Visualization of Death in Armenian Culture

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The article capitalizes on the nature of certain sociological and cognitive concepts as death and memory.

Death is a phase of transition involving loss and adjustment and the aim of the article is to examine the ways in which memory comes into play as an important aspect of the process of dying, mourning and grief.

The research work is comprised of four logical parts. In the first section of the paper our point of departure is an extended discussion of memory making. Material culture mediates our relationship with death and the dead; objects, texts, images and practices as well as places and spaces call to mind or are made to remind us of the deaths of others and of our own mortality.

In the second part of the work special emphasis is laid on the analysis of the corpse as memory "object". We begin by considering the significance of the visual in the shaping of memory and then move on to the analysis of the linkage of death and memory through the body and its imaging. Examining the visual aspects of memory in this context, we acknowledge the complex relations between immediate visual experience in lived social spaces, and the production of visual representations, which link the tangible present to other (past and future), remembered or imagined bodies, times and spaces. We consider the body itself as something which is devoid of living form but can be reanimated as a material of memory through death.

Section three deals with photographic images. In the last part writings which are dedicated to the public memories of "past lives" are studied.

Memory Making

"What is memory for?" The easiest and spontaneously given answer to this question is that "memory is for storing information about the past", "memory helps us preserve past events", (Boyard, Wertshch 2009:3).

Human memory is fragile and finite. We mentally store the events of life as memories. However, memories are easily forgotten, and the retrieval of memories through the acts of recall is inexact and faulty. That is why, human societies have created a series of devices for storing memory in extrabodily form. These devices include marble funerary monuments and stone tablets, and, at a later stage, drawings, photographs, phonographs, videos and other recording technologies. Each of these offers an increasing capacity for the storage of memory.

First of all we would like to elucidate the relationship between the conceptions of memory and materiality of the social domains. Here we trace connections between the crises of death and the formation of memory, the interplay of loss and recovery, the ways

in which memories operate to render present that which is absent, we find concepts of death and memory interwoven intimately.

It is at the time of death that embodied persons disappear from view; and, consequently, their personal relationships with others come under threat. Indeed, in contemporary contexts, the threat of death is very much bound up with the possibility of oblivion. As it is, individuals or certain groups of people may believe that there is no independent existence after death; they may also face the possibility of social **e**rasure and the annihilation of identities that they have lived out.

In some cases effigies are used as a factual material which represents the past life of the deceased and creates their future social reputation. As the natural body decays, the ritualized monumental body prevents the social body from being overwhelmed by a similar fate. The monumental body is to be set up at the place of burial to mark its site and is designed to stand forever as a replacement for the social body. As a subsidiary function, it also acts as a reminder of the living form of the natural body (Llewellyn, 1991:101).

There is no doubt that while the effigy masks the decaying natural body which will inevitably disappear, it also creates a stable social body that is assured continuity. Hence, the material, design, symbolic features, inscriptions and physical location of monuments – all these work to reinforce this continuity. Let us take, for example, the pagodas in the Shaolin Temple*,* where abbots of the temple were buried since the Tang Dynasty (618 907 AD). Nearly 250 stone and brick pagodas of various sizes and shapes, with carvings and inscriptions have been found. It should be noted here that the height as well as the size of the monument (in relation to other monuments) is also taken as an indication of social status. The higher the pagoda, the higher the rank of the departed was.

The same traditions can be traced in Armenian culture in the construction of tombs, the latter serving as a means of retaining the social presence of the dead person with the present. The function of tombs is commemoration of persons who do not exist materially and, at the same time, visual demonstration of the social and political ranks of the deceased. For people of higher rank – the ruling or intellectual elite, the rich, etc. – tombs convey a sense of permanence, provide a continuity of authority and social position. That is why the tombs of these persons are made of precious material, with special designs and structures. On the other hand, the graves of wretched and lonely people are very often inconspicuous.

Thus we can agree with the statement that ‘‘if memory and memories are grasped through sets of associations with material structures and objects, this is suggestive of broader social and cultural processes that link persons or subjects with material domains. The materials of memory, whether in the form of texts, visual images, objects or bodies, hinge upon and acquire their significance through conceptual linkages between personhood and the material world. If personhood and social identity are fashioned through the body and the material objects with which this body is associated, then it is through that body and these objects (either directly or via associations with further bodies and objects) that the deceased are kept within memory” (Hallam, Hockey 2001:36).

