

Conference Paper

Methodological Issues of Cultural Evaluation in the Context of Political Prosumption

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the search for theoretical and methodological foundations of cultural evaluation as a new area of expert activity. There are two new elements in this study. First, while studying online visual images, a number of artistic methods are identified that can be used as criteria in the analysis and evaluation of extremist content materials. Secondly, the analysis is conducted taking into account the characteristics of the digital environment, which ensures the relevance of these criteria to modern social and cultural reality. The article shows that political prosumption creates favourable conditions for the dissemination of conflict-generating and extremist content. It is possible to counteract this destructive tendency by appealing to universally recognized values, such as the victory in the Great Patriotic War in the context of Russian history. This article suggests that civic identity should be used as the foundation of expert analysis, based on a non-alternative recognition of the heroic role of the Soviet people and rejection of Nazism ideology. In the process, the methods of Nazi ideology propaganda are revealed via examples centering on the destruction of the foundations of civic identity.

Keywords: cultural evaluation, digital space, political prosumption, identity, value system, Nazi symbols, propaganda

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1. Introduction

In this article the authors focus on theoretical and methodological foundation of a rather young and very progressive field of research and practice – cultural evaluation. It isn't a secret that principles and methods of cultural evaluation are still at an initial stage of development and are a subject of thorough discussions. Complications appear starting with formulating definitions for the key notions, determining the subject field, object of analysis and also include challenges of institutionalizing this type of activity. The matter of cultural evaluation limits is also under discussion. Taking into consideration the fact that the subject field of cultural evaluation encompasses the entire diverse world of

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culture, we agree with the statement that manifestations from the symbolic sphere of human activities, collective experience, cultural identity, values, meanings etc. become the objects of expert analysis [1, p. 4]. The unique character of such research is in the impossibility of giving the exact assessment and final interpretations. Besides, it is important to consider heuristic potential of an expert and analytical activity of a specialist in culture who produce new expert knowledge. In this case, relying on established description rules and text analysis of culture doesn't exclude the researcher's own position or interpretation of cultural forms and practices [1, p. 8]. The noted contradiction – a requirement of objectivity and general validity of results vs interpretative nature of knowledge and methods – sets a vector of research: discovering theoretical and methodological foundation of cultural evaluation.

It is difficult to shape theoretical and methodological foundation of cultural evaluation, since modern cultural reality is heterogenous and develops under the influence of different factors. It is also described with various conceptual frameworks: "society of performance", "economics of impressions", "culture of presumption" and others. At the same time, besides many differences, contemporary culture is characterized by trends that can be called universal. Among these are global digitalization that produces new objects and new types of evaluation. According to researchers, digitalization isn't just an opportunity for development and improvement of life quality, it is also a growing danger of computer crimes [2, p. 92]. It is quite common when visual component of the content raises concerns and requires professional expert assessment. For example, web-comics that have been adapted to the special medium of digital environment contain a large amount of verbal and non-verbal information, and they frequently become the object of linguistic research based on different criminal, civil and administrative cases [2, p. 93].

The authors are interested in the graphic and symbolic content of the information environment. Our goal is to set the guidelines for developing methodology of cultural evaluation including analysis criteria as an applied expert examination of cultural phenomena. The novelty of this approach is determined by two aspects: first, while studying online visual images, a number of artistic methods are identified that can be used as criteria in the analysis and evaluation of extremist content materials. Second, the analysis is conducted considering the characteristics of the digital environment, which ensures the relevance of these criteria to modern social and cultural reality.

In the spotlight of our attention there is an emergence of economics and a culture of presumption that erase the typical boundaries between the producer and consumer. The subject of this culture is a prosumer, an active participant in the process of production, who produces "for himself/herself" and actively interacts with like-minded fellows

especially online. Communities that are formed in the process of such communication have a great impact on the identity of its participants. We can say that out of all types of collective identities it is a group identity that dominates the prosumer communities. That said, group identity construction often happens based on the participants' activities and interests and using values and attitudes that go beyond the conventions of legitimacy and eligibility.

This raises a question: is it possible to talk about certain stable content assessment criteria (axiological, morally ethical, ideological, expressing worldview etc.) in regard to visual images, which formally correspond to artistic, aesthetical and stylistic norms? Are there some indicators that can be used during expert analysis when social, ethical and aesthetical norms and boundaries have been conventional and shifted?

The phenomenon of political prosumption deserves special attention in this context. It started off as a variation of media political content (citizen journalism, political blogging, open news, participation of citizens in occupy movements, pirate parties) [3, p. 66]. Citizen journalists – amateur authors, non-professionals in media sphere – become the subjects of prosumption and take part in creating information products and then independently bringing information to mass audience. The principles of political prosumption provide citizens with an opportunity to participate in political process “in accordance with their personal singularities, interests and knowledge” and “to start free communities that focus on specific themes or challenges” [3, p. 72]. Unlike political consumerism, which features a one-way subject of political product, political prosumption implies active participation of citizens in politics and their impact on political process. Political consumerism is often viewed as a really pragmatic and consumeristic attitude towards politics that can be compared to introducing business-like forms and methods into politics and turning political sphere into market-oriented one [4, p. 103]. Nevertheless, in both cases we are dealing with free consumers who are critical of professional politicians and their ideas and who don't have ideological attachments to a certain political party or formulated guidelines in the world of politics, they demonstrate independence in their political sympathies and act individually based on their personal interests and preferences. The cyberspace is a place where they can find a mass of opportunities for political activism: local online groups, actions of protest, flash mobs, discussions etc. S.N. Pshizova notes that “All these forms of political participation are characterized by the absence of stable organization, individual character of their actions and network mobilization. It is exactly due to their particular features that they are very hard to assess” [4, p. 104].

