

Conference Abstracts & Biographies

3E – Marine Environment & Meanings

Chair: TBC

Northern Lights/Southern Views: Depicting the “Barren” Arctic Environment, Empire and Exploration

Christopher John Gismondi, Concordia University, Canada

Abstract:

My project aims to understand why explorers from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries represented the Canadian Arctic as absent of flora. In doing so, this is the first Arctic environmental art history. When Canadian settler-colonialism began dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their land, it disrupted their environmental knowledge with contrasting European understandings of the natural world. Although historians have interrogated Arctic exploration, these historical inquiries have not examined explorers' sketches, prints, and other visual culture. Thus, we do not know why explorers' often traveling in the summer months when many plants were in full bloom they chose to depict the Arctic as devoid of plants. This question stems from an earlier project that examined the absence of botany in Inuit art that caters to commercial markets and qallunaat (southern non-Inuit, non-Indigenous) art markets. Contemporary artists often play into these colonial expectations despite the preserved botanical knowledge in archives and in practice today by Inuit.

To understand what motivated artistic depictions of the Arctic, I survey images produced during and after major expeditions undertaken by the Royal Navy, Hudson's Bay Company, and the Canadian government, including the British Arctic Expedition of 1875 and the Canadian Arctic Expedition (1913-1918). These expeditions participated in the colonial tradition of knowledge gathering about seemingly exotic environments. Correspondence between famed British botanist Joseph Hooker and explorer John Franklin's botanist Thomas Drummond indicate that these 'strange' natural worlds were of intense interest. Why does flora get erased from these Arctic landscapes, when botanical knowledge was actively being gathered on these same expeditions?

Keywords: Arctic exploration, settler-colonial art history, environmental history, naval exploration, misrepresentation

Biography:

Chris Gismondi is a Masters student in Concordia's department of Art History. His thesis supervised by Dr. Heather Igloliorte sheds lights on the misrepresentations of the Arctic environment by polar explorers. Chris is an alumni of McGill University, Joint Honors Art History, History, and Indigenous Studies.

The Wonder Whale: A Commodity, a Monster, a Show and an Icon

Cristina Brito, CHAM – Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH, Portugal

Abstract:

Abstract: In the Whale we can find a name, a conviction, a belief, an animal, or just the representation of some of these aspects or the encompassing of it all. It is, for sure, a being, but one that is described, depicted and appropriated in several forms and in a multitude of ways. The whale is always assigned a role, but its relevance to distinct groups of the society and its presentation to diverse audiences, across history, can be very different from one type of source to another, as from a certain moment in time to another one. The identity of the whale and the value given to it may change, even though its main element of wonder is always present. Working from an initial question, what is there in a whale? - we present a study on

the long-term human-whale relationship, connecting history and literature, to highlight the deep entanglement of societies and cultures with the marine environment. We aim at understanding the significance of whales and how culture, knowledge and values determine human behaviour and actions towards these mammals. For that, we run through a long timeframe discussing the Whale, mostly based on Portuguese written sources in comparison with other European sources, to discuss the whale as a commodity, a monster, a show and an icon. What we will find is that either way it has been conceptualized, or still is, it has continuously been an element of human fascination. Not merely a whale, but rather the wonder whale. An animal that still attracts crowds of people when it strands on nearby shores or even when just its blow is spotted in the horizon. The wonder whale allows ever more for a close connection of people with the enormous and paradoxical, still much unknown, oceanic realm.

Keywords: Marine mammals; Perceptions and representations; Ocean exploitation; Early modern Atlantic

Authors: Cristina Brito, Nina Vieira & Joana Gaspar de Freitas

Biography:

Cristina Brito has a PhD in History of the Portuguese Discoveries and Expansion, NOVA FCSH, and a background in Ethology and in Marine Biology. She was awarded a Research Contract by FCT (IF/00610/2015) at CHAM – NOVA FCSH to investigate “Cow-fish, ngulu-maza or iguaragua? Local and Global Knowledge Production, Changing Perceptions and Practices on Marine Animals in the Atlantic, 1419–1758” (2016-2021). She has an interdisciplinary, comparative and cross-cultural approach to her research. Her scientific interests include early modern marine environmental history, history of early modern natural history, local and global perceptions about and uses of the seas, Atlantic and ocean history. She is the Executive Director of OPI ‘Oceans Past Initiative’ (2014-2018), and member of the Management and Synthesis Committees, working group leader at OPP ‘Oceans Past Platform’, COST Action (2014-2018). She also coordinates a thematic line of research at CHAM (the Sea), the UNESCO Chair on Oceans’ Cultural Heritage and the H2020 RISE project CONCHA (2018-2021).

Is the ocean a space without history?

Tomas Buitendijk, Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract:

Waves admit no inscription, yet on the ocean floor we find numerous indications of a long history of seafaring and the societies that engaged in it. Shipwrecks and lost anchors, along with numerous unexpected items they’re all there for the taking, if only one could reach them. This is the scene of Nadine Gordimer’s ‘Loot’, where the ocean retreats and lays bare the contents of its vaults. Soon everyone descends upon these riches to grab what they can.

Through the madness of beach combing in ‘Loot’, a history of sorts appears. This is no innocent nation it has its past blemishes and sufferings. Alas, there is no time to explain this history: the sea returns and swallows everyone.

The proposed essay will perform a critical analysis of contemporary efforts of structural and social marine engineering through the lens of Gordimer’s short story. The reading is supplemented by arguments from among others the works of Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Rob Nixon. The case studied is the Seasteading project in French Polynesia. This initiative promises to construct a floating city-state that leaves behind obsolete political systems conceived in previous centuries; a new nation rushing towards the future. An analogy can be found with the relentless forward movement of the storm driving Benjamin’s metaphorical Angel of History. Pushed back into the future, the angel wishes only to contemplate the rubble of the past, the items at the bottom of the sea. Do these items teach a seminal lesson on the inscription and value of history? On the reappropriation of past values and identities? And if so - should we not be wary of a society without a past?

Keywords: Benjamin, Gordimer, History, Seasteading, Space

Biography:

Tomas Buitendijk, M.Phil. is a Ph.D. research student at the DCU School of English in Dublin, Republic of Ireland. In his research, he performs a cultural-historical reading of (British) marine fiction in the twenty-first century. Seminal aspects of his research are to question the constructs of space and place at sea; to situate and in tandem problematize the concept of history at, on, in or beneath the sea; and to indicate the value of marine history and fiction to contemporary society. He has previously attended University College Utrecht (BA hons. in Literature and Philosophy) and Trinity College Dublin (M.Phil. in Comparative Literature). He has published in *The Shandean*.