

On Anniversaries

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Abstract

European Ethnology is always intimately involved in its research objects, making sense of our practices and of the things with which we surround ourselves. Among other things, European Ethnology underpins the adoration of authentic places and helps to promulgate the idea of marked caesuras and cuts. Many topics that ethnologists encounter in their research are also and at the same time a part of their own lives, for example the anniversary. Such topics only become recognizable as “other” when subjected to a perspective from which they no longer seem self-evident but are instead experienced as curious and “foreign.” The article analyses anniversaries—including that of SIEF—from this ethnological perspective.

Beginnings and Repetitions

SIEF is not alone in celebrating its anniversary. Much like the rest of us, SIEF is surrounded by anniversaries. Old and new media constantly bring us news of yet another anniversary and their constancy is more packed with every passing year. On August 3, 2014 we learned that electronic post has existed for 30 years in Germany (Radomsky 2014). Any and all founding dates or birthdays of institutions, cities and villages, as well of course as those of individuals, seem to merit commemoration. The focus is on beginnings. For the celebration of their special jubilee anniversaries, rabbitbreeders and sport-clubs, much like scientific organisations, establish planning committees, create logos, hold events, and issue publications—like this one.

Anniversaries, and that is what they all have in common, highlight institutions or persons or groups. Anniversaries seem inevitable and somehow necessary in modern societies. They serve as hooks for ideas, as apologies for reflection, as catalysts for creativity. Wedding anniversaries for instance accentuate and decorate the couples' twenty-fifth anniversary with silver, the fiftieth with gold. In a testament to its heightened consumerism, the last century discovered more and more time junctures to celebrate as anniversaries (the 5th as wooden and the 10th as tin, etc.), each with its corresponding, appropriate gifts.

Anniversaries often involve celebrations and it seems to go without saying that these are more meaningful than a mere party. Indeed, celebrations often have a touch of solemnity. A celebration then may flow into a party, but the first part, the celebration, is more solemn and self-important than the party in its focus on history and tradition. The celebration is very often attached to the idea of its repetition. The celebration can announce its temporality, like for instance the Christian last supper does. It instantiates a pattern common within European culture when its words of institution demand: “Dies tut, so oft ihr’s tut, zu meinem Gedächtnis!” (Martin Luther) (“For as often as you do this...do this in remembrance of Me”) (Corinthians 11, 17-32). The anniversary’s strict and explicit demand for repetition seems to come from a European understanding of culture as a permanent dialogue with the past, related to the European obsession with heritage (Harrison 2013). The repetition has to quote, returning to the beginning in a justification of the self and a celebration of its discrete, organic being—tending to its “roots” (an organic metaphor). Hermann Hesse, Germany’s twentieth century Steppenwolf-dreamer, once wrote: “Und jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne.” (A magic dwells in each beginning) (Hesse 1961).

Popular Culture, Our Fields, and Long Lines

Remembering its beginning in 1894, the *Wiener Verein für Volkskunde* (Viennese Association for Volkskunde) and its museum celebrated its centennial in 1994. Designed as a nearly perfect reenactment of the association’s beginning (European Ethnologists are the experts!), the celebration took place the same date as in 1894, on December 20, and in the same location, the old Vienna town hall. The music played in 1994 was composed by Hugo Wolf who had a special relation to Michael Haberlandt, the founding director of the Museum (Schindler 1995, 101-104).¹ Instead of the Habsburgian archduke, who was the protector 1894, in 1994 the Austrian minister of science gave the festive speech (the empire making way for the republic), after which the current director and a Viennese academic gave lectures.²

