

Fluid archives

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A consistently and purely maritime perspective on the land is difficult for a territorial observer to comprehend. Our common language constructs its markers quite self-evidently from the land.

Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*

These 5 modules seek to provide a manner of thinking with the sea. They proceed, via a series of intersecting problematics, to disturb and critically undo the historical and cultural frames of Occidental provenance and their manner of disciplining and defining the modern Mediterranean.



Bianco & Valente, *Terra di me* (2018)

module 1

The challenge of the sea



Going off-shore and voicing the sea as a direct challenge to the terrestrial capture and national confinement of historical processes and cultural configurations is to operate a sharp cut in the habitual narratives of time and space. In particular, it involves confronting the linearity of historical narratives with complex singularities and constellations that exceed a singular rhythm and collocation. This leads to disturbing and interrupting the chronologies secured in the soil of the European narrative of progress and modernity. Commencing from intertwined histories and overlapping cultures encountered at sea, thinking with the inconclusive currents of their ongoing composition, loosens the authority of accounts deposited in the institutional stability of text books, museums and the objectifying gaze of the social sciences. Taking seriously the centrality of the sea to both biological life (human and non) and the making of our historical bodies and becoming, suggests adopting an ontological raft. Adrift, and less secure in our bearings, we can adopt an altogether more provisional navigation. It leads to a critical passage that in its very vulnerability is more responsive to the challenge of the present.

The Mediterranean is frequently evoked as the metaphor for the multifarious faces of modernity: from its presumed roots in classical Greece to the ever tighter intertwining of Africa, Asia and Europe in its waters induced by today's immigration 'crisis'. From the beginning to the end of this parable, questions of cultural identity, together with historical and political authority, have been elaborated, contested and imposed. Sedimented in its waters, as though in a liquid archive, both ancient amphorae and contemporary migrant bodies propose an inescapable materiality that breaches the metaphorical consolation of language. Unable to reduce the complex spatiotemporal heterogeneity of this body of water to a unique narrative, our language inevitably splutters on the edge of the unsaid and the indecipherable. The sea, with its fluid and tempestuous custody of the histories we seek to know, frustrates our rationality. This maritime challenge, famously rehearsed by Friedrich Nietzsche ('...at last our ships can put out again, no matter what the danger, the sea, our sea lies there open before us...'), suggests, beyond the more obvious appeal to the necessity of interdisciplinary and trans-national analyses, the registration of limits.¹

Such limits are never simply barriers. They are also productive in their invitation to consider what exceeds our conception and control. To take an obvious example, we could consider the most widely spoken language, in all of its variants and dialects, in the Mediterranean Basin: Arabic. Perhaps an 'Arabic Mediterranean', in the manner we Europeans are accustomed to consider such coordinates, does not exist. As a minimum it certainly evokes a very different set of perspectives, maps and lexicons. It suggests an archive that does not merely mirror a subaltern and repressed version of that elaborated over the last two centuries on the northern European shore. At the same time, this is not to suggest a separate alternative, or radical alterity, but rather to consider the underside and the unconscious dimensions of a Mediterranean which when laid out flat as the map betrays the limits of its modern European inscriptions.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, pp.209-10.

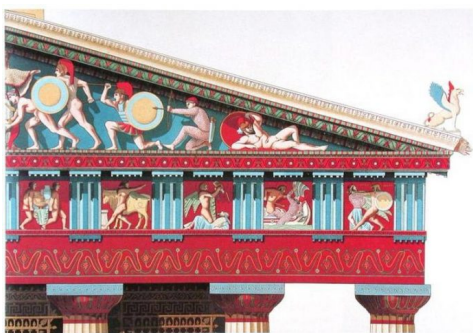
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module 2

