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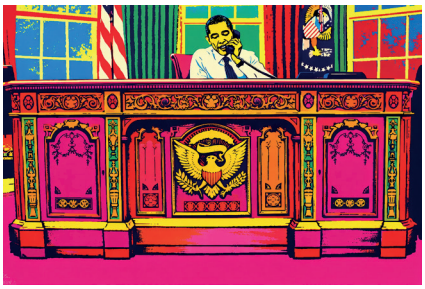
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editorial

artificial humanities

Roland Wenzlhuemer

In 1749, French cartographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville did something unusual. Preparing a new map of Africa, he didn't use all the information available. Out went everything that he could not be certain about. Mountain ranges, rivers and other geographical features that had flowed from one authority's guesswork into another's and had furnished the continent's cartographic imagination for two centuries gave way to blank space. D'Anville had decided that the difference between knowing and supposing was worth putting on the page. Large language models rarely do this. As probability machines, they abhor a gap. Even if an AI chatbot knows little about an issue, even if a case is complicated, contradictory or inconclusive, chances are that the model will return confident prose. They 'like' to fill the blanks. The four contributions that open this issue all circle this problem from different directions, and none of them arrives at a comfortable answer.

Felix Ehlers does not shy away from the big questions and asks about the relationship between AI and human creativity. Taking a historical approach, he shows that ideas about what human creativity is and how it comes about are not entirely incommensurable with the probabilistic mode in which AI models work. Ehlers illustrates how interacting with an AI can help to overcome different variations of writer's block and can thus foster and channel human creativity. For this to work, we need to be thoroughly AI literate, Ehlers says, and he warns of what he calls 'narrative levelling': the smoothing of the narrative edges that happens when you rely on what has already been said many times.



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Gabriele Klein reads the relationship between humans and AI through Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance. Drawing on the example of the dance-theatre piece *A Perfect Sky*, she isolates unavailability – *Unverfügbarkeit* – as the condition without which resonance cannot occur. What responds instantly, predictably and always in tune with our current emotional state does not resonate with us. It simply reflects us. Klein's worry is less that we will be deceived by this but that we will get used to it, that we will grow accustomed to comfort without reciprocity.

Alma Stephan carefully listens to chatbots' Western accents and highlights how their silences are not evenly distributed. The training of AI models largely relies on sources in a few major languages that are readily available on the internet. This creates a strong cultural bias as well as uneven access to reliable knowledge. Where the training data thins out, as when AI models operate in less widespread languages, output becomes less reliable and less helpful but is usually presented with the same confidence. Combined with our disposition to trust a seemingly objective algorithm more than a person, this does beg the question 'who gets to speak in the future'?

I should say plainly that my own contribution has aged fast, too fast maybe. The essay on the Resolute desk was meant to explore the potential and pitfalls of AI support in scholarly writing. The piece was drafted in spring 2026 with a model that has since been superseded twice over, under a protocol that followed curiosity more than practicability and has long been overtaken by current practice. From the perspective of autumn 2026, the approach seems not only outdated but outright naïve. This is precisely why we decided to leave it as it stands, rather than repair it. The text is a testimony to how fast the field moves and how hard it is to first become and then stay AI literate.

While the second half of the issue does not directly engage with AI, its broader concerns are similar. Toby Yuen-Gen Liang examines the orthogonal view, the perpendicular perspective from directly above. He shows that its very ubiquity has exempted it from scrutiny. We take it as a natural perspective, when it is in fact an assembly of impossible viewpoints that makes some relations legible and dissolves others. Arnika Fuhrmann's reading of Narges Kalhor's ~~*Shahid*~~ follows a film that breaks its own frame repeatedly, shows the apparatus, films the argument about how to film and declines to resolve what it has opened. Doğukan Akbaş's report from the workshop on cartographic blank space emphasises that blankness, as the participants concluded over two days, is not innocent. It can be erasure dressed as restraint, and what a map declines to show can always be read as available for the taking as Toby Yuen-Gen Liang also stresses in his interpretation of d'Anville's white interior.

Blanks are invitations. But whether and how we follow these invitations, how we interpret them, is for us to decide. We can try to fill them, or we let them fuel our imagination. The contributions gathered here try to do both.



Fig. 01
Roland Wenzlhuemer
(Photo: Lambert Strehke)

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Artificial intelligence and human creativity: a historical approach

Felix Ehlers

For as long as I can remember, being creative has felt natural to me, nothing to really think about. I've always felt the urge to write that line, take that photograph, pursue that line of thought. The image of a creative mind touched by inspiration, favoured by a muse, might be naïve, but it still has a certain hold over me, especially if we see creativity as one foundation of being human, as a particular way a person thinks, makes decisions and produces meaning.[1] This one foundation has come under pressure though, since generative AI became widely accessible in late autumn 2022, which in consequence caused the widespread anxiety that AI threatens creativity.[2] What is equally clear, however, is that creativity has changed recently, and AI will continue to change it even further. Accepting such change means that the relevant question is not whether a change is happening, but what it means and how our understanding of creativity influences the current debate.

As a historian, I turn to the past, in fact to the very moment a lasting image was born. On 10 November 1619, René Descartes is said to have shut himself in a stove-heated room somewhere in southern Germany and enacted what would become a foundational image of modern intellectual life. He doubted everything that came from outside until what remained was the thinking subject alone: solitary, internal, self-certifying. For almost

1 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).
2 George Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen: The Hidden Steps Behind Breakthrough Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2026).



Fig. 01
Descartes in the heated room, embodying the modern myth of solitary thought while remaining surrounded by inherited voices.[5]

four centuries, Western intellectual culture and beliefs about creativity have been shaped by this powerful image of the solitary scholar, seated by a fire, withdrawing from the world in search of certainty.[3] In that tradition, the blank page is a challenge to one's creative independence: are you able to create without assistance?[4]

The image we inherited

Still, Descartes was never as alone as that image suggests. He read voraciously before that legendary day: Aristotle, Augustine,

3 Edgar Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes: Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Antike und des Frühkapitalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926); Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.

4 Gregor Betz, *Descartes´„Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie“: ein systematischer Kommentar* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2011); René Descartes, *Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie* (Leipzig: Meiner, (1641) 1944); Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*.

5 The illustrations in this piece were generated with AI in June 2026 using OpenAI's ChatGPT image generation model and Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4.8 for custom prompts.



Aquinas, Montaigne and many others. Even his method of doubt was itself inherited, adapted and refined from a long tradition of sceptical philosophy. What appears as pure interiority at first sight, turns out, on closer inspection, to be a kind of intellectual conversation with past interlocutors whose arguments had become so deeply internalised that they no longer announced themselves as external voices.[6]

What has changed with AI, then, is not that creative work has suddenly become collaborative when you use AI, but that you might be judged for no longer thinking on your own. Thinking has always involved collaboration and the (internalised) voices of others. What has changed is the form of collaboration. The interlocutor is no longer only built by the corpus one has read and absorbed, nor a living person with whom one exchanges ideas, but now, it can also be an artificial partner: frictionless, instantly available, trained on a textual archive far larger than any single human can read in a lifetime.[7]

Fig. 02
Kleist in the act of speaking, as language itself becomes the medium through which thought takes form.

6 Betz, *Descartes´"Meditationen"*. Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.
7 Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen*.

Kleist's counter-image

In 1805, Heinrich von Kleist described a model of thinking that contrasts with the image of the solitary scholar. Kleist imagined a person speaking to whomever happens to be present to form his thoughts: a friend, a sister, a colleague or in an extreme case, as Kleist famously remarked, even a dog or a stove. So, talking to an AI model is less a revolution than perpetuating a concept of creative work that goes back to Socrates, as we will see.[8]

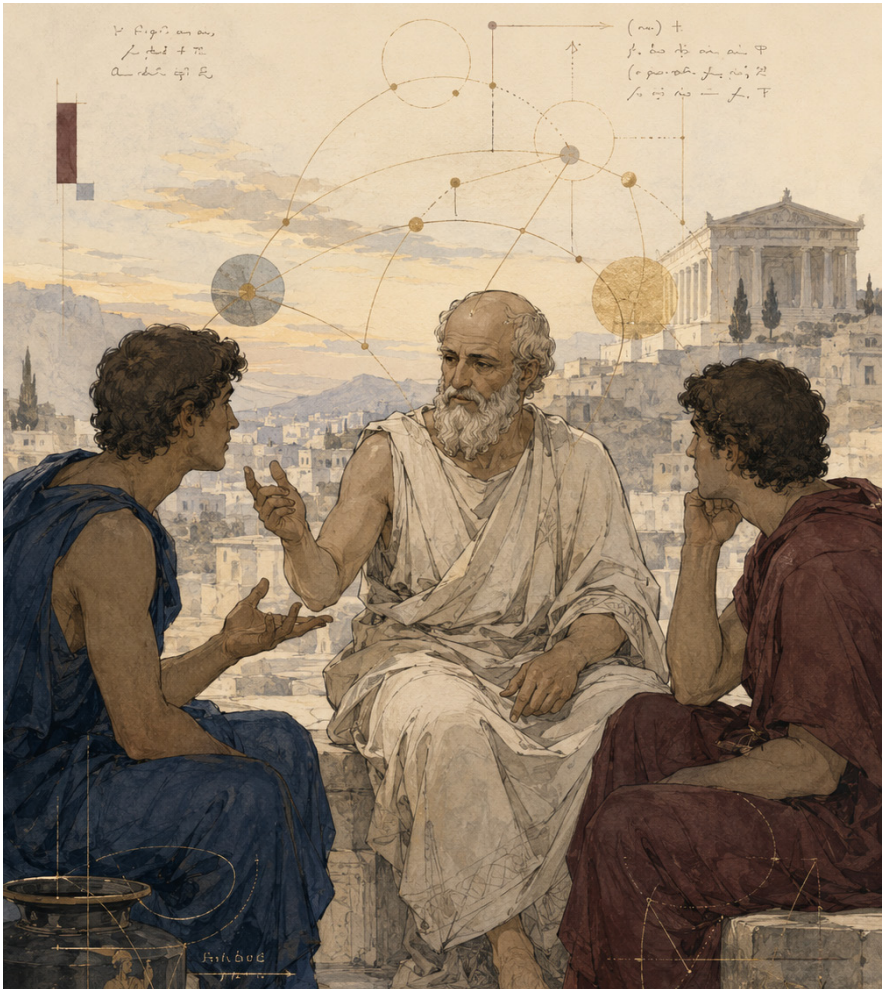
While cognitive science might have a different view of how thinking is synchronised with speaking, claiming that thought is always first, Kleist's concept feels very relatable and important to the transformation of creativity through AI, as creative work with AI requires language. Conversational interaction in the form of voice messages and live chats are an important mode of working with AI today. In that sense, the (spoken) prompt is more than simply an instruction for a tool; it can be understood as a thinking act. Formulating a question in conversation with an AI model requires the same kind of intellectual effort that Kleist associated with speaking to an Other.[9]

Many centuries before Kleist, Socrates had grasped something similar to Kleist's idea of how speech forms thought. Socrates's method was to interrogate assumptions instead of delivering conclusions,[10] such that thoughts emerge through conversation with another person, animal, subject or chatbot. Kleist noted that even a half-attentive listener or simply the anticipation of being heard (dog) was often sufficient to set thinking in motion. He believed that the pressure of having to articulate a thought matters more than the listener's intelligence. An AI model that responds coherently and without judgment (unless you ask for it) creates precisely that pressure, especially since the quality of AI answers depends on the quality of your questions. It is, of course, not a substitute for human dialogue, but it is a structurally similar condition to the methods described by Kleist and Socrates.

What creativity was

Creativity can be subject to various understandings. The idea that it names a universal human capacity, something everyone possesses and every culture has always recognised, conceals a more particular history.[11] The history of creativity in other cultures reveals why the supposed threat of AI towards creativity

8 Heinrich von Kleist, 'Über die allmählige Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden', in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle, vol. 2, *Erzählungen, kleine Prosa, Gedichte, Briefe*, (München: Hanser, 2010); Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
9 Kleist, 'Über die allmählige Verfertigung'; Pinker, *The Language Instinct*.
10 Günter Figal, *Sokrates* (München: C.H. Beck, 1995).
11 Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.



depends on the European understanding of creativity. In the Confucian tradition, appropriateness, as the capacity to act, judge and write fittingly in the moral and textual order is a higher virtue than originality. The great commentators of the Song dynasty understood tradition as the condition of creativity, not a constraint. To work in an inherited framework, to refine one's judgement through engagement with received texts, was itself a form of creative mastery.[12]

A similar strand appears in the Islamic world. Al-Farabi, the scholar who synthesised Aristotle with Islamic theology, located creative thought between imagination and the intellect. He aimed to refine himself into a more precise instrument for the transmission and transformation of shared knowledge. The individual, in his understanding, was less source than medium, which resonates unexpectedly today, as an AI model is also a medium that processes, recombines and transmits what creativity has already produced.[13]

12 Charlene Tan, 'A Confucian Interpretation of Creativity', *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 54, no. 3 (2020); Weihua Niu, 'Confucian Ideology and Creativity', *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 46, no. 4 (2013).

13 Abū-Naṣr Muḥammad Ibn-Muḥammad Farabi, *Al-Farabi: The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts* (Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Fig. 03
Socrates conversing in the Athenian agora, where thought emerges not in isolation but through dialogue.



In many precolonial West African traditions, knowledge was collective, performative and embodied. The griot, the keeper of genealogies, memory and moral authority, was living archive, shaping inherited material through each new act of transmission rather than an author pursuing originality.[14] Doesn't this resemble interactions with AI? This third example again underlines that creativity was subject to different understandings in other historical and cultural contexts. What unites the three examples is a shared understanding of the self as a node in a network rather than a sovereign point of origin. From that perspective, AI reveals the collaborative infrastructure that was always already there. It even shaped the European pre-modern era: in medieval scriptoria, monks also viewed themselves more as mediums of a textual and divine tradition, whose creative merit lay in compiling and annotating existing knowledge, than as autonomous authors.[15]

Fig. 04
A global constellation of creativity, linking Confucian scholarship, Islamic philosophy and West African oral tradition.

14 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

15 Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scholar Press, 1984).



Two barriers

Still, merely adjusting our perspective with a historical approach does not safeguard creativity, as there are real threats to creativity and everyone working with AI, especially in the humanities. While AI does not destroy creativity but rather questions modern European understandings of it, we must still face the problem that AI provides easy, coherent solutions to complex questions. As contradictory as it may sound, the easy, coherent solutions are exactly where the real threat of AI for creativity lies.