What am I insinuating? Anniversaries, like the one mentioned above, follow certain patterns. They try to simulate, to copy the beginning by performing it as a repetition. The repetition brings into relief the legitimacy of whatever is so celebrated by displaying its continuity and staging its fidelity to its founding principles and original obligations. Furthermore, the performance holds also the promise to improve the institution. Highlighting the beginning is entirely the norm; it is a common practice. Anniversaries and jubilees recall the beginning and its order of events in an act of repetition. So accepted is this

pattern that a big market in advisors, a coaching industry, has come into being (Roth 1999).³ Internet calendars underline the importance of anniversaries, of our awareness of them and, indeed, our celebration.⁴ And then enter the ethnologists and folklorists, to study these socio-cultural and popular events in the production of which we have, in fact, been intimately involved during the last two centuries, charged as we have been with modern society's historical and reflexive self-consciousness (Köstlin 1997). SIEF as a scientific institution has thus gone native in celebrating its own proper jubilee.

Topolatria, the Adoration of Places

All the paradigms of the historicization and musealization of remembrance—that is the genre to which anniversaries belong—subscribe to the sacredness of the time and the place of the beginning (Turner 1974). One may perhaps be forgiven for wondering if the obsession with anniversaries owes anything to changing interpretations of time and place in times perceived to be “globalized.” Of course, globalization has no real face to fight and in fact, goes back much further than the coining of the expression “global.” Regardless, today we constantly repeat and reify that chant of globalization, of acceleration and non-places (Augé 1992). The talk of the loss of “real” places in “supermodernity”—places defined as historical, relational and so offering identity as places of memory—and the absolute negation of the “non-places” (airports, clinics, hotel-chains, transit points, refugee camps, etc)—supposedly inhumane and therefore not anthropological—both rely on a notion of “genuine” places and reproduce our attraction for them.

Back to Christianity: to be affected by historic sites has a long history. The Catholic Church taught that copies of places like Golgatha should be as efficacious as the original, and thus the copies too became destinations for pilgrimage. Nils-Arvid Bringéus (my predecessor as SIEF-president) has interpreted the Bethlehemic cradle—the crèche—as an innovation brought forth within Swedish families during the nineteenth century: it is a prime example of the copy as a place for devotion (Bringéus 1968). According to a legend, St. Francis restaged the cradle for the first time already in 1223 near Assisi in Italy. The legend provides a necessary beginning, providing the practice with a first time.⁵ The “imitatio Christi,” as a contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ, can be seen with all its instruments (Bendix 2000, 268) as a basic example of the anniversary and a model for the repetition of “the first time.”

The adoration of places, that very European form of *topolatria*,⁶ motivates a secular repetition and reveals an unspoken sacrality in its metrical mysticism. The nineteenth century with its invention of national monuments and institu-

tionalization of centennials and decades founded institutional memories (and even made the writing of individual biographies a popular practice), often organized on the basis of decimalism. This predominantly male technique of public celebration owes much to the fact that public history and memory were long dominated by churches, clubs, associations, academies, guilds, leagues, and universities. Their manner of staging themselves seems not far removed from today's memorial culture, even if it is now "transgendered." Accentuating birthdays at anything down to five-year intervals urges us to skip in linear progression along these intervals instead of following the life cycle,⁷ an alternative model of time. The circle of life has been replaced by a linear metaphor with an emphasis on the beginning. The beginning initiates time measurement, as a chronometry based on a secular, but seemingly also sacred, decimalism. Our metric culture of decimalism gains its structure from this scaling.

Producing Attention and the Reenactment

Reenactment tries to stage historical events as authentically as possible: Passion plays, historic plays and novels in the genre of Walter Scott did this in their way during the nineteenth century, making their localities famous. Today the celebration of anniversaries also has to produce attentiveness. A little community in the German Blackforest opened a museum for perms in 2006, in honour of the man who invented that coiffure a hundred years earlier.⁸ Permanent waves are indeed important for the straight of hair. In this case the invention serves to offer a unique selling proposition (USP) for the community. It serves as a brand, marking distinction. "Brand yourself" and tell a story about it.

