AMBIVALAND:

Cultural Ambivalence and the Aura of Newfoundland

Project Sketch

Newfoundland has captivated me since I was first invited for an artist residency on the island in 2007. After being struck by the beauty and majesty of the scenery, I learned about the rich and extraordinary history and culture of the place that is situated at the edge of North America, or virtually half-way to Europe. Soon, I also wondered about a number of apparent inconsistencies, like the historical relevance of the place in the face of its remoteness, the simultaneous light-heartedness and graveness radiated by many people, or their cherishing of a European ancestry contrasted by a strong regionalism. Observations like these which I felt were 'essential' yet hard to grasp and only fully perceptible on site eventually made up what I conceived as Newfoundland's chatoyant 'aura' in the Benjaminian sense. As my perception of this aura intensified, so did the place's inspiring grip on me. I was craving to capture that chatoyance and to grasp the fissured texture that was lurking beneath the shiny surface. Eventually, it dawned on me that multi-faceted layers of ambivalence might be at the core of this tension-filled yet stimulating Newfoundland aura.

To further develop the hypothesis that Newfoundland is a case in point for a place that bristles with ambivalence, the project first sheds more light on the notion of ambivalence. Against the background of how it is conceived and used across disciplines, an overarching yet concise definition for ambivalence is proposed. This allows for the clear identification of ambivalence while distinguishing it from notions it has an alleged overlap with, most notably from ambiguity. To develop a better understanding of ambivalence, it is then compared to and illustrated by concepts it has actual parallels with, such as paradox, dialectics, and janusian thinking. These concepts will also be called upon inorder to establish ambivalence's creative potential as an alternative to the encumbering force it is usually conceived as. Finally, ambivalence is conceptually expanded to characterize not only individuals but collectives and situations, and structures as well, an expansion that I refer to as cultural ambivalence.

Equipped with the idea of cultural ambivalence, the project sets out to identify and analyze ambivalences of this type in Newfoundland since the island became a node in the Atlantic Triangle in the sixteenth century. Instances studied in detail include the ambivalence of favouring vs. impeding settlement of the island by British stakeholders in the eighteenth century; the autonomy/dependence ambivalence inherent to early modern economic outposts; and the conflicting efforts to 'modernize' and to preserve the culture that was expected to vanish as a consequence in the decades after confederation with Canada in 1949. These historical ambivalences are augmented by two ambivalences that are induced by the geography of the place alone: the ambivalence of being marginal and historically central alluded to above and an island/mainland ambivalence that is rooted in Newfoundlanders' inclination to conceive of their large home island as a mainland-like world on its own. Looking at contemporary (settler) Newfoundland, two ambivalences figure particularly prominently. One is the often voiced experience of Newfoundlanders of European descent that, while they are undisputably colonizers, they are or were also colonized by Britain or Canada. The other is that of deep attachment to vs. often termless exploitation of the land as resource and environment. The project will identify actualizations of these ambivalences, reveal their correlations with historical and geographical ambivalences, and investigate their creative potential. The idea is to render visible a dynamic network of ambivalences that spans and shakes yet also coheres the Newfoundland society and culture.
The objective of the project is two-fold. First, it aims to defy the neglect and disregard of the concept of ambivalence, reveal its creative potential, and, in an expanded understanding, to establish cultural ambivalence as a powerful research lens that can help develop a better understanding of tension-filled sociocultural issues. To illustrate the device's functioning and to demonstrate its potency, the second project part will present Newfoundland as a case study. Employing the lens of sociocultural ambivalence, it attempts to shed new light on a number of intensively studied issues in Newfoundland's past and present and to provide a more coherent picture of apparently unrelated and inconsistent aspects of the local society and culture. Notably, the colonizer/colonized ambivalence inherent to the local settler society will be investigated to fathom its potential for opening the mutual perception of settlers and Indigenous peoples in Newfoundland. Moreover, by developing a deeper understanding of the origins of the observed attachment/exploitation ambivalence towards the land, the project attempts to undermine entrenched perspectives and facilitate considerations of how forces of previously counteracting groups might be joined. Ultimately, the project aims at enriching the perception of the place from inside as well as from outside by providing a lens and a mechanism of analysis that have the power to re-interpret alleged deficiencies and foster confidence and optimism. Looking beyond Newfoundland, the project's objective is to provide a novel analytical device that facilitates alternative modes of understanding locales or scenarios that appear filled with tension and studded with alleged inconsistencies more generally.

