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## CP, TK, TCE & Co.: The end of Freewheeling Culturalization?

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This paper is an only slightly enlarged version of the plenary paper prepared for *INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden*, by ACSIS, Norrköping 11-13 June 2007. On the basis of examples from historical docu-soaps and contemporary art involving reenactment, the interweaving of cultural knowledge production and cultural practices in the realm of experiencing and/or consuming the past are shown. Building on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s concept “meta-cultural production”, the term meta-historical productions is suggested and differentiated from a more politically motivated “culturalization” also present in heterogeneous societies. The paper further postulates that the experiential motivations inherent to phenomena such as reenacting are a major reason for the growing spectrum of meta-historical productions. They go, however, hand in hand with legitimating bureaucratic regimes such as heritage programs or efforts to bestow copyright on them, thus seeking to harness such phenomena for political, legal and economic purposes.

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Let me begin with two related but differently lodged examples culled from Germany, 2007:

**Example 1:** On May 27<sup>th</sup>, German television aired the first installment of “Stone Age – the Experiment”. Two families with three children each, thirteen people overall, and aged from 3 to 63, lived for two months in reconstructed stilt houses at the Lake of Konstanz. “Nothing was taken along from modern life except for tampons and tweezers to remove ticks,” we can read in one of the press releases. While hunger was a new sensation to cope with initially, “none of the participants fell ill. On the contrary: afterwards, they were physically and psychologically in better condition.”<sup>1</sup>

“What would television do without spectators willing to go to the limits of tolerable experiences?” was the commentary in Stern-magazine.<sup>2</sup> Time travel combined with reality TV are the two components that shape what is referred to as “docu-soaps”, and as Michaela Fenske observes, despite the label “living history”, “docu-soaps hardly deal with history in terms of a historically reconstructed past. Historical docu-soaps (rather) narrate how late modern individuals act in historical stage sets; they deal predominantly with needs, experiences, insights, questions and problems of the present” (2007, 2). Knowledge of diseases carried by ticks marks the boundaries of our desire to live in history; lack of knowledge how Stone Age women dealt with menstruation explains the tampons.

Knowledge and choice are crucial ingredients in the appropriation, experience and mass-mediated representation of slices of history. For the active participants in the stone age experiment, acting and experiencing are what is relevant and what constitutes a learning leap. Knowledge is what one gains; choices are what one makes, and both are modern, present-day ways of individual engagement with past and present. For producers and participants, and especially for audiences, the Stone Age experiment is then ultimately not a form of “consuming history”. Rather, the program is a confrontation with the past - or those parts of it that are known - with the education one has received in the present. Even the vocabulary chosen - “the Experiment” – points in that direction, “experimentation” is hardly part of the language of the Stone Age.

**Example 2:** On June 9<sup>th</sup>, the exhibit “History will repeat itself” opened in Dortmund, Germany. It presents historical reenactments as documented by contemporary artists in search of understanding the phenomenon’s popularity, as well as artists who seek to show historical events using the “representational mode of reenactment” (Klot 2007, 89). There are, for instance, performance art pieces and video installations of reenacted battles; but in contrast to historical battle enthusiasts engaging in reenactment of long ago wars, some artists participating in the Dortmund show have chosen recent “traumatic experiences” in their work. Jeremy Deller, for instance, invited lay actors to restage the violent altercation between British miners and police in 1984. Such an event, runs the argument, has left a deep impression on the collective consciousness and reflecting it from an artistic- aesthetic distance brings to the fore its relevance for the present. As the shows curators put it: “Artistic reenactments are not an affirmative valuation of the past (as are ‘regular or popular reenactments’), but they rather serve to question the present.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the artists as well as the shows initiators and curators are both utilizing and commenting on the cultural technique “reenactment”, using it for new ends and thus

1 Report from the following online TV-magazine:

<http://www.satundkabel.de/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=19343&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0> (checked May 26, 2007).

