SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

PORTRAIT AS A "MACHINE OF IMMORTALITY": RECONSTRUCTION OF PERSONALITY IN SOCIAL MEMORY

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-720-8-8

A visual portrait can be considered not only as an artistic genre or a means of reproducing a person's appearance. From a broader anthropological perspective, it can be seen as one of the oldest communicative mechanisms for preserving a person's identity after their physical death. The history of portraiture in the ancient world suggests that human beings sought not only to survive, but also to leave behind an image that would continue to exist in social memory.

As is well known, the first visually reproduced images of human beings appeared much later than the ability to skillfully depict the surrounding world. Cave and rock art demonstrates remarkable accuracy in the representation of animals, while the human face did not become an independent object of depiction for a long time. This suggests that the emergence of the human "self" as a distinct object of cognition was not merely a cultural act but, above all, a prolonged biological process associated with the maturation of human consciousness. Human beings gradually came to depict the world and then to create an alternative, symbolic reality in which individuality acquired its place [1].

In Ancient Egypt, the funerary mask and portrait were connected with the idea that existence could continue after death. It was believed that the human soul, after undergoing certain trials, would attain eternal life if the body were reproduced realistically and accurately. The portrait thus became a kind of "substitute for the body," a material bearer of individuality. At the same time, the Egyptian portrait revealed a fundamental contradiction: it sought realism while also idealizing the image in order to emphasize the significance of the person depicted [2].

In the ancient Greek tradition, portraiture gradually shifted away from idealization toward another function – the representation of a person's individuality. The earliest portrait sculptures were created in honor of athletes

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and Olympic champions, and later celebrated military commanders, politicians, and philosophers. Initially, standardized images served to glorify a unified ideal of beauty, but they were eventually replaced by precise, individualized, and historically accurate portraiture [3].

An exceptional example in the history of ancient portraiture is the philosopher Socrates, who left behind no personal texts, memoirs, or self-portrait. His appearance, character, and biography have come down to us through other people, above all through the writings of his students. Although he did not conform to the canons of ancient Greek beauty, he nevertheless became part of culture. And not only through his ideas, that is, through his oral and written narrative, but also through his visual image. His sculptural representations were the result of a complex process of reconstructing his personality from the testimonies of others. This indicates how deep a trace a person can leave when the memory of their image is capable of inspiring people from later generations, who never knew them, to reconstruct it.

It should be noted that a personality rarely enters culture directly. As a rule, between a person and subsequent generations there are people who have seen, remembered, described, interpreted, and depicted them. These are witnesses who form the primary field of information about the Other. Their testimonies are fragmentary: they see a person discretely across space and time and assess them according to their own position, experience, character of interaction, and cognitive capacities. The body of testimonies they produce is not a ready-made personality, but through it the personality becomes visible.

The next level in the preservation of social memory is the work of the Observer – a meta-figure who gathers and interprets the scattered traces of a person's existence. The Observer may be a sculptor, artist, biographer, journalist, historian, researcher, or anyone who undertakes a deliberate analytical reconstruction of a personality, followed by the act of assembling it into an integral form. Their task is to establish connections between diverse traces and testimonies. It is also to make the form reflect that unchanging, fundamental core which constituted the person's stable "I." The assembling of a personality is destined to remain asymptotic: an approximation to the truth can never be achieved in absolute terms, but it will always remain the goal.

The history of the visual image of Jesus Christ provides an illustrative example. His portraits emerged much later than his physical death, drawing on oral tradition, texts, the memory of the first Christians, and cultural imagination. In other words, this is a case of reconstructing a personality in the absence of a direct visual source. Yet it was precisely the reconstructed image that became culturally active: it survived for centuries, entered the memory of civilization, and continues to function regardless of what the historical figure actually looked like [4].

The first Christians were witnesses to the life and activities of this significant historical figure. The Observers, in turn, were various agents of culture, each of whom, in their own time, created portraits, icons, religious biographies, historical accounts, and other representations. The visual image of Jesus Christ is particularly interesting from a metaphorical perspective. The cultures of different peoples recreated this image in accordance with their own characteristics, seemingly adding even more contradiction and obscuring reality. Yet the recognizable core remained unchanged in all representations of Jesus Christ, making it impossible to confuse Him with anyone else. This provides an example of symbolic immortality in portraiture, which preserves the uniqueness of individuality even amid contradictory interpretations.

It should be noted that the portrait is a special form of communication between a living person, the witnesses to their life, and subsequent generations. It "carries" the personality across the boundary of physical death while simultaneously changing its status: a living person who existed within the flow of their own life gradually becomes, after death, a cultural image. This image is not identical to the person, but it is precisely the image that becomes available for continued existence within culture.

At the same time, the reconstruction of personality is its fundamental anthropological function. Looking at a portrait, we do not merely try to recognize the person; we also try to "fill in" what is invisible: their character, inner world, way of thinking, and life story. The portrait activates the work of the Observer within the viewer. In this sense, every portrait is simultaneously an image and an invitation to reconstruction.

The history of the ancient portrait allows us to see a much broader process. Witnesses preserve fragments of a person's existence; the Observer assembles them; and the reconstructed personality acquires a new life within the cultural field. Thus, social memory compensates for the limitations of individual memory, while culture continues the existence of those whose physical lives have already come to an end. It can therefore be assumed that humanity has sought ways to prevent personality from disappearing together with the body. The portrait can thus be regarded as one of the oldest technologies – a kind of "machine of social immortality" for the human being.

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