Digital Aestheticization and its Challenges

International Symposium

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
6 September 2023

DigiFREN
Digital Aestheticization
of Fragile Environments

Venue:

In-Person
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts
Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
Zavetiška 5, 1000 Ljubljana
Lecture room: P3

Online
ZOOM: https://uni-lj-si.zoom.us/j/3214435602?pwd=aENGcUlMcWNxQ2o0NzJibWFqTkh1QT09

Organisers:
Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana;
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb

Programme and organising committee, editors of the book of abstracts:
Assist. Prof. Blaž Bajič (UL), RA Sanja Đurin (IEF), Assist. Ana Svetel (UL)

Cover Photo: Senso-digital walk, 19 July 2023, Roban Cirque, Solčavsko, Ana Svetel.

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Across diverse European environments, one can readily observe that how people engage with their surroundings has changed dramatically. In the mountains and the forests, along riverbanks and seacoasts, it is hard to find anyone who is not tapping on their smartphones, flying drones, using wearable cameras or other digital gadgets to "capture" and augment their experiences. This process could be described as one of digital aestheticization, a process of mediating, reframing, and decentring human perceptions through and by digital media and technologies and diverse "ordinary" aesthetic categories (Ngai 2010) (re)produced therein. Research on how digitalization affects environmental relations is particularly pressing in times of "overheating" (Eriksen 2016) as it pertains to broader issues of cultural and ecological sustainability.

Yet, digital aestheticization, taking place through an intra-relatedness and in-betweenness of digital and non-digital, online and offline engagements, words and senses, remains a diffuse and impalpable process. Thus, it challenges cultural anthropology, cultural studies, science and technology studies, human geography, environmental history, and other disciplines to develop judicious and discerning methodological and epistemological approaches.

The symposium on Digital Aestheticization and its Challenges aims to address the central question of how to grasp and understand this intricate process. This issue will be elaborated from methodological, epistemological/conceptual, and ethnographic perspectives. By bringing together scholars and practitioners from various disciplines, it will foster interdisciplinary dialogues, exchange insights, and develop innovative methodologies to unravel the intricacies of digital aestheticization in the context of the environment. We hope that together we can advance knowledge and contribute to sustainable approaches that navigate the ever-evolving relationship between digital technologies, aesthetics, and the environment.

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Programme:

9.00 **Welcome by the Organisers**
Uršula Lipovec Čebron, Head of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, FF UL
Jaka Repič, leader of Ethnological research of cultural knowledge, practices, and forms of socialities, an ARIS research and infrastructure programme
Blaž Bajič, DigiFREN project leader

9.30 **Presentation of the Project**
Blaž Bajič: *Digital Aestheticization of Fragile Environments*

10.00 Coffee Break

10.15 **Session 1 – Ethnographic Potential of Aesthetics**
Chair: Sandi Abram

Rajko Muršič
Aesthetic Whisperings of Sounding Rivers: On Vulnerability of the Mura and Oder Rivers and the Balkan River Defence

Magdalena Sztandara
'I will not talk about cranes when they kill my river'. Grief as a Response to the Environmental Disaster on the Oder River

Senka Božič-Vrbančić, Mario Vrbančić
Aesthetic Categories and Telašćica Nature Park

11. 45 Coffee Break

12.00 **Session 2 – Images, Technologies, Change**
Chair: Senka Božič-Vrbančić

Juhana Venäläinen
Hiking with Machine's Eyes. Challenges and Possibilities in Using Computer Vision to Analyse Visual Representations of Recreational Nature Sites

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Finn Arne Jørgensen
Environmental Change and Rephotography

Tomislav Oroz
Putting Time in the Picture – Temporality and Digital Technologies

13.30   Lunch Break

15.00   **Session 3 – Skiscapes, Walkscapes, Talkscapes**
Chair: Ana Svetel

Mark P. Muniz, Matthew A. Tornow
Virtual Skiscapes, Climate Change, and Digitizing the Ephemeral Experience

Sandi Abram
Walking the Post-Digital World: A Hybrid Method for Exploring the Environment and Digital Technologies

