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Fixing and Circulating the Popular

(Introduction)

“To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.” This quote by Susan Sontag ([1977] 2005, 2) stresses the role of recording and storage techniques in making it possible to fix ephemeral impressions and phenomena, to store them permanently and to make them available for further use. Sontag’s example also references the social dimensions associated with the practice of photography and the photograph itself as an artefact, here specifically the appropriation of the visual content captured in the photograph. The example of photography could also be used to illustrate how content – itself often fixed using media techniques – can be disseminated through media techniques.

For decades, it has been common ground in folklore studies that ‘folk culture’ (perceived as inherited customs and beliefs and reflected in the research focus on peasant culture) would ‘die’ with modernity. In contrast to this scepticism towards technology, our book wants to give weight to the potential of storage technologies to enable practices of recording, dissemination and – in the next step – practices of (re-)appropriation of popular culture¹ in various spatial, temporal and social contexts. In this respect, we refer back to considerations that the folklorist Hermann Bausinger already made in 1961 in his groundbreaking study *Folk Culture in a World of Technology* ([1961] 1990). Bausinger deconstructed the supposed contrast between technology and folk culture as a myth and pointed out that technology did not destroy cultural practices, but rather changed them by enabling spatial, temporal and social horizons to be widened. As an example, he referred to the assertion that singing as a cultural practice was threatened with extinction due to the availability of music via the media (then radio). He contrasted this with the following: “Schlager songs”, he writes, were “not only heard, but also sung; and the number of members in the choral societies” had “since the advent of broadcasting not fallen but in fact increased enormously” (Bausinger 1961, 39). This observation can easily be applied to contemporary digital musical practices, the cultural criticism associated with them, and the simultaneous growth and diversification of the choirs and choral societies.

When Bausinger explains that popular songs [Schlager] disseminated through the medium of radio encourage listeners to sing these songs in their everyday lives, he focuses on the processes of appropriation of popular cul-

ture mediated by the media in different social contexts. We take these considerations as a starting point and assume that the availability of popular culture – enabled by technology – can be accompanied by new processes of appropriation. These are extensions and changes of options for action, imaginations or inventories of knowledge all the way through to new coding of the popular cultural content which is disseminated. With reference to Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model, which assumes that intended attributions of meaning of a message on the reception side and in distinct social contexts can be understood or interpreted differently from the production side, we propose the term 're-coding'. Re-coding describes processes of re-appropriation in which elements of popular culture are charged with (new) meanings when disseminated. This can be seen, for example, in the processing and dissemination of archival materials that take place in the context of identity politics. The contributions in this volume focus on the role of recording and storage techniques in the fixing, dissemination and re-coding of popular culture. Technology is examined in its social contexts and from the perspective of the actors involved. In order to make this perspective comprehensible, a brief historical classification will be given in this introduction. This is followed by an explanation of the approach to the cultural analysis of technology [Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung], which was the key guiding factor in this book.

The articles in this volume originate from a panel at the 2013 SIEF conference in Tartu on the subject of *Circulation*. The congress topic focused on universal processes of cultural exchange and mobility.² The second driving force behind the book is the research group Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung, a network bringing together researchers interested in technology from a cultural studies and cultural anthropology perspective in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, who also contributed a number of articles.³ All authors are specialists in one of the successor subjects of folklore studies.⁴

Archiving and circulating popular culture

The creation of collections on the basis of written, visual and acoustic recordings has been an integral part of the young discipline of folklore since its foundation at the end of the 19th century. Media techniques were thus a *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of ethnographic cultural studies and have shaped the character of the tradition, sometimes inscribing themselves into it. The fairy tale collections of the Brothers Grimm or the collections of folk songs by Johann Gottfried Herder, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano marked the beginning of the recording activities linked to the collections of 'folk-lore'. The idea of 'capturing' initially meant registering (sensory) data,