Anniversaries give selfevident legitimacy to the practices and objects of reenactment. On October 23, 2006, in Budapest (Hungary) a riot took place, reenacting the revolt of 1956. But this time the new insurgents came from the right wing. Just as in 1956, they stole a Soviet T-34 tank, this time from an open-air exhibition in town, and the tank really worked (which speaks well of the conservation skills involved!). In Berlin, for more than 20 years, a violent repetition of a demonstration against the local police takes place on May 1, notwithstanding the fact that the original reason for the demonstration is long forgotten. It is an event⁹ that attracts people from many countries. The date of the violent repetition, May 1, inscribes it into a tradition of the previous night as "free night," liberated from social norms and conventions. Indeed, women celebrate the night before May 1, Walpurgis night, in a reenacted witch-event following a long and legendary tradition.

Fitted with cultural markers, anniversaries measure time. They fulfill a crucial role in regard to repeated caesuras as scale factors—private as well



Exhibited in 2006, this historical Soviet T-34 tank was stolen by rioters during the 50th anniversary of the revolt against the Soviets. Photo Wikimedia.

as public and official remembrances. With constant talk of acceleration, the relation between time and history, continuity and discontinuity, is shaped by new contours and accorded newfound importance. The lucidity of former epochs seems to have vanished. Jürgen Habermas, the best known and most respected German philosopher of our days, once spoke of the “*Neue Unübersichtlichkeit*,” the “*new complexity*,” which characterizes our times (Habermas 1985). This characterization may be accurate. But the talk of new complexity suggests a contrasting counterpart, a certain idea of clarity of epochs and a sense of order in premodern lives. Thus Jürgen Habermas emerges as a *Volkskundler*, an ethnologist of the old school.

The culture of remembrance has in recent years emerged as a major topic of research in the cultural sciences, a topic that they themselves are intimately involved in producing. They now study what they have invented in the past and cannot stop inventing in the present. These caesuras, decades, shape our lives as much as they shape our museums. Talking about the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties of the last century, we find ourselves on exhibit in

museums and displayed on the shelves and windows of shops selling memorabilia, the retro, the antique, and the shabby-chic. We connect each decade with designs, colors, hairstyles, and musical styles, and with the idea of an impulse in its beginning. As repositories of cultural memory then, anniversaries function as a sort of encapsulated knowledge about the past, promoting the idea of the identity of a group (or a generation) and of its lifestyle. Reflexively, but routinely, we create the scales, memories and icons of our existence.

Individuals and groups accentuate their peculiarity and emphasize their differences, big or (more often) small, as though deliberately sharpening their USP, their unique selling point. Coined in the 1940s, the term comes from the idiom of the advertisement industry. In the culture of memorialization, individuals and groups try to draw attention to themselves and to others, but mainly to themselves. The reenactment explains the group and tries to define its identity and its position in society. Visualizing its potential publicly, the group in question gives itself a congratulatory slap on the shoulder. The consensus to celebrate jubilees is not only about invoking the memory of the occasion. The jubilee performance also proves the continuity and the consistency of a group; it confirms, perpetuates, and promises to improve the institution; it displays its legitimacy in a sensual manner. The anniversary thus reinforces the idea of progress (scientific in the case of SIEF) and refers us back to conclusions that are not new as such, but performed in a new genre. We know that we stand on the shoulders of giants and we realize the fragility and relativity of the “modern.” The cultural memory, represented in relief by the USP, concerns itself mostly with a past on which the group’s or institution’s consciousness of its unity and peculiarity rests. Thus in celebrating SIEFs anniversary, we perform ethnology’s continuity, we perpetuate the field, we define our identity and proclaim our legitimacy. But even when not so obviously self-occupied, European Ethnology is involved nevertheless in these multifold processes of popular decimalism and the production of overwhelming localisms.¹⁰ European Ethnology contributes to them, studies them, and is nourished by them, its practitioners variously sought out to help perform them or to comment on them, or both. Even so, despite our involvement, the arbitrary idea to celebrate and resume after 10, 25 or 50 years—of all the possible intervals—and to combine this celebration with the promise of a new orientation, a new beginning of sorts, remains random and of course completely unscientific.

