

Looking into the Machinery Room (Düsseldorf, 8–10 May 25)

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, May 8–10, 2025

Deadline: Oct 30, 2024

Prof. Dr. Eva-Maria Troelenberg

Looking into the Machinery Room: Images and Visual Archives of Movement and Acceleration across the Mediterranean.

Conference organized by Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Anna Sophia Messner and Shraddha Bhatawadekar (Research Group MEDMACH, ERC Horizon 2021, grant agreement ID: 101042597).

In this conference, we aim to seize the epistemic potential that arises when the production, circulation and storage of images and visual practices are interwoven with infrastructural histories. Taking the globally connected Mediterranean after 1800 as our geographical anchor, we look at visual histories around infrastructures and machineries, which envision, enable, or also inhibit, interrupt or destroy processes of mobility and acceleration.

This approach addresses the need to write a timely history of the Mediterranean, which reaches beyond national or cultural borders and essentialisms. We focus on the period starting from the 19th century which is increasingly characterized by fossil-driven acceleration and marked by an ever-increasing connectivity and mass-movement between the natural and geographical spaces, but also by profound alterations through nation-building and human interventions into nature. The same technical progress which triggered these processes also meant that these histories have been more systematically documented, narrated and broadly circulated through images and visual practices than ever before.

For instance, the Suez Canal and its Mediterranean port facilities were a popular photographic motive, marking a moment of transition for travelers on their Grand Tour after 1869. Images of the Canal, its port facilities, ships and dredgers began to circulate widely. More recently, the surreal image of the Costa Concordia cruise ship, lying afloat in the Tyrrhenian Sea between 2012 and 2014, embodied the excess of fossil fuel-driven mass tourism and decadence. At the same time, the shipwrecks left behind by African and Near Eastern migrants in the ship graveyard of Lampedusa constitute an iconic monument to the dire reality of Mediterranean migration today and have become a subject for activist art. Such examples show that there is not one linear and universal history of the modern and contemporary Mediterranean, but rather multiple histories entangled with cross-cultural encounters or conflicts.

Against this background, a main query of the conference is about the places where knowledge is kept in this context. By interrelating the geographical space and the spaces of knowledge storage

and production, we aim to map out institutions and archives whose holdings and practices are relevant for the unearthing and understanding of visual histories of movement after 1800. Thereby, we understand the notion of the archive not as metaphorical; rather, it is always bound to the material and technical reality of tangible and legible visual practices in a concrete historical context. At the same time, the archive is also to be understood in a dynamic epistemic sense, which includes the loss of, disinterest in, or resistance against image- and archive practices. This latter aspect is crucial to avoid privileging the normativity of official archives and the state or corporal power over the histories of nomadic, diasporic or marginalized agents and communities. This type of archival thinking emphasizes the relation of human agents to the material remains and to the ecosphere of the Mediterranean. It asks how individuals or communities engage with visual sources of knowledge on a local, regional and global scale.

We are particularly interested in case studies that examine the role of vehicles, vessels, train stations, port facilities, airports, bridges, water dams, channels, border structures and other infrastructural elements within the visual fabric of diverse sites around or connected to the Mediterranean. The visual practices surrounding these sites can range from touristic imagery to scientific documentation, from utopian planning to the creation of memorials, including the curatorial reinterpretation and re-use of infrastructural sites.

We invite contributions that address one or several of these aspects from the perspectives of art history, history, anthropology, industrial archeology and neighboring disciplines. Proposals by specialists and experts working in archives or artists engaged in related practices are particularly welcome. We also encourage early-career scholars (PhD and early Postdocs) to apply. The conference will take place at Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf from 8-10 May 2025. The conference language will be English.

The program includes a keynote by Naor H. Ben-Yehoyada (Columbia University).

Please submit your abstracts (no more than 300 words) and a short CV as a single PDF to medmach@hhu.de by 30 October 2024.

The applicants will be notified by the end of November. Travel and accommodation will be covered for all speakers.

For details on the research project see: <https://medmach.hypotheses.org/>

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Reference:

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