2 “Dokumentation: Zurück in die Steinzeit”, Stern, <http://www.stern.de/unterhaltung/tv/:Dokumentation-Zur%FCck-Steinzeit/589610.html> (checked June 4, 2007).

3 “Art-in.de”, <http://www.art-in.de/inmeldung.php?id=1418> (June 8, 2007, my translation).

critiquing the indulgence inherent to popular reenactments. Both cultural knowledge production and art are thus right on the heels of every day practice.

Reenacting has established itself as a cultural technique. It is a cultural technique, I would argue, which runs parallel to cultural heritage productions but brings forth practices and goals that are socially and politically located differently. Solemn memorial celebrations for battles lost or won, typical of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, have made way for experience-centered hobby reenactors who stage mega-events and/or enjoy online variants played in real-time. Factual knowledge of events and material culture are key for these activities which implicitly, yet importantly, hold that bodily experienced “facts” or pieces of knowledge permit greater proximity to times past.

As with the classical authentic music movement, historical scholarship offers data that can be transferred into action. From an initial stage of enthusiasm for participating in the restaging of past battles grows the possibility to make the experience more and more real through the addition of “authentic” paraphernalia and ever more accurate period knowledge: Authentic uniform fabrics can be commissioned, so that reenactors can feel the roughness and weight of a non-synthetic, non-water repellent uniform; eyeglasses can be made using optical technology of yesterday to insure that vision is made worse. And as for food, one might consider growing heirloom grains and vegetables for preparing the make-believe soldiers’ grub.<sup>4</sup>

The Dortmund exhibit, however, moves us already onto a plane beyond the craving for experience. Instead, it rather reflects and thickens the layers of knowledge, past and present, and offers an aesthetic commentary on the fascination and practical implementation of cultural pasts.

In his nearly fifty year old observations on culture, technology and modernity, Hermann Bausinger observed the shrinking of horizons and the acceleration of time (1961). This contributed to the construction and celebration of ideas about closed off “cultural wholes” – “Volkskultur” or folk culture, tribal cultures – at the very moment where the mobility of people and ideas should have proven the dynamism and change of group habits inherent to cultural flows. For the early 21<sup>st</sup> century one would have to add as a further element the steady thickening of what Ernst Bloch termed the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (1935) – a characteristic of modernity which Konrad Köstlin has claimed as an essential precondition for the emergence and maintenance of cultural research (Köstlin 1998). Hermann Bausinger also saw this as a major task for ethnographic documentation and analysis (Bausinger 1989). This thickening experience of temporally or spatially divergent “culture” results from an accelerated transfer of humanities’ “knowledge production” into public discourse and cultural practice.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett might call both examples – the docu-soaps and the art exhibit – meta-historical productions. They are subcategories of what she has termed “meta-cultural operations.” She considers these the basis for the creation of cultural heritage (2004). Through them “habitus is transformed into heritage and . . . local or national heritage is transformed into world heritage” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in press).

In both examples, knowledge production and its transfer into popularized and aestheticized variants play a considerable role; scholarly consultation is the rule for historical docu-soaps. Re-enactors, too, are often very well-read and build up their own reference libraries to increase the detail of their knowledge horizons. The same is true, as Sabina Magliocco and others have shown, of practitioners of neo-pagan religions, another present-day phenomenon resulting from culturalization practices (Magliocco 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, “Heirloom Vegetables” [www.frenchgardening.com/p/APharv.jpg](http://www.frenchgardening.com/p/APharv.jpg) (checked June 8th, 2007).

Both of my examples illustrate what this conference labels “culturalization as retrospective and proactive reflexivity”, with a capacity of “projecting accumulated historical memories into a progressing future”, a point Wolfgang Kaschuba elaborated already in the mid-1990s (1996). Kaschuba, however, also discussed the transformation of culturalization into its political variant, *culturalism*.<sup>5</sup> In immigrant societies facing a heterogeneity previously not experienced, culturalism delivers convenient arguments to explain away behaviors that have their roots in majority cultures and their institutions. One question to keep in mind when examining culturalization practices is, then, where the lapses into culturalism reside. I would argue they lie not just in communal politics but also in the commodification of “valuation practices” in the heritage and property domain. These ultimately have both economic and political ramifications that I will take up at the end of my presentation.