Continuities

The impression of continuity seems pivotal to this form of representation and its mode of display in epochs, centuries, and decades. The talk of epochs, scales,

liminalities and ties, transitions and crossings sketches a plausible sense of the conjunction of time. The focus of the anniversary, however, is squarely on an impression of continuity. Such a seemingly plausible construction of continuity may even be related to the recent renaissance of ethnic consciousness among young and old nations alike: the rediscovery of the nation and national identity invokes an impression of duration. Nations and their experts (including, notably, their ethnologists) have developed various arguments to support this impression, often based on their so-called folk-culture, seen as the brick and mortar of their cultural systems. Searching for the “deep play” (Geertz 1973) of their own societies, they perform their “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In so doing, they sometimes flesh out smart and innovative interpretations, but even so they have lost their unchallenged authority after the epistemological crisis. Cultural representation is now not only contingent and historical, it has also become contestable and is, indeed, contested on all fronts.

Nevertheless, the importance of the jubilee, the point of it, remains undiscussed. There is no public debate about the necessity of anniversaries in general. Jubilees have to be celebrated. Their importance is self-evident, that is to say that they are plausible, they make sense, and they produce an aura. As a matter of course any group and any institution that would neglect such an occasion might be blamed for missing the unique chance that an anniversary offers: to reflect, to promote, to celebrate. Not to take advantage of such an event could be assigned to ignorance, apathy or, worse, to arrogance.

As it was so tempting, I could not refrain from using SIEF’s own announcement of its jubilee meeting (from which this special issue stems) to illustrate my argument. Announcing “a golden jubilee symposium in Amsterdam” on 12 September 2014, SIEF invited us to join in a “special celebration of its 50th anniversary.”

We gathered, according to the announcement, to celebrate “50 years of collaboration [can this have a double meaning?], dialogue, and critical debate in ethnology and folklore... and [to join] in a toast to the next 50 years.” Much like in every other jubilee, the occasion was used to reflect “on the shape of the field(s) and society, their past, present, and future.” In attendance, an “illustrious lineup of speakers at the jubilee symposium includes two of SIEF’s ex-presidents, SIEF’s official historian and special invited



Logo SIEF 50 Years Jubilee.

guests." What great company in which to repeat the origins, rehearse the history, and perform its continuity!

Yet this repetition, rehearsal, and reflection also provide an occasion for forward movement, for a promise of progress. Preceding the symposium, SIEF's jubilee was celebrated also with an extraordinary General Assembly that, as signaled in the announcement, moved SIEF "after 50 years, into a new age of digital democracy": the promise of a new beginning, leading scholars into an era in which digitalism is the new frame of scientific communication. Behind this lurks the strong belief that the Internet will strengthen democracy and that digitalization will mobilize, open access, and multiply the opportunity to speak.

Deconstructionists really look old today. Networkers are the new constructionists. Out of the ashes of postmodern deconstruction, the networks rise wherever one looks, bringing together hermeneutics, actor-network theory, bio-thesis, and new media studies, creating a vision for the global network society. Participation, it turns out, has been an elitarian approach, it is an old-world word; "sharing" is instead offered as a more democratic approach, sometimes with a moralistic impulse. It is also, I would add, a form of control.

Outlook: Another Mode of Repetition?

