

The Martin Luther King Monument in Washington: Meaning and Message

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Martin Luther King will be the first non-president and the first African-American to be honored on the National Mall in Washington DC. It's about time! MLK is one of the towering, heroic figures of the 20th century.

The design of the memorial is based on an image in MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech, "We will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." Like many of MLK's metaphors, this one is compelling, but does it translate well into sculpture? From the time this monument was proposed over a decade ago until now, the project has been criticized on both esthetic and political grounds.

One objection has been to the allegedly authoritarian artistic style of the monument, which presents King as a stone figure 28 feet high, more than 50% taller than the nearby statues of Lincoln and Jefferson. The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts found in 2008 that “the colossal scale and Social Realist style of the proposed statue recalls a genre of political sculpture that has recently been pulled down in other countries.... the proposed treatment of the sculpture—as the most iconographic and central element of the memorial to Dr. King—would be unfortunate and inappropriate as an expression of his legacy.”



Indeed, the height of the monument is comparable to those giant stone icons of Soviet art that were placed in the cities of the USSR and Eastern Europe, and it's also true that its Chinese sculptor, Lei Yixin, has created massive statues of Mao Zedong.

In the lead-up to the official dedication of the memorial, this objection has resurfaced in the mainstream press. But in fact the MLK memorial breaks sharply with the principles of Soviet-style social realism.

In that artistic tradition, the ideal leader rises above nature and becomes god-like. Statues of Mao Zedong in China, for instance, are almost always elevated, positioned to soar above an audience. The figure of King in the MLK memorial, on the other hand, is clearly earth-bound and makes a quite different impression. Monuments to Mao affirm a triumphant seizure of state power. The MLK memorial does not do that. The innovative placement of the King statue – which is turned away from entrance to the memorial, so that the visitor views first only blocks of stone, and comes only later upon the statue itself – diminishes the grandiose realism so characteristic of monuments of this kind.

It's true that sculptured figures of super-human dimensions have traditionally served autocratic governments as icons of intimidating, unmovable authority, warning that dissent on the part of ordinary "little" people can be readily crushed by the powers that be. Even when these sculptures aim to honor and glorify "the common man" – workers and peasants – their messages of revolutionary achievement are often belied by everyday corruption and hypocrisy.

Placed on a hill overlooking Prague, the monument to Stalin commissioned by the Communist regime in 1955 was 45 feet high and mounted on a huge concrete pedestal. Following Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin as a mass murderer, the monument was dynamited and removed in 1962.

As Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodor Adorno and



Herbert Marcuse elaborated over half a century ago, the very form of a work of art can tell a lie. An ennobling portrayal of a "Communist hero" like Stalin is false not only because Pravda's characterization of the man as a "genius of the new world, the wisest man of the epoch, the great leader of communism" is disproven by the facts of Stalin's rule. The deeper problem is that the very form of the representation – the way it glorifies and deifies the "hero" – is false, and would remain false even if Stalin had been wise, humane, and benevolent.

Is the statue of King sculpted by Lei Yixin false in this way? It is modeled after a photograph of King taken in his Atlanta office. King is shown with a print of Gandhi on the wall, and his arms are folded, left over right, in a modest, unassuming posture. Taking this image into stone, Yixin has stiffened the pose and placed the right arm over the left one, in keeping with the social realist heroic style that, following Western artistic convention, affiliates the right arm with strength and masculinity and the left arm with weakness and femininity. (The Latin word for left, "sinistra," is the root of the English word "sinister.")



The upshot is that critics can make a plausible case that the sculptor has designed authoritarian formal features (size and style) into the MLK memorial. But that's not the only way to view this historical monument. We can tell a different story about this work of art and arrive at a quite different interpretation. Although Martin Luther King was a pacifist, seeking social change through dialogue and mutual understanding, he was also a fighter of a kind. Seen through this "narrative lens," so to speak, we can regard the sculptor's modifications made to the photograph as an appropriate expression of MLK's resolute determination in advancing a worthwhile cause.

Another kind of ambiguity about the meaning of the monument derives from the contradiction between King's aims and those of the world's remaining superpower that now proposes to canonize him. Cornell West, in his recent essay "Dr. King Weeps From His Grave," wonders whether the memorial will obscure the realities of contemporary life in America, and he notes that:

"Militarism is an imperial catastrophe that has produced a military-industrial complex and national security state and warped the country's priorities and stature ... Racism is a moral catastrophe, most graphically seen in the prison industrial complex and targeted police surveillance in black and brown ghettos rendered invisible in public discourse.... The age of Obama has fallen tragically short of fulfilling King's prophetic legacy."

West continues, "King weeps from his grave. He never confused substance with symbolism." But does the MLK memorial convey the message that King's aims have been reached, or rather that his values remain radically unfulfilled and at odds with the nation's priorities today?

The statue of King, which emerges only partially from the granite block in which it is embedded, suggests a struggle whose outcome remains to be decided. This critical edge of the memorial is sharpened by the quotations from King's speeches and writings that are etched into its walls, opposing nationalism and militarism as well as racism.

Yes, the memorial can be seen as a shallow assimilation of King's message, but it can also be understood as a challenge to the regime that will, somewhat disingenuously, extol the ideals of King and the Civil Rights Movement at the forthcoming dedication ceremony.