

MEDITERRANEAN AS METHOD

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On the map of the Mediterranean everything lies flat, and borders are clearly defined. The topography is rendered evident. All is seemingly captured by the eye, rendered measurable and knowable. This is the basis for the geopolitical chessboard where everything is put on the dissecting table. It seemingly provides a neutral and disinterested (or “scientific”) rendering of reality. But simply by asking who does the mapping, and what does the desire for transparency hide and obscure, we disturb this picture and capture the outline of another Mediterranean. For the power of our maps, where objective measurement confirms our subjective centrality, betrays a cartography of power. Works of art – not as objects restricted to art history and aesthetics, but as a critical apparatus and practice – can be a device capable of disorienting and reorienting our mapping of the modern world, beyond the present structures of power.

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Let’s begin with a map of the Mediterranean. Everything laid out flat. Borders clearly defined. The topography rendered evident. All is seemingly captured by the eye, rendered measurable and knowable. This is the basis for the geopolitical chess board where everything is put on the dissecting table. It seemingly provides a neutral and disinterested (or “scientific”) rendering of reality. Further it appeals to, and confirms, a liberal organisation of the world where all the actors and spaces are treated as though equal, permitting the analysis to listen to both sides of the argument while remaining “balanced” and “impartial” – something that is patently impossible to sustain when considering present day relationships between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, or, on a smaller scale, the dramatically unequal relations of power that sustain the violence in Palestine-Israel.

If historical and geographical explanations, area studies and political analysis, have produced the premises we today employ they invariably

tend to lead to conclusions that confirm their point of departure. This self-referential machinery of explanation rarely disturbs the frame. What I propose here is an altogether more unruly prospect that proposes a deliberate contamination of existing arrangements. This is not about solving the problems of limits – disciplinary, historical and political – but rather of proposing modalities to register and rework them in order to produce a further critical space and set of practices.

Simply by asking who does the mapping, and what does the desire for transparency hide and obscure, we disturb this picture and capture the outline of another Mediterranean. For the power of our maps, where objective measurement confirms our subjective centrality, betray a cartography of power. Our knowledge, once held up to the light, reveals the watermark of an indelible colonial formation and the deeply ingrained colonial modality of our methods¹. Here we are invited to consider the intertwining of stories and cultures that are suspended and sustained in the spatio-temporal coordinates associated the Mediterranean. Perhaps the crucial point is to search for another language, a different narrative style, capable of recording that excess of meaning that takes us beyond the reductive rationalisms and boundaries imposed by existing powers. Freeing the materials and materiality of the Mediterranean, and allowing them to float in other stories, means tearing it away from the pretence of an exhaustive narrative. This is clearly a vast subject that implies a critical engagement with the disciplines, institutions and authorities that have given rise to modern definitions of the Mediterranean. To give a critical form to this challenge, I would simply suggest four terms: space, rhythm, time and archive. We will see, however, that their separation is still impossible: each is intertwined in the other, and the critical constellation that emerges from this union is always in transit, an integral part of the story that tries to define it.

In simply observing its present-day European borders we can see how these extend far beyond the sea to reach into the depths of North Africa. Not only food products destined for European markets are cultivated according to criteria established by European legislation, but the deaths of migrants in the Sahara and on water, together with the terrible detention camps in North Africa, are directly attributable to European authority. As a political and juridical space, the Mediterranean, framed by European definitions, is mobilised along invisible borders thousands of kilometres

1 A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009.

to the south and east of its shores. At the same time, the Mediterranean has always been supported and suspended in larger networks. Many decades ago, Braudel spoke of a Mediterranean that rolled north to the Baltic and south through the Sahara. Such considerations suggest the adoption of mobile and multiple frameworks in order to understand its continuous composition. In the food, in the flavours, in the language, in the sound and in the music, other cartographies emerge suggesting a mixture and remixing of different stories traced in altogether more extensive geographies. Here the Mediterranean is transformed into a hybrid and creolised historical-cultural formation. Tomatoes from Peru or coffee from Ethiopia propose a culinary cartography that travels on a far wider axis than the one usually proposed to explain the formation of the modern Mediterranean.