Some weeks ago in Vienna, Tom Cruise raised some interest while filming scenes for "Mission Impossible V" around the opera house. Number V is a repetition of previous impossible missions. Like in a Dada-collage, the immortal soldier wakes up again, having been killed before in his fight against the aliens. The permanent reboot enables Cruise to master situations better. Hollywood has remakes and rebirths and reenactments, it produces actions in ellipses; the DVD collapses, jumps back and forth and presents what we have already seen. Its heroes seem to have experienced everything already before. Its originality arises from anatomising the repeated and the known, converting it into new formats. And shortly after this year's 9/11 (a date that denotes an event looking forward already at the time of its naming to future commemorations), the movie "A Most Wanted Man" (Director Anton Corbijn) was released in Germany. It is the story of a Chechen muslim who illegally immigrated to Hamburg and got involved in the international war of terror (according to a novel of John le Carré) which was affording a splendid opportunity to anniversarize not only 9/11 itself, but also to remember the late Philip Seymour Hoffmann.

Finale

Georg Simmel, a bright German sociologist and philosopher, noted at the beginning of the twentieth century that human beings can acquire power only from things in which they have implemented meanings and ideas before. This takes us back to anniversaries: Two young ladies recently told me that they celebrated the tenth anniversary of the day they got to know one another. Besides partaking in that obsessive cult of remembrance and the heritage regime, they were simply in the mood to commemorate and to celebrate themselves. On the other hand, in 2015 Vienna is selling history in announcing a bundle of celebrations: the 650 years' anniversary of Vienna University, the 200 years' anniversary of Vienna University of Technology, and the 150th anniversary of the Wiener Ringstrasse (the road around the old town of Vienna). At the end of 2014 the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* announced a list of jubilees: "Runde Sache-Jubiläen 2015" with "rounded" dates according to the decimalist model, counting down from 600 (Jan Hus) to 200 (Waterloo and the kingdom of the Netherlands) to 10 years (the first video on Youtube) (Runde 2014).

Commemorative coin celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, issued in 2015 by the Belgian government. The French president Hollande found this historical commemoration "harmful" because it memorialized a battle that France lost. In the European Council, Hollande successfully put pressure on Belgium to destroy the entire run of coins. France itself was, however, not hindered in 2014 by issuing coins commemorating D-Day, which marked a much more recent defeat of another European country.



Notes

- 1 Haberlandt and Wolf only came into contact in 1897, after which Haberlandt was helpful in promoting Wolf's career. The presentation of Wolf's music in 1994 was chosen to accentuate the spirit of the end of the nineteenth century.
- 2 For the whole event, see *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 1995, 84-100.
- 3 <http://www.fastcompany.com/3023504/leadership-now/an-inside-look-into-the-wild-west-of-life-coaching> (accessed March 10 2014). The website is just one of the many examples showing how marketing strategy entrepreneurs try to overflow the world with "coaching" in terms of "cultivating creativity."
- 4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_historical_anniversaries (accessed March 10, 2014). The website encourages users: "Browse [!] important events in history by clicking on each day a featured archival *New York Times* front page article, as well as a list of other notable event that occurred on that day." The calendar has a row of external links and resources such as *New York Times*, the Library of Congress or Today in Australian History.
- 5 In 2014 the cradle at the Piazza San Pietro in the Vatican held the inscription "Franziskus 1223 - Franziskus 2013," citing the inauguration in 2013 of the new pope Franziskus.
- 6 The term is coined in analogy to idolatry, the adoration of images, see: Michel 1987 and <http://www.zeit.de/1987/38/die-magie-des-ortes> (accessed March 1, 2015).
- 7 The SIEF Congress in Zürich in 1987 was entitled "The Life Cycle."
- 8 Already in 1996, his memory was honoured with a "Nessler-Prize," the "Karl-Ludwig-Nessler-Jubiläumsfrisieren," which is awarded to accomplished members of the German hairdresser trade every third year. Nessler, born 1872 in Todtnau, emigrated in 1918 to the US where he died in 1951; cf en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Nessler (accessed March 10th, 2014).
- 9 Etymologically the word "event" has its roots in the word "aventure" as something unexpected, never seen before, conveying also the intention to out-do or top what went before.
- 10 With a broadened notion of these lieux see the big movement of Nora 1997, see also the many followers of this idea in likewise projects in Germany, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands etc.

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