Blaž Bajič, Sanja Đurin
Thinking Through (Senso-digital) Walking – A Dialogue

16.30   Concluding Remarks

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Book of Abstracts

Rajko Muršič, University of Ljubljana (rajko.mursic@ff.uni-lj.si)
Aesthetic Whisperings of Sounding Rivers: On Vulnerability of the Mura and Oder Rivers and the Balkan River Defence

Selected sound recordings from the banks of the rivers Mura and Oder will provide an opportunity to compare and analyse the vulnerable environments through critical use of the concept of aesthetization. Recorded sound ambiances at the rivers' banks may bring the perception of transitory spaces to any sound reproduction device, anywhere in the world. Can sonic digital commons in the process of presenting sonic postcards in any way affect the perception of space? The main question the author will pose is understanding of various aesthetization processes as prerequisite for integration of ethics, aesthetics, and politics, i. e., the relationship of individual and common. Aesthetization relates to active sensory perception of any given space, using digital extensions of sensory perception with expanded techniques in shaping of humanly created world (praxis) over the more-than-human environments.

Magdalena Sztandara, Jagiellonian University (magdalena.sztandara@uj.edu.pl)
'I will not talk about cranes when they kill my river'. Grief as a Response to the Environmental Disaster on the Oder River

In the summer of 2022, the whole of Poland lived an environmental disaster on the Oder River. As a result, thousands of dead fish remained in the river and the deadly threat affected all beings, including humans. Not only has the disaster continued uninterrupted for a year, but many people are haunted by the vision that it will return in the years to come. The situation on the Oder has provoked debates about the condition of the river as a common good, relationships with wildlife and the effectiveness of public policies to protect the environment. One of the emotional reactions to the disaster was grief, attributed to experienced but also anticipated loss. Grieving artists, environmentalists and nature conservationists began to create representations of the Oder using images and sounds. They attempt to use them not only to convey the urgency of the situation but also to generate discussion about the future of the river. Grief and its various forms (from the social to the aesthetic), seem to acknowledge the fragility of the river but also to take responsibility for its fate.

In line with those actions and representations (sonic and visual), I attempt to problematise grief and ecological loss. What are the political, ethical, and aesthetic implications of ecological grief? How can grief be approached as an active, hopeful, productive engagement, with ethical-aesthetic-affective interventions behind it that are driven by the need to arouse public feelings? Does

mourning and visual-sound interventions allow us to perceive the 'slow violence' of environmental injustice? Finally, can emerging representations influence the ways of seeing the river and become a condition for new political agency?

Senka Božić-Vrbančić, Universtiy of Zadar (svrbanci@unizd.hr)
Mario Vrbančić, Universtiy of Zadar (mavrbanci@unizd.hr)
Aesthetic Categories and Telašćica Nature Park

The day trip to Telašćica Nature Park offers a variety of exciting activities, including snorkelling, swimming, climbing the cliffs, and floating in the salt lake. These experiences are widely promoted on various tourist websites as must-do activities in Zadar. When we conducted a Google search in early June this year, we came across many of these websites. Interestingly, in the following days, we noticed targeted ads about activities in Telašćica appearing on our screens every time we used the web. This algorithm-driven advertising strategy prompted us to analyse how different commercial web companies function as performative intermediaries in our postdigital time, influencing our ways of seeing and shaping our perception of natural parks as recreational playgrounds. Drawing inspiration from the works of Ngai and Berlant, we am particularly intrigued by the emergence of various aesthetic categories in relation to the description of experience of Telašćica and the park itself (interesting, cute …). As Ngai states an aesthetic category always "names the bond between a sensuous 'look' and a discursive evaluation … and both sides of that relation are saturated with affect" (2022: 24). Therefore, through our analysis, we aim to explore some aesthetic categories related to Telašćica's commercial websites, and their entanglement with the broader issues of our historical present (precarity, fragility, environmentality …).