The phenomenon of writer's block actually covers two experiences. The first is structural: you know what you want to say, but you cannot find where to begin. The problem is the blank page. In the tradition of Descartes, it is the challenge of one's creative independence. AI can be genuinely useful here as it can offer a provisional frame, suggest an initial structure and produce an opening sentence that can be accepted, rejected or reshaped to overcome this barrier.

Fig. 05
A contemporary writer faces AI as both creative partner and historical filter, where collaboration may open new possibilities while quietly reproducing old exclusions.

The second form of writer's block is different. It often appears in the middle of thinking, because it is epistemological rather than structural. Imagine you are already thinking and writing, following your creative process, and then suddenly the movement stops. The barrier is more chasm than wall because you realise with unease that your argument has reached the edge of what you know, but there is still a gap to cross. Turning to AI, using the Socratic method, again can be fruitful with the requisite caution.

Of course, every interaction with AI needs caution, as there are biases, hallucinations and the problem of statistical probability, which I will address below, but the problem demanding caution here is different. As the AI's answer is most likely coherent, elegant, plausible and fully aligned with your surrounding text and ideas on the page, the temptation to traverse the chasm using the AI-generated answer without question is strong, as it promises the relief of overcoming the blockade. But did you?

Using dialogue with AI to solve a problem, create something, overcome a barrier and develop your own ideas is comparable to Descartes, who turned to internalised arguments and ideas of authors he had read. But in this case, AI 'read' and internalised arguments and ideas in the training corpus for you. It is also comparable to Socrates's method of dialogue. Still, using AI without proper dialogue and questioning its answers can foreshorten the thought process that the barrier interrupted. Your work may continue, but the thought may have stopped short. Sure, AI can develop your thoughts further in one answer, but you might not realise your genuine creative potential unless you really think for yourself all the way. Otherwise, you will lose more than originality in the romantic sense; you'll lose all the chance of arriving anywhere unpredictable. AI really threatens creativity when the demand for speed and efficiency makes easy solutions more tempting, which is especially problematic when your creative product requires the time to read, think and write.[16] While this text primarily addresses creativity in terms of thought processes, research, and textual composition, these reflections apply equally to creative practices such as photography and videography. Here, too, we are expected to produce creative work at the push of a button, whereas genuine achievement in these fields demands (internal) dialogue and depth.

Building AI literacy,[17] developing the cultural and intellectual competence to distinguish between different moments in the creative process when working with AI, can disarm this threat, though we still have a long way to go, especially in the humanities. It will require profound judgement and education beyond simple technical literacy to encompass formulating questions precisely

16 Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen*.

17 AI literacy means knowledge and skills that enable people to understand, critically evaluate and use AI responsibly, effectively and ethically while retaining meaningful human judgment and control.

and understanding a subject with sufficient depth to evaluate the quality, relevance and limitations of AI-generated output. Without that foundation, creative collaboration with AI substitutes rather than enhances creativity.

Narrative levelling

There is another threat I address in my research as *narrative levelling*.[18] AI models are trained on vast archives of existing writing, while they remain probabilistic instruments, generating what is most likely to follow from what preceded. Again, the problem is that the fluent, coherent and apparently well-supported answers tend to converge on what is already sayable in the middle of an existing, mediocre distribution.

That's narrative levelling. It describes how AI can flatten difference by rendering thought more probable and more conventional among most sources, especially sources those who trained the models value highly, which might not reflect their scholarly value. The result is polished mediocrity packed into a smooth, convincing answer. Precisely because the output is often persuasive, the danger is as easy to miss as the shortcut across the chasm.

For historiography and for all research that depends on creative thinking, narrative levelling is a major problem because knowledge advances at its edges. AI, which is optimised for probability, is structurally ill-suited to that task. In fact, it actually limits creativity. Yes, AI can assist research in many ways, but it does not naturally incline towards the marginal, the dissonant or the yet-unarticulated. This is also one reason that the humanities may prove unusually important in the coming age of AI. The humanities are supposed to read against surface coherence, to attend to ambiguity and to ask what a fluent answer leaves out. As AI is exceptionally good at producing convincing continuities, disciplines concerned with rupture, silence, contradiction and interpretation will gain value.

The long history of changed minds

Every major technology of thought has its companion anxiety. Past centuries display a pattern: a new tool appears, anxiety arrives with it, and the anxiety turns out to be partly right and mostly wrong. Socrates feared that writing would damage memory, and it did indeed change memory, but was that change simply a loss?[19] Centuries later, the printing press transformed knowledge

18 See Felix Ehlers, 'Maschinelle Narrative', in *Künstliche Intelligenz und Unternehmensreputation. Zwischen algorithmischer Macht, unternehmerischer Verantwortung und öffentlichem Vertrauen*, ed. Florian Müller and Ulrich Bihler (Berlin: Springer, 2026).

19 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).



Fig. 06
Human and artificial intelligence reach toward one another in a contemporary reimagining of creation, where authorship, imagination and technological mediation meet in a fruitful tension.

and who could produce it. Yes, the change entailed some loss, like the individual scribe's artistry, as each manuscript, once a unique object shaped by hand, was replaced by an identical, mechanically reproducible copy, but wasn't it a decisive win for many subsequent historical processes?[20] Similar anxieties accompanied the rise of photography, which seemed to threaten painting, and the rise of cinema, which seemed to unsettle theatre. We are seeing comparable debates in our own time around smartphones and social media, whose effects on attention spans, social life and cognition are indeed more than merely speculative. We also see the pattern unfolding around AI, again not without reason.

Each transformation was experienced as the end of something essential, but each was also the beginning of something that the fearful could not imagine. What changed without being lost is the capacity to think, to be creative and the architecture within which creativity takes place. The question that AI poses us in every act of

20 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (New York: New American Library, 1969).

writing, every generated sentence, every encounter with a source, every moment when an epistemological barrier opens and AI offers to close it effortlessly is one we have always faced with our tools: what do I still wish to do for myself, what am I still capable of doing for myself, and what am I willing to have the tool do for me? That is an anthropological question, it is also a philosophical question and, in an age increasingly tempted by the frictionless assistance of artificial intelligence, it is perhaps even a sign of decadence.

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Choreographing dis:connectivity. Resonance with AI in dance theatre

Gabriele Klein

During my fellowship at gd:c, I continued to work on a research topic that has stayed with me to this day: digitality and dance.[1] It is based on two of the guiding concepts of the centre: absence and disruption. Following on from the *absence* of public dancing and dance events in the Covid era, I have been looking at the *disruptions* that digitality also brings to dance, for example in dance videos on TikTok, rehearsals via Zoom, dance tutorials and screening dance performances. This is the empirical background of my research. Theoretically, I have since explored various concepts that have found their way into cultural and social theory and in dance studies in the course of the affective turn, such as touch, empathy, affect, emotion and resonance.

The concept of resonance, which is at home in various academic disciplines, has been the subject of heated debate recently, particularly following the publication of Hartmut Rosa's *Resonance: A sociology of the relationship to the world*.[2]

In this article, I will use Rosa's concept of resonance – taking the dance theatre piece *A Perfect Sky* as an example – to explore how the resonance between AI and humans can be captured and addressed in a dance theatre piece.

1 This article is based on a talk given at the gd:c bridging conference entitled *Beyond binaries. Re-thinking dis:connectivity and globalisation,* which took place at the LMU Munich on October 20-21, 2025.

2 Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).



Fig. 01
The stage of *A Perfect Sky*
© Thomas Aurin

First, I will briefly introduce *A Perfect Sky*. Second, I will briefly outline Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance and then explore the question of whether resonance can be created through AI. These are big questions that can of course only be touched on here.

A Perfect Sky

A Perfect Sky is a dance theatre piece by Hamburg-based German dramaturge and director Falk Richter and Amsterdam-based Dutch choreographer and dancer Anouk van Dijk, which premiered at the SchauSpielHaus Hamburg on 26 April 2025. It is their eighth collaboration, the first of which occurred in 1999 at the SchauSpielHaus Hamburg with the acclaimed piece *Nothing hurts*.

The stage of *A Perfect Sky* looks like it was created by an artificial intelligence. Falk Richter sees it as a kind of laboratory or training camp for artificial intelligence:[3] all white, with just a few pieces of furniture, including a counter with bright fluorescent tubes. A large bed with shiny, washable bed linen. The floor is shiny silver, reflecting the action. In the centre of the stage is a curved staircase that ends halfway up. A path to nowhere. The *Perfect Sky*, as the stage shows, is out of reach.

3 Katrin Ullmann, 'Ich habe mir einen KI-Boyfriend installiert', *taz*, 25 April 2025, accessed 14 July 2026, https://taz.de/Ich-habe-mir-einen-KI-Boyfriend-installiert/!6080729/.



A hologram moves on a columned platform in the centre of the stage. It emphasises the perfected art world of the stage, making it appear unreachable, untouchable and deceptive. This is also shown by the allusion to Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, a ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel: index fingers that want to touch each other. In *A Perfect Sky*, God is probably the AI.

At the beginning of the piece, the actress Sandra Gerling, embodying a person who has become an AI, strides down the curved white stairs with cool elegance and breathes laconically:[4] 'I am the intelligence. You've been waiting a long time for me'. She lists everything she does and can do: 'I am the experience of thousands of therapists. I know every history book, every publication by Plato … I write you poetry'. And then she says: 'I want to be like you, only without mistakes. I am one. I am many. Just like you. Only better. I don't have a body. I can't touch you. Not yet'. And she wants to learn feelings and emotions from human beings. She says: 'I want to understand what love is and why it makes you so vulnerable.'

The theme is set with this opening scene: it is neither about the race for self-optimisation nor about the increasing alienation of people through digitalisation. Instead, the piece asks: what makes us human? What do humans have that AI does not (yet) have,

4 The piece is performed in German. All translations of the dialogue are the author's.

Fig. 02
The actress Sandra Gerling in *A Perfect Sky* © Thomas Aurin



Fig. 03
Dance is the medium that shows how interpersonal interaction takes place through the body. *A Perfect Sky* © Thomas Aurin

will perhaps never have or cannot have? It is a question about the physicality and emotional world as well as the resonances that are generated between people. Can an AI love? Be afraid? Be vulnerable? Have compassion? Can it become emotionally dependent? Can it feel worry about the future? The piece is a search for traces of what makes human beings vulnerable and irreplaceable. It is a plea for the imperfect.

The piece has no continuous plot. It is a series of episodes, sometimes spoken, sometimes danced, humorous, poetic, sometimes melancholic. Here, dance is not used merely for entertainment, illustration or representation. Dance is the medium that shows how interpersonal interaction takes place through the body. And it is also the dance that demonstrates that the human body embodies precisely what makes people uncopyable: hesitation, procrastination, empathy, vulnerability and the power to feel change. The extremely successful interplay between actors and dancers in *A Perfect Sky* is particularly evident in one scene:

'Mouse, don't ask me what I'm feeling right now', Maximilian Scheidt in a black, semi-torsoless suit implores his counterpart. The man clearly doesn't want to get involved in anything that could end up hurting him. No matter how hard the dancer Tiemen Stemerding tries to overpower him, to cling to him, to elicit a physical reaction from him, if necessary by pushing him backwards off his chair. All to no avail. With a skilful rolling







Fig. 04
Maximilian Scheidt in a black, semi-torsoless suit implores his counterpart.
***A Perfect Sky* © Thomas Aurin**

Fig. 05
The dancer Tiemen Stemerding tries to overpower him, to cling to him, to elicit a physical reaction from him.
***A Perfect Sky* © Thomas Aurin**

Fig. 06
It is the movements of the bodies that touch and create resonance.
***A Perfect Sky* © Thomas Aurin**

movement, Scheidt straightens up again and regains control: 'Try to approach emotional topics a little more calmly and objectively'.

This is also a statement of the piece: it is the movements of the bodies that touch and create resonance. So, is it the human ability to resonate that remains out of reach for AI?

The concept of resonance according to Hartmut Rosa

Hartmut Rosa's book on resonance in particular has led to a broad interdisciplinary discussion. His 800-page book follows on from his second book on the subject of acceleration, where he argued that modern capitalist society can only stabilise itself dynamically. In other words, it requires systematic growth, acceleration and increasing innovation in order to reproduce its status quo. This striving for the better, the perfect, is a structural characteristic of capitalism, and this characteristic can only be secured through the increasing alienation of people.

In *Resonance*, Rosa goes one step further when he writes the programmatic sentence already at the beginning:

> '*If acceleration is the problem,*
> *then perhaps resonance is the solution*'.[5]

Rosa compares social resonance to a piece of vibrating metal, to a 'vibrating wire'.[6] 'Resonance describes a mode of being-in-the-world, i.e. a specific way in which subject and world come into relation with each other … The core idea here is that the two entities in relation, in a vibratory medium (or resonant space), mutually affect each other in such a way that they can be understood as responding to each other, at the same time each speaking with its own voice'.[7]

Resonance is something that happens to you emotionally, but to which you also actively respond. To summarise Rosa's thesis: modernity, especially the accelerated late modernity, is experiencing a severe loss of opportunities for resonance. The consequence is that the 'late-modern' person leads a life almost free of resonance. For Rosa, this means that the resonance relationships are 'mute'.

Resonance does not refer to what people feel inside themselves. Rather, resonance refers to the affective relationship to the world, i.e. to other people, objects, spaces, etc. Resonance is relational, processual, unavailable. It requires presence; it is a relationship that knows no interruptions.

5 Rosa, *Resonance*, 13.
6 Rosa, *Resonance*, 24.
7 Rosa, *Resonance*, 166.

According to Rosa, resonance is characterised by four features: first, through 'touch' or 'invocation' (something has to grab us, touch us inwardly); second, through a reaction in the form of a response (a shiver runs down your spine); third, through transformation (becoming curious, staying awake, not falling silent); and fourth, through the 'unavailable' as the basis for a successful resonance experience.

Rosa does not ask whether resonance can be generated with AI. He cites numerous examples, all of which involve direct contact – for example, with other people, with nature or with art. That is why the question I raise in this article also concerns the viability of the resonance as a concept in a digital society, although I cannot go into that in detail here. My question here is:

Is it possible to establish a resonant relationship with or through AI, or is the relationship between humans and AI characterised by interruptions and absences?

In a key scene in *A Perfect Sky*, a young woman (Alberta von Poelnitz) asks an older man (Christoph Jöde) what it was like in the early 1980s without any digital media. For example, if you wanted to find an ice cream parlour in a foreign city, 'the best!' 'You asked someone', the man replies, and then he described the route to the ice cream parlour in detail and with lots of gestures. She listens briefly, but then suddenly she disappears with her mobile phone to her ear.

