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## Complexities of the Mundane: Recollections

Workshop *Power and Politics of Mundane Memories. Tracing, Templating and Transforming Everyday Life*. London (March 24, 2017), King's College London

### Introduction

Personal and collective memory-making are usually studied on large scales that bridge rather extensive temporal distances, at least in human time. What is overlooked are the kinds of ordinary phenomena mundane memories are made of. The routines of keeping and recurring records, taking notes and planning the proximate future as well as representations thereof and the tools used to accomplish such activities often seem neither especially consequential nor important. Frames of meaning, cultural practices and socio-political cleavages profoundly inform their ethics of attention and recognition that impact upon which mundane memories become normalised while others are rendered redundant, suspicious or precarious.

The concept of mundane memories, explored in this workshop, aims at providing a lens through which it may be possible to examine or contemplate the largely ignored modes of day-to-day remembering that knit together activities, events, relations, materials and places of quotidian life along the chronological axis of past, present and future. With speakers from sciences, arts and humanities, and curatorial institutions, the

workshop explored a framework through which it is possible to address the complexities of mundane recollections. Namely by bringing to the discussion professionals from outside the academic practice, like photographers, artists and writers. The workshop also explored practices and representations of mundane memories in artistic works, organisations as well as in media forms from historical and current perspectives.

Specifically, the workshop addressed the following questions:

- a) How do digitally networked tools and platforms for tracking, broadcasting, sequencing, and archiving people's everyday lives impact upon mundane memory-making?
- b) How can the concept of mundane memories be brought in conversation with ongoing work on digital and social surveillance, raising questions related to ownership of data that records everyday life?
- c) Which kinds of efforts go into upholding and transforming the temporal organisation and calibration of quotidian life in times of disruption?
- d) How can mundane memories be understood from a non-human centric perspective, considering the materials, environments and infrastructures that preserve and arrange records of day-to-day activities?
- e) How can we, academics, practitioners and the public interested in these questions, work together to produce cohesive approaches towards the conceptualisation of mundane memories?

The first panel addressed the topic of 'Exploiting Mundane Memories', with Andrew Hoskins from the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow giving a talk on 'the digital mundane and the abandoned past'. 'Reimagining the Daily Grid', the second panel, opened with Katrin Schreiter, lecturer of German and European Studies at KCL, who discussed her exhibition 'Things we keep'. This was followed by a talk from Katherine Howells, PhD student at the Department of Digital Humanities at KCL, who analysed the relationship between the mundane and the culturally significant in Ministry of Information campaigns of the Second World War. The workshop closed with a roundtable discussion between photo journalist Ömür Özkoyuncu Black, and Cigdem Esin and Aura Lounasmaa from the 'Stories from the Jungle' project at the University of East London, as well as Max Saunders, from the Department of English and the Ego-Media Project at KCL.

## Conceptual Background

Since the beginnings of human culture, techniques and tools have been devised to schedule and manage the temporal relations that connect people, places, events and things (Hoy 2009; Landes 1983; McCrossin 2013). The workshop explored the im-

portance of such representations and practices that are often found in artistic works, social organisations and affordances of media forms and technologies

Over the past two decades, the study of memory and remembering has gained momentum to become a cardinal area of study not only in the newly established 'memory studies' but also in humanities and social sciences as well as in other fields of inquiry and professional practice. This growing theoretical and empirical interest in the construction, form, transfer and contestation of memory has animated a burgeoning body of literature exploring individual memory, personal memory, family memory, collective memory and cultural memory.

Drawing on various disciplinary traditions, researchers have begun to approach mundane life regarding common sense and skills, routines and ethnic-methods, rituals and practices and have shed light on issues such as the continuous conduct an ongoing accomplishment of social interaction, inertia, and accountability or taken-for-granted systems of meaning<sup>1</sup>. These general sensibilities also have been taken to empirical fields like laboratories (Knorr Cetina 1981), domestic media use (Silverstone 1994) or waste recycling (Woolgar & Neyland 2013).

The features of mundane memories highlighted above give rise to the following questions that were critically examined in discussions during the workshop:

- What are the disciplinary understandings of the mundanity of memories and how could their differences and similarities be made productive?
- Through which practices do mundane memories come into being and how do they differ and perhaps conflict in time, across cultures or between social sectors and institutions?
- How are mundane memories and memories of the mundane reflected in artistic and literary work(s)?
- How do practices and presentations of mundane memories interact and what role is ascribed to media forms and technologies in accomplishing mundane memories?
- What ambitions and expectations are associated with the organisation of mundane memories, for instance, regarding efficiency, expedition or scale?

## Outlook

Three general and connected themes emerged from the workshop:

1. *The Continuity and Contingency of Mundane Memories*. Mundane memories and their relations to places, people, events and media are marked by repetition

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1984; de Certeau 1984.

and revolution alike. Instead of taking the orderliness or ordinariness of mundane memories for granted, such perspective emphasises the work that goes – and has always gone – into upholding and transforming the temporal organisation and calibration of quotidian life. Arguably, these efforts become especially evident in times of disruption or collapse when the ordinary becomes extraordinary and the recreation of the daily grind a primordial task.

A cultural history of mundane memories could follow up on the evolving, corresponding or conflicting forms of accomplishing and valuing day-to-day temporal scaffolding. In their incongruity, mundane memories could then also become a matter of comparison, contrast and scale across cultures and time. Moreover, given mundane memories' resonance with ideas about orderly conduct, frictionless cohabitation and settlement, assumptions about the appropriate or necessary ways of maintaining everyday remembering can also be set in contrast to thus allegedly unsettled ways of living in need of order and structure. Moreover, thinking of the manifold arrangements necessary to bring mundane memories into being might also open up to non-human centric views by looking at their materials, environments and infrastructures.

2. *The Power and Politics of Mundane Memories.* Frames of meaning, cultural practices and socio-political cleavages profoundly inform the ethics of attention and recognition that render certain mundane memories normalised or naturalised while others are deemed suspicious or precarious. Mundane memories hence also can function as objects of pedagogy so to pass on and impart acceptable and accountable ways of memory making in everyday life.

Furthermore, mundane memories are also met with expectations about enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, pushed and measured by novel digital devices and services and their call for swifter creation, more simple organization and better adjustment. Digital technologies can, moreover, be seen as eliciting mundane memory-making by rendering something as being memorable enough to be posted, shared or commented.

3. *The Growing Pervasiveness and Publicness of Mundane Memories.* Practices and representations of mundane memories arguably are changing in the face of the rise of mobile and digital media. As of now, due to the sheer volume of media technologies and forms and their systemic impact, social life is usually recorded by default, complimenting people's self-documentation in e.g. diaries, blogs or videos. These automatically generated accounts of the daily lives raise issues of attention, presentation and filtering as they constitute much more scattered and partial accounts open to incongruous empirical, potential and intended public. They are vulnerable to problems related to corrupt data, vanishing records and decay as well as all those parts of life that still (can) escape automatized notation.

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