So, rather than a single space to study, the Medi-terranean – as an interface between Europe, Asia and Africa – becomes a multi-stratified constellation, a point of dispersion and diffusion rather than a single unit. This means that Egypt, Greece or Palestine do not exist only as ancient Egypt, classical Greece and the Holy Land. They are not to be reduced to the Pharaohs, Hellenism and the land of the Bible, in order to represent stages and monuments in the subsequent development of European civilization. In this parable, the centuries of the history and culture of the Arabs and the Ottomans are reduced to a marginal deviation to expunge. The contribution of Arab culture, the Ottoman Empire and Islam is cancelled. To bring those histories back into play we have to think in terms that take us well beyond a small adjustment; we need instead to consider the terms of a radical reconfiguration of the history and culture – ours – which claims to be the only one fully able to narrate the past, define the Mediterranean, manage its archives and propose its meanings.

The materiality of memory – those sounds, tastes and tastes supported in a linguistic, culinary and musical order, for example – proposes a Mediterranean that defies obvious linearity. The past that survives and lives in these languages, often ignored by the established historical archive, actually offers a different type of historical memory. Altogether more jagged, modest and incomplete, this is a memory that supports a past that, as Nietzsche reminds us, cannot be dissolved or captured in pure knowledge. We are here proposing an understanding of the places, the archives and the memories that deepen and extend the sense of the past as a connective means, bringing together in their differences a mobile community and a potential coexistence. Here the conventional historical and geographical

map of the Mediterranean is torn and folded to allow a more critical and open, and therefore more democratic, space to emerge.

Such a perspective leads us to think less in terms of blocks of time linearly organised in a chronological history and held in a stable geometric space. For we are now confronted with the changing sociality of a space-time that is perceived and experienced in terms of intervals, interruptions and different rhythms. Declined in the folds of time the historical rhythms of different bodies and lives invite us to question an institutional knowledge, and the stability of its disciplines, which claims to always be able to explain its trends. Considering the Mediterranean in terms of intervals, rhythms and diverse spaces, means to collect the return of common and conflicting elements in a composition that is always in the process of being elaborated.

At this point, traveling beyond linguistic and national boundaries, we find ourselves measuring ourselves in the heterotopic understanding of time-space: where other histories and cultures lie alongside us, intertwined and sometimes interrupting our trajectory, producing other versions of a common space called the Mediterranean. Proposing histories that seek their sources in the rhythms of the Mediterranean does not mean looking for a hidden centre that orchestrates the narrative, but rather accommodates a multi-rhythmic composition that transforms different roots into emerging routes. We are not looking for an organizing principle, or a philosophical rule, but rather a new critical rhythm. It is the latter that is potentially able to accommodate the diversity of the unsuspected. The rules and disciplines that have so far “explained” the Mediterranean continue to be imposed only through the explicit rejection of the elements that disturb and question the universal claims of their taxonomies.

So, let us re-open the archive and consider in what way does the Mediterranean constitute an archive? How do its multiple histories and diverse cultural formations propose a different set of maps and coordinates? Further still, what of the histories, cultures, bodies and lives that do not have an archive, that remain unrecognised and unregistered? To bring these elements into play, into the picture, permits a re-iteration and repetition where language, literature, culture and art cross and creolise what tends to be considered closed matters. To reassemble the fragments of the past in this manner is to construct an alternative sense of the present.

This is most obviously a lesson drawn from the German critic Walter Benjamin and his insistence in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that the past does not simply pass but rather accumulates as an interrogative ruin

in the present². It is an understanding of time as an unruly turbulence, as opposed to being considered homogeneous and empty, that also resonates in the histories from elsewhere and from below proposed in the assembled musical montage of the Jamaican dub masters mixing fragments of sound and history into another sense of time and place.