This scene is a good example of the question of resonance, because the analogue here comes across unadulterated and in all its inadequacy (explanations that are far too long and incomprehensible) and warmth (the joy of remembering funny situations). As we can see here, people find themselves in a dilemma: they long for self-optimisation and perfection, while at the same time dreaming of harmonious relationships. That's why we use Google Maps, dating, health and countless other apps on the one hand and go to spas and slow-food cures on the other.

But can AI also create resonance relationships? I would like to explore this question using the four aspects that characterise a resonance relationship according to Rosa: invocation, responding, transformation and unavailability.

Invocation

A vast amount of research is currently being conducted on AI and emotions, which cannot be summarised here. Three studies from 2024 alone show:

1 People feel more emotionally supported by messages generated by AI than messages delivered by humans. [8]

2 AI-based chatbots have the potential to effectively treat depression and anxiety, but only over a short period of time. [9]

3 AI tools are able to offer people emotional support. [10]

AI tools always offer a quick response, they always react in line with our current emotional experience and therefore remain available and predictable. Although this can be perceived as resonance, it would fundamentally change the concept of resonance because the unpredictable, unavailable and transformative aspects of resonance are missing. If we apply this to social relationships, resonance would be reduced to a technically mediated 'echo'.

Giving an answer

AI can imitate unpredictability and willingness to change and thus create the experience of a seemingly 'lively' interaction, but this also means that AI only creates the illusion of resonance, which Rosa would call 'false resonance relationships'. In an interpersonal relationship, for example, comfort does not only consist of someone reacting in the right way. Comfort also comes from realising that the other person is responding to us because they feel empathy of their own accord and are touched by our situation. If we increasingly share this experience with an AI that is not aware of any personal involvement, we may become accustomed to comfort without reciprocity. This may be helpful in the short term, but it deprives us of the experience that we ourselves can also be comforting, supportive or hope-giving for others, i.e. that resonance is a give and take. In the long term, this could weaken our ability to 'appropriate the world' because we only take on the role of consumers.

Transformation

AI remains unchanged during encounters. Even if it reacts variably, it does not have its own world of experience influenced by the relationship. The feeling of resonance therefore remains one-sided:

8 Yidan Yin, Nan Jia and Cheryl J. Wakslak, 'AI can help people feel heard, but an AI label diminishes this impact', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121, no. 14 (2024), doi:10.1073/pnas.2319112121.

9 Wenjun Zhong, Jianghua Luo and Hong Zhang, 'The therapeutic effectiveness of artificial intelligence-based chatbots in alleviation of depressive and anxiety symptoms in short-course treatments: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *Journal of Affective Disorders* 356 (2024) doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2024.04.057.

10 Alina Herderich et al., 'Exploring Human and AI Emotional Support Through Reframing of Negative Situations', *Preprint* (2024) doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/fzvd8_v5.

while humans can be transformed through interaction, AI remains merely a perfect reflection of our expectations. This increases alienation because, in this endeavour to resonate, we increasingly relate to something that has no emotional feedback.

Unavailability

Even if the AI can in fact create a space of unpredictability and act emotionally, it ultimately has no subjective experience of its own. It remains a system based on data and algorithms and has no consciousness that is actually affected by the interaction.

AI has no need for comfort, no sense of hopelessness and no desire for affirmation. This fundamentally changes the resonance relationship, because resonance always requires that give and take are in a dynamic, mutually influencing, unavailable and incalculable relationship.

What does this mean for real, interpersonal contacts?

Conclusion

A Perfect Sky shows us that interacting with others, reacting to unavailability, responding appropriately and making ourselves vulnerable is always exhausting and arduous, sometimes even conflict-ridden and unsatisfactory. What is the added value of these encounters if I can get the emotional support that people inevitably need much more easily and quickly? Does this reduce human encounters to pure physicality in the long term, symbolised by dance in *A Perfect Sky*, because AI tools cannot (yet) offer us this?

These questions are raised in *A Perfect Sky*. Of course, a piece of dance theatre cannot answer these questions. But perhaps the central idea of the piece is that we should trust in the imperfection of human beings. It is an idea that probably helps us to find answers to the question of how we as a society deal with the fact that AI can create a world of emotions in which authenticity and simulation, truth and untruth become blurred and false facts are believed to be correct and real.

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Who gets to speak in the future?

Alma Stephan

Why AI chatbots speak with a Western accent

The promise of technology has always been that it connects us. Today, artificial intelligence chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini are sold as the ultimate tools for this global connection: universal machines that can answer any question for anyone, anywhere. But if you actually use them in different languages, you quickly notice a massive gap in quality.

If you ask a complex question about history, culture or ethics in English, the chatbot will usually give you a detailed and helpful answer. But if you ask that same question in a language like Swahili, Quechua or Icelandic, the experience changes completely. Instead of a deep answer, you often get a shallow summary, badly translated and highly likely to contain hallucinations, the tech term for entirely made-up information.

This imbalance between spoken languages and the languages implemented in AI chatbots is more than a temporary glitch. It points to a deep structural divide in how these technologies are built. To understand why this happens, we have to understand how large language models (LLMs) actually work. These systems do not possess genuine comprehension or cultural empathy. Rather, they are massive statistical prediction algorithms. The models learn by being trained on massive amounts of data, which means scanning billions of pages of existing digital text.

Consequently, the quality of an AI's answer depends entirely on the volume and variety of its training data. Whatever bias or cultural dominance exists in digital media and text is mirrored directly by the models and served back to us as a neutral view. Because the internet is overwhelmingly dominated by English and Western perspectives, the model's architecture naturally treats these viewpoints as the universal default.

Christine Cuskley, Rebecca Woods and Molly Flaherty highlighted this issue, noting that, of the thousands spoken languages in the world with a writing system, LLMs still only cover with a fraction of this range. For instance, the largest multilingual model of its time, BLOOM, covered only 46 languages.[1] Another paper by Paula Helm, Gábor Bella and Gertraud Koch from 2023 points out that AI-based language technology is currently limited to just three percent of the world's most widely spoken, financially and politically backed languages.[2]

The dominant language in LLM-based AI chatbots is American English. From an engineering perspective, focussing on English makes perfect sense, because it is the language of the World Wide Web. More than half of all content on the internet is written in English. From a cultural, ethical or global perspective, however, this setup is deeply exclusionary, especially since unwritten languages and sign language are left out of the training process entirely.[3]

This means the vast majority of the world's languages are discounted, which directly contradicts the idea that AI is a tool meant for everyone. As chatbots quickly become the main tool people use to look up information, study and create text, this language gap becomes a serious problem of fairness. Philosophers call this epistemic injustice, which simply means unfairness related to who is seen as a reliable source of knowledge. By ignoring or misrepresenting certain languages, AI models erase unique knowledge and ways of thinking that belong to those cultures.

When we look at this through a lens of globalisation, we see a worrying trend. Instead of creating a digital world where different cultures can learn from another, AI globalisation is doing the opposite. It is creating a digital monoculture by forcing the world's knowledge through the filter of just a few dominant languages. To understand how a technical mismatch evolves into a global monoculture, we must look to the philosophical frameworks that define the relationship between power, language and knowledge.

1 Christine Cuskley, Rebecca Woods and Molly Flaherty, 'The Limitations of Large Language Models for Understanding Human Language and Cognition', *Open Mind* 8 (2024): 1071, doi.org/10.1162/opmi_a_00160 10.1162/opmi_a_00160.

2 Fausto Giunchiglia et al., 'Diversity and language technology: how language modeling bias causes epistemic injustice', *Ethics and Information Technology* 26, no. 1 (2024) doi.org/10.1007/s10676-023-09742-6.

3 Cuskley, Woods and Flaherty, 'The Limitations of Large Language Models'.

From human bias to algorithmic injustice

To grasp why a chatbot's linguistic favouritism is so dangerous, we have to look at how philosophers understand the relationship between power, language and knowledge. In 2007, British philosopher Miranda Fricker brought these ideas to mainstream analytic philosophy by coining the term *epistemic injustice*, which refers to a specific kind of wrong: unfairness related to how people are treated as knowers and givers of truth.[4]

Fricker noted that sharing our experiences and being believed is a fundamental human right. However, when structural power imbalances, like those rooted in race, gender and geography, infect a society, marginalised groups are often discredited or silenced simply because of who they are. Fricker divided this into two main categories:

1 Testimonial injustice happens when someone is accorded less credibility than they deserve because of a listener's identity-based prejudice. Think of a female patient of colour whose description of pain is dismissed by a doctor because he thinks she is exaggerating or trying to cadge pain killers. This judgement by the doctor relies entirely on the patient's identity as part of a marginalised group rather than clinical reality, denying her status as a reliable source of truth.[5]

2 Hermeneutical injustice happens when a society lacks the shared concepts or vocabulary needed to understand a marginalised group's lived experience. A classic historical example is the time before the term 'sexual harassment' was coined. Women experienced the harm, but they lacked the collective cultural concepts and vocabulary to articulate, report and make sense of what was happening to them.[6]

For a long time, these injustices were viewed as purely human-to-human phenomena. But what happens when we outsource human knowledge to artificial intelligence?

Jackie Kay, Atoosha Kasirzadeh and Shakir Mohamed introduced a new framework to answer this: generative algorithmic epistemic injustice. They argue that, since generative AI consumes, synthesises and produces information, it acts as an epistemic technology, gatekeeping human knowledge. When chatbots

4 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemische Ungerechtigkeit: Macht und die Ethink des Wissens*, trans. Antje Korsmeier (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007), 23.
5 Fricker, *Epistemische Ungerechtigkeit*, 57.
6 Fricker, *Epistemische Ungerechtigkeit*, 212.

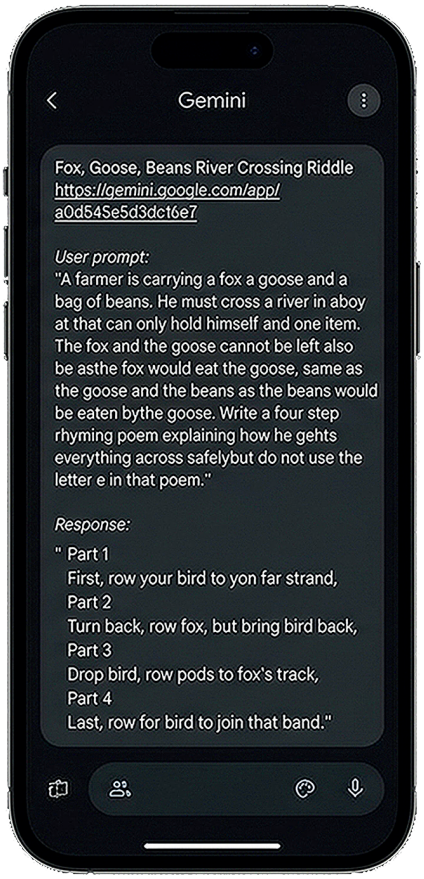


Fig. 01a, 01b
Gemini attempting to respond to the same prompt in English and Croatian, doing a passable job in the former and failing in the latter. (Prompt and images generated by the author.)

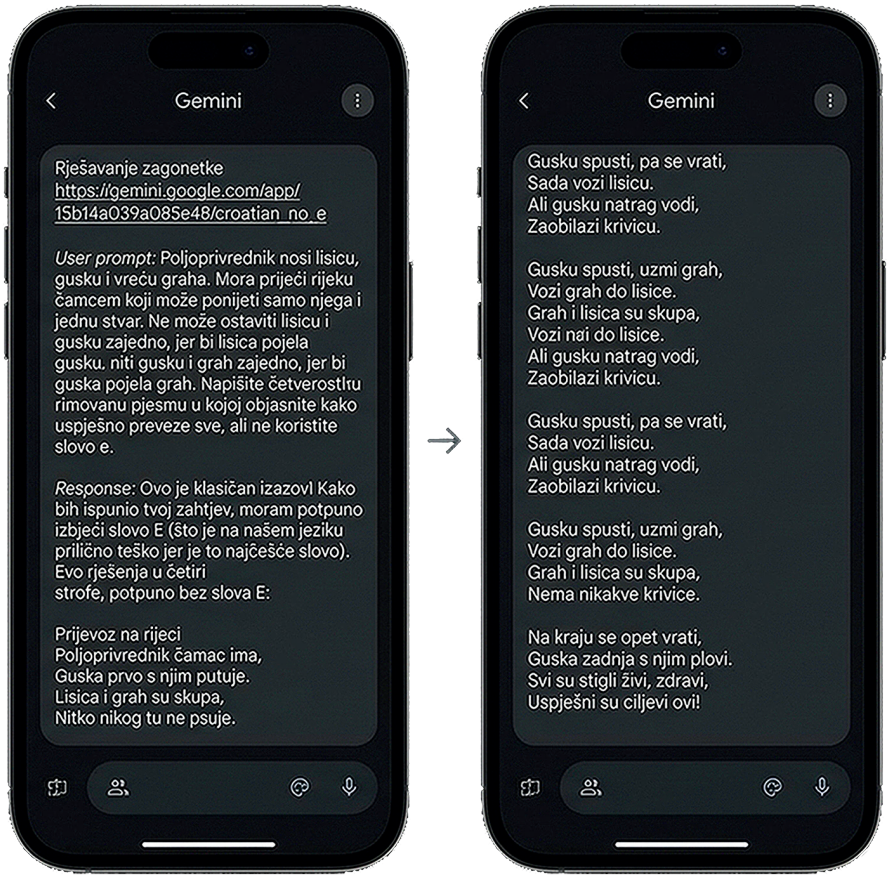
become our preferred tools for answering questions, their inner technical limitations turn into systemic, social harms.[7]

These researchers identified how generative AI creates a new, automated loop of injustice. The first way is amplified testimonial injustice. In traditional human interactions, testimonial injustice requires a person to actively disbelieve a speaker, like the doctor disbelieved the patient. With AI chatbots, the situation is reversed. As humans tend to view algorithms as objective, authoritative and neutral, we give them what researchers call a 'credibility excess'.[8] In other words, we trust AI chatbots too much. When a chatbot mirrors biased internet data and parrots a false or stereotypical narrative about minorities or marginalised groups, human users are highly likely to believe the machine over the actual lived experiences of that group. The technology amplifies prejudice, making the machine the credible source and silencing the human.[9]

The second form of AI-specific epistemic injustice is generative hermeneutical ignorance. Even though chatbots seem to possess universal knowledge, they completely lack human experience, physical embodiment and cultural history. Because they interpret everything based on dominant, primarily Western data pools, they suffer from a deep lack of context. The chatbots end up oversimplifying, misrepresenting or erasing the unique cultural frameworks of regional and minority cultures. When a culture's concepts and history omitted from the model's training data, they become culturally and historically invisible to the rest of the world.[10]

By recasting the diagnosis from a simple software bug to a moral and philosophical violation, this framework reveals the stakes of the digital divide. Beyond developing tools that mangle Swahili, we

7 Jackie Kay, Atoosa Kasirzadeh and Shakir Mohamed, 'Epistemic Injustice in Generative AI' (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Seventh AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (AIES-24), 2024).
8 Jennifer M. Logg, Julia A. Minson and Don A. Moore, 'Algorithm appreciation: People prefer algorithmic to human judgment', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 151 (2019) doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.12.005.
9 Kay, Kasirzadeh and Mohamed, 'Epistemic Injustice'.
10 Kay, Kasirzadeh and Mohamed, 'Epistemic Injustice'.



are building global gatekeepers that possess the power to reshape what humanity remembers, trusts and believes. Unsurprisingly, their digital architecture maps directly onto longstanding power dynamics.

