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CAN A MONUMENT BE BAD? NORMATIVITY AND COMMEMORATIVE VALUES IN PUBLIC SPACE

Abstract: A monument is usually understood as an entity (sculpture, building, landmark...) erected (or recognized) as a sign of memory of a person or event. This is applicable regardless of the type of monument we are considering (private, public, cultural); what differs is the type of memory (which, in this sense, again can be private, public, or cultural). From that basic division, all other divisions of monuments into different types are derived (for example, by form, by historical period, by social function...). That is why when we talk about monuments, it is always about memory of someone or something. Hence, the basic value attached to monuments is commemorative value. Commemorative value can be understood as the content (memory) that is kept in our minds via the monument. Thus, it is possible to say: if it has a commemorative value, then it is a monument. Or in normative terms, a monument is something that ought to have commemorative value. That seems clear and understandable. However, there are many examples, some very recent, of monuments being destroyed or removed because of their commemorative value. In other words, they were considered unacceptable as public monuments precisely because they met their monument “norms”, namely to commemorate someone or something. In our time, monuments are most often destroyed or removed because they allegedly represented symbols of racism, colonialism, or hegemony. Their commemorative values do not match the current social values of the public. But does this mean that the monuments are morally problematic? Does that make them “bad”? Thus, in this paper we discuss the relationship between different aspects of the value of monuments, their transformations over time and ways to recognize their essential commemorative function in public space.

Key words: monuments, commemorative values, public, removal and destruction of monuments.

Introduction: The rise and fall of monuments

Nineteenth-century artist Horatio Greenough (1802–1852) is occasionally recognized as the first American sculptor (Wright, 1963). During his lifetime, he was best known for two sculptures commissioned by United States government. The first one, *The Rescue* (1837–50), depicts a pioneer family rescued from vicious native american (“indian”) attackers, meant to “commemorate the dangers and difficulty of peopling our continent, and which shall also serve as a memorial of the Indian race” (Boime, 2004, p. 527). The second one was seated figure of George Washington (1840), an American Founding Father, ichnographically modeled in the monumental form of Olympian Zeus.



Fig. 1. Horatio Greenough's *The Rescue* (1837–50) and *George Washington* (1840)

Both sculptures primarily occupied significant spots in Washington D. C.: the first one was located at the entrance to the Capitol building, the second one in its Rotunda. Representative motifs displayed in prominent places made them national monuments, but also made Horatio Greenough famous during his lifetime. But the life of a monument is measured by different standards than the life of a man. In fact, the controversy surrounding the George Washington sculpture began immediately after its erection. The half-naked body of the first American president was not universally approved. It also turned out that the light in the Rotunda was not good for this type of sculpture, so it was moved to the lawn in front of

the Capitol. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with the appearance of the sculpture continued, so in the beginning of the twentieth century the sculpture was moved to the Smithsonian Institution Building. In the second half of the same century it finally settled in a quiet second floor in The National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. But *The Rescue* had a much more dramatic fate. In 1939, there was discussion in the U.S. House of Representatives on the “joint resolution to remove a monument now standing at the right of the east entrance to the National Capitol, representing the American Indian”. One of the speakers even recommended that *The Rescue* should be “... ground into dust, and scattered to the four winds, that no more remembrance may be perpetuated of our barbaric past, and that it may not be a constant reminder to our American Indian citizens ...” (Fryd, 1987, p. 17). It did not happen, but the sculpture was finally removed in 1958. That was not the end: in 1976, while moving it to a new Smithsonian storage a crane accidentally dropped *The Rescue*, reducing it to several fragments (Fryd, 1987, p. 17). Thus, two (once very respectable) monuments designed by Greenough, the first American sculptor, and commissioned by a patron of the highest status (the United States government), today are out of the focus of the public, placed in the shadows of the museum display or in the deep darkness of storage units. Were they that bad?

What is a monument?

The illustration we started with is not unknown or rare in the history and culture of monuments. There are countless example of removal or demolition, whether it is a Christian break with pagan heritage, the iconoclasm of the French Revolution, or the reckoning of Eastern Europe with bronze or stone giants from the era of the Soviet Union (Nelson, R. S. & Olin, 2004). In the domain of the contemporary global culture of monuments, the first quarter of the twenty-first century was marked by the specific phenomenon of removing landmarks that after decades, sometimes even centuries, are now recognized as undesirable (Shahvisi, 2021, pp. 453–468). They became “bad”, often due to their racist or colonialist background and thus invite discussions about their *ethics* (Demetriou & Wingo, 2018, pp. 341–355). Sometimes, as in the case of Greenough’s aforementioned sculpture of George Washington, there are also *aesthetic* disagreements (Lehtinen, 2019, pp. 30–38). But are these ethical and aesthetic norms, as important and socially relevant as they may be, actually what defines the vital idea of a monument and its public connotation? Thus, maybe we should start with the first and basic question: what is a monument?

A monument is usually understood as a sculpture, building or landmark *erected* in memory of a person or event. The more considerate ones would agree, but would also add “erected or *preserved* in memory of...”. In the first case, for example, we are talking about monuments like The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., while in the second case we are talking about the remains of the Berlin Wall (which were not erected as a monument, but were preserved to be one). The first are most often called *intentional*, the second *non-intentional monuments*. However, the most one careful would perhaps replace “erected or preserved” with a word that unites them, but also essentially complements them. That word is *recognition* (cf. Riegl, 1903/1982; Young, 2003, pp. 234–247). Because, we can ask ourselves, is it significant (in the context of culture of monuments) that something was erected or preserved if it is not *recognized* as a sign of memory of a person or an event? So, to begin with, here are two key terms: *memory* and *recognition*. We can notice that in contrast to the physical constitution of the monument (most often it is built with the idea that it should last “sub specie aeternitatis”), memory and recognition give the impression of “fragility”. This dualism is the basis of the dynamics of the culture of monuments.

The result of the blend of *recognition* and *memory*, that special capacity that makes a monument a monument, we usually call *commemorativeness*. If we were to play with words, we could translate the term commemorativeness (from Latin, of course) literally as “call to remembrance”. The values derived from that capacity are *commemorative values* (Riegl, 1903/1982; Harrer, 2017, p. 31). In a few quick words, commemorativeness would be the recognized as the content (memory) that is kept in the minds via the physical reality of a monument, while commemorative values represent the *current aspect* of the commemorative property. To summarize: a monument is a physical structure that has the property of commemoration; commemorativeness is a permanent property of a monument; commemorative values during the lifetime of the monument are variable. For example, a memorial dedicated to an army general can at one moment be a monument to a liberator, at another a monument to a conqueror.

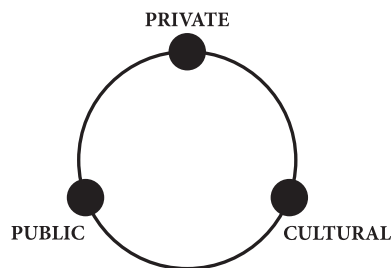


Fig. 2. Three aspects of commemorativeness

Generally speaking, through the blend of recognition and memory, commemorative values can be defined in three ways: private, public and cultural (cf. Dewey, 2005, p. 24; Assmann, 2011, pp. 15–27). It seems that every monument always has these three aspects, and what differs is their mutual relationship (Popadić, 2023, pp. 257–258). For example, the tombstone we erect for a deceased family member is most certainly a private monument, or rather a dominantly private monument. Because, most often (except on very rare exceptional occasions), tombstones are erected in cemeteries, and cemeteries are public spaces and a certain community (family, relatives, friends), therefore part of the public, usually participates in the commemoration. The shape of a tombstone and the material from which it is built are also an expression of the cultural patterns of a certain community. Sometimes they are standardized, “pre-designed”, so that all monuments in the cemetery are uniform. A *public monument* was initially intended directly for the public and was erected in a public space. It can be initiated by a private person, but it is generally raised in the name of a community (local, national, state...) for the purpose of public commemoration. However, in addition to these dominant characteristics, it becomes a part of people’s everyday life or part of their private lives. For example, if we pass a public monument on our way from home to work and back every day, it can hardly be considered a commemorative ritual related to the public function of the monument, and it will undoubtedly create a certain private commemorative content. It will become “our” place and “our” monument, no matter how much it is in public space. Like private monuments, public monuments are always an expression of cultural patterns. Finally, public monuments are often understood immediately after their construction as cultural monuments, although they become such only through the administrative process of establishing cultural values. In other words, a *cultural monument* is a “title” determined by officially authorized acts, which a monument acquires after a formally prescribed procedure. Let us note that here the adjective *cultural* means the confirmation of the institutional-administrative apparatus of a certain community and puts monuments in the corpus of formally identified cultural (or natural) heritage (the decision on the recognition of cultural monuments is made by a representative body depending on the importance of the monument, e. g. an institute for the protection of monuments, a parliament, a government...). Cultural monuments are therefore always public monuments, and in the same way as “ordinary” public monuments, they also have their own private aspect. Perhaps one clarification should be made here: not all monuments are “cultural monuments” in the formal sense, but all monuments are an expression of culture. That is why, whenever we talk about monuments and their commemorativeness, we always talk about the intertwining of those three aspects: private, public and cultural.

The Good and the Bad: A short comparison of two Belgrade monuments

If we would like to summarize the previously stated in normative terms, we could say *a monument is something that ought to have commemorative value*. That seems clear and understandable. However, there are many examples, some very recent, of monuments being destroyed or removed because of their commemorative value. In other words, they were considered unacceptable as public monuments precisely because they met a “monument norm”, namely to “call to remembrance” someone or something. In our time, monuments are most often destroyed or removed because they are recognized as symbols of racism, colonialism, or hegemony. Their commemorative values do not match the current public values. But does this mean that the monuments are morally problematic? Does that make them “bad”? Are we confusing commemorative value with celebration or glorification? Do we blame monuments for human faults? After all, monuments cannot be “racist” or “colonialist”; people can. Monuments do what they are supposed to do – they commemorate. Paradoxically, aside from the affirmative commemorative rituals, it is by removing monuments that their true (“monumental”) nature is confirmed. This means that they were removed purposely because they were “good” monuments, that is, they performed their commemorative function. If it they did not, it would be only removal of a pile of stones, metal, or concrete, and that would have no public purpose or importance other than clearing the ground. However, blocking that “call to remembrance” it is often justified by ethical or aesthetic reasons.

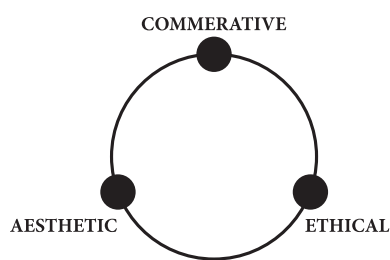


Fig. 3. Three aspects of the value of monuments

We will use two examples in an attempt to explain this combination of commemorative, aesthetic and ethical values. In both cases, we are talking about monuments in Belgrade, the capital of the Republic of Serbia, but with very different current statuses. These two monuments are: Po-

bednik / 'The Victor', casted in 1913 and erected in 1928, and the *monument to Stefan Nemanja* erected in 2021 (basic references about these two monuments: Vučetić-Mladenović, 1999, pp. 110–123; Makuljević, 2022, pp. 212–237). The first one is likely to be the most recognizable monument in the city and often serves as an unofficial symbol of Belgrade. The second, almost a century younger, is a frequent subject of public polemics about the current culture of monuments in Serbia. In other words, today the first (despite its not so glorious beginnings) is often seen as an example of a "good", the second of a "bad" monument. Well, let us see what this is all about.



Fig. 4. Two Belgrade monuments: 'The Victor' and *Monument to Stefan Nemanja*

For almost a century 'The Victor' has stood on the plateau of the Upper Town of the Belgrade Fortress. It was designed by the sculptor Ivan Meštrović: a standing bronze male figure in the nude with symbols of peace and war (a falcon in the left hand and a lowered sword in the right), commemorating Serbia's victory over the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires during the Balkan Wars and the First World War. Architect Petar Bajalović, who designed the pedestal (a transposed version of the Doric column) is also accountable for monument's adequate spatial arrangement. The total height of the monument is 14 meters, but the impression of significantly larger dimensions was created with the help of its position at the high terrace of the Belgrade fortress (above the confluence of the Sava River and the Danube River) and its visibility. The stylized but understandable expression of the figure, clear commemorative content, spatial accessibility and visibility from afar (which results in an iconic silhouette), make this monument recognizable and effective.

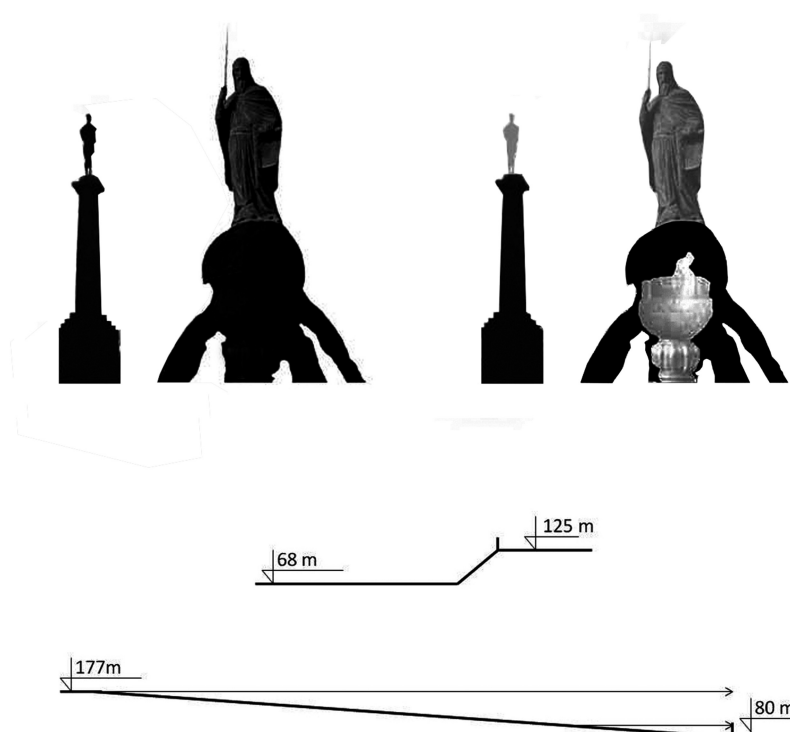


Fig. 5. *'The Victor' and Monument to Stefan Nemanja: comparative analysis of visual and spatial characteristics*

The monument to Stefan Nemanja is located on Sava Square, one of the central squares of Belgrade in the immediate vicinity of the Belgrade Waterfront (a project that completely changed this area of the city in a style of brutal and arrogant investor urbanism). The monument is the work of the Russian sculptor Alexander Rukavishnikov and is dedicated to the medieval ruler of Serbia, Stefan Nemanja (c. 1113–1199), the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty (who ruled between 1166 and 1371). The monument has a very complex pedestal: on the scepter of Saint Sava (the first Serbian archbishop and the youngest son of Stefan Nemanja), there is a broken Byzantine helmet; on the inside of the helmet are scenes from the life of Stefan Nemanja. On the pedestal is a figural representation of Stefan Nemanja, who holds a raised sword in his right hand and in the left the Hilandar Charter (the founding charter of the Hilandar monastery, important for the establishment of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the main endowment of Stefan Nemanja and Saint Sava). The total height of the monument is slightly more than 23 meters. The monument was placed at the bottom of the River Sava

slope in a very specific urban environment. In consequence, the monument, which has the height of an eight-story building, remains very difficult to see and it is almost invisible except from the immediate surroundings. Only the side views of the monument can be seen to some extent without obstruction. But we see a slightly bent figure in contrast to the authoritative attitude visible from the close-up foreground. However, from close-up, a spectator is puzzled by the pedestal that visually and narratively competes with the figure instead of highlighting it. Thus, an observer, either from close-up or from afar, gets, to say the least, confused, if not disorientated about the commemorativeness of this landmark.

Compared to the monument to Stefan Nemanja, 'The Victor' seems as a textbook example how a monument should look like and how should be placed. Although ten meters smaller (for the height of a two-story building) 'The Victor' seems more monumental, while the memorial to Stefan Nemanja, despite its "monumental" dimensions, is suffocated by the dissonance of its own symbolism, by eternal jams of the city traffic and by the conflict of the miscellaneous layers of the urban matrix. But are we overlooking something?

How to live with monuments?