Holes in time: thinking with the diver



Inside a tomb, rediscovered fifty years ago we encounter a distinctly dark male body that befuddles nineteenth century Hellenism and the transformation of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, together with Greek gods and heroes, into white Aryans. Some two thousand five hundred years ago a body descends gracefully through the air. This famous painting on the inside of the lid of a sarcophagus, destined to invisibility, lights up the present in an emergent reconfiguration of the past. It comes from the Greek settlement of Poseidonia, better known by its Roman name of Paestum. As a Greek colony, Paestum was part of the expansion of the Peloponnesian city states that stretched over Homer's 'wine-dark sea' into Asia Minor, northwards to the steppes bordering the Black Sea, and westwards through Sicily and southern Italy to the coastlines of modern France and Spain. Like all colonialisms, it invariably involved conquest, together with the subjugation and enslavement of indigenous populations. The land, as always, was never empty. Control had to be wrested from local authority. Blood would have been spilt, lives arbitrarily terminated. It involved the brutal imposition on someone's soil, memory and territory of an imported culture and its political management. This is the violence that accompanies what more recently has come to be identified in the specificities of settler colonialism. Today, much of this detail falls away, lost in the myths of a European nostalgia for the presumed purity and nobility of its origins. Yet it is deeply etched into the architectural grammar of contemporary Occidental cities where neo-classical buildings imitate the illusory whiteness of Antiquity: from imperial London, Paris, Washington and Berlin to fascist Rome. The temples of Paestum, as elsewhere in the classical world, were actually decorated in vivid colours.



125 Charles Garnier: Farbkonstruktion der Front (Ausschnitt rechte Hälfte) (1853/1884).

So, punching holes in time in order to think with the diver is to respond to the reverberations revealed in the profound *anachronism* of the historiographical operation. Opening the tomb is to suggest a set of connections and coordinates with which we could choose to navigate the Afro-Asian-European matrix of the Mediterranean. Of course, without abandoning the disciplinary competence that has brought this past to light (archaeology, philological research, the history of ancient Greece...), this also means refusing to reduce its materials to a single inventory of time. It is to adopt a more ironic relationship to origins. In a sort of archaeology of archaeology we can seek to uncover other genealogies that do not merely mirror a European will to power. This sends us out

along wider axes to make connections that might not and, according to certain disciplinary protocols, should not be made.

The large Viking treasure hoard found at Spillingsskatten in 1999 contained around 14,000 silver coins, nearly all them of Islamic origin. Over a thousand years ago these *dirhams* connected the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea to Asia and North Africa: the result of trade and raids that reached into the Mediterranean along the Atlantic coast (in the process producing the Normans) or via the great rivers of Russia flowing into the Black Sea and on to Constantinople.

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N. Shamma, *Maqamat Ziryab: Desde el Eufrates al Guafalaquivir*, CD, Pneuma, Madrid.

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module 3

Sea passages: colonialisms, migrations and the violence of the present



To think of the centrality of the sea to the colonial enterprise – both the thalassocracies and *mare nostrum* of the ancient world and the modern Occidental appropriation of the planet – is to understand the sea itself, not merely as an intermediary medium to elsewhere, but as an active archive. Listening to the pedagogy of the ‘repeating island’ (Antonio Benitez-Rojo) of the Caribbean, the colonial deposits sedimented in the sea passage from Africa to the Americas, in the bodies and histories both set ashore and cast away at sea, provides the language of the ‘sea is history’ (Derek Walcott). In this manner it becomes possible to dub and recast the centrality of maritime narratives in the making of modernity through histories from below, from far, far, below. This returns us to connections deep in time and space that provoke altogether more fluid and creolised cartographies compared to the assumed neutrality and stilled objectivity of Occidental maps. So, if the sea has been central to the transport of the European political economy around the world and the subsequent capitalisation of the planet, it has also been a crucial site of its counter-histories, refusals, rebellions, and the rejections of its uninvited laws.