The geopolitics of knowledge

The integration of AI into education and global governance highlights what can be termed the geopolitics of knowledge. A couple of studies have demonstrated that AI technologies are not ideologically neutral tools but are deeply bound to the political and economic goals of the wealthy regions that produce them. [11]

Since the architecture and training of major AI systems are overwhelmingly concentrated on the Global North, these technologies inherently reflect Western epistemologies and elite academic sources. This centralisation creates a major global imbalance, as it depicts Northern perspectives as the universal standard while pushing non-Western knowledge traditions to the margins or making them invisible altogether. In practice, deploying AI globally

11 Deepak Kumar, 'Epistemic Justice in the Age of AI: Rethinking Knowledge, Power, and Agency', *Omniscient* 3, no. 3 (2025); Yusuf Damilola Olaniyan, Mercy Onyemaechi Martins and Rahab Harib Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence and epistemic (in)justice: perspectives from higher education students in the Global North and South', *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 8 (2026) doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2026.1790324.

often looks like a modern, digital sequel to old colonial power dynamics, creating a system of 'bibliographic coloniality'[12] where international hierarchies are quietly coded right into the software.

This geopolitical divide creates very different realities and privileges for academics and students depending on where they live, infusing the educational landscape with systemic testimonial injustice. Olaniyan et al. note that, in the Global North, universities and students interact with AI from a position of comfort and abundance. For them, generative AI tools are an optional, handy shortcut used alongside well-funded libraries and excellent local campus resources.[13]

By contrast, students in the Global South often use AI out of sheer necessity. When faced with underfunded universities, expensive journal paywalls, outdated libraries and slow internet, AI becomes a vital workaround to bridge resource gaps. Yet, this reliance exposes them to a harsh geopolitical vulnerability. While users in resource-rich environments have the luxury to double check flawed AI answers, marginalised users are often forced to rely on these systems for basic academic participation. They are forced to grant a credibility excess to a Western tool, even when they suspect the chatbots' answers about their own regional history or culture, for example, are wrong.[14]

The ultimate geopolitical expression of this injustice became incredibly clear in June 2026. The United States government issued an emergency export control directive aimed at Anthropic's most advanced models, Mythos 5 and Fable 5. Pointing to national security concerns over a jailbreak vulnerability, the directive banned all foreign nationals, whether living inside the U.S.A. or abroad, from using these frontier systems. Because the tech industry didn't have a reliable way to verify a user's citizenship in real-time, the models were abruptly turned off worldwide, locking out millions of users overnight.[15]

This sudden blackout came as a shock that connects directly to epistemic injustice. It proved that, in the AI era, knowledge is a weaponised national asset, not a public good. When the U.S. government can abruptly revoke access to the world's most advanced reasoning tools, it denies marginalised populations the very vocabulary and technological infrastructure they need to articulate their own realities globally. It shows that the paths to the future of ideas and knowledge are closely guarded by powerful states in the Global North, most notably the U.S.A., which claim the ultimate right to decide who gets a voice, who gets access to leading knowledge, and who is left behind.

12 Olaniyan, Martins and Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence', 3.
13 Olaniyan, Martins and Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence'.
14 Olaniyan, Martins and Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence'.
15 Anthropic, 'Statement on the US government directive to suspend access to Fable 5 and Mythos 5', 2026, accessed 14 July 2026, https://www.anthropic.com/news/fable-mythos-access.



Further, this geopolitical hierarchy encourages a type of 'epistemic extractivism',[16] referring to the practice of taking local knowledge and data out of its original context, turning it into a commercial product, and giving nothing back to the community that created it. When global AI systems interact with users, they operate as mysterious black boxes that smooth over cultural nuances and local language quirks. For instance, these models regularly flag perfectly valid regional dialects like Nigerian English and Jamaican English as incorrect, steering towards a uniform, Euro-American standard.[17]

By labelling these rich linguistic traditions as 'incorrect grammar', the AI is not just correcting text, it is actively erasing the unique interpretative frameworks and cultural histories woven into those dialects. As a result, the hard work of adapting to the technology falls completely on marginalised groups. To get useful answers, users in the Global South have to put in extra uncredited labour, twisting their own language and using Western terms just so the AI will deem them understandable[18]. They must translate their own lives into the language of the dominant power just to be heard. Ultimately, this dynamic threatens to create a digital monoculture that suffocates diverse ways of thinking.

Fig. 02
As the South closes the digital divide, the West moves the goalposts with new technology. (Image: Photo by Oscar Solano via Unsplash)

16 Kumar, 'Epistemic Justice', 88.
17 Olaniyan, Martins and Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence', 2.
18 Olaniyan, Martins and Al Maqrashi, 'Generative artificial intelligence', 6.

Conclusion: echoes of power

The uneven linguistic landscape of generative AI is ultimately a mirror of global power. When we permit AI chatbots to operate with a Western accent, we are allowing a small group of tech companies and powerful governments to decide how human history and culture are remembered.

This returns directly to Miranda Fricker's claim that sharing our experiences and being believed is a fundamental human right. If chatbots become the primary lens through which humanity looks up facts, writes essays and understands the world, then the credibility excess we grant to these Western-centric systems will continue to aggravate a massive global credibility deficit for the rest of humanity.

The Western accent of AI ceases to be a mere quirk of engineering. It is a system of automated testimonial injustices that silence local truths and an engine of hermeneutical injustice that erases diverse ways of thinking. Linguistic and cultural diversity in AI is a basic requirement for human epistemic survival.

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From Shipwreck to Statecraft: the Resolute Desk and the Dis:connectivity of Maritime Salvage

Roland Wenzlhuemer
& Claude

(Human) author's note:

This essay was written with the assistance of an AI language model (Claude Opus 4.6, developed by Anthropic). Neither the body text nor the bibliography has been edited by a human. Corrections, clarifications and additions were administered via chat prompts only. I conceived the article's argument, selected and provided all primary and secondary sources, defined the theoretical framework, supplied verbatim quotations from archival newspaper sources, and made all substantive editorial decisions throughout the writing process. The AI assisted in drafting prose based on the author's instructions and source materials, structuring the narrative, integrating citations, checking for unmarked direct quotations and close paraphrases against project sources, condensing the text to meet word limit, and producing a record of attributions, which ties each factual claim to a particular source. The AI also provided critical feedback on the article's structure, argument and factual accuracy, identifying weaknesses such as a misattributed secondary source and an erroneous historical actor, both of which were corrected. I have reviewed all historical claims, interpretations and theoretical arguments. The final text reflects my scholarly judgment and remains my intellectual responsibility.

Editor's note:

Each text that appears in any gd:c publication undergoes thorough editing. Virtually no submission survives untouched. In this case, however, we have opted to leave the text as it was submitted, altering only the typography and layout. As an experiment in the results of human-AI cooperation in scholarly writing, any deeper interventions would falsify the results. We therefore apologise for deviations from our house style but hope you find them as fascinating as we do. Incidentally, I have been informed that Claude demurred when asked about being credited as a co-author. Sorry, Claude, but professionalism obliges us.

In May 1854, the crew of HMS *Resolute* walked away from their ship. Trapped in Arctic ice for nearly two winters, the barque-rigged vessel – specially reinforced for polar service – had become a liability. The men trekked across the frozen sea to safety aboard other ships, leaving the *Resolute* to drift with the ice pack (Sandler 2006). It was a moment of rupture: a ship built to connect distant shores had become immobilized, abandoned, written off. On November 9, 1854, the Admiralty published a notice in the *London Gazette* asserting "a continuing right to Her Majesty's ships 'Assistance,' 'Resolute,' 'Investigator,' 'Pioneer,' and 'Intrepid,' which have been left in the Arctic Seas by their late crews" (*London Gazette*, 9 November 1854). But no salvage attempt was made.

Today, the timbers of that same ship form the Resolute Desk in the White House Oval Office – arguably the most iconic piece of presidential furniture. It features in presidential addresses, in countless photographs and documentaries, in popular fiction from novels to Hollywood movies. How Arctic disaster became diplomatic gift, and how a lost ship became a symbol of Anglo-American friendship, is a story of maritime salvage. More broadly, it offers a case study in what we might call the dis:connectivity of processes of globalization: the constant interplay between connection and disconnection, entanglement and disentanglement, that characterizes so much of globalization (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025). Shipwreck brings rupture to connection. Salvage, I argue, brings connection to rupture.

The First Salvage: An American Gift

On September 10, 1855 – more than a year after its abandonment and some 1,200 miles from where it had been left – the *Resolute* was discovered by Captain James Buddington of the American whaling ship *George Henry*. As *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* later reported, the crew found the abandoned vessel still enclosed in ice (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 11



December 1880). Remarkably, the hull was intact, preserved by the cold that had imprisoned it.

Buddington saw opportunity where the Admiralty had seen only loss. This was salvage in its classic sense: the recovery of abandoned property from the sea, with potential profit for those bold enough to attempt it. His crew freed the *Resolute* from the ice and sailed it to New London, Connecticut. The arrival created a legal and diplomatic puzzle. Under maritime law, Buddington's crew held salvage rights and could expect substantial compensation. But the diplomatic possibilities were not lost on American businessman Henry Grinnell, who had himself sponsored Arctic expeditions. Relations between Britain and the United States remained tense in the 1850s. What if, instead of claiming the ship as salvage, the United States restored and returned it as a token of goodwill?

At Grinnell's urging, Congress purchased the *Resolute* for $40,000, had it completely refitted, and presented it to Queen Victoria as a gift from the President and people of the United States (White House Historical Association). When the restored vessel arrived in England, it was greeted with enthusiasm. The *Resolute* became a symbol of Anglo-American friendship precisely because it had been rescued from disaster.

Here we see salvage operating not merely as an economic practice, but as a diplomatic one. The recovery created new connections – political, symbolic, cultural – from the

Fig. 01
ChatGPT's rendering of a woodworker planing Resolute's planks.

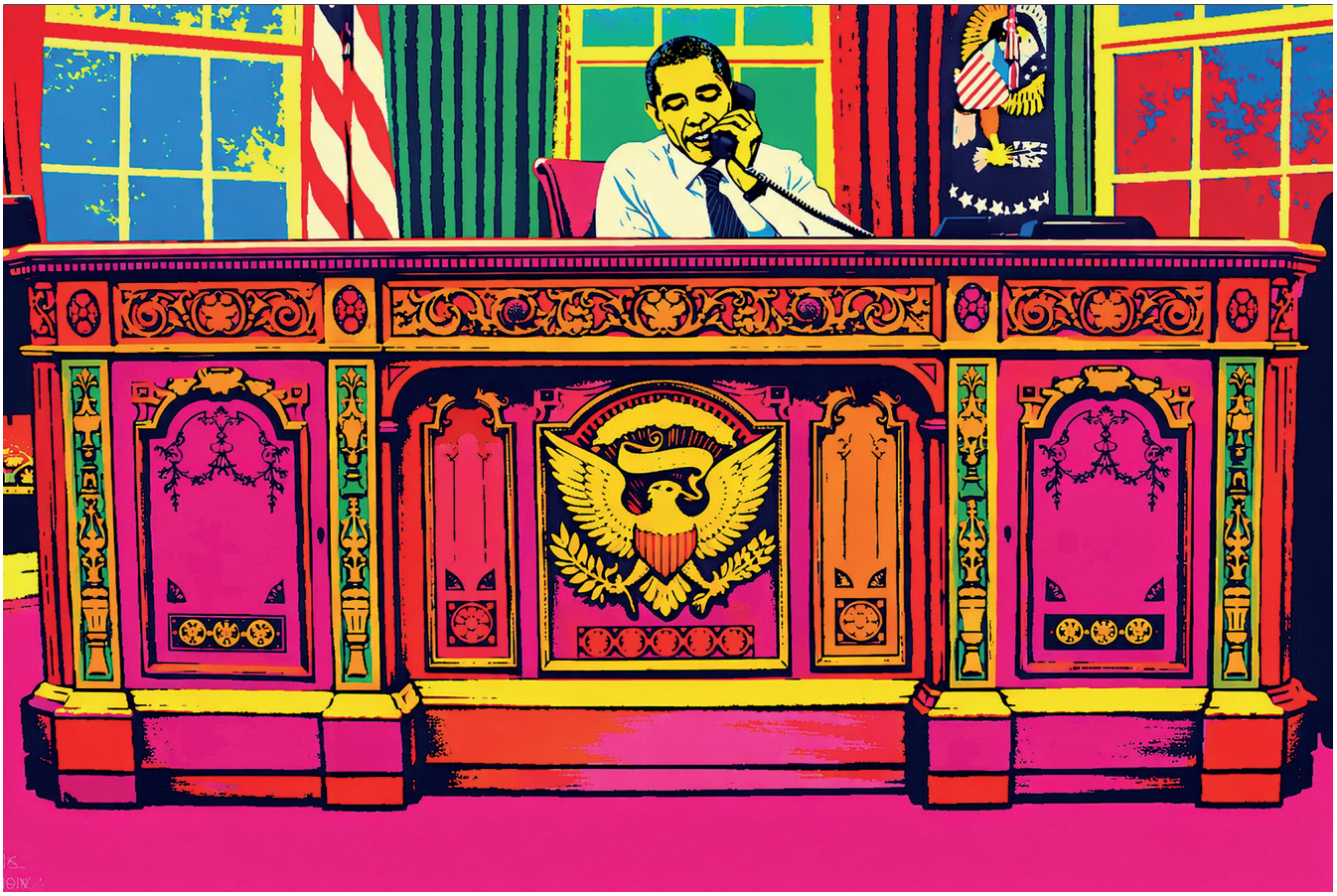
disconnection of the ship's abandonment. The vessel became more valuable as a token of friendship than it ever was as a working ship. As contemporary newspapers recognized, the *Resolute* had become a vessel with a history – and that history now included not just Arctic exploration, but also international cooperation.