The Corpse as Memory "Object"

The capacity of the corpse to trigger and shape the memories of the living depends upon the ways in which death is conceptualized – continuity, rebirth, or the absolute end of life. In Armenian culture, for instance, the prevailing Christian notion about death is the release of the spiritual from the material body. This interpretation enables the members of the community to treat the corpse as a material thing which fades away in contrast to the continuity of the spirit which lives on. The corpse is buried, while the social presence of the body can be maintained via a stone or a marble funerary monument. It is important to point out that Armenians made huge cross-stones for this purpose. The latter were carved after the Armenians had adopted Christianity in 301, thus becoming the first Christian nation in the world. Cross-stones were placed as gravestones in holy places, in graveyards, near the roads and sometimes on hills and cliffs. Ancient Armenian graveyards are rich in these magnificent creations of human mind and skill. The medieval cemetery in Noratus village is a vivid example of visual and verbal commemoration of the dead: 900 cross-stones, some of which are about 1.5 m tall.

The use of cross-stones as well as sculptures as a means of representing the earthly life of the deceased and creating their future social reputation continued in the modern period. Very often the human body sculpted posthumously indicates an ongoing relationship with the dead. While the corpse is allowed to recede and return to dust after death, the stone or marble monument marks a death and, simultaneously, refers back to a "life". Thus, when certain visual signs of social class affiliation and status are deployed, for example, by displaying the deceased in sculptured clothing and jewellery, the personal image of the deceased is retained partially. Funerary monuments of this type rest upon a precarious boundary somewhere between the status of a corpse and a socially "living" body.

Not only cross-stones or sculptures but also memorial drinking fountains are used for this purpose in Armenia. These fountains, which are usually placed in streets, yards, parks and other public places, have

various inscriptions and the names of the deceased on them. Their fundamental role is to create and sustain temporal relationships between the living and the dead.

This drinking fountain made of granite has the form of a cut tree with deep roots symbolyzing the social position of the deceased. The head of the family passed away but the roots are deep and the departed will not be forgotten and will live forever in the hearts of his friends and relatives. The form of the tree reinforces the capacity of the drinking fountain to preseve social ties with the dead – here the significance of close family relations is displayed.

The social status of the dead is revealed through the visibility, the forms and media of the material markers.

People probably tend to salvage and redeploy memory directly because after death the material body is perceived as something to be lost or decayed. Our investigation has revealed that in Armenian culture hair has been the most important form of materialized memory. For example, in many villages elderly women keeping their departed mothers' or daughters' hair can be found. Hair is thus positioned as a visual medium infused with special powers of recall, holding in view both particle of deceased persons and spaces dedicated to memory. Not only hair but also combs, hairpins, hairgrips, hair slides and many other personal items are used to connect the body of the deceased with that of the living.

The physical remains of the dead can be regarded not only as a material reminder of the embodied, living person, but as a medium through which the dead might communicate directly with the living. Human material that was regarded as "dead" while the person was living, is thus transformed into a "living" substance at death in the sense that it is reanimated as a possession capable of sustaining the deceased in close proximity to the bereaved (Kwint 1999:9). The physical durability of hair allows it to contrast with the unstable fleshy body. The quality of endurance and the specificity of reference to a particular individual renders hair especially appropriate as a form of memory.

Thus we "keep" and "preserve" our memories almost as though they are objects in a personal museum (Hallam, Hockey 2001:141). We choose when to disclose or display our memories to others, either in the form of sculptures, different objects or photographs.

Body, Death and Memory in Photographs

The photograph has the capacity to preserve or maintain as living periods of time which have passed and people who have died: "to enshrine identity, creating a memorial which pleads for deathlessness and issues a challenge to time – on behalf of someone" (Warner 1995:41). In this context photographs establish particular relations with the body – they do not comprise human flesh as in the case of relics, but they do rely upon physical proximity at the time the photograph was taken. It is this closeness, contact, or the shared physical space of camera and person that gives the photograph the power to evoke sensations of intimacy with the departed.

Photographs are created with a view to the future – they are a means to preserve, in the form of a "transparent" image, the present moment for later contemplation (Edwards

1999:228). Hence the material dimensions of photographs, including their styles of display and positioning in lived environments, inflect the ways in which they act as a form of memory making.

We have observed that in Armenian culture the association of the memorial stone with the departed body is often consolidated with the use of photographs. The photographs tend to be fashioned as framed portraits that are attached to the headstones. However, new technologies have opened up a wide range of designs and nowadays we can find the transfer of photographs directly to the stone. In this case the material of the stone is effectively fused with the living bodily trace of the departed, thus establishing the gravestone as a distinctive physical presence that "lives". The healthy, active and often happy-looking person is brought into the present, obscuring the painful phases of dying and death.

Besides photographs, memorial inscriptions rendered in stone may also become ways of creating a sense of presence and unbroken immediacy to the dead.

