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Intangible Heritage is Virtual Heritage

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Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) never exists “as such” - it needs to be mediated to come into being. Naturally, ICH is mediated by humans acting as mediums. As a consequence, only few people will ever be able to observe these performances in real time. But because one of the aims of the UNESCO convention on ICH is to raise awareness of these cultural expressions internationally, they need to be transformed into medial representations that can transcend space and time.

This is a paradox situation. Firstly, the specific quality of ICH consists in many ways in its ability to remain open to changing circumstances. Secondly, every medial representation of “reality” is achieved at the cost of its ir-realization. Representing ICH comprises many complex and diverse processes: selecting, picturing, adapting, disseminating, digitizing and archiving being only some of them. In the course of working on an epistemology for a comprehensive future methodology for the creation of representations of ICH, an entirely new field of research emerges that encompasses discourses of Cultural and Visual Anthropology, the Anthropology of Knowledge, Heritage and Memory Studies.

In this talk I will try to indicate some aspects of the complexity of the problem. I discuss the need to move away from classical discourses of, for example, ethnographic film and its ever present idea of representing culture as a master narrative. Rather, we need to take into account present and future internet technologies as the most adequate tool for disseminating and archiving ICH. Key ideas for a comprehensive epistemology on the representation of ICH are multivocality and multisitedness, empowerment and experiment, cooperation and co-production. Finally I argue, that we have to accept that Intangible Heritage is, due to the nature of the medial representations that inhabit the world’s global cultural memory, always Virtual Heritage.