If we are willing to consider the Mediterranean in terms of such critical archival work, then what is still to be registered in the making of its present comes to us from the future. This is to turn the traditional and institutional understanding of the archive around and insist, with Jacques Derrida, that such an archive is orientated towards the future precisely because the past as unacknowledged and refused matter, as detritus and ruins, has yet to be acknowledged and authorised in the present configurations of modernity³.

The archive opens on to the future. Here the Mediterranean with its multiplication of views, maps, cultures and histories undoes a unique explanation and introduces a series of coordinates that disturb the usual explanatory frame of the nation state that guarantees a literature, a history, an identity: American sociology, British history, French theory, Italian identity. And then the sea itself, as we have learnt from the poetics and critical practices of the Caribbean, is history, a liquid archive in which bodies, living and dead, negated histories and cancelled cultures, are suspended, sedimented and transmitted. This altogether more extensive and fluid space raises complicated questions about belonging – how and where? – and the constitution of home in the dynamics of overlapping territories, intertwined histories, and the elaboration of identities in transit. I would suggest that this mobile complexity is perhaps best captured – both aesthetically and ethically – in contemporary visual and sound cultures. I will return to this point in a minute. Let us begin to look at this situation, and consider the formation of the modern Mediterranean. This means inevitably to consider it in its European and colonial formation.

If mass migration is modernity, and not something to be relegated to the periphery and the past, then the movement back and forth across Mediterranean waters, both north to south and south to north, is part of a common hubris motored by a trans-national political economy and the worlding of the world by capital. At the beginning of the Twentieth century the European population of Algeria (the Ottoman province

2 W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in Id., *Illuminations and Reflections*, trans. H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1969.

3 J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998.

military occupied by Paris in 1830) was close to one million, the majority French, alongside sizeable components of Spanish and Italians. Tunisia next door had an Italian population of 100,000, while in Libya (another Ottoman territory invaded by Italy in 1911) had an Italian population that peaked in the 1930s also at a 100,000, amounting to around 13% of the population. What is occurring today with migration towards the over-developed north of the planet is the latest episode in a very long narrative. From the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary migrations there are clearly differences but also deep, underlying continuities that would also permit us to write the history of modernity as the history of migration.

Once again, it is a European mapping – both economic, political and juridical – that manages the Mediterranean, transforming present day migrants into illegal beings. For it is European law that defines them as objects of punitive legislation and promotes a necro-politics transforming the sea into a liquid cemetery. Between the waves of the Mediterranean there emerges the profound gap between the rule of law and the deeper histories of negated justice. The right to migrate was proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948; no European or First World country today respects this declaration. This involves another and more extensive discussion, but quite clearly the contemporary migrant poses the political question of our time. Her presence and practice interrogate fixed definitions of citizenship and nationhood that, no matter how fiercely denied, are invested by the transitory and translating processes of what, at the end of the day, is a migrating modernity.

When the ninth-century Muslim dandy Abu l-Hasan ‘Ali Ibn Nafi, better known as Ziryab, brought from Baghdad to Cordova his compositions and musical innovations for the oud, he was not simply traversing Dar al-Islam. His musical passage left a profound cultural trace. Today, this has been reworked and re-proposed by the oud player Naseer Shamma, who is also from Baghdad⁴. As a contemporary event, Shamma’s recording and performance of music from Islamic Spain opens a hole in time. More suggestively, it proposes, to echo Gilles Deleuze and his noted work on the baroque, a fold in the regime of linear temporality that renders physical and temporal distance proximate, immediate and contemporary⁵. The intimation of another Mediterranean, sustained in sound, provokes a critical interruption in its present configuration. The homogenous alterity

4 N. Shamma, *Maqamat Ziryab: Desde el Eúfrates al Guadakaquivir*, Pnuema, Madrid 2003.

5 G. Deleuze, *The Fold*, Continuum, London & New York 2006.

associated with Muslim culture in contemporary definitions break down, and comes to be replaced by an altogether more complex historical and cultural composition in which the Arab, Berber, Persian, Turkish and Islamic world turns out to be internal to Europe's formation.