Drawing these observations closer to hand, it is all too rapidly forgotten that modern colonialism as the planned and systematic appropriation of territory began in the Mediterranean with the maritime transport of Napoleon’s expedition (both military and scientific) to Egypt in 1798. The story of colonialism was never faraway, ‘down there’ in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Americas, but also right here, close to our European shores. All depended on the sea traffic in slaves, soldiers, stolen goods, illicit appropriation and ‘illegal immigration’. At the beginning of the Twentieth century Algeria was home to a European population of more than a million, mainly French, together with sizeable Spanish and Italian contingents. Tunisia, next door, although a French colony hosted an Italian population of around 300,000. In the mid-1930s the Italian population of Libya (seized from the Ottomans in 1911) amounted to roughly 13% of the total population. And if it was only in 1962 that French troops finally abandoned Algeria, the ongoing war against the local population by a settler-colonial society in Palestine-Israel daily reminds us of the colonial wound that refuses to close. At sea, temporary free of histories that run exclusively through the paranoid groove of the nation, we can perhaps better appreciate the historical and political sense of this colonial archive that continues to design and discipline the present.

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J. Fynn-Paul, ‘Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era’, in *Past and Present*, n. 205, November 2009.

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- A. Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, Bordighera Press, New York, 2015.
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module 4

The Mediterranean as a laboratory of modernity



Meeting at sea and looking landwards permits the evaluation of overlapping territories and intertwined histories (Edward Said). Here undoing time and refuting authorised representation is not simply tied to the impossibility of establishing boundaries and frontiers at sea. Rather, to be free of the ‘suffocating template’ of nationalism (Sivamohan Valluvan) is to engage more fully in the colonial constitution of the present that is indeed also seeking to confine and regulate the sea. So, the new centrality of the Mediterranean in historical, political and critical terms, suggests something more than simply a revisionist history and a reworking of the record – from archaeology to area studies and political science. This is certainly happening. But what is perhaps more significant is the deeper critical swell that pushes the axes of interpretation into another alignment. This is where the articulation of the history of the past comes to be recognized as an anachronism, its narratives and language themselves subject to historical analysis. Against the linear narration of causal chronologies, even those involving the most intricate nets and multiple rhythms of the *longue durée*, the historiographical operation always involves the anachronistic assemblage of the temporal past in a contemporary configuration. The retrieval of the evidence, its languages and techniques, does not simply impact on our understanding the past; it also constructs it, rendering it comprehensible through a present day understanding of concepts such as ‘documents’ and ‘archives’, even ‘archaeology’, and the shifting interpretative grids that accompany their identification. The historiographical operation is deeply embedded in the contours and concerns of the present. The presumed temporal distance that supposedly guarantees neutrality and objectivity is a critical illusion.

What I am suggesting here is that the modern Mediterranean has not only become a hot spot in terms of geo-political issues, migration and a postcolonial disciplinary revisioning of its previous objects of study, but that it also poses deeper questions that touch the epistemological heart of the social and human sciences and their knowledge formation. In immediate terms, this means to set modernity at the sea, drawing both the Mediterranean and aquatic archives in general, to the centre of our attention.

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module 5 Other maps, sights and sounds



The purpose of this module is to suggest emergent critical languages drawn from music and the visual arts that offer further maps of modernity and the Mediterranean. Rather than consider art and music in terms of historical testimony these languages and practices can suggest a critical movement in their own right. Here the history of art and the sociology of music become art as history and music as sociology. This is to understand that images – both visual and auditory – not only invite us to look and listen again as they move from the realm of representation to that of a critical injunction, but that they also contain more time than any one of us can ever fully grasp or comprehend. They disseminate interrogations that can never be fully answered. They invite us to consider more fluid cartographies as they travel without regard for local, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Beyond the brutal confines of identity cards and passports, such art promotes a cultural citizenship and an affirmative post-national belonging that frequently leaves the official lexicon speechless.

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Matri-Archive of the Mediterranean (MM):

<http://www.matriarchiviomediteraneo.org/?lang=en>

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Isaac Julien, *Western Union, Small Boats*, three screen video installation, 2007.