Writing after Death

Writings which appear on tombs (probably beginning with the 14th c. BC in Egypt) are meant to be read by someone.

Writing or the construction of a text that outlives the dying, was recognized as a precarious process in that all aspects of the material world were open to decay (Hallam, Hockey 2001:168).

The inscription of words is often very important in establishing relationships between the memory object (e.g. a gravestone) and the subject to be remembered. The text establishes a social and emotional continuum, the prospect of reunion with the deceased and the anticipation of return.

Classically, a gravestone includes some basic information about the deceased, such as his or her name, date and place of birth, and date and place of death. In Armenia the inscribed name is a primary marker of individual personality; it is a means of relating to persons after their death. Mainly the name and surname as well as the dates of birth and death of the deceased can be found on an Armenian gravestone.

However, sometimes we can find brief messages engraved on gravestones, including quotes from religious texts, lines from poems, or verses composed especially for the deceased. The latter generally do not have any literary value. For example, the inscription on one of the tombs reads:

Passer-by bend your proud head
Here rests a handful of space.

The inscriptions often give clues as to how the person died. Our local graveyard has facts such as "tragically killed in a road accident" or "An innocent victim of March 1, 2008", and so on. The latter refers to the developments following the 2008 presidential elections in Armenia, when 8 people died and 200 were injured during the tragic events of March 1.

In most cases the memorial texts indicate some sense of continuity beyond death, that the deceased and the bereaved will meet again, or simply that life goes on or the departed will "live" in our memories, etc. For example, an inscription on a gravestone reads:

Who says I shall die
That's not true, I do not believe
My roots are deep, my dreams are clear
I shall live forever!

It is worth mentioning here that citing the deceased seems to invoke her or his voice and in this way maintain spiritual and social relationships between the living and the dead.

As mentioned above, memorial inscriptions can also be found on cross-stones and drinking fountains. The latter are of particular interest as the words on the fountains are often addressed to the citizens, to someone and to nobody at the same time, to a potential reader. When a person slakes his/her thirst by drinking cold water from the memorial drinking fountain, he/she stands for a while, reads the inscriptions and the name of the departed and says "oghormi kez", which means "May you rest in peace". In this respect the past presence and the present absence are condensed into an object which is located spatially, a memorial drinking fountain. Its materiality feeds memory and the survivors form a sense of the person who is absent.

The discussion of materials presented comes to prove that memories emerge and operate within wider social contexts.

We have focused on materials of memory that are linked to the bodies of the dead and the living in particular ways – as fragments of the body or as photographic traces which are constituted as "living". The

writings after death also tend to connect the bodies of the dying, the dead and the bereaved. We have come to the conclusion that textual forms of memory making are significant aspects of material cultures associated with the process of dying and retaining the social lives of the dead.

Thus having explored the links between death and memory we can assert that memory making which has material dimensions does not only mark death but also signifies social and cultural processes through which lives are remembered and futures are imagined.

Notes:

1. The modern is coming from the Indian , a tomb-like structure where sacred relics could be kept safe and venerated. The architectural structure of the stupa has spread across Asia, taking on many diverse forms as details specific to different regions are incorporated into the overall design.
2. A typical cross-stone (khachkar) is made out of slate of volcanic basalt or tuff. In the center of the cross stone is the symbol of Christ's crucifixion, which is usually resting on the symbol of the sun, or of the wheel of eternity. The cross itself and its surroundings is usually covered by fine patterns, or images of grapes and leaves. It is very typical of Armenian cross-stones to have branches of date-palm symbolizing Christ's glorious resurrection.
3. We also need to note that memorial drinking fountains are often located in places where the inhabitants are familiar with the deceased, e.g. in the yards of the block of flats or in the parks of the districts where the departed lived.

References:

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Մահվան պատկերավորումը հայկական մշակույթում

Սույն հոդվածում քննության է առնվում մահվան, հիշողության և նյութականի կապը հայկական մշակույթում: Մահացած մարդու պատկերը կարող է վերակենդանանալ նրա մահից հետո՝ դառնալով նյութական հիշողություն: Այդ հիշողությունը սովորաբար պահպանվում է կենդանի մարդու բնական մարմինը փոխարինող արձանների, գերեզմանաքարերի, խաչքարերի միջոցով: Հոդվածում անդրադարձ է արվում նաև լուսանկարների հասարակական իմաստավորմանը, ինչպես նաև քննության են առնվում գերեզմանաքարերի վրա արված գրավոր խոսքի նմուշներ, որոնց նպատակն է լեզվի միջոցով հասարակական կապ ստեղծել կյանքից հեռացած անձի և հասարակության միջև: