Forming time, making memory: using the material and the visual to investigate and articulate temporality

This panel investigates how humans use material and visual means to articulate, perform, and recollect time. It also seeks to understand how the agency of material artefacts and images may work to constitute temporality. People enact, organize, and interpret everyday rhythms of time (as well as their memories and anticipations about the passage of time) through making objects and through embodying the temporal in various ways. Such objects and images, both made and found, reflect and affect how people understand and experience the movements of time. If the making of time is considered to be situated somewhere in between human actors and the material world, how can time be established, reproduced, negotiated, remembered and imagined through such interactions between subjects and objects? As anthropologists, what methods can we use to analyze these interactions and how might we interpret them? How does the temporality of the material world affect us, and how do we make it meaningful to ourselves and to others? The panel will address these issues from the perspective of cultural aspects of time, and invites papers that are concerned with visual and material culture.

Panel presentations

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Kolam patterns as Materialisation and Embodiment of Rhythms

Every day, thousands of women in South India begin their day by painting complex geometric and figurative structures, kolam, on the streets outside their houses. The images form a large part of the local cultural landscape, and influence the mood of the surrounding environment. This paper will discuss how the rhythmical movements of time become embodied in the kolam. The practices of kolam-making change in relation to rhythms of life, and through the performances and their material results, rhythms of time are translated into rhythms of space. Innate body rhythms of the kolam maker and the movements of the planets are related to rhythms of social and religious events that are learnt in a cultural context. The religious power that is considered to be capable of moving the planets in certain rhythms is seen as the same power that many women hold as their source of knowledge on how to draw good kolams. While certain rhythms of kolam-making follow a regularity of flows, this paper will also discuss how new values and circumstances cause disruptions in these flows. Attention will be given to how established cultural rhythms concerning norms of aesthetic appreciation and skills are negotiated through experimentations with new forms of expression in which the future might be imagined differently.

Visual methods have been used during fieldwork, and I have experimented with various ways of presenting my research findings through visual and audiovisual media. While my PhD included photographic essays, abstract works in textile and video have been used for presenting this research in other contexts. The rhythmical aspects of the kolam practice are embodied in a video installation that will be presented during the panel. This tactile form of conveying anthropological knowledge is intended as a supplement to the paper.
Tracking memory through the ‘travelling’ shot in ethnographic film

Memories cannot simply be ‘inscribed’ by language or images; they are also ‘inhabited’ by our bodies in space and time (Healy 2003). My research on everyday sites and practices of remembrance work in post-communist Romania explores such corporeal dimensions of memory, investigating how Bucharest residents are recollecting the communist (and post-communist) past in multiple ways, through their minds, bodies, and emotions.

My ethnographic film about the subject, Lumina amintirii / In the Light of Memory (2010), utilizes experimental shooting and editing techniques to generate sensory understandings of Romanians’ experiences of the past and anticipations of the future. The film contains several long, uncut ‘travelling’ shots obtained by shooting with a camera attached to the seat of a bicycle. I use these sequences not to merely describe perceptions of the past, but to cultivate a new filmic space situated in the shifting contexts of the present, and thereby trigger spectators’ emotions and perceptions akin to the very processes of remembering. Such extended moments resonate with a Bergsonian interpretation of memory not as a static substance physically lodged in matter, but as constant yet discontinuous movement woven into bodily experiences of the duration of time.

Through these filmed temporal spaces, I aim to generate visceral, sensory understandings of the fragmented, multi-layered experiences of recollection I encountered in Bucharest’s current moment of post-socialist transition. This paper discusses how filmic practices that operate not just in audio-visual dimensions, but also in temporal ones, may provoke affective images and sensations that help communicate the complex, elusive experiences of remembering.

Experiencing the memories of others: creating place through telling stories among the Crow Indians

The title of this paper has two points of reference in ‘experiencing the memories of others’. Firstly, it has to do with the way memories are shared and retold between Crows as a process of creating place. Secondly, it refers to the way that the author partakes in this sharing of memories and how that may contribute to the process of creating place. Through storytelling, memories provide agency to individuals in the past and the present, connecting them to a place in the Crow landscape and providing meaning. It is a process of legitimacy that is strengthened through concepts of moral character and belonging, cultural traditions, and visions for a better future, yet steeply rooted in the concept of a Crow homeland.