Juhana Venäläinen, University of Eastern Finland (juhana.venalainen@uef.fi)
Hiking with Machine's Eyes: Challenges and Possibilities in Using Computer Vision to Analyse Visual Representations of Recreational Nature Sites

This paper explores the methodological and epistemological implications of using computer vision to analyse digitally circulating visual representations of recreational nature sites. For the experiment, 6648 recent Instagram photos from Patvinsuo National Park (Lieksa, Finland) were collected through relevant hashtags. The photos were analysed using unsupervised machine learning methods in the Orange Data Mining platform: image embeddings (Google's Inception v3 API), hierarchical clustering, and principal component analysis. These methods facilitated constructing a "visual taxonomy" of nature representations and a set of dichotomous factors that supposedly describe a part of the dataset's "variance" as identified by the embedding algorithm. I will discuss whether and to what extent the resulting taxonomy and the dichotomies intuitively make sense and can be interpreted by the researchers. When the results are easy to interpret,

they point at the promise of extending the scale of data beyond ordinary human effort. Conversely, even counterintuitive findings can be valuable for boosting our analytical imagination.

The findings suggest that machine learning's advantage in this domain is not merely finding "answers" (as in labelling objects or formulating categories) but inspiring new questions and challenging our underlying assumptions. Additionally, the experiment emphasises the need to recognise biases within analytical tools, a critical aspect when incorporating computer-assisted methods into the analysis process.

Finn Arne Jørgensen, University of Stavanger (finn.a.jorgensen@uis.no)
Environmental Change and Rephotography

This paper explores how scholars can use rephotography as a method in research and outreach on topics related to environmental change. The paper will combine an overview of the field with analysis of relevant cases, followed by practically grounded reflections of how we can use rephotography in our practices as scholars.

While rephotography as a term encapsulates a wide range of practices through many fields, including environmental sciences and arts, I will focus on two main approaches to rephotography. The first is the creation of a time-series of images of particular locations through photographing the same scene at different times. A very common motif in such series of images is the melting glacier, where rephotography helps create a sense of loss and urgency. Viewers can see the glacier disappearing before their eyes, as the glacial passage of time speeds up. The second approach is one where the photographer superimposes a historical photograph on top of a newer scene, either by editing a photo into another or by holding a physical printout up against a landscape with one hand and taking the photo with the other.

In either case rephotography provides us with a way to directly observe change in landscapes over time and to make slow environmental change concrete and comprehensible. The paper will argue that scholars can use rephotography to stimulate to reflection over our ideas of environmental baselines and change.

Tomisalv Oroz, University of Zadar (toroz@unizd.hr)
Putting Time in the Picture – Temporality and Digital Technologies

The presentation will problematize the concept of temporality in the context of research conducted thus far in Telašćica Nature Park on Dugi Otok island, Croatia. On the internet and social media, Telašćica Nature Park is often visually advertised as a natural retreat, evoking images of a wild and protected island space with no human activities in the scene. These images are often accompanied by drone pictures that highlight the steep cliffs on the western part of the island, overlooking the open sea, or those that showcase the salty lake Mir. From the ground, the same cliffs in Telašćica serve as Instagram-worthy locations for visitors whose kayak tours or walks

around the park lead them to capture the 'right moment' for the 'perfect' picture. Additionally, in 2021, various locations throughout Dugi Otok and Telašćica Nature Park served as the backdrop for Expeditie Robinson, the RTL Netherlands version of the popular TV show Survivor. Therefore, this presentation will primarily focus on the theoretical and methodological challenges that emerge when examining the ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory experiences of time conveyed through the digital re-figurations of Telašćica Nature Park. Whether it's the sense of timelessness, the feeling of acceleration or a hectic pace, or other temporal modalities influenced by what John Gillis refers to as 'islomania' (2001), implying the long dureé of the Western imagination of islands, the temporal rhythms overlap and entangled, significantly impacting our understanding of islands and their environments. Building upon Mark Coeckelbergh's concept of "technoperformances of time" (2023), this presentation aims to initiate a discussion about how we orchestrate and conceptualize our temporalities through the technologies we employ and engage with. In order to comprehend the various temporal frameworks conveyed and reproduced through the digital re-figuration of nature, this presentation will question the entangled relations between fragmented experiences of time, digital technologies and diverse aesthetic categories that use temporalities to highlight the sense of island experience.