I began with examples of culturalization of the historical kind to open a path into witnessing actual practices. Thinking about the motivations lying behind them opens the possibility of a comparison with heritage practices. Comparison allows one to show the different kinds of avenues individuals and collectives have been taking in bringing both pasts and cultural otherness into their present.

Heritage practices have arrived, I would argue, at a point of formalization and institutionalization that stand in the way of the fundamental human impulses and motivations for engaging with the “cultural other” and the “historical other.” They have been harnessed into political and economic regimes and have, to some extent, turned into mechanisms of social control. The importance ascribed to “cultural heritage” by the major cultural arm of the United Nations, UNESCO, the differentiation into tangible and intangible varieties of heritage and memories of the world, have brought with them selection procedures. These in turn have legal and economic ramifications that focus one-dimensionally on monetary and cultural value as well as on group rights.

Yet when we observe visitors to heritage sites and shrines, visitors behave as though in church or in a museum: quietly, respectfully, honoring what they perceive as the sanctity of their environment. They tame or curtail in themselves what is overwhelmingly present among historical re-enactors: curiosity and discovery, play and the aesthetic impact of personal mental and physical experiences.

When looking at re-enactors – though well on the way to formalization and regimentation – it is possible to perceive motivations that are central for bringing about “meta-cultural practices” in the first place. Observing, for instance, re-enactors in a War of Independence staging in Kingston, NY, in October 1998, I was struck by the level of bodily energy, the smell of sweat and sheer physical tension that could be felt from these groups of men in period uniform. Not all went according to plan in this staging that occurred under the heading “The British are coming – again.”

Enactment as described by Roger Abrahams is constituted by various levels of play (1977). These are part of the vocabulary of any kind of festive or ritual endeavor and are deeply ingrained in war games. In historic reenactment the bodily, costumed play is heightened by facets of historical knowledge: self-enhancement increases by a combination of physical and mental engagement with elements of past culture. Among Kingston re-enactors one could see intense moments where present and past melted together. There was a physical and mental high, a “flow” (Csikszentmihaly 1991) where sensory perception, knowledge and experience melted into bodily action and enactment.

Pleasure and passion are perhaps the strongest motivations that carry activities of this nature. As with many make-believe activities, however, it is also a borderline, or, in Edward Bruner’s language, a border zone activity (Bruner 2005), where the real and the make-believe

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gilroy in his plenary paper at the INTER conference eloquently addressed this issue, albeit from a different angle.

seem to fuse together; in experiential terms, this fusion can be both highly desired or be cause of intensive fear. Consider this small scene along the street in Kingston:

A mother with several children stood on the sidewalk in front of the houses lining the street among the spectators, awaiting the clash of the British and the Americans. There was excited talk of how the husband or father and other relations were to soon be seen, that they would likely be coming from the left. A little girl in a dress and patent leather shoes bounced up and down, asking the mother over again when it would all begin, before running in circles again out into the street. The excitement was rising, one could hear drums in the distance. The first regiment approached from the right, rows of four uniformed men at a time, walking in even step following the bellowed commands of the lieutenant. As he screamed "Halt", that first row of men fell to their right knee and got their rifles into shooting position. Simultaneously, the second regiment had turned the corner and become visible on the left, the echo of their booted step ringing through the street. The first salvo of gunshots rang through the air, and the little girl let out a scream. She cried and ran as far away from the curb as she could. Her siblings went to get her, trying to pull her back to the front, the father would, after all, be visible any moment. But the child sobbed and pulled away as hard as she could, her face wet with tears and sweat. "I want to go home!" she cried and while various spectators looked with concern at this family unable to keep their child in check, it seemed to me that this girl was the only human being present who reacted as one rightly ought to: With horror and fear at the destructive movements and sounds of men engaged in annihilating each other in war.