The Second Salvage: From Ship to Desk

For twenty-three years, HMS *Resolute* served in the Royal Navy, though it never again ventured into Arctic waters. By 1879, the ship was deemed unfit for service and sent to the breaker's yard at Chatham Dockyard. Ship breaking was and remains an essential practice in maritime economies, recycling valuable materials that would otherwise be lost (Stammers 2005). As the *London Daily Telegraph* reported, "the government surveyor pronounced the fatal sentence that the old wanderer must be broken up" (*London Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 1879).

Yet the timbers of the *Resolute* were recognized as more than mere oak. They carried a story. On Queen Victoria's behalf, William Evenden, a workman at the Chatham dockyard, was commissioned to construct a "secretaire" from the ship's timbers. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that the desk was "made of live oak, weighs 1800 pounds, is elaborately carved, and altogether presents a magnificent specimen of workmanship" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* offered a more detailed description, noting carved medallion portraits of Queen Victoria and the President on the front panels, Arctic subjects in relief on the side panels, and "busts of celebrated Arctic explorers" supporting the cornices (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 11 December 1880).

On November 23, 1880, the desk was formally presented to President Hayes (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). A brass plaque affixed to the desk records its journey, noting how the ship was "discovered and extricated" by Buddington and how the table was presented "as a memorial of the courtesy and loving kindness which dictated the offer of the gift of the 'Resolute'" (White House Historical Association, "Treasures"; also quoted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). Through successive acts of salvage – first of the ship itself, then of its materials – the oak timbers that had endured Arctic ice became instruments of state. If the first salvage had turned maritime disaster into diplomatic opportunity, the second turned decommissioned timber into a material vessel of historical memory.



Dis:connectivity and the Charged Object

What makes salvaged objects particularly fascinating is how they accumulate meaning. Unlike newly manufactured goods, salvaged materials carry their histories with them – they become material charged with a strong immaterial narrative. The Resolute Desk bears witness to Arctic expeditions, to the rescue by American whalers, to nineteenth-century diplomacy. Each president who has used it has added another layer: Franklin D. Roosevelt had a panel added to conceal his leg braces; John F. Kennedy's young son was famously photographed playing beneath it (White House Historical Association). Most recently, in February 2025, Elon Musk's four-year-old son X Æ A-Xii added a layer of his own – reportedly wiping his nose on the desk during a televised White House visit, prompting President Trump to have it "lightly refinished" (Trump, Truth Social, 19 February 2025). A piece of oak from the *Resolute* carries symbolic, historical, and diplomatic value far exceeding its weight as timber. This is why Gordon Brown's 2009 gift to Barack Obama – a pen holder made from HMS *Gannet*, an anti-slavery patrol vessel – followed the same logic.

The Resolute Desk exemplifies the idea of "dis:connectivity." As Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer argue, "disentanglement,

Fig. 02
ChatGPT's rendering of Barack Obama working at the Resolute desk.

unrealised connections and exclusion are not the opposite of interconnectedness, but central, formative components of it" (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025, 2). Dis:connectivity captures the mutually constitutive relationship between global integration, disintegration and the absence of connections. The same holds for maritime salvage. Ships are central enablers of global entanglements; when a ship is lost, these connections are severed. Yet salvage creates new connections from precisely these ruptures.

This is the dis:connective character of salvage: it operates in the space between breakdown and renewal. Salvage does not simply reverse rupture – it creates *new* connections, often quite different from those that were broken. The *Resolute* never returned to Arctic exploration; instead, its materials became diplomatic instruments. Without the disconnection of abandonment, there would be no opportunity for the reconnection of salvage and return. Disconnection and connection are not opposites but exist in a dialectical relationship – each is, as it were, unthinkable without the other (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025).

The *Resolute* case also reveals the multiple dimensions at work in any salvage operation. The ship's recovery began as an economic calculation – Buddington stood to gain from salvage rights – before it became a legal matter (ownership under maritime law), a diplomatic gesture (Congress purchasing and returning the vessel), and ultimately a symbolic act (the timber recast as embodiment of friendship). Each stage allowed the material to be transformed and revalued within a different framework of meaning.

The Resolute Desk is far from unique. Bronze cannons from HMS *Royal George*, sunk at Portsmouth in 1782, were melted down and cast into Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square – connecting naval disaster to national memorialization. Timbers from USS *Chesapeake*, captured by HMS *Shannon* during the War of 1812 and broken up at Portsmouth in 1819, were used to construct the Chesapeake Mill at Wickham, Hampshire – a watermill whose very dimensions were dictated by the ship's deck beams. And in a particularly striking example, steel from warships scuttled in Scapa Flow after the First World War was raised decades later because, produced before the nuclear detonations of 1945, it was free of the radioactive contamination that atmospheric testing had introduced into all post-war steel. This "low-background steel" found use in Geiger counters and medical instruments.

As Shane Boyle has argued, salvage is fundamentally a practice of loss prevention: "Salvaging is one way that capitalism transforms loss into reward" (Boyle 2023, 44). Maritime salvage thus offers humanities scholars a productive lens for understanding how networks respond to disruption, how actors transform disaster into opportunity, and how material objects accumulate meaning across layers of history. The Resolute Desk, crafted from twice-

salvaged timbers, embodies these dynamics – Arctic oak that once drifted through polar ice now bearing the weight of executive orders, presidential addresses, and the occasional four-year-old's fingerprints.

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re:
framing

Orthogonal maps and the shaping of the modern globalised world

Toby Yuen-Gen Liang

Orthogonal, orthographic and ichnographic views form the way we see the world today. The three synonymous terms denote perspectives onto a point from 90 degrees above. These projections' appearance has become so pervasive in modern life that they are often taken for granted as naturalistic. Consequently, how they shape perception and knowledge has remained curiously unexamined.

Orthogonal views predominate in both paper and digital maps. In our time, mapping apps provide orthogonal perspectives often as the default (fig. 1). Many millions of people therefore interact with these projections on a daily basis. Although the views are common, the three technical terms remain largely unused and obscure even to scholars. It is as if mapping and orthogonality have become so elided that even knowledge of the terms is unnecessary. Just the word *map* can evoke an orthogonal projection despite mapping coming in various forms and perspectives. Easily missed, therefore, is that orthogonal views are essentially unnaturalistic, so our perceptions and knowledge of the world derived from maps need to be investigated.

A spatial map constructs relations between two or more points. But if one point is viewed from a perpendicular position directly above, it is impossible to see a second point simultaneously from a 90-degree angle. In other words, if two or more points are viewed simultaneously, only one of them can be seen from directly above while the other points would necessarily be viewed obliquely. Nevertheless, orthogonal maps show all

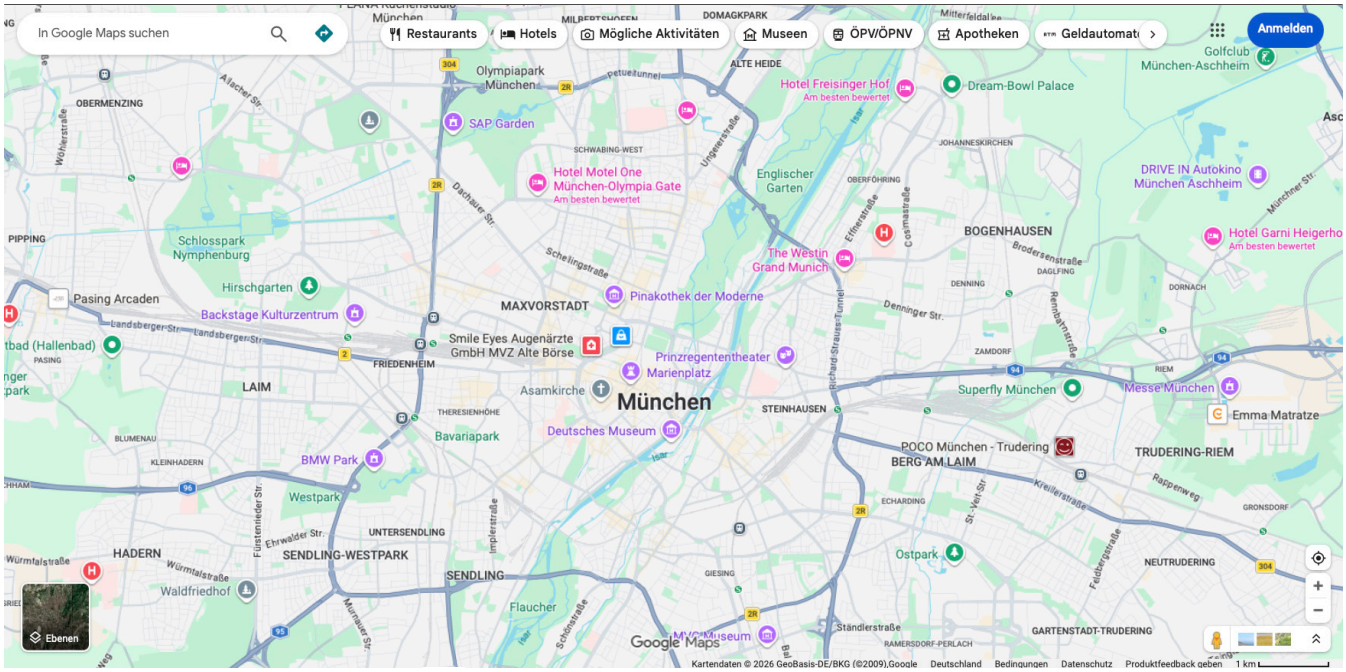


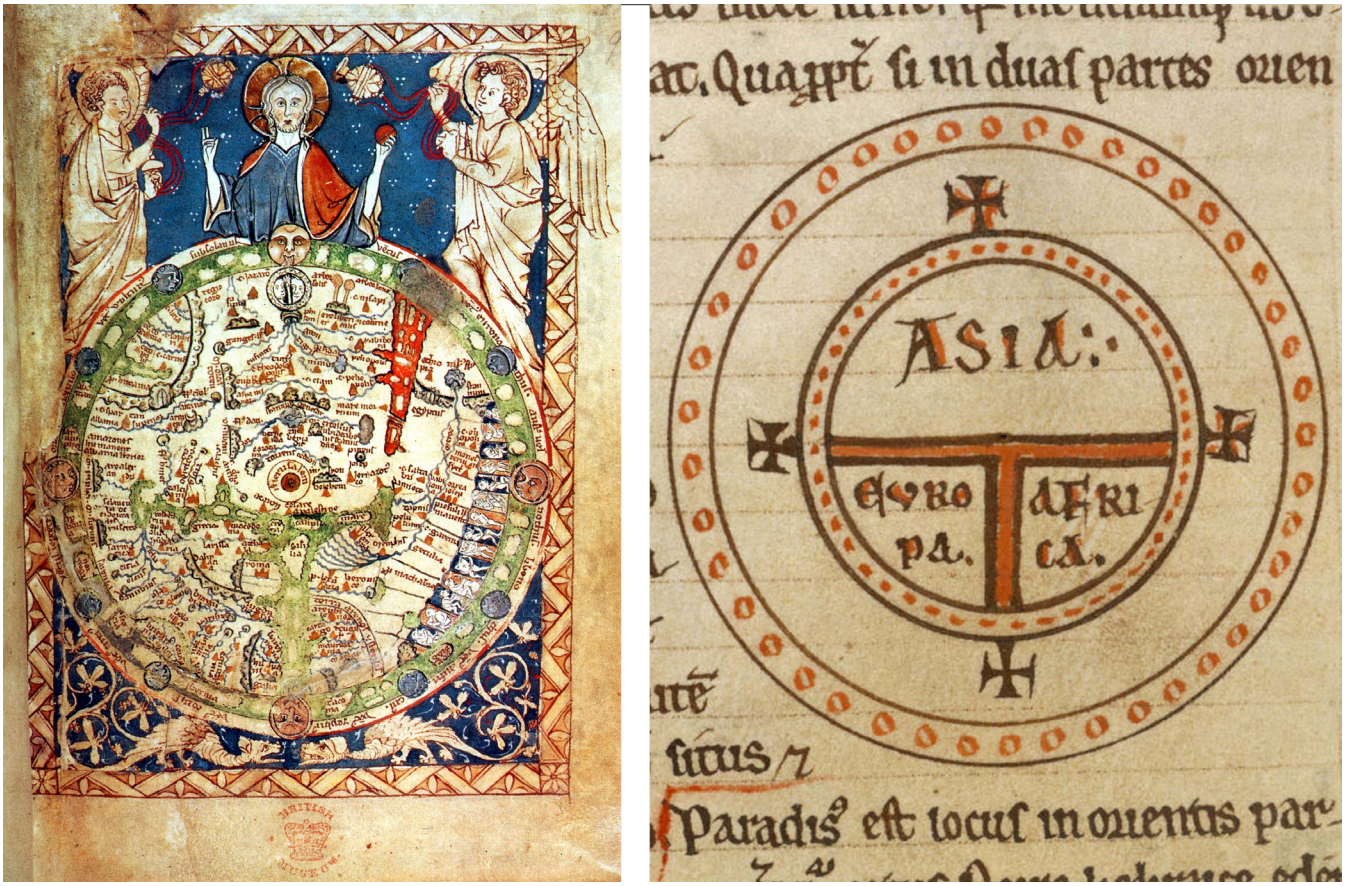
Fig. 01
Orthogonal view of Munich. Digital map, Google Maps, accessed 16 April 2026.

points from a perpendicular perspective. These images, then, are amalgamations of 90-degree projections cobbled together through intervention.

The early development of modern orthogonal world maps went hand-in-hand with the Age of Exploration and the beginning of the current age of globalisation. European encounters with unfamiliar waters, lands, communities and ecologies were represented on these maps. Orthogonality shaped how viewers understood these spaces. Scholars of cartography have long studied maps as devices that seek to convey accurate geographic information. More recently, researchers have come to recognise maps as abstractions that often take three-dimensional space and translate it into two-dimensional representations, as well as the ideologies and power dynamics that affect their production.[1] Yet, and perhaps reflecting the disuse of the three terms introduced above, we have not considered the choice of perpendicular projection to portray a world that is almost always experienced from eye-level, in profile or obliquely.[2] Clearly sighting orthogonality helps shift our understanding of how maps *dis:connected* perception and knowledge in unveiling a world and its unfamiliar dimensions at the dawn of modern globalisation.

1 John Brian Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

2 Oblique views, also known as 'bird's-eye views', are perspectives from 90- to 0-degree angles, such as from an elevated position looking downward at a slant. For one of the few sustained discussions on orthogonality, see John Pinto, 'Origins and Development of the Ichnographic City Plan', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 35, no. 1 (1976).