This music, calling to us down the centuries, further emphasises in its contemporary execution the right to the imagination; the right to narrate, hence to assemble and tell the tale differently. For Naseer Shamma's performance proposes an invented historical inventory: the music we hear comes from no known notation, historical manuscript or document. It is a composed contemporary intervention that permits us to cut into time, to cut up time, rendering proximate distant places and temporalities in an imaginative emergent critical constellation that interrogates the present.

To work in this manner of receiving and reworking the archive – not as a mausoleum, an accumulation of dusty documents or a museum technology narrating the nation, but as a living and ongoing site of critical elaboration and a redistribution of responsibilities for the future, as Derrida would have put it – is not only to recover from the rubble of the past materials to conceive of a diverse today and tomorrow. It also permits, through interrupting a singular understanding of the present provided by a national or disciplinary identity, new circuits of connections and understandings to emerge.

This is to operate a cut in the teleology of history, as though it were simply the linear accumulation of progress through empty time and space. It is precisely here that what I would call post-colonial art suggests another direction, other coordinates that do not respond to a single rhythm or unique score. The repetition, retrieval and re-search of repressed and negated pasts leads to a radical reworking, renewal, transformation and translation of what has been inherited and transmitted in the multiplicities of the Mediterranean. Here contemporary postcolonial Mediterranean art and music suggest altogether more extensive and unfinished business, disseminating holes and cuts in existing maps and explanations, and working the ambivalence of images into unsuspected supplements whose weight breaks the back of a single narrative

Understanding the past through the lens and language of the present is to understand that we and our historiography are always anachronistic with respect to our sources. This is provocatively to insist that to think of origins, both historical and cultural, is always to think of contemporary configurations. Walter Benjamin characterised origins as “that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearing” where there is

no stable source but rather a “whirlpool in the river of becoming”⁶. This means that we are always working a past that is inherently unbound with respect to any single measure or location.

Here the recent production of artists and critics, often themselves coming from subaltern and once invisible histories, provide us with an altogether more extensive and dynamic theoretical script. Sharp distinction between the factual and the fictional evaporate in a critical narrative willing to award the imagination that delivers to the contemporary moment an altogether more complex sense of the unfinished past, present and their futures. Necessarily incomplete and ambiguous, this produces another context, both analytically and politically. Documenting and bringing to our attention such practices and procedures – whether directly, obliquely, ironically or in bitter tonalities – the archive is traversed and trespassed so as to be de-linked from a unique authority (History, the museum, the nation-state) in order to promote a new series of negotiations. Historical temporality comes unstuck from the single measure of the presumed “progress” of the West and its version of the world. This means to weave out of the mounting debris of the past another relational web, drawn from what is apparently out of time and out of place. It is to hold on to the discontinuous in the productive montage that makes up the present, and to insist on a history beyond the existing historical “record”.

If this particularly archive clearly comes from the future – for its histories are still to be recognised and registered – then the past has neither concluded nor passed. I would suggest that this proposes an instance of critical freedom, a freedom that is probably most fruitfully put to work in contemporary postcolonial art. The names and works that can be evoked at this point are many. So many that perhaps we should refer to a “postcolonial turn” in modern art: that revaluation of the archive and the associated documenting of historical time and place that operates a cut and proposes a critical discontinuity not simply within modern art practices, curating and art history, but across the knowledge formation we call modernity. Through sensorial and corporeal engagement, contemporary postcolonial artists propose a configuration of signs and sense in which the ethical and the aesthetic, the past and the present, become inseparable. They register the repressed return, reworking and releasing that conventional history is rarely able to acknowledge.

6 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Verso Books, London – New York 1998, p. 45.