To this little girl, the experience was real; to those engaged in enactment it was – perhaps much as in the enacting of the passion of Jesus Christ, a confrontation with the inevitability of death (Bendix 2000, 265-6). In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), Michael Taussig has explored human impulses that bring the other into one's own present. Robert Cantwell has coined the narrower notion of *Ethnomimesis* (1993) to characterize the psychological impetus that is transformed into cultural practices while we explore the cultural or historical Other. Both scholars were concerned with understanding the motivation(s) and experience entailed in such endeavors.

Taussig sought to demonstrate the mimicking practices of non-Westerners, of the colonized, whether in rituals or in material culture, invoking or depicting images of "the white man". These are in Taussig's vocabulary instances of "mimetically" embodying Otherness. In them, one recognizes the steps of culturalization. That is, transforming new experiences and knowledge of the contemporary and non-contemporary, and incorporating it in intimate or distant, enjoyed or repelled ways into one's life-world. If we follow Taussig, the impulse "to culturalize" is not an exclusive property of the present, modern and late modern industrial societies but a deeply human strategy to activate memory as well as new knowledge.

If the need for pleasure and passion is a part of human engagement with cultural and historical resources, then the needs emanating from politics and economics are trying to address such resources from a quite different angle. This would be the moment to explain the acronyms in my title, though I suspect that they have gotten already so familiar that for many no decoding is necessary.

CP cultural property

TK traditional knowledge

TCE traditional cultural expression

For good measure, IP for intellectual property must be added. These acronyms and many others are used in the labor-intensive intergovernmental committee of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva that is entrusted with finding solutions helping to

identify and protect the property status of selected elements of culture. The full title of the committee is “IGC (Intergovernmental Committee) for Traditional Knowledge, Genetic Resources and Cultural Expressions”. The endeavor, holding its 11<sup>th</sup> session in early July 2007, began in “1998 and 1999, (when) WIPO consulted a wide range of stakeholders, such as indigenous peoples and local communities, NGOs, governmental representatives, academics and the private sector, to identify the I(intellectual) Property needs and expectations of the holders of T(raditional) K(nowledge) and cultural expressions.”<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of such a committee is directly linked to the political and economic dimensions of culturalization practices both within, and more importantly between, cultures and social classes. These range from the competition for cultural heritage status on the world stage, to the use of traditional or indigenous music in new aesthetic forms, to the infusion of indigenous healing (i.e. plant) knowledge in biomedical research and the development of pharmaceuticals.<sup>7</sup> While these phenomena differ widely and bring into focus issues of ownership, profit and protection in divergent ways, they also demonstrate the rise of regimes that seek to control the parameters and effects of culturalization. Both economic interests and political power set stringent boundaries around the human passion for enriching experience through mimetic culturalization practices. Whether we look at the highly bureaucratic UNESCO heritage selection processes or the complicated legal proceedings envisioned for granting ethnic or indigenous copyright to melodies and weaving patterns, freedom to borrow or play with selected segments of “culture” has become increasingly restricted.

The Cultural Property realm remains so complex that neither WIPO nor the World Trade Organization will soon arrive at globally agreed-upon solutions. But the effect of heritage selection on social life can already be documented. At a recent conference in Göttingen, we termed the process “heritage-ification” (Hemme, Tauschek and Bendix, *in press*) and pointed to how the label of “heritage” simultaneously honors and restricts the human engagement with evidence from cultural pasts.