e.g., music or other expressions, with the help of recording techniques. The early folklorists were using certain foci in terms of content (later characterised as 'folklore canon'). These capturing efforts were aimed at representing the "folk spirit" in the service of the nation-building process (Bauman and Briggs 2003).⁵ Orally transmitted artefacts of popular culture were stripped of their ephemeral nature by means of writing techniques, made permanent and thus available for further use. This was followed by the foundation of folkloristic collections and archives around 1900, which were to form the basis for studies carried out by later generations of researchers (Burckhardt-Seebass 1990). Examples include the folk song archives in many European countries and the large European atlas projects in the middle of 20th century (Wiegelmann and Cotter 1968), which, however, were in most cases not fully completed. The background to these efforts was the fear, anchored in Western intellectual history with the advent of industrialisation, that customs and traditions were at risk of being washed away by a civilisation shaped by technical innovations. This notion, while paradoxically encompassing both technological determinism and scepticism, resulted in the conviction that the 'authentic' folk culture had to be collected, archived, documented and researched so that it could, if necessary, be brought back to life.⁶ In this context, technology was seen as a cause of the alleged loss of folk culture and was therefore not anticipated in folklore as an object of investigation (just as technology was hardly discussed in the scientific disciplines related to anthropology; Sigaut 1994, 420–24).

Cultural anthropological research has often critically stressed the conjuncture that reproductive technologies 'freeze' culture and de-contextualise the thing recorded from its traditional, religious, local or social contexts.⁷ At the same time, however, folklorists used the most modern technical means (photography, phonography, archives, railways, etc.) to preserve the culture supposedly threatened with extinction. With the help of state-of-the-art recording devices and storage methods, they constructed the allegedly authentic folk culture they had been looking for, rather than finding it (cf. Bendix 1997; Clifford 1988; Lindner 1998). Through recording techniques, the ephemeral became permanently documentable and gained significance through archiving. Systematic storage and ordering of the records made them available and rendered it possible for them to be disseminated into new spatial, temporal and social contexts. Simultaneously, as new media are becoming available, new actors are involved in the circulation of the popular.

This is where the idea for this book comes in. It is assumed that the currently new communication media with a storage function can have the same significance as classic archives. They enable, firstly, the fixing of knowledge stocks in the form of data, secondly, the dissemination of these data into di-

verse contexts and, thirdly, processes of (re)-appropriation and re-coding. Unlike analogue archives, digital media environments are inherently equipped with the option of dissemination, and therefore the digitisation of archive material also opens up new opportunities – ethnographic data collected over decades in archives and libraries now emerge as a knowledge resource digitally from dusty, forgotten collections into the public sphere and are available and circulating in new ways.

Using and appropriating technology

Our starting point is an understanding of technology based on how technology is used by different actors – be it in everyday use or in classical professional contexts such as archives and folklore studies/cultural anthropological research. The actor-centred approach is what differentiates the cultural-analytical view on technology from, e.g., media studies investigations, which focus on life worlds seen from a (media) technology point of view. Actors utilize artefacts in various ways, according to their habitus, knowledge, or in line with their demands: while “resistance” might be a leitmotif of folklore, cultural studies, and related fields (along with creativity, or primitivism, Warneken 2006), it is undeniable that creative practices and unintended, or even subversive, tactics of re-appropriation can be found very often in everyday life (de Certeau 1988).

Seen from the perspective of *Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung*, social change is not caused by technology; instead, it is focused on the interaction between actors and technology in their respective historical and social contexts. In doing so, technological determinism is avoided (in contrast to the ubiquitous grand narratives of technical progress, which also continue to exist today and can be clearly seen if one looks at most of the museums of technology). Rather, emphasis is put on the “enabling potential” of technology and possible disparate modes of action in certain socio-technical settings (Schönberger 2017). Technology research informed by cultural anthropology asks in both directions: what people do with technology and what “calls to action” technology addresses to people (see Hengartner in this volume, pp. 17–34). Technology is thus theoretically not, as proposed by actor-network theory (e.g., Latour 1996), located as actant on the same level as the acting subject, but the acting subject is in fact seen as co-constructor of technology (social construction of technology, see Hengartner in this volume, p. 23).