Emphasising temporal and spatial multiplicity as essential to the violent and ambiguous making of modernity – both its political economy and its art – it is the processes of producing time and space, history and geography, as unfinished historical business that comes to the fore. This is clearly neither a neutral experience nor merely an aesthetic act. Drawing on the languages and lexicons of the established art canon is central precisely to the degree that they are revisited, cut up and reworked so that another sense of time and place emerges. This cuts both aesthetically and ethically into our understanding of the formation of the present.

Here we can move from considering the art work as a restricted object of art history and aesthetics, to registering it as a critical apparatus and practice. In inviting us to look and think again there emerges the supplement that burdens the circulation of art with the anachronism: the present drawn into and reconfigured by a negated past that we can never fully recover nor know. Here, despite the crushing consensus imposed by capital and the neo-liberal order that insists there is no alternative, postcolonial art deliberately works the gap and sustains the contradictions that render its language critical. If, while pushing up against the apparently neutral white walls of the modern museum and art gallery, postcolonial art does not escape capture in the institutional frame and the circuits of commerce it nevertheless disturbs its premises. Precisely through inciting a past still to come, imposing the anachronism, such art and criticism constantly propels us into another history.

To consider art as the index and signature of this untimely cut, pushing the consensual picture out of joint, draws us towards what we have been incapable of seeing, registering and hearing. To travel this line is to follow the fracture between the illumination of Occidental modernity and the obscurity that sustains and concentrates its power. This means, to use François Hartog's words, to crack apart "a world so enslaved to the present that no other viewpoint is considered admissible"⁷. For to ask whose time we are referring to here is to disrupt the continuum; it is to split time from itself and force its abstract universality to ground and into place. There we can register in its shards other configurations coming to meet us from a world we may not have authorised, but which exists, persists and resists.

Let me conclude by bringing these arguments home and consider the so-called contemporary migrant "emergency" in the Mediterranean. As I have already suggested, we are dealing with deliberate political control

7 F. Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017, Kindle edition.

and juridical construction on the part of Europe. Refusing Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), all European states have decided that not everyone has the right to move and migrate. This violent exercise of European and First World power reopens a profound colonial wound. Migrants rendered objects of our legislation and laws render explicit the asymmetrical relations of power that produced the colonial world and constitute the ongoing fashioning of the present.

This evocation of “emergency” and “crisis” in the Mediterranean, signalled in the brutal necro-politics of leaving some to drown, others to be turned back, and all to be forced to suffer horrendous journeys over desert, sea and increasingly fortified barriers, clearly draws on altogether deeper geographies of regulation and possession established when Europe felt authorised to appropriate and colonise the rest of the world, not simply economically and politically, but also morally. And if historically European colonial power was established, affirmed and secured by control of the seas – from the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean to the British in the Caribbean – this also applied to the more provincial waters of the Mediterranean. In 1800, from the Bay of Naples to the delta of the Nile, France and Britain were fighting for global hegemony around its shores and on its waters. Still today, the Mediterranean remains an exclusively European matter (with Israel and Turkey as subcontractors). It is part and parcel of the geometry of the colonial present, where our security invariably secures someone’s else’s subjection, even their death. Against this singular framing, we could consider a beautiful short film *Asmat* by the Ethiopian activist and film maker Dagmawi Yimer that seeks to rescue from the anonymity of the depths those who have drowned by restoring their names to memory⁸. The sea is here becomes a vital archive for those of us condemned “to listen to these screams”. Yimer was himself an “illegal” migrant who made it across the Mediterranean.

