of memory. They have their authors and agents – initiators and enthusiasts of memory – who lead the production of these collective events in ways that are not much different from those that film directors use to make films.

Memory also has its promoters, as surely as it has its censors and foes. As Dirk Uffelmann illustrates in his essay, cultural memory shapes interdependent constellations with various cultural genres, which retain memories of their own and therefore are concurrently able to express and produce important artistic, cultural and political memories. Unfolding in various genres and often combining them, memory events are secondary to the historical events that they interpret, usually taking place years or even decades later. Sometimes, a memory event attains the significance of a historical event, therefore blurring the distinction between the two. But there are important differences: historical events tend to be singular, while memory events rarely are. Memory events tend to repeat themselves in new, creative, but recognizable forms, which circulate in cultural space and reverberate in time.

Memory is always about complex, dynamic interrelations between the past and the present. If memory events happen in the present and change public understanding of the historical past, their counterpart is *memory models*, which borrow ideas, stories and images from the past and apply them to the political present. In post-socialist Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, the political present has often been fluid, uncertain and possibly dangerous. It is easier and clearer, sometimes even more comfortable, to interpret new historical events by analogy with a chosen past, or even with its obsessive repetition. There are many examples of how this works. The Russians who were arrested for their participation in the protest rallies

of 2012 compared their persecution to Stalinist terror, and the hash-tag, 'remember 1937' [#помни37], during these arrests became one of the most popular hash-tags on *Twitter* worldwide.

Memory events and memory models have been used by all participants in revolutionary transformations, friends and foes alike. During the Ukrainian revolution of 2013-2014, its Russian enemies consistently called the Ukrainian activists 'the Banderists', as if they were instructed by the Ukrainian nationalist activist Stepan Bandera, who had died many decades earlier. The use and abuse of this memory model has been the subject of a sophisticated quantitative study by Rolf Fredheim, Gernot Howanitz and Mykola Makhortykh. This research appears highly relevant now that the Ukrainian revolution has been largely accomplished (even though the study was designed and completed well before the Russian counter-revolutionaries consistently misinterpreted the revolutionary events on Maidan Square in Kyiv in terms of their chosen 'Banderist' memory model).

The current deterioration of political relations between the Western world and Russia has been characterised as 'The New Cold War', the subject of Elizaveta Gaufman and Katarzyna Walasek's essay in this cluster. After the 2010 crash of the Polish presidential airplane on its way to mourn the victims of the Katyn massacre, some mourners talked about 'Katyn 2'. In another effort to conceptualise and operationalise this new area of studies, Marijeta Božović, Bogdan Trifunović and Aleksandar Bošković present here a study of memory models that the arrest of Ratko Mladić actualised online in various cultural genres of the internet, from analytical blogs to video-clips and satirical cartoons. Finally, in the essay by Hanna Stähle and Mariëlle Wijermars on the blog by the Russian political activist Aleksei Naval'nyi, we see an all-important political dilemma of memory unfolding into a complex, methodologically ground-breaking study: are memory models true and relevant for political activism in an oppressive society, or does the excessive use of the past distract the political protest from its current, necessarily present-ist objectives?

As these and many other examples demonstrate, truthfulness, defined here as historical validity, is just one of the criteria that operate within the sphere of memory. A memory formation may be powerful though untrue; it may be true and irrelevant; or true and relevant, but still ignored because of its repetitiveness. Both memory events and memory models operate within relevant communities and change how these communities remember, imagine and talk about the past. They are performative acts, and can be understood in the light of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition: their performative quality is directed towards designing a community's past.

The impact of a memory formation on a community depends on its *truth claims* – on whether the community perceives it as generating a true account of the past; on its *originality claims* – on whether the community perceives it as new and different from the accepted version of the past; and on its *relevance claims* – on whether the community perceives the changing vision of the past as central to its identity. Complex relations that need more research and theorizing connect these three components – truth, originality and relevance – though their synergies are usually evident. While relevance derives from the perceived truth and originality, we know how many documents in historical archives are authentic but irrelevant. In many uncertain cases, relevance and originality dictate questions about truth. Though

cultural memory can sometimes be activated by texts that do not claim truth, such as fictional novels or films, public judgment on historical truth largely defines the reception of these texts, particularly when they are perceived as game-changing and identity-relevant.

Researching this new, broad and challenging subject of scholarship, the participants of the Spring School *Digital Mnemonics in Slavonic Studies* formed cross-cultural, multidisciplinary groups which defined their thematic focuses. They explored these themes across such digital genres as social networks (e.g. *Facebook*), blogs (e.g. *LiveJournal*), video hosting services (e.g. *YouTube*), news services (online-newspapers, TV-channels, etc.), as well as bottom-up (NGO) and top-down (governmental) sites. Each team tested quantitative methods in application to the chosen memory site, memory event, or memory model. Above all, we encouraged the participants to initiate cooperation beyond national or disciplinary borders at a very early stage of their research. Digital representations of the turning points of 20th century history such as the Holodomor in Ukraine, Katyn in Poland, or the Cold War in Russia, served as the primary subjects of these studies. This pedagogical approach allowed the participants to formulate, prove or disprove their own innovative hypotheses, which address developments, asymmetries and disruptions in cultural representations of the past on the World Wide Web. In addition, the participants' work allowed them to explore new vistas of qualitative and quantitative analysis of digital memory. The Spring School acquainted young academics with advanced knowledge important for the further development of research on digital memory cultures – a promising and rapidly developing field of academic interest.

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