Inherent to the view of the cultural analysis of technology, which we share with related fields that use ethnographic methods, is a focus on practice. From a praxeological perspective it is examined how potentials for action are updated and realised in the concrete use of technology (Beck 1997). Thus, actual

uses (or non-uses) of the technical often only become apparent in the course of time, when usage conventions emerge after the appearance of a new technology. Another premise of the cultural analysis of technology research approach is therefore the assumption that social issues and technology are interwoven (cf. Hengartner and Rolshoven 1998). Due to the empirically observable “inconspicuous omnipresence” (Bausinger 1981, 227) of the technical in everyday life, one could almost speak of a “technicality” [Technizität] of the everyday, i.e., “cultural settings, phenomena, and constellations” (Hengartner 2012, 134) and a “culturality’ [Kultürlichkeit] of technology” (Hengartner 2004). This is expressed in the fact that the use of technology as implicit knowledge (Polanyi 1958; Hörning 2001) is present in everyday routines. However, with regard to these routines, patterns of appropriation can certainly be identified that are socially situated and run along the lifestyle concepts of the respective actors (Schönberger 2017). With the term “long arm of real life” (Schönberger 2017, 19), the cultural anthropologist Klaus Schönberger argues, “that users would most often act in the same or similar fashion in ‘virtual life’ as they did in ‘real life’” (ibid.). His considerations on “persistence and recombination” are also based on this assumption, which explain that new practices – here connected with the use of technology – always rest on existing practices (ibid.).

From a cultural anthropological view ethnography is considered the ideal approach to adequately investigate the complex entanglement of materiality, practice, and culture in the everyday (e.g., Beck 2000; Niewöhner, Sørensen and Beck 2012). Ethnographic research into ways of dealing with the enabling potential of (media) technology can be applied to a wide variety of questions. Popular culture research in the tradition of folklore and ethnology can draw on the methodological and theoretical reservoirs of cultural studies, material culture studies and empirical social research. The exploration of the present everyday practices always includes a historical perspective that questions the history of techniques, social contexts and practices.

Relating to recording and storage media, an explorative ethnographic perspective offers the advantage that unlike other methods it discovers precisely those ways of using technology that actors themselves are not aware of because they lie below the threshold of perception and are therefore not subject to reflexion (cf. Ayaß 2016, 342). According to Bachmann and Wittel (2006), a media-ethnographic perspective means an ethnography “about people who use, consume, distribute or produce media” (ibid., 183). Based on empirically collected individual cases and a praxeological approach, the focus is placed on social contexts in which actors incorporate technology. From the perspective of media ethnography, the media-theoretical question of the ‘mediatisation’ of communication and everyday life (Hepp et al. 2015; Michelsen and Krogh 2017) is posed the other way round by examining how actors pur-

sue their interests and develop their specific logics within existing globalised and commercialised framework conditions. In detailed ethnographies, handling of technology and media can be meticulously examined, processes of perception and the organisation of sensual perceptions can be explored using media technology, and questions of constructing identities through online media (Poletti and Rak 2014), or the political dimension of media content and infrastructures can be analysed (cf. Bender and Zilliger 2015, XVII–XX).

Ethnographies of technology, media, archives and the dissemination of popular culture

The articles in this volume present ethnographies of practices, techniques and paths of re-appropriation, re-coding and (further) dissemination of popular culture. They deal with techniques of collecting popular culture in the past and present, folkloristic archives and cultural policies that are applied, for example through popular music on the radio. The example of mobile phone films produced and distributed with smartphones and the use of geodata platforms such as Google Maps will also show how popular culture is fixed and disseminated, produced and appropriated.

The first contribution is *Technology, Culture and the Everyday* by Thomas Hengartner. In his programmatic paper he focuses on fundamental considerations of the cultural analysis of technology and uses concrete examples with a historical perspective to show how human actors, technology and everyday practices are interwoven in many ways.

The next three articles are centred around early folkloristic collecting practices, the associated use of technology and processes of (re-)appropriation of cultural expressions. The study by Fanny Gutsche-Jones and Karoline Oehme-Jüngling also deals with a folkloristic collection, which was produced by the Swiss Shortwave Service but ideologically based on older, traditional folkloristic concepts. Using the example of the Swiss song *Lueget, vo Bärge und vo Tal* (1823), the authors analyse how this folk song shifted in its meaning from a signet of nostalgia to a signet of classic ‘Swissness’ through its use in the media and how it contributed to the acoustic identity construction of Switzerland through sensual perception. Karin Gustavsson analyses in her contribution on vernacular architecture in Scandinavia in the 1920s the use of (media) technology (including the new means of transport and recording techniques) in ethnographic house and settlement research of the early 20th century. Her focus here is on the question of how the technically mediated practices of collecting and documenting have inscribed themselves into objects that to this day serve as the basis for knowledge production. Johannes Mücke’s contribution on the topic of archiving and circulating ‘folk medicine’

uses the example of folk medicinal healing practices in Switzerland to examine how the data collected as part of early folklore collection efforts have undergone a change of meaning against the backdrop of the implementation of a global cultural heritage framework.