In an important sense, art in its concentrated attention and affects is always about matter out of place. The figuration of the migrant in the contemporary field of vision deepens and disseminates this unhomey quality. For the modern migrant is not only the reminder of a colonial past that powerfully and unilaterally made the world over in a certain fashion. She also shadows present artistic practices with what the prevailing sense of modernity and our associated understanding of the Mediterranean structurally seeks to avoid or negate, precisely in order to secure our

8 D. Yimer, *ASMAT-Names in memory of all victims of the sea* (<https://vimeo.com/114343040>, 2015).

particular sense of home and belonging. On the other side of the canvas, in the margins of the frame, throwing a constant shadow across the visual field and disturbing our ears, those other histories fester as an incurable wound that continues to bleed into the present. Reopening the archive of a modernity whose art increasingly seems to revolve around itself, the critical pace here quickens, threatening to spin out of the regulated order of its institutional reception in order to dirty the whiteness of its walls and the rationality of its knowledge with death, despair, destitution and the desires of another worldly order.

It is in this situation, consistently sidestepped and avoided for embarrassing the hollow claims of European humanism, a number of contemporary visual artists insist that we return to the scene of the crime to account for where “we are now?” The force of the question lies in the ambivalence of “we”. If, most obviously, the collective noun might seem to immediately refer to relocated migrants in unfamiliar lands and cities, forced to renegotiate their way in a world robbed of domestic referents, the insidious undertow is that the “we” is also us and our responsibility for such a situation. In the transit of translation (linguistic, cultural, historical) we discover not simply that migrants, often under the most dramatic duress, are forced continually to transform themselves in order to engage with unplanned situations, but also that the context of European culture and home are being translated. It is this mutual process, no matter how sharply asymmetrical the powers involved, that unleashes the slow but profound remaking of home, citizenship, culture and belonging... for all; not, and most obviously, only for the unwelcomed stranger. This cuts up ready explanations and the flat maps of our understanding with rougher, often difficult to assimilate, interrogations. The latter leave no one really feeling at home.

In her visual and mixed media work, the Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira draws us into the slippage and the translation that accompanies the transit of contemporary “traveling cultures”: women in white veils who oscillate in the interval of Islam and Christianity: perhaps Muslim or the Madonna (*Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary*, 2000). Elsewhere, between rusting hulks of ships bobbing in the sea waters of Mauritania (*Shipwreck series*, 2008), or derelict colonial buildings on the Algerian coast once the scene of military torture (*Haunted House*, 2006) and the gaze northwards from the African shore towards maritime horizons that promotes desire and dreams of a better life⁹.

9 <http://zinebsedira.com>

Here the sea, as a troubled archive, registered as a site of multiple crossings, is transformed from a presumably dumb accessory to the political life and histories occurring on land to become a historical interrogation. If Occidental modernity depended on its marine mastery to realise a colonial appropriation of the globe, a maritime reasoning today insists on the transit of other narrations on and over its waters. The ambivalence of the sea as both bridge and barrier reveals the deeper political economy of migration and its long term centrality to the making of the modern world. The ruins of a European colonial past here float into the picture to haunt configurations of the present.

Homogeneous and static representations, stamped by the authority of Italy and Europe, fall apart. Take the island of Lampedusa, some 200 kilometres south of Tunis and Algiers, and yet part of Europe. Crossed by multiple bodies and histories, the island escapes reduction to a frontier settlement, migrant detention centre and summer tourist spot, and becomes the laboratory for questions and processes that neither Italy nor Europe seem capable of answering. Contrary to unilateral definitions of the Mediterranean and of Lampedusa's role in policing and protecting its borders, we can rescue from the archives sustained by this island and the surrounding sea a humanism that exceeds the limits of European and Occidental sovereignty.

Here tracing itineraries that commence from the south – from south of the Sahara, from the south of the Mediterranean, of Italy, of Europe – both artistic and critical work disorients and re-orientates our mapping of the modern world. Confronting journeys set in motion by music and the visual arts we are invited to look, to look and listen, again. This is always accompanied by the grit in the eye, the dissonance in the ear, that scratches the conventional framing and figuration of the world. It produces a slash in our habitual tempo-spatial coordinates. As such it leaves a potential trace, the afterlife of a disturbance, an interrogation.