We have already mentioned that 'The Victor' is almost a century older. Before it was erected at the Upper Town of the Belgrade Fortress, the monument had a whole prehistory that caused public controversies. But, leaving that aside, even when it was placed in its current position, it was not without criticism. In 1933, Miodrag Grbić, a prominent inter-war archaeologist and curator of the National Museum in Belgrade, wrote: "[The Victor] is mercilessly swallowed by the Upper Town and it admirably affects only the observer from the side, without connection to the city. This is not about the quality of the monument, but about the quality of the place where it is located. It must retreat from the corner of the city to the place where it will dominate" (Grbić, 1933, p. 286). What is this about? How is it possible that one of the important advantages of the positioning of this monument was not recognized at the time? The answer is more than simple. In the early thirties of the twentieth century, the dynamics of the city of Belgrade were completely different. The left bank of the Sava River was entirely undeveloped. Meanwhile, just a few decades later, new prospects (urbanistic, political and cultural) opened up, primarily with the expansion of New Belgrade (a new administrative center, but also with an immense residential neighborhoods) on the left bank of the

River Sava. Now ‘The Victor’ was seen not only by visitors of the Belgrade Fortress, but by tens of thousands of citizens who every day migrated from the left to the right bank of the River Sava and vice versa. In 1958, ‘The Victor’ even appeared on the first title card of the newly founded TV Belgrade, the first television broadcaster in the country, thus soon to become a trademark seen daily by millions of viewers. It was no longer “in the corner of the city”, but in the center of the urban and media landscape. The aesthetic qualities of the monument, as well as the universally understandable theme of victory, unequivocally contributed to that recognition.

Can the monument to Stefan Nemanja hope for the same fate? It is always difficult to predict and it is also beyond the competence of this paper. What could be said is that in this case *challenges* (a convenient word to avoid the word “problem”) are much higher: the monument to Stefan Nemanja is literally in a *depression* (in terms of urban morphology), and in addition, its iconography requires concentration that goes beyond the average observer (it is necessary to perceive three visual elements – a helmet, a scepter and a human figure – in three different proportional scales at the same time). But even with all those flaws, it is not without commemorative value. It seems that this depressed monument testifies so clearly and directly about our confusion on values of the past in the present times, about the replacement of the idea of historical meaning by mere material grandeur, about the substitution of eloquence by the accumulation of content, about the swap of cultural and national development by political authoritarianism... It may not be the best memorial to Stefan Nemanja, but it seems an appropriate monument for Serbia in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. But, above all, it is there, in the city center and, by all odds, we will have to learn to live with it.

If we have to find a way to live with monuments, how can we reconcile their commemorativeness with the values we consider acceptable today? Here are some examples. In Tübingen, in Germany, there is monument dedicated to Friedrich Silcher (1789–1860), a German composer whose works were infused with local folklore, and who reached the zenith of his creativity precisely in Tübingen, where he died. Celebrating folk musical motifs and composing works inspired by patriotism, he gained the status of a recognizable national bard in the spirit of the romantic culture of the first half of the nineteenth century. Almost a century later, his patriotism and creative expression were recognized by the ruling Nazi ideology as a predecessor of their own principles. Designed in 1939, Silcher’s monument was finally erected in 1941. It is a bulky, almost six-meter stone block, from which emerges the composer’s figure engrossed in work, and a family, a woman, a man and a child – illustrations of motifs from Silcher’s works – but in the recognizable National Socialist iconography.

In the period after the Second World War and the military collapse of the National Socialist ideology, despite the law that ordered the removal of symbols that bore the recognizable characteristics of that period, the monument to Silcher was not removed. Was it the cultivation of the Nazi spirit or Silcher's work? Controversies continued and continue. Thus, at the beginning of 2020, the art collective *Neue Dringlichkeit* and the residents of Tübingen had an action in which they installed an interpretive panel with the aim of changing the dedication of the monument. The new one read: "a monument against the appropriation of art by racist and nationalist forces." In other words, they decided to snatch it from the jaws of destructive ideology and appropriate it (Silcher Monument, [S.d.]).

Here is another example. When in April 2015 Ukraine adopted a package of laws requiring, among other things, the removal of communist monuments, the statue of Lenin in Odessa, located in an old factory yard on the outskirts of the city, avoided such a fate. Local artist Oleksandar Milov "encased" it in a new titanium costume, creating what is said to be the world's first monument to Darth Vader, the fictional hero from the "Star Wars" movies. The posture of the existing feature was fully utilized and Lenin's long coat became Darth Vader's swirling cloak, a lightsaber fit into a clenched fist, and helmet covered the statue's face. The statue of Lenin has no doubt been removed from view, but it is also preserved under the costume of the anti-hero of global popular culture (Macdonald, 2015).