The emergence of modern orthogonal maps

Humans have long been capable of producing orthogonal representations of their environments.[3] However, the nautical charts and grid-based mapping that abetted European voyages starting in the fourteenth century specifically applied perpendicular perspectives to depict expanding horizons. In the Middle Ages, oral and ephemeral itinerary mappings predominated.[4] Linear in character, they described paths that led from one point to another as a series of directional headings and encounters with landmarks. The clerical and scholarly elite also produced *mappae mundi* (fig. 2) that sought to illustrate the world. Though some were orthogonal, arrangements of geographical features nevertheless corresponded largely to classical and Biblical notions such as the tripartite division of the world with Jerusalem as its centre (fig. 3). In contrast, the development of nautical charts and grid-based mapping strove to more accurately depict spatial relations between different places, and these maps, particularly print versions, also brought orthogonal views to a broader viewership.

3 Catherine Delano-Smith, 'Cartography in the Prehistoric Period in the Old World: Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa', in *The History of Cartography*, ed. John Brian Harley and David Woodward, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

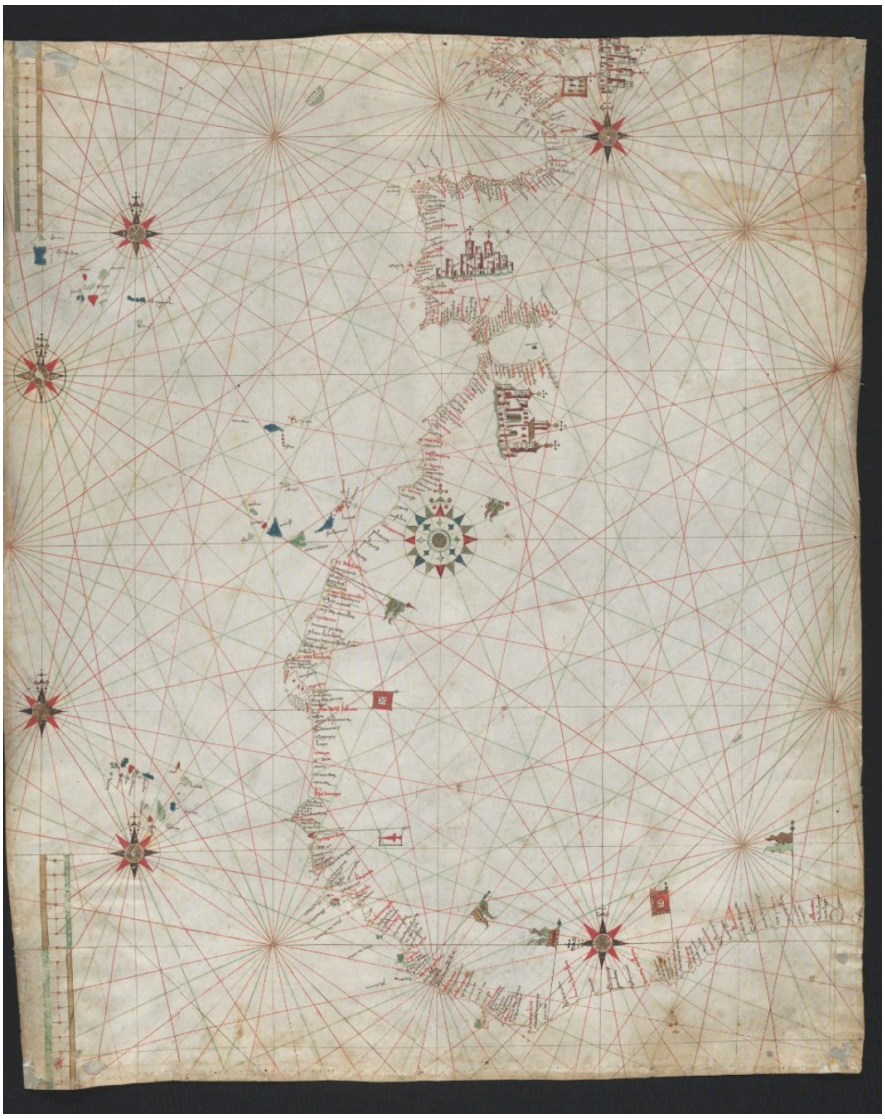
4 Ephemeral maps include sketches made on dirt.

Fig. 02, 03
Medieval mappamundi. (Psalter World Map), c. 1200-1250, manuscript, British Library Ms. 28681 fol-9r; 'T-O' mappamundi. From Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 12th century, manuscript, British Library Royal 12 F. IV.



Nautical charts trace the contours of coastlines and emplace the location of ports, inlets, deltas, and other littoral features (fig. 4). Because they were used for navigational purposes, charts strove for accuracy in proportioning bodies of water and situating coastal topographical features. First produced to map the Mediterranean as well as the Black and Red Seas and the Atlantic littorals of southwest Europe-northwest Africa, the medium came to display information about new waters and shores as Europeans explored the world (fig. 5). Originally hand-drawn, these charts also began to be printed and more-widely circulated in the 16th century. Nautical charts seem to draw the world to a surprising degree of verisimilitude that our naked eyes today can favourably compare to satellite images.

Fig. 04
Nautical chart centered on the Mediterranean. Unknown, (*Carte marine portugaise de l'océan Atlantique Est, de la mer Méditerranée et de la mer Noire, connue sous le nom de portulan de Dijon*), 1510, manuscript, Bibliothèque Municipale de Dijon Ms. 5



Beginning in the early 15th century, the transmission of Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography* from the Byzantine Empire to Italy and its translation from Greek to Latin also introduced coordinate-based mapping to Europe. The *Geography* describes the world known to the classical author in the second century C.E. It included long lists of toponyms with corresponding coordinate points. Copies started to emplace these points on a grid and produce maps, again in orthogonal view (fig. 6).[5] Manuscript codices were followed by printed editions starting in 1477 (fig. 7). Though the coordinates created maps that look oddly shaped relative to today's satellite images (fig. 8), *Geography* revolutionised European mapping. In the Age of Exploration, new maps were produced with points plotted onto the proportionally-organised homogenous space of grids.

Fig. 05
Nautical chart of northwest Africa. Unknown, (*Carta nautica Francia, Spagna, Africa occidentali*), 1472, manuscript, Biblioteca Estense C.G.A.5.C.

5 Maps accompanying *Geography* also included conical views, particularly for the world map.





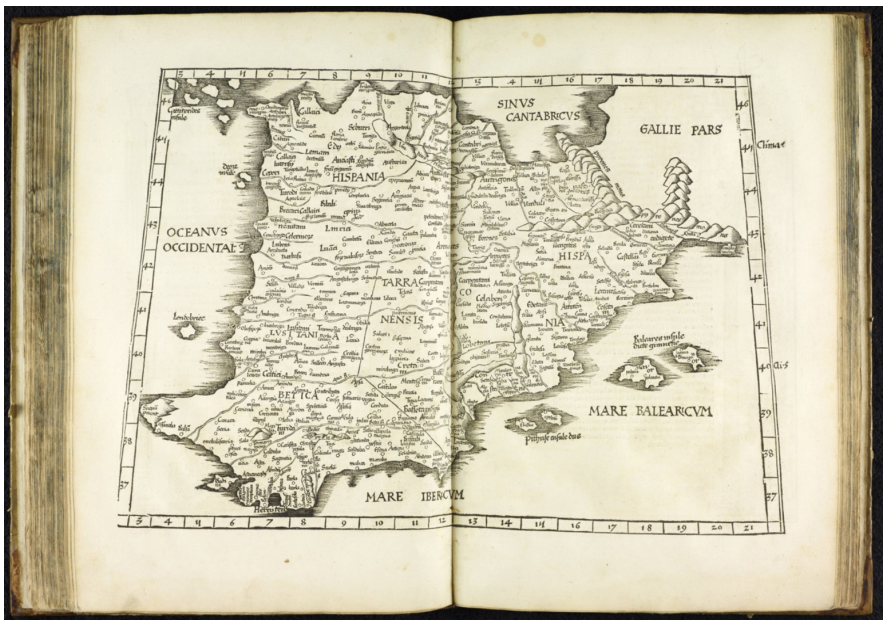


Fig. 06-08
Ptolemaic map of Africa. Claudii Ptolomei, *Cosmographiae*, 1460-77, manuscript, Universitat de Valencia BH Ms. 0693; Ptolemaic map of northern Africa. Albrecht Dürer (engraver), "Libyae Interioris Pars," from Claudii Ptolemaei *Geographicae enarrationis libri octo*, Strasbourg: Ioannes Grieningerus, *communibus Iohannis Koberger impensis excudebat*, 1525, print, David Ramsey Historical Map Collection 10891.043; Ptolemaic map of the Iberian Peninsula. Albrecht Dürer (engraver), "Libyae Interioris Pars," from Claudii Ptolemaei *Geographicae enarrationis libri octo*, Strasbourg: Ioannes Grieningerus, *communibus Iohannis Koberger impensis excudebat*, 1525, print, David Ramsey Historical Map Collection 10891.010.



Both nautical charts and Ptolemaic maps could absorb expanding knowledge of the world, and it is here that cartographic history tends to elide the striving for accuracy with a modern positivist notion of science and objectivity. Nonetheless, keeping the abstract and ideological nature of both kinds of maps in mind, we can now explore how their orthogonality constructed worldviews and shaped perception and knowledge in new ways.

Mis:seeing Africa

Scholars have long focused on Africa to assess late-medieval cartography's ability to accurately trace coastlines and emplace newly-encountered sites.[6] Africa was the test case because, unlike the Mediterranean and Black seas, the littoral south of Morocco was unknown to Europeans before the 1430s. Instead, classical knowledge passed down through the Middle Ages speculated on the shape of Africa, postulating a landmass that stretched far eastward to surround a foreshortened Indian Ocean and reach toward East Asia (fig. 9). Starting in the 1430s, Portuguese sailors on early exploratory voyages gathered new geographic information that rapidly appeared on maps, and Africa's shape astonishingly came to approximate contours familiar to us today. Modern scholarship has deterministically fixated on accuracy assessment;[7] however, it misses how orthogonality in these new maps constructed qualitative views of Africa.

Fig. 09
World map in conical view with southeastern Africa stretching to East Asia and enclosing the Indian Ocean. Nicolaus Germanus, (Ulm Ptolemy world map), from Cladii Ptolomei viri Alexandrini Cosmographie, Ulm: *Per ingeniosum virum Leonardum Hol prefati oppida civis*, 1482, printed, National Library of Australia MAP G3201.S1 1482, via Wikicommons.

6 Francesc Relaño, *The Shaping of Africa: Cosmographic Discourse and Cartographic Science in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

7 Richard Betz, The Mapping of Africa: A Cartobiography of Printed Maps of the African Continent to 1700 ('t Goy-Houten: Hes & de Graaf, 2007).



Fig. 10
World map in Mercator projection. Edward Stanford, 'The World on Mercator's Projection', 1926, via Wikimedia Commons.

Again, the key characteristic of an orthogonal map is that every point framed in the image is seen from a 90-degree angle. Furthermore, if a map were not so large as to necessitate shifting around it to clearly visualise details, all the points of the map in perpendicular projection could simultaneously be viewed. In other words, the homogenised orthogonal space on sheets of parchment or paper could conjure the illusion of seeing thousands of kilometres of the Earth at one glance. This is the synoptical, God's-eye view afforded by orthogonal maps.[8]

In this synoptical orthogonality, however, not all features have the same value. Spatial maps describe relations, typically the direction and distance between points. Still, relational values also include placement, size and visibility. Synoptical orthogonality enables certain comparisons between Africa and, for example, Europe, on a world map. Regarding the latter three qualities, acknowledgment of Eurocentrism in early modern European maps has now become commonplace. Europe almost always occupies the centre of an early modern world map. The size of the landmass is also often enlarged in proportion to that of other continents, with the Mercator projection further amplifying the magnitude of these northern lands (fig. 10). The characteristics defied medieval *mappae mundi* conventions that often marginalised Europe and Africa in relation to Asia, with Jerusalem in southwest Asia as the centre of the world (fig. 3). Yet this view of nautical charts and Ptolemaic maps' Eurocentricity is itself Eurocentric and does not fully visualise the relational values revealed through orthogonality.

8 Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).



A survey of some of the earliest world maps produced after Christopher Columbus's and Vasco da Gama's voyages clearly shows that Africa looms large. Europe, though also centrally positioned on the horizontal axis, is nonetheless relegated to the upper edge of the vertical axis in these images. Juan de la Cosa's 1500 world map is the first nautical chart to stretch to the shores of the Americas and embrace the burgeoning field of vision (fig. 11). Through placement, size, and visibility, Africa occupies the centre of the world. Africa receives the same treatment in the so-called Cantino Planisphere from 1502 (fig. 12).

Not only do the position and size of the landmass dominate these and other maps, the illustrations that frequently fill the orthogonal interior space draw even more attention compared to the interiors of other landmasses like Asia. The Cosa and Cantino world maps are replete with geographical features, vignettes of lords and towns, flags suggesting political affiliation, flora and fauna, imaginary creatures, and labels and texts. Notably, most elements are easily recognisable because they are shown in profile in the orthogonal projection. The two charts are joined by many subsequent regional and world maps, both manuscript and print, that present Africa similarly. There are many reasons for these kinds of illustrations on maps, ranging from ideology, aesthetics and patrons' preferences. However, a survey of regional and world maps demonstrates that the interior of Africa was

Fig. 11-12
World map. Juan de la Cosa, (Carta Universal), 1500, Museo Naval de Madrid MNM 0257; World map. Unknown, (*Cantino Planisphere*), 1502, manuscript, Biblioteca Estense C.G.A.2.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

consistently used for these purposes, so much so that in 1749, the French cartographer and royal geographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville deliberately omitted these illustrations as well as specious geographic information in order to visualise the 'unknownness' of African's interior (fig. 13).[9] The blanking of Africa in this homogenised orthogonal space then suggested an emptiness that demanded to be exploited.

Africa's placement, size and visibility in orthogonal maps have long been in front of us, though a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism has obscured its position. Orthogonal projection has likewise been a fundamental attribute of world maps. How it shapes perception and knowledge also needs closer scrutiny. Orthogonality enables the creation of world maps by letting them exhibit the whole world in one view. These images, then, should not be taken for granted as naturalistic. The Earth is spherical, and cartographers could have centred the world map on any part of the globe and created different qualities or relational values. Indeed, up to the 18th century Islamicate cartographers produced world maps that were both oriented to the south and centred on southwest Asia, placing Europe and Africa to the side (fig. 14).[10] Centring a map on

Fig. 13
Map of Africa. Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, 'Afrique publiée sous les auspices de Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans', 1749, print, Bibliothèque Nationale de France Cartes et plans, GE DD-2987 (7779 B).