I have selected three quite different examples to illustrate how evaluation and selection regimes alter our relationship to what is being honored, and how this in turn evokes further limiting and controlling behaviors in our present:

\* After 1971, some of the most important manuscripts of Icelandic sagas were repatriated from Denmark to Iceland and became a part of the collection of the Árne Magnússon Institute at the University of Iceland.<sup>8</sup> While access was not completely open, visitors and researchers could nonetheless see them by appointment, at which point staff would bring them up from storage for viewing. In other words, the artifacts were integrated into research life at the institute. In recent years, a permanent exhibit was installed for the most valuable or foundational manuscripts in Reykjavík’s “Culture House,” a stately downtown building fancily restored for the purpose. Locals refer to this state-of-the-art, climate and light-controlled exhibit as “the mausoleum” – that is, a tomb or burial chamber. The jocular term speaks volumes about the effect of heritage practices; the artifacts alter their use value within the group, are excluded from the normalcy of every day life and open for veneration beyond one’s own group. The question is whether this honor is also reducing the passion and pleasure Icelanders hold for these texts and artifacts – I would doubt it, given the joy of rhyming and the referencing to these works in Icelandic communicative culture and everyday life. Yet the impact is nonetheless one that is culturally marked.

6 “Traditional Knowledge, Genetic Resources and Traditional Cultural Expressions/Folklore” <http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/> (last checked June 22, 2007).

7 The scholarly literature on cultural property phenomena has grown exponentially and I refrain here from further references, as this paper was intended as a means to stimulate reflection more so than a report on the status quo of research.

8 Cf. <http://www.hi.is/pub/sam/main.html#ex> (checked June 4, 2007).

\* In 2004, UNESCO placed the Cologne Cathedral on the black list of endangered world heritage, because the city had plans to build high-rises in the vicinity, and one of them was already nearing completion. Opponents of this plan mobilized UNESCO and it was then argued that it was not only the cathedral that had been placed on the list, but its entire surroundings: the new buildings would compromise the visual integrity of the heritage award. [A similar controversy has arisen in 2006 over plans to build a new bridge in Dresden.] While some groups have argued that a given monument would remain famous with or without UNESCO's stamp of approval, the city of Cologne halted construction of the other planned buildings.

How do architects feel about the demand that they submit to markers of the past? More than UNESCO is at work here, though, for there are those who speak of "the crimes" of post-war architecture in urban (and even more so in "idyllic" countryside) locations. Some places even restrict the type of building materials that may be used, limit the height of buildings, insist on the contours of roof lines and so forth. The power of heritage regimes over aesthetic innovation becomes evident, though there are clear geopolitical differences in such implementations: Northerners who travel south for a holiday exclaim over what has happened architecturally to the resorts they go to on the Mediterranean -- even though those buildings were constructed precisely in order to provide affordable holiday housing for those coming from the north...

\* Since 1992, the city of Goslar in Germany's Harz mountains has been on the UNESCO register. An activist group composed largely of retirees sees it as their task to cultivate this precious designation. In 2006, some members were so irritated about the accumulation of garbage in the city's environs that they threatened to alert the German UNESCO office in Bonn. The lack of concern fellow citizens showed for the beauty and integrity of the city, they said, would concern everyone if the city would end up on UNESCO's black list as a result. Communal garbage collection days were one of the initiatives that resulted.

To me, such examples are first and foremost illustrations that are available for ethnography and interpretation. In contrasting reenacting phenomena and heritage phenomena, it would seem possible to also contrast cultural essentials such as "passion" and "experience" with "competition", "evaluation" and "control".

If one was to evaluate the effects of increasing regulation and institutionalization of culturalization practices, one might point to the fact that the curiosity, passion and experience, increasingly forced into application documents, selection procedures and the like, will seek alternate outlets. As war re-enactors meet up with the measuring rod of authenticity controls, they might begin to explore the excitement of paintball. As cultural heritage sites can be visited virtually, and as informational signage offers all the knowledge necessary for understanding why they are worthy of heritage-ification, the need for passionate encounter with the auratic and unexplained might dive deeper into magic or science fiction.

We learn from the spread of culturalization options what kind of knowledge has been transferred most effectively, and how selective such transfers really are. Interesting and important to consider for cultural researchers is the following: Why is it so comparatively easy to develop or engage in meta-cultural practices? Why is there so little reflexivity that leads to meta-legal, meta-political and meta-economic practices? These are questions to continue working with, both from an ethnographic and from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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