Researchers stress that “prosumer participation can imply actions of citizens that fulfil goals typically implemented by the state” [3, p. 76]. It’s important to mention that acting upon unusual functions is a distinctive feature of prosumption. However, we think that favourable conditions of prosumerist culture that legitimizes diversity of political reflection results can also spread on products with conflict-generating content. The Internet includes different communities that base their assessments of events on the ideology of fascism, antisemitism and others. Despite legal restrictions the practice of constructing group identity on the grounds of neo-Nazism ideology, which is transmitted using the system of visual images, finds its place online. That is the reason, why no hopes should be pinned on hypothetical unity of meanings and values and on spontaneously emerging solidarity. The chances are high that negative manifestations of different kinds of extremism (national, social, political etc.) are to spread. “Political consumption” takes roots in society as a cardinal new form of political activism, and its risks are to be assessed with all gravity.

On what grounds can we lay out criteria for expert analysis that would be relevant to the nature of contemporary cultural production as a form of self-identification, communication with members of “our group” and identification of the “alien members” and what can oppose the negative effects of political prosumption? It is our opinion that overcoming dominating microsocial (group) identity and constructing the right structure of identity is possible on the grounds of higher identity levels – national and cultural, civil, which blend together historical memory with developing the future and providing society with axiological and symbolic solidarity [5].

This kind of information that shapes collective level of identity is provided, for example, by events of the Great Patriotic War. The heroic role of the Soviet people and negative attitude towards the Nazi ideology had conventional nature in the one-sided assessment. A system of art-produced images that embody the military theme in Russian art of the Soviet period points to that. We would like to hope that their system of symbols and signs conserves the meanings and axiological strength till nowadays despite multiple styles and variety of formal techniques of contemporary art. The truth is that today lines between culturally acceptable representative models marking members of “our group” and non-acceptable models that promote ideology of Nazism and discredit victory of Soviet people become blur.

Cultural evaluation supported by legal and juridical base of the Russian Federation, which controls propaganda and public demonstration of Nazi symbols, gained a certain experience in analyzing this sphere. In reality, ideology of Nazism can be used as a potential foundation for building group identity of politically-oriented communities

in time when the unified space of cultural memory disappears and multiple social and cultural ontologies co-exist. Whereby, visual images of such content can boast of versatile techniques: some are aimed at direct propaganda, while others are neatly packed with masked meanings that cannot be identified.

It is worth noting that only those actions that are aimed at open propaganda and visual systems that accompany them have clear signs of incoherence with the required axiological and symbolic norms. Publicly organized actions that feature active participation of Wehrmacht army soldiers, Schutzstaffel members, neo-Nazis, e-games with similar themes etc. are referred to as Nazi actions. The key role in promoting objectivity of Fascist ideology, neo-Nazism, denying the results of Great Patriotic War is published on the websites that are aimed at consumers of political product who don't share fundamental values of civil identity. Let us take a closer look at radical right conservative internet portal *Natsional–Socialistichesky Platsdarm* and website *Narodny Obozrevatel/Völkischer Beobachter. Informationsnyi list russkogo natsional-sotsialista*. Verbally and visually (on the level of artistic and graphic system) their content openly reflected ideological points of political program: starting with the main provisions of national socialist ideology to artistic methods of agitational graphics dating back to the Second World War and including demonstration of Nazi symbols and attributes. Despite the fact that the abovementioned websites are deleted, similar political products promoting conflicts and extremist ideologies continue to surface and construct group identity of online users.

Nevertheless, it is those cases that cannot be qualified as open propaganda of Nazi ideology or demonstration of Nazi symbols that present the biggest challenge for expert analysis. The contents and formally representative aspect of similar artistic systems has its own features that ensure that Nazi meaning of images is transferred on a connotative level. Of all the methods aimed at masking Nazi meanings, we can focus on creating of axiologically and symbolically neutral conditions for demonstrating examples of agitational art of the Third Reich; one-way demonstration of materials that erase the negative content of Nazi images aimed at shaping human faces of its leaders; including Nazi symbols and images into a cardinaly foreign art system that provokes uncertainty of axiological and symbolic contents [7]. In all three cases, the fundamental mechanism that revives propagandistic features of images is their pseudo-neutral demonstration which implies minimization of methods that shape interpretative context. Hence, we have to deal not with direct spread of Nazi ideology but with a disorienting phenomenon that distorts our perceptions and destroys the axiological paradigm of Russian culture.

2. Conclusions

We link the use of such methods to the characteristic features of digital culture that allows to legitimately leave the boundaries of unified space of cultural memory (under the pretense of a search for new artistic forms and images and new group identity) using the mechanism of re-evaluating common culture norms and values. There is no doubt that not any image that includes Nazi symbols worth criminalizing should be criminalized but at the same time we should show due diligence to the risks of political presumption that can become the source of xenophobia, aggression and destructive actions.

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