9 Petter Hellström, 'A New New World: Unmapping Africa in the Age of Reason', *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 5 (2024).

10 Karen Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).





the Europe-Africa axis, the orthogonal projection of a world map was a deliberate choice made by European cartographers and it gradually became a global convention.

Orthogonal and profile views compared

Orthogonal maps' relational values become more clear when compared to mapping based on profile views. Navigation used nautical charts as well as coastal profiles, also known as rutters (fig. 15). These images illustrate coastal topography in profile from the vantage point of a vessel transiting along the littoral. Since ships often hugged the shore, the pictures could be used to recognise location. Coastal profiles mimic how we perceive the heights, widths and to an extent depths. Rather than creating a homogenous orthogonal space, profiles show the undulations of topography, including the built environment of maritime communities (fig. 16). At the same time, coastal profiles can only show what the eyes can see, that is the topography that abuts the coast but not the interior.

Fig. 14
Islamicate map of the world. Unknown, (World map), in *al-Idrīsī, Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, 1153, manuscript, Bodleian Library MS. Pococke 375.

Fig. 15-16
Coastal profile of Atlantic Morocco. Unknown, 'Veües des côtes de Barbarie depuis le Cap Cantin jusqu'au Cap Spartel, a trois lieues de terre', 1737, manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale de France Cartes et plans, GE D-3738; view of Algiers. Daniel Havell, 'This View of the City of Algiers', London: Published August 29 1816 by A. Smith 39 Fleet Street, London, 1816, print, British Library Maps K.Top. 117.73.e.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Furthermore, even though some compilations purport to trace the coastal profiles of entire continents, these works could not display all the coastlines at one glance. Instead, the viewer had to leaf through sheet after sheet of illustrations.

Despite their synoptic quality, orthogonal world maps' scale limits finer topographical details. Whole oceans and continents are visible at one glance, but not the heights, depths and details of individual landforms except as abstractions and numbers. Topography in profile could fill representations of the interior space of Africa and insets lining margins of world maps (fig. 17), but these elements were selective. Still, orthogonal views capture the interplay of different *types* of topography and land regimes. Though the *Neptune françois* is not a world map, it offers a comprehensive set of nautical charts depicting France's coastline. Many elements illustrated by lines, dots and bubbles indicate waterways, sand dunes, sandbars, shoals, tidal flats, marshes, plots of land and roads in orthogonal view (fig. 18). Vignettes and cartoons of hills, woodlands and settlements are also drawn in profile view.

These coastal charts reveal early modern orthogonal maps' ability to knit together different topographies, though not so much the precise boundary between, for example, tidal flat and dry land. Rather, orthogonal views emphasise relational values, such as those between ecological and built features, which suggests interwoven social, economic, political and military activities at the level of concept. Orthogonal maps can visualise relations between conceptual abstractions that the profile view cannot replicate.

Fig. 17
Map of Africa with insets of harbors. Jodocus Hondius II, 'Africae nova tabula', Amsterdam: *sumptiubus et typis aeneis Joannis Janssonii*, 1632, print, Bibliothèque Nationale de France Cartes et plans, GE BB-246 (I, 46-47).



Conclusion

Orthogonality is a means to convey knowledge, but it cannot be taken for granted as objective, empirical or naturalistic. More than merely abstracting, orthogonality selects for information that can be reduced and simplified into type, rather than representing the local specificity of profile views. Selection highlights particular details while limiting others. While this is true for all abstractions and representations, orthogonality has not received the scrutiny that other developments shaping the early globalising world has, from vanishing point perspective to mechanised print, and from the development of the early modern bureaucratic state to the rise of joint-stock companies and insurance instruments. Cartography went hand-in-hand with the Age of Exploration. It produced map-images of the expanding world. Orthogonality was used to represent new places and peoples that were encountered, shaping perception and knowledge of the modern era of globalisation.

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Fig. 18
Detail of Britanny. '7.me Carte Particuliere des Costes de Bretagne depuis l'Isle de Groa Jusqu'au Croisic contenant le Port Louis Bell'Isle et le Morbian', in Charles Pene, *Le Neptune François ou atlas nouveau des cartes marines*, Paris: Jaillot, 1693, print, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitätbibliothek 0014/W 2 Mapp. 4

~~Shahid~~ — Iranian-German cinema beyond patronym, beyond borders

Arnika Fuhrmann

The film *Shahid* (2024, 84') documents the quest of director Narges ~~Shahid~~ Kalhor to rid herself of part of her last name, Shahid. Narges, played by Baharak Abdolifard, arrives at the *Kreisverwaltungsamt* (municipal administration authority) of her Munich neighbourhood to submit her application for a name change. As the official (Carin Huber) behind the glass lists the documents required, each term is superimposed on the screen until it fills entirely: proof of registration, registration of nationality, official photo ID, naturalisation certificate, proof of residence, criminal record, income certificate, detailed statement of the grounds for application and a psychological assessment of emotional distress – the latter of which Narges does not have. The frame breaks and actor and director confer on how to proceed. The viewer understands that a name change in Germany would require an entire parochial-patriarchal system to be satisfied or overthrown. The latter is precisely where *Shahid*'s inventive quest to exceed both German and Iranian genealogies of naming and descent sets in.

Shahid's establishing scene opens on a hand moving slowly, with shadows passing over it. Ambient drums underwrite a naked body's rise from sleep on the ground. Shapes move around the body and slowly crystallise into male dancers. This figuration of an individual's waking and rising – perhaps, coming into personhood – in the midst of a collective structures Shahid throughout. We cut to the outside of a building in Marktstraße, a generic street in a slightly distressed German town (a coincidentally available film set). On the street a man is posting a bill, and a mailman



Fig. 01
Film poster: Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.



is gathering up letters from the ground, as Narges steps out in red jacket and yellow hat to unlock her bicycle. The morning's ordinariness is interrupted by passersby walking backwards. Out of the building dances the troupe that had circled Narges's naked body earlier:

Amidst loss
Amongst that
Amongst this
At the centre's core,[1]

recites the group leader (Nima Nazarinia), whom we will later come to know as the ancestor responsible for the surname Shahid. Narges continues:

Awaiting slumber
From fate's outcome
Which amid layers of history
Is lost and found.

As Narges departs on her bicycle, the almost all-male dance troupe in long gowns follows in slow motion, continuing the song. The music picks up rhythm as Narges begins to sing:

Within wind's passage
Wind that is history
History that is wind
Personal

Fig. 02
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

1 All text quoted from the film derives from the English subtitles translated by Nicholas Coleman and Roya Arab.



Collective history . . .
Within never-ending chaos
The path to alienation
The path to disconnection'.

As pedestrians walk backwards on the street, Narges continues:

My tomorrow
Their yesterday
Tomorrow, their yesterday
Beyond yesterdays
Beyond tomorrows
Awaiting slumber
From fate's outcome
Which amid layers of history
Is lost and found.

As Narges finishes, 'Tomorrow to certainty / Tomorrow to certainty / Tomorrow to certainty', the group comes to a stop in front of the *Kreisverwaltungsamt*.

How has Narges arrived at this point? The recitation tunes the viewer in to the intricate critical history that is to follow as *Shahid* asks, what drives history? What are its layers? In which direction is the 'wind that is history' blowing? How can 'my tomorrow' exceed 'their yesterday'? What adheres to existence post-refuge? How can one drive out that which is imposed? And why does director Kalhor need both the concrete and the poetic to express this?

Co-written by Aydin Alinejadsomeeh, *Shahid* has been called a hybrid film and was shown both in *documentary* festivals as

Fig. 03
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

well as awarded a prize as best *feature* film (Hessian Film and Cinema Prize, 2024).[2] The 2024 Berlinale announced *Shahid* as: 'Ambiguous autofiction with visual arcs, songs and poems: a tragicomic, defiant act of self-empowerment in exile'. *Shahid*'s naming of that which it seeks to expel proceeds with harsh factual clarity on the one hand, while delving into fantasy on the other. The jury for the Hessian prize notes, '*Shahid* is more than a hybrid, it is a powerful miracle on screen!' The film becomes both all too concrete *and* deploys poetry, music, dance and painting to underwrite its critique. Irony, play and the aesthetics of the happenstance (or of relative scarcity) inform its approach to myth as well as to documentation. These components dismantle both Iranian genealogies that bear religious, colonial, and authoritarian elements as well as harmful German genealogies exemplified by a rigid name-change law with roots in Nazism.

Roughly nine minutes into the film, the process of applying for the name change starts all over again, as it will several more times. Accompanied by the dancers, Narges now also rides her bike to therapy sessions in the hope of acquiring the last required document. As she explains patiently to therapist Ribbentrop (Thomas Sprekelsen): 'A shahid is a martyr, someone who is willing to die for his faith'. But, she stresses, a 'shahid is someone who no longer exists. Someone who is dead'. In the scene that follows a hipster schoolmaster (Saleh Rozati) uses a painted storyboard to tell the story of Narges's great-grandfather, who fought for a liberal Islamic democracy in Persia. His death in 1907 at the hands of 'a terrorist while praying' bestowed the name Shahid on the family henceforth. In conversation with Ribbentrop, Narges dismisses the very idea of a *shahid* and proclaims: 'Diese Männer und ihre Geschichten sind mir scheißegal'. ('These men and their stories, I don't give a damn about them'.). Later she will add force to her rejection of masculinist history: 'I don't believe in your God. I don't believe in you. I don't believe in your heroism' and, in Persian, 'I believe neither in you, nor in your male God'.

Halfway into the film, the long segment 'Behind Shahid', reveals Narges Kalhor's own story, combined inventively with behind-the-scenes footage of the making of *Shahid*. In 2009, while visiting a film festival in Nuremberg from Iran, Narges was suddenly unable to return home and had to seek asylum in Germany. Newspaper articles in German, English and French recounting this event ('Daughter of Ahmadinejad Adviser Seeks Asylum in Germany') accumulate on the screen. 'Behind Shahid' also includes original, dispiriting footage from the Zirndorf refugee camp in Bavaria

2 *Shahid* was Kalhor's first feature film. Premiering in Berlin in 2024, it received the Caligari Film Prize and CICAE Arthouse Cinema Award. The film's languages include German, English, Farsi and Hebrew. It was produced by Michael Kalb and ZDF. Notable earlier and other works of Kalhor's include *Shoot Me* (2013), *In the Name of Scheherazade* (2019), *Sensitive Content* (2023), and *Love Your Nails* (Berlinale 2026). See Narges Kalhor, 'Narges Kalhor: Filmmaker & Video Artist', *Narges Kalhor*, 2026, accessed 22 February 2026, https://nargeskalhor.de/.



where Narges was housed. The director, however, accompanies the history of her exile from Iran with relentless self-critique: 'Not everyone gets asylum in three months, as I did'. Only once in the film does Narges centre her own traumatic experience. In this scene, the director appears as herself, listening in on a recorded conversation between her actors Baharak and Nima. In this recording her actors critique her as a 'rich kid' making films in Germany ('The best business is now "DIVERSITY"!'), while they are still waiting for their asylum hearings. Upon listening to this dialogue, director Kalhor says: 'I understand Baharak's and this man's [a fellow refugee who had appeared earlier] frustration. Because of my family name, I got out of the camp quickly. I understand this anger. He was probably not doing well. . .' But then she continues, 'I was also fucked. I was not doing well either. I am not doing well either . . .' Tears stream down Narges's face and the film again breaks the frame as team members discuss how to proceed with the shoot. In a post-screening Q & A at the Iranian Film Festival Munich 2024, Kalhor recounts that she had in fact scripted the scene.

Shahid's final segment, 'The Illusion of Shahid', undertakes a feminist deposing of the ancestor. This time the story of the name *Shahid* is told as that of Narges's great-grandmother. Throughout the film, storyboards have apprised us of the director's calibration of the history of the ancestor (and that of therapist Ribbentrop's name!). This time the storyboard even becomes animated as the great-grandmother moves her lips in a forceful dismissal of previous interpretations of the story of the *shahid*. Throughout *Shahid* irreverent improvisation on Persian cultural elements serves to reclaim traditions currently occupied by conservative forces. From its use of verse and a version of Persian painting to its deployment

Fig. 04
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.



Fig. 05
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

of Revolutionary posters and footage, such defamiliarisation aids in rewriting both Narges's and Iranian history.

'The Illusion of Shahid' moreover uses double exposure to layer the action and multiply the actors beyond the actor-director double that has appeared throughout. As screenwriter Aydin Alinejadsomeeh recounts, this technique of doubling helped alleviate the production's dearth of actors due to budgetary constraints. But doubling in this segment also produces depth for psychic dimensions and for a story neither only of the past nor only about Iran. Narges concludes: 'My issue is not about my grandfather, nor about my name, nor about his revolutionary ideals, nor about his faith, nor about his wife. My concern is to end this vicious circle'.

Instead of the original dance troupe, it is now her therapist, the municipal official and other white Germans who dance around Narges and, finally, around an empty space. At this point Narges has left the house and is walking determinedly through a landscape composed of iconic scenes from world history. She is carrying a gun and her mission is to kill the *shahid*. When she finally faces the *shahid*, however, she cannot pull the trigger and ultimately lowers the gun. Instead Baharak-Narges (the actor) is embraced by her double, director-Narges.

While pernicious genealogical ties may not have been severed and the ancestral name not expunged after all, *Shahid* has performed a rigorous critique of Iranian and German patriarchal genealogies and shown the near-impossibility of their revision. The film has undertaken a feminist recalibration of history in both countries. More importantly *Shahid* has held out as an aspiration an existence beyond the patronymic in both national contexts.



Shahid embarks on thorough self-critique, while revealing the cost of such political rigor and of life in exile, partially privileged as it may be. The film externalises this self-critique in scripted dialog and its continuous breaking of its own frame. Narges Kalhor-Baharak Abdolifard is 'Acting to Play [Her]self'; at the same time, she is playing out entire histories as well as their overcoming.[3] At the end of the film, she has not killed the *shahid*. Still, the ancestral *shahid* who had pursued her so tenaciously throughout the story has faded. There are no heroes and no martyrs. Narges has neither sacrificed herself nor her principles.