Fig. 6. Monument to Friedrich Silcher (Tübingen, Germany), Monument to Darth Vader (Odessa, Ukraine) and Monument to Matija Gubec (Krško, Slovenia)

In 1973, during the socialist period of former Yugoslavia, in Krško, Slovenia, a monument was erected to Matija Gubec, a well-known leader of the Croatian–Slovene Peasant Revolt of 1573. In the modern era, Gubec was celebrated as a national hero, but in the socialist period he would also be a symbol of all the oppressed classes through history that finally,

after the communist revolution and with the help of the inevitable logic of dialectical materialism, freed themselves. Nevertheless, the end of the socialist era and the new age of global capitalism brought oblivion to former heroes, as well as to oppressed classes. But citizens of Krško did not give up their monument. The monument was recognized as “theirs” by the supporters of the local football club. Often, before a match, the figure (significantly larger than life size) is dressed in the jersey of local team or the Slovenian national team, depending on who is playing. The monument and the square become the gathering place, a symbolic rallying point from where fans go to the stadium. The monument again became a leader, but this time a leader of football supporters (Posavski obzornik, 2010).

Conclusion: A circle of commemorativeness

If we delve a little deeper into the previous examples, we can notice that they are intertwined with the aspects of the appearance of monuments that we talked about in the first part of the paper: private, public, cultural, aesthetic, ethical and of course commemorative. All these aspects are part of one normative chain, which in the context of culture of monuments we can call *a circle of commemorativeness*.

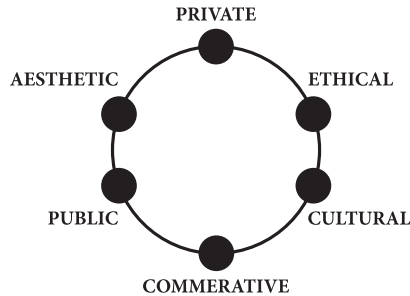


Fig. 7. A circle of commemorativeness

There is no doubt that monuments are created to manipulate memory. Although the word manipulation means “to treat or operate with or as if with the hands” (for example, I’m manipulating the computer as I write this), much more often we use the word in a connotation that assumes certain “ulterior motives”, like abuse, deception and similar shenanigans. It is the same with monuments. By erecting a monument, someone use their position of power to impose certain representations of the past on the public. But, as we said at the beginning, commemorativeness is conditioned by recognition. *Recognition is the moment of connecting the monu-*

ment with our view of the world. And our view of the world may or may not coincide with the intention of the one who erected the monument. This is what sets the circle of commemorativeness in motion. It is the wheel that has upturned the fate of the Horatio Greenough's monuments (which we met at the very beginning) and many others.

When we talk about the merging of the mentioned aspects of commemorativeness (private, public, cultural, aesthetic, ethical), it means that we accept monuments in all their complexity, as an expression of high (representative) culture, but also as a phenomenon present in everyday life (one that is unburdened with ideas of "eternity" and takes care of immediate needs). The "call to remembrance" sent to us by the monuments cannot be authoritatively normed (even though it seems so at the moment of erection) and is necessarily received in the context of current public norms (Petovar, 2022, pp. 58–59). Although it looks like a symbol of the power of the one who raises the monument, the monument is actually an expression of the public's power to deal with wanted and unwanted memories. As an experienced connoisseur of monuments, the Croatian art historian, Ivo Babić says: "In the very concept of a monument, regardless of its debatable and diffuse scope, the concept of duration, warning, will and speech that will not be silenced is embedded; the concept of survival, personal, group, human in general. A monument opposes entropy, defies time. Its essence is transcendent, if not transcendental. By questioning the essence of a monument, we also question the essence of a human being" (Babić, 1988, p. 707). In other words, ("essentially") whenever we talk about monuments, we are actually talking about human beings.

Thus, understanding the circle of commemorativeness can help us to learn to live with monuments we "disagree" with, not because they glorify unwanted ideas, but because they remind us of our own weaknesses and delusions. By fulfilling their function and thus reminding us of the dark side of human nature, monuments (which we imprudently accuse of praising unacceptable values) actually allow us a better understanding of the human condition. Hence, in the end, we have to ask ourselves: do "bad" monuments make "better" people? If so, how can these monuments be "bad"?

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