The following articles focus on practices, techniques and paths of appropriation, re-coding and (further) dissemination of popular culture. In her meticulous analysis, Sibylle Künzler examines new forms of strolling via/with the help of the use of new navigational geo platforms like *Google Maps*. These hybrid platforms function on a completely different technical basis than classic archives, but they pursue an idea that was ultimately a key driving force behind early folkloristic research – capturing society as completely as possible and situating it in geographical space. The platforms offer users the opportunity to mark events and places as metadata, which in turn enables new uses, such as appropriating them through the practices of “clicking” and “zooming”. The ideal of the graphic representation of cultural expressions in space leads to a return of the container spatial model criticised by cultural studies. Christian Ritter’s article forms a bridge between the nation-state identity politics (discussed in the previous chapters) and the negotiations of group identities and self-constructions by means of the use of information and communication technologies, which are the subject of the next three chapters. Using the example of Swiss youths with Albanian background and their use of the media, in particular the circulation of images on the social web, he analyses the negotiation of postmigrant identity.

One form of use is filming with a mobile phone. While in the media discourse the use of mobile phone cameras in certain contexts, such as pop concerts, is qualified as disruptive, Ute Holfelder stresses the social functions of these films in her article. Camera phone videos taken at concerts are used as authenticity markers and to capture and share memories of “unique moments”. The book concludes with Klaus Schönberger’s programmatic article on media use and socio-cultural change. From a historical perspective, he deals with the changes in love communication, which follows specific media and social logics. His article once again carves out, through a case study *From Love Letter to Love Message*, the cultural-analytical perspective of technology research practices and media use, which is critical of technology-deterministic views and incorporates the social dimension into the investigation of technology.

Notes

- 1 We use the term “popular culture” both in the sense of “popular arts” (Maase 2010) and in the sense of inventories of everyday knowledge in the context of popular culture.
- 2 SIEF2013, Tartu, Panel “The predicament of technology: fixing and circulating the ephemeral—recording devices, data carriers, and the enabling of circulation and appropriation of cultural elements”; URL: www.nomadit.co.uk/sief/sief2013/panels.php5?PanelID=2240 (however, the volume does not encompass all contributions).
- 3 Research group for Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung, director: Thomas Hengartner; funded by the Leibniz Programme of the German Research Foundation (DFG); 2003–10 University of Hamburg, since 2010 University of Zurich; www.technik-kultur.uzh.ch.
- 4 The “field of many names” (cf. Bendix 2012) appears today at universities in German-speaking countries under the names European Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, Empirische Kulturwissenschaft [often translated both as Cultural History/Cultural Studies] and Popular Culture Studies; in museums and public folklore institutes the older term *Volkskunde* (folklore) is more common. Folklore continues to be the name and common denominator for the specialist societies in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, which are called the Austrian/German/Swiss Folklore Societies.
- 5 Cf. Bauman and Briggs (2003), chapter 5: Language, poetry, and Volk in eighteenth-century Germany: Johann Gottfried Herder’s construction of tradition; and chapter 6: Scientising textual production in the service of the nation: the Brothers Grimm and Germanic philology.
- 6 Examples are not only provided by the Atlas projects that were used for educational purposes in museums and schools, but also by folklore publications and radio shows through which knowledge about folkways was popularised and disseminated to the broader public. Like, e.g., Margret Mead in the U.S. also European ethnologists were engaged in the popularising of (critical) ethnographic thinking; well-known examples are given by Richard Wossidlo who hosted a radio show in the 1920s in Northern Germany (Schmitt 2005), and also by the books by Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann who used the older folklore archives for new publications, among them *Das Weihnachtsfest* [The Christmas feast, first published 1978, reprints).
- 7 This holds especially true for the ethnographic fields using storage technologies, e.g., ethnomusicology (for a critical discussion, see Sewald 2005).

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