Being genuinely interdisciplinary, the project does not rely on a single or homogeneous theoretical framework. Rather, it uses a collection of methodological approaches reflecting a number of intellectual perspectives from various disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. These include problematization, transversality, genealogy, abductive reasoning, reassembling the social, and speculation. What unites these approaches is their capacity to open new realms for reasoning and knowledge through the radical questioning or active ignoring of existing explanatory systems, together with a rigorous appreciation of contingencies. Ideas from cybernetics and complex systems science, such as the ecology of mind and spontaneous emergence complement the methodological tool kit that focuses on tracing integral processes and relations rather than describing inert systems made of firmly demarcated subjects and phenomena.

The creation of artistic and documentary photo, video, and sound works based on footage collected across the island of Newfoundland and presented off and online will augment the scholarly findings and enrich interdisciplinarity with multimediarity. The idea is to combine and interweave academia and art to stimulate the eye, the ear, and the brain and to foster the accessibility of the results. This will enhance the chances for the concept of cultural ambivalence to enter the public discourse, a prerequisite for the actualization of its creative potential.
Biography

Originally from Germany, I am a doctoral student in the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador with a focus on Humanities, Social Sciences and English since January 2018. My academic background is in Physics. I studied at the universities in Saarbrücken and Cologne and completed my Master's Degree with a thesis in high energy physics at the Saarland University in Saarbrücken in 1996. Since 1995, I have been a member of the German Physical Society. I have held positions as a scientific assistant at the Max Planck Institute for Colloid and Surface Research in Potsdam and at the University of Essen from 1997-1999. Subsequently, finally following an early vocation, I started a career as a visual artist. I was a guest student at the renowned Academy of Fine Art in Düsseldorf in 1999/2000 and completed a training in Multimedia Design at ca.medien.colleg in Essen in 2001.

I have been working as a freelance artist since 2000 and my works have been exhibited in solo and group shows internationally. For the realization of my research-based artistic projects I was awarded numerous grants and awards by international institutions. Not unlike in natural science, the revelation and visualization of genuinely invisible or unseen connections and phenomena is at the core of my artistic work. Using a wide range of media – from photography, video and animation over object art and installation to graphics and sound – my focus is on themes that defy an easy or ultimate description and understanding. The finished works leave space for associations and inspire an engagement by the viewer.

Newfoundland has been the place and subject of my work since 2007 when I first came to the island for an artist residency at the Pouch Cove Foundation. Residencies in Terra Nova National Park (2011) and on Fogo Island (2012 & 2015) followed. Other places in Canada I have been invited to work at include Centre Est-Nord-Est in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli (2008) and Centre Daimon in Gatineau (2010).

Since the start of my artistic career, I have been engaged in artists' associations and initiatives, notably as a member of Berufsverband Bildender Künstler and Deutscher Künstlerbund, as well as a member and board member of Künstlerhaus Dortmund and Westdeutscher Künstlerbund. In 2016, I was elected a delegate of Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildenden Künste (IGBK), Berlin, the German stakeholder for visual artists in Europe. I am committed to advancing the connections to artists' societies in North America and have become a member of the Canadian Artists' Representation (CARFAC) in 2017. Moreover, I have promoted other artists' work by curating thematic group shows and shared my expertise on artistic mobility and cross-cultural artistic practice at conferences and symposia across Europe.

In recent years, my growing interest in cultural and social themes made me wish to put the related humanistic and social scientific research on a solid academic foundation. This wish came within reach when I was accepted into the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Memorial University. Today, I consider my work not as research-based art but as inter- and multidisciplinary research in which my artistic sensitivity, together with scientific structuredness and scholarly open-mindedness, are key ingredients to develop my projects, and visual art is one of the instruments (beside academic and creative writing) to convey my findings.

Newfoundland has become my partner's and my second home in 2016 when we purchased a small old home by the St. John's harbour that we are still busy refurbishing. Visit my photo blog for some impressions of making a new home across the Atlantic: www.rangsch.de/middle_battery.html