Temporality and Material Culture under Socialism (online, 1-2 Jul 21)

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Rafael Ugarte Chacón, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

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Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

This conference focuses on the relationship between temporality and material culture in twentieth-century socialist regimes. We are primarily interested in looking at case studies from the USSR and Europe, but also from other geographical contexts such as Asia, Latin America, and Africa, especially from a comparative perspective.

In the last decades, "time" has increasingly become a research topic in itself: theoretical studies of changing experiences, perceptions, and conceptualizations of past, present, future (and even eternity) have taken off. These studies have spawned a wide-ranging discussion on the modern and postmodern temporalities, on the so-called "régimes d'historicité" (Hartog 2003), spanning several disciplines and national contexts.

Researchers of socialist societies have been no strangers to this boom. Temporality figures as an important theme in recent scholarship on socialist culture, including architecture, painting, literature, photography, and cinema. One of the common pieces of reference of many of these works is Vladimir Paperny's concept of "Culture Two". However, as in Paperny's study of Soviet architecture, socialist temporality typically figures as only one theme among many, rather than a subject proper. As a result, for instance, scholarship often draws upon clear dichotomies between past and future, without a rigorous critique of these categories themselves.

Accordingly, this conference seeks to foreground the analysis of socialist temporality as the main object of study. All the same, we believe that material culture provides a particularly effective "entry point" into the problem of time. Following the ideas developed by the "spatial turn", especially in memory and cultural studies, this workshop emphasizes the fact that experiences of time are hardly separable from experiences of space. Thus, tackling the issue of temporality through the lens of material culture, we intend to ground the discussion of often-abstract concepts into their spatial and tangible incarnations.

We welcome interdisciplinary contributions dealing with the intersection of temporality and architecture, public art, urban planning, design, and other spheres of material culture.

We are particularly interested in, but not limited to, the following themes and questions:

 What was specific about the experience and conceptualization of time under socialism? Did it follow (or not) “Western” or global trends in the changing “regimes of historicity” and “temporality”? How does material culture reflect, embody, and represent this specific relationship to time under socialism?

 How do experiences and conceptualizations of time vary (or not) between socialist regimes in the 20th century? How did the circulation of material culture contribute to the circulation of representations, perceptions, and conceptions of “socialist time”?

 What was unique about the way temporality under socialism affected material culture? How was this relationship mediated by creators/artists?

 How did socialist material culture inform and participate in users’ experience and perception of time?

 How did the memorialization and heritagization of socialist material production reflect ideas about time?

We seek to foster an interdisciplinary conversation to tackle a central issue in the study of socialism – temporality – from new perspectives. We particularly encourage submissions from advanced graduate students and early career researchers.

This conference will take place on 1–2 July 2021 over Zoom. The working language will be English. Please send a short biographical statement and an abstract of up to 250 words to julie.deschepper@khi.fi.it by 16 April 2021. Decisions on the conference program will be made within two weeks of the deadline.

Organized by

Julie Deschepper, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut
Antony Kalashnikov, International Center for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences, NRU Higher School of Economics, Moscow
Federica Rossi, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut / Università degli Studi di Firenze

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