Centers and Peripheries. Photography's Geography Lessons (Rome, 17–21 Mar 25)

Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max Planck Institute for Art History, Mar 17–21, 2025
Deadline: Oct 27, 2024

Steffen Siegel

A photo-historical seminar for doctoral and post-doctoral scholars, organized and led by Tatjana Bartsch (Bibliotheca Hertziana), Luke Gartlan (University of St Andrews), Johannes Röll (Bibliotheca Hertziana), and Steffen Siegel (Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen)

Supported by the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Stiftung, Essen

In 1851, the London-based photographer Antoine Claudet staged a captivating group portrait in front of his camera. He may have had a little role play in mind, imagining his son as an instructor teaching geography to his pupils. The globe, visible in this picture, serves as a valuable instrument for such purposes, as do the open travelogues and photographically illustrated atlases. In the middle of the nineteenth century, knowledge about the world could draw on various resources, old and new. Claudet's "The Geography Lesson" lays open that the medium of photography had already gained pivotal importance in this context.

In 1839, Dominique François Arago had predicted such a function in his address to the Paris Academy of Sciences with remarkable clarity. Indeed, photographic practices have since proved indispensable for the scientific exploration of the globe but also for problematic forms of conquest, subjugation, and domestication. In the age of colonization, geography and photography entertained troubled forms of association. Such processes were driven and supported by a hierarchical logic that distinguished between centers and peripheries, most prominently dividing and apportioning the world in the era of "Western" empires. Yet, in the early twenty-first century, we must address a pressing question: Can we formulate all these observations in the past tense?

By no means has research dealing with the histories of photography avoided such problems. An increasing number of studies on the medium's history and current moment have been engaging with visual cultures all over the globe, in local, national, and transnational contexts. We can observe promising tendencies that the medium's historiography continues to open itself to a global scope. Yet, despite all reasonable efforts, we should wonder if such an overdue reconfiguration of our research interests will lead to historiographic models freed of all hierarchies. We still have to confront current research with problems of maintaining, extending, and deepening well-established differences that continue to shape our understanding of the histories of photography.

We should raise questions that address, in a forthright manner, the social fabric of our ongoing work. Thus, if we attend "Photography's Geography Lessons" today, we should deal with the intel-

lectual and institutional preconditions of how we conceive and justify our research interests. We have to address the relevant institutional frameworks for our work such as archival infrastructures, academic training, and access to publishing opportunities. And we must inquire how we involve research published in languages in distinct contexts and diasporic communities.

This seminar invites us to rethink the evident structures that have divided photography's territories into centers and peripheries. Such a divide relates to the global state of current research—the people and their institutions—and the materials and questions at play. How can we reshape the landscapes of photography by challenging still accepted canons? How can we broaden, convert, and renew our knowledge by considering what has been overlooked, neglected, and actively sidelined? What are the possible impacts of the so-called peripheries and how are they modifying, diversifying, and challenging understandings of the medium's manifold histories?

Drawing on these aspects, we invite applications from emerging scholars who will present new scholarship and, in the context of a week-long seminar, discuss a set of questions that relate to local or global histories of photography and that deal with problems of centers and peripheries, contested spaces, and the "imagined geographies" of photography and its cultures. Among the relevant questions that applicants may wish to consider and that will shape the seminar are:

– In what ways have photographs and their classification in archives enabled or prevented certain geographical imaginings of place in relation, for instance, to distance, proximity, locality, or mobility?

– How have photographic formats and forms of photography's presentation – including, to name but a few, panoramas, postcards, albums, photo books, photo-essays, and exhibitions – responded to and reconfigured understandings of geography, locality, and community, as well as its dispossession, occupation, contestation, division, and actual and potential re-imaginings?

– How might photo-historical research invite photographic encounters and imaginings of place and geography that center eco-critical, feminist, postcolonial, queer, migrant, and diasporic perceptions, experiences, and histories of location?

– How do we recognize, define, and interrogate photography's histories in terms not only of cartography, geography, and surveillance, but also nomadic, non-linear, disruptive or discordant strategies of place and travel?

– In what ways has photography historically transformed or reformed the emotions of location, in relation to longing, estrangement, identification, absence, presence, nostalgia, or loss?

– In what ways have photo-historians and curators interrogated the historical language of center and periphery in association with photographs? In what ways has photography produced, defined, or critiqued terms such as view, vista, and scene, but also the liminal, the heterotopic, and the non-site?

– How do we consider photographs and their archives in relation to concepts of center and periphery, the provincial, the rural, the metropolitan, the urban, the transnational, the migratory, and the mobile?
What critical approaches address the exclusions and absences in the photographing of place and

locality due, for example, to cultural, religious, or legal and governmental restrictions?

We welcome proposals from Ph.D. students in the dissertation phase and recent post-doctoral scholars (maximum of three years since degree) in art history and related disciplines with a strong photo-historical component. The seminar language will be English. All participants will present some aspect of their current research projects, which must relate to the program's subject matter. Visits to several photographic archives in Rome will be an integral part of the seminar.

The Bibliotheca Hertziana will provide lodging and reimburse the incurred expenses for traveling economy class up to 500 euros. Please upload the following application materials as PDF documents by October 27, 2024 on https://recruitment.biblhertz.it/auth/Apply/0/Position/15237125/Step/0

– Title and a 500-word abstract of the proposed topic (all participants will give a 30-minute formal presentation)
– Brief CV (maximum 3 pages)
– Brief summary of your dissertation or postdoctoral project
– Names and contact details of two references (but no letters at this point)
– Questions and queries may be sent to: fototeca@biblhertz.it

The first seminar was followed by the publication of "Circulating Photographs," a special issue of History of Photography, vol. 45, issue 1, 2021, co-edited by Antonella Pelizzari and Steffen Siegel:

https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/thph20/45/1?nav=tocList.

The second seminar will be followed by the publication of "Archival Absences: An Incomplete History of Photography," a special issue of Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, vol. 88, issue 4, 2025, co-edited by Elizabeth Otto and Steffen Siegel.

The organizers anticipate selecting a limited number of the 2025 seminar's final papers for publication in a similar volume.

Reference:

CFP: Centers and Peripheries. Photography's Geography Lessons (Rome, 17-21 Mar 25). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 15, 2024 (accessed Nov 22, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/42632>.