Mark P. Muniz, St. Cloud State University (mpmuniz@stcloudstate.edu)
Matthew A. Tornow, St. Cloud State University (matornow@stcloudstate.edu)
Virtual Skiscapes, Climate Change, and Digitizing the Ephemeral Experience

By engaging in outdoor sports and activities, people develop communities of practice that imbue natural landscapes with cultural meanings. Communities of practice that engage in winter sports, such as Nordic skiing, are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change as winters grow warmer making ski seasons shorter. Social distancing in response to COVID-19 decentered community engagement with specific cultural landscapes as many iconic cross-country ski races created virtual options for participation. Examples of virtual options include skiing at alternative venues or substituting completely different activities (e.g., running, cycling, swimming) in place of skiing. An anonymous survey of 1300 cross-country skiers provides multifaceted data on how virtual participation in otherwise in-person events affected perceptions of culture and community at various social and geographic scales. Special emphasis is placed on the way in which many skiers digitized their experiences with nature as a means to record the completion of their virtual events. Virtual alternative races may provide local solutions to lack of snow, but they disrupt the connection between humans, winter landscapes, and the shared production of meaning by allowing the culturally sanctioned substitution of one appropriate "skiscape" for another. The use of digital platforms to document and share these virtual alternatives plays a very important role in facilitating the adaptation to climate change while maintaining a sense of community that is highly prioritized by the survey respondents.

Sandi Abram, Universtiy of Ljubljama (sandi.abram@ff.uni-lj.si)
Walking the Post-Digital World: A Hybrid Method for Exploring the Environment and Digital Technologies

Walking is considered a specific methodological tool as it allows for dynamic, multisensory encounters with(in) the environment. When walking with others and walking with place (Springgay and Truman 2018), it can help us "'creatively construct correspondences' [Okely 1994] between our own and others' experiences" (Pink 2015: 47). However, recent considerations about the "post-digital world" (Berry 2014) have shown that existing "new walking studies" (Lorimer 2011) have not sufficiently captured the intersection of sensory perception and the use of digital media and technologies in the research of territory, instead assuming a separation between the realm of "the sensory" and "the digital". This paper introduces the development of a "hybrid" (Przybylski 2021) experimental method of senso-digital walking. Influenced by mobile methods used in ethnographic studies of sensory experience and technology (Bajič and Abram 2019; Jørgensen 2017), senso-digital walking aims to stimulate reflection on the "interface between the physical and the digital" (Dufva and Dufva 2019: 23) while walking through an unfolding environment.

Blaž Bajič, University of Ljubljana (blaz.bajic@ff.uni-lj.si)
Sanja Đurin, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (sdurin@ief.hr)
Thinking Through (Senso-digital) Walking – A Dialogue

For this experiment in thinking jointly and singly, we draw chiefly from our ethnographic experiences in the Alpine Solčava Region in Northern Slovenia, and in Paklenica gorge in northern Dalmatia in Croatia in order to dialogically reflect on the methodological ramifications of senso-digital walking. Environments, as the ones where we are conducting our fieldwork in, due to them being full of people using digital gadgets, wearables, mobile apps, digitally mediated and/or internet-acquired imagery to imagine, augment, and represent their experiences, afford an excellent opportunity for the study of digital aestheticization. To engender our knowledge of the process, we have utilised a variation on now well-established method of ethnographic walking, namely senso-digital walking. With senso-digital walking, we aim to enable temporally and spatially focused ethnographic study of the interrelatedness and in-betweenness of digital and non-digital, online and offline engagements (Przybylski 2021; Zavratnik and Svetel 2021; Podjed and Muršič 2021). However, what does this developing experimental method entail practically, what must one especially focus on, and what are what kind epistemological potentials and limitations does it provide? Reflecting the very dialogical form of senso-digital walking we, in our conversation-cum-paper, offer some tentative observations and considerations from the dynamic interweaving of interface between the physical and the digital" (Dufva and Dufva 2019: 23).