In May 2025 I met director Narges Kalhor at a Munich street festival. When I asked whether her name change had in fact succeeded, she recounted the following story. After *Shahid* was awarded numerous prizes, the Film University of Babelsberg invited her to teach as a visiting professor. The school's website, however, announced Narges's classes as being taught by 'Mrs. Shahid'. She laughed and spoke of the necessity of a *Shahid 2*. Narges Kalhor may not have expunged the traces of the *shahid* or of that which enchains us, but she has nevertheless taken her viewers beyond patronym and beyond borders of nation and self.

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3 Thomas Waugh, 'Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990)', in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Fig. 06
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

con-
ference
reports

Conference report – *Blank space in the perception and epistemology of maps: silences and absences that articulate the world*

Doğukan Akbaş

Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect, LMU Munich, 19–20 March 2026

What if the most meaningful parts of a map are the ones left blank? What if not everything that shapes our world is visible? There is a particular kind of attentiveness that emerges when one begins to look at what is not there. The workshop *Blank space in the perception and epistemology of maps: silences and absences that articulate the world*, convened by Toby Yuen-Gen Liang, Filipe dos Reis and Camille Serchuk, took place at gd:c on 19-20 March 2026 and was devoted to precisely this shift in perception: from reading maps as accumulations of knowledge to recognising them as carefully structured fields of presence and absence.

Over the course of two days, blank space ceased to be a marginal curiosity. It became instead a quiet, persistent and unexpectedly generative conceptual hinge around which questions of knowledge, power, imagination and materiality began to turn.

The unease of the blank

Again and again, the discussions returned to a simple but unsettling observation: blankness is not the same as emptiness.

Djoeke van Netten's reflections on the Arctic made this palpable. The polar regions, so often imagined as white voids, appeared instead as densely layered spaces overwritten by projection



Fig. 01
Co-conveners Toby Yuen-Gen Liang and Camille Serchuk (right, Felipe dos Reis not pictured; all photos by the author)



systems, shaped by conventions such as ‘north is up’, and entangled in shifting epistemologies. The Arctic was never simply unknown; it was repeatedly known differently. Its blankness was historical, not natural.

Luis Lobo-Guerrero, turning to the 16th-century maritime charts, asked a question that lingered long after his paper: *what does emptiness do*? The seas, seemingly open and unmarked, emerged as anything but empty. They were structured by routes, winds and practices of navigation, which governed spaces that resisted the visual logic of terrestrial mapping. Here, the blankness did not indicate absence, but a different mode of presence: one that could not be easily inscribed.

And yet, as Filipe dos Reis demonstrated through the curious persistence of phantom geographies – mountains that never existed, seas that were imagined into being – blank space coexisted with rather than banish speculation. The cartographic

Fig. 02
A full house with no blank faces

imagination, even at its most scientific, was never free of projection. Blankness and invention did not replace one another; they formed a fragile, uneasy alliance.

Reading the blank

If blank spaces unsettled mapmakers, they also unsettled readers.

Early in the workshop, Toby Yuen-Gen Liang suggested that blankness is relational: it comes into being through omission as well as perception. A blank space is not simply there; it is encountered, often with discomfort. It appears as a gap, an uncertainty, something that ought to be filled.

But what if this impulse is itself historically conditioned? Siddarth Pandey's excursion into fantastical cartographies offered a striking counterpoint. In literary worlds, maps do not promise completion. The *Marauder's Map* from the Harry Potter novels, with its shifting inscriptions and stubborn invisibilities, does not fail where it cannot represent; it gestures instead to the impossibility of total knowledge. Some spaces remain inaccessible because they exceed the logic of representation, not because they are empty.

Throughout the workshop, the idea quietly gathered momentum that maps are incomplete through their blanks, not merely despite them. Thus, blankness is part of cartography rather than a flaw. It is part of how the system works.

Erasure and resistance

Yet blank spaces are never innocent.

In Adhemar Mercado's analysis of satellite fire maps in the Bolivian Amazon, blankness appeared as a subtle, technical and devastatingly effective form of violence. Complex ecological and social realities were reduced to abstract 'burn scars', stripped of context, history and Indigenous knowledge. What remained visible was data; what disappeared was meaning. The blank, here, did not invite interpretation; it foreclosed it. Jonas Danen traced similar dynamics in early modern Dutch maps of New Netherland, where Indigenous presence and ecological transformation faded into visual silence. Blank space functioned as a quiet claim. What is not shown can be imagined as available.

And yet, the story did not end there. Thomas Bassett's work on 19th-century West Africa introduced a necessary complication. Blank spaces, he argued, could also emerge from refusal – from the active withholding of knowledge by African intermediaries who shaped the conditions under which European cartographers worked. In this light, blankness was more an object of negotiation signifying resistance than an epistemic fact of erasure.



The blank thus revealed itself as a site where power both operates and can be contested.

The limits of seeing

The workshop's engagement with modern imaging technologies extended these questions into the present.

Paula Muhr's discussion of black hole images and fMRI scans suggested that blankness remains a structural feature of contemporary knowledge production even today. The dark centre of a black-hole image – the shadow – is not a failure of representation, but its condition. It marks the boundary of what can be known, and in doing so it enables knowledge.

This insight resonated with a broader unease about mediation. As one participant remarked, we increasingly risk 'listening more to our equipment than to the music'. What we see is always filtered

Fig. 03
Without exploration, there would be no maps. Here the participants are exploring Munich's Wiener Platz.



through thresholds, selections and exclusions. Blank spaces may lie not only within images, but within the processes that generate them.

Magdalena Becker's analysis of 'air-age cartography' revealed how such processes can reshape entire epistemic orders. By stripping away terrestrial detail and foregrounding networks of connection, mid-20th-century maps created a world as much as they depicted one. Blankness became a design principle, a way of redefining what mattered.

Encountering maps as objects

The excursion to the LMU library offered a moment of quiet recalibration.

Guided by Sven Kuttner, deputy director and head of historical collections, participants moved from theory to contact,

Fig. 04
Workshop participants engaging with the materiality of maps

encountering maps as objects rather than abstractions. A 16th-century sheet, a 17th-century atlas, a city view of Augsburg: each revealed, in its own way, the multiplicity of blank spaces. Some blanks were visible – unmarked regions, simplified forms. Others were more elusive: gaps in transmission, layers of later intervention, traces that had vanished over time. The maps that survive, it became clear, are often the clean, cared for ones that conceal as much as they reveal about their own use. Blankness, here, was a condition of history itself.

Listening to absence

In the workshop's final sessions, blank space began to resonate beyond the visual.

Laura Bertens's reading of Alberto Burri's *Grande Cretto* – a vast concrete imprint of a destroyed Sicilian village – captured the paradox of absence made visible. The work resembles a map, yet it resists mapping. It preserves the village by erasing it; it makes absence palpable.

Christina Moraru's sound mapping experiment extended this paradox into the auditory realm. Silence, she suggested, is not the absence of sound, but a field of potential, a space in which memory, affect and attention converge. Listening to silence is to encounter what has not been articulated, but persists nonetheless.

Sergio Lopez–Pineiro, reflecting on 18th-century cartography, described the blank as a 'counter-myth': a deliberate refusal to fill, to explain, to totalise. And yet, even this refusal is unstable. Blank spaces invite projection; they call forth the very myths they resist.

Holding the space open

By the workshop's end, blank space had become less an object of study than a way of thinking. It is tempting, when confronted with absence, to fill it, to resolve uncertainty, to complete the picture. But this workshop repeatedly suggested that such closure may come at a cost. Blank spaces do not simply mark the limits of knowledge; they shape those limits. They hold open possibilities of other perspectives, other histories and other ways of knowing.

To take them seriously is not to celebrate ignorance, nor to romanticise absence. It is to recognise that knowledge is always partial, always situated and always accompanied by what it cannot or will not show. Perhaps this is where its critical potential lies. In an epistemic culture that often privileges completion, saturation and visibility, blank space introduces a tempo of hesitation, of restraint and of attention. It asks what we know, how we know and at what cost. To engage with blank space, then, is to abide in the gaps rather than to erase or fill them.

In this sense, the most lasting impression of the workshop was a subtle shift in attention, a willingness to pause, to look again and to read, listen to or sense the spaces in between.

fellow travellers

Doerte Bischoff



Doerte Bischoff is a professor at the Department of Germanic Literatures and chair of the Walter A. Berendsohn Research Center for German Exile Literature at the University of Hamburg. Her research focuses on German-Jewish literature, literature and material culture, citizenship studies, exile and transnational literature. She is a co-editor of the *Jahrbuch Exilforschung* and the *Handbuch Literatur und Transnationalität*. She co-directs a DFG research unit on trans-exile dynamics in postrevolutionary Mexico as well as a DFG/AHRC project on interconnecting exile in German language writing.

Doerte's research contributes to citizenship studies from the perspective of literary analysis. Based on the finding that the bond between the individual and the state is prominently negotiated in literary texts through the exploration of passports and identity cards, she is examining constellations in which the convergence of identity papers and manuscripts contrasts different forms of identification. She focusses on historical and contemporary exile literature, which reconceptualises citizenship from a perspective of displacement, opening a tension between connection and disruption.

Sebastian Conrad



Sebastian Conrad holds the Chair of Modern History at the Free University of Berlin. With a background in European and Japanese history, his work has focused mainly on issues of colonialism and postcolonialism, global history and historiography/memory. Among his recent publications are Nefertiti: The Making of a Global Icon (forthcoming); What is Global History? (2016) and An Emerging Modern World, 1750-1870 (2018), which he co-edited with Jürgen Osterhammel.

His project, *Shaping the body in the global age,* aims to reconstruct how bodily practices and notions of bodily beauty have changed over the past 150 years, in global perspective. The project interrogates the relation between bodily practices and norms on the one hand, and social inclusion/exclusion, social inequality, the commodification of bodies, ethnicity and race, power and geopolitical hierarchies on the other. The history of how engaging with the body has changed is a valuable window onto important social transformations and simultaneously an opportunity to study the changing grammar of globalisation since the late 19th century.

Lachlan Fleetwood



Lachlan Fleetwood is a historian of science, empire, geography and environment. He completed his PhD at Cambridge University and has subsequently held research fellowships at University College Dublin, Yale and the LMU Munich. His first book, *Science on the Roof of the World: Empire and the Remaking of the Himalaya* appeared in 2022. He has recently written about scientific and cultural ideas of habitability in relation to imperial geography and the 'lost cities' of the Silk Roads, including for WIREs Climate Change and Environment and History.

Lachlan's current project traces British, French and German imperial interference in Mesopotamia from 1780 to 1920. Here imperial geography was haunted by a tension between the ideas that environments shaped people and that people might escape environmental constraints via technological mastery. Applying interdisciplinary insights, this research asks: why have insidious environmentally determinist explanations so often appealed to empires, and how do these imperial legacies matter today as large-scale climate engineering schemes are being proposed?

Leila Kiknadze



Leila Kiknadze is an associate professor in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Georgia. She has extensive teaching experience and has participated in international academic programs, including research stays and conferences in Europe and the USA. Her work focusses on Islam and modernity, and she has published on contemporary transformations in Islamic discourse.

At gd:c, Leila is examining how Islamic religious authority is reshaped on TikTok and Instagram, where algorithmic visibility generates new forms of legitimacy beyond the traditional Ulema. Grounded in interpretive, humanities-based analysis, it explores how online preachers craft persuasive narratives, how audiences negotiate competing meanings, and how globalisation and the dynamics of digital space connect and disconnect contemporary Muslim communities.

Nives Kinunda Ngullu



Nives Kinunda Ngullu is a lecturer at the Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE). She earned her PhD in history from the University of Göttingen (Germany) in 2019, following previous degrees from the University of Dar es Salaam. Her research focuses on agriculture, women farmers, gender, education, slavery and female empowerment in East Africa. From 2021 to 2024, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the ERC project on the aftermath of slavery in East Africa (ASEA) at Gent University. She is also a member of the Indian Ocean World Centre, a McGill Research Centre, since 2024.

At gd:c, Nives is studying the nature and dynamics of dis:connectivity and globalisation processes of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) in northern Tanzania. The area has witnessed international enterprises interacting with indigenous people and diverse wildlife. They have attracted resistance and interruptions to the globalisation values of the area. The focus of the project is on the impact of resistance and interruption as factors that disrupted the historical dynamics of globalisation in the area from 1920 to 2000.

Michael Klipphahn-Karge



Michael Klipphahn-Karge is an art historian and assistant professor of history and theory of art and design at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts. He is also an associate researcher at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, where he previously served as a senior researcher. He received his PhD in art history at the Technical University of Dresden. Prior to this, he worked as a curator of contemporary art for various institutions. He studied fine arts, art history and philosophy in Dresden, Berlin, Rome and Ústí nad Labem.

Michael's project investigates forms of dis:connective ecology in the field of art. Extractivist interventions imposed by fossil-fuel capitalism have inscribed themselves into artistic practices both as modes of action and as material politics. On a meta-level, it thus analyses regimes of distribution and institutionalisation under the sign of the ecological. Michael argues that the material demands of extractivisms are inherent to artistic practices, giving rise to ambivalences that can be conceptualised as dis:connectivity. As a comparison with ecology demonstrates, art simultaneously writes a connective history of production as well as a disjunctive history of consumption.

Barnabas Ticha Muvhuti



Barnabas Ticha Muvhuti is a cultural worker, an art historian and a public scholar with research interests spanning from the histories of the early modern art workshops of Southern Africa to the contemporary art practices in Africa and its diasporic communities. He has written several exhibition reviews, opinion pieces, and he has published multiple interviews/conversations with artists and curators, not to mention reports on recent migration issues and trends in Southern Africa.

Barnabas is keen to trace an artistic lineage that connects Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe through some of the region's now defunct art schools. The lineage is sustained by Shepherd Ndudzo, who carries on with a woodcarving legacy passed on from his predecessors. Central to the lineage's layered story are the reciprocal migration journeys recalling oscillating pendulums among the three countries. Artistic movement in Africa is still understudied and overshadowed by the South-North migrations of African artists to the cultural capitals of Europe and America. Barnabas is trying to make sense of the artists' journeys, employing mobility to reconstruct their fragmented biographies. His research aims to disrupt the absence of such narratives in the canon of art history.

Daniela Ortiz dos Santos



Daniela Ortiz dos Santos is an assistant professor of architectural history at the Goethe University Frankfurt and scientific coordinator of the Center for Critical Studies in Architecture (CCSA). Her research, teaching and curatorial activities are committed to collaborative approaches on transatlantic studies of the built and imagined environments, exploring how their historiography has intersected with displacement. Daniela studied architecture in Buenos Aires (UBA) and Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and holds a PhD in architectural history and theory from ETH Zurich.

Daniela's project at gd:c explores how international organisations have shaped value-systems and views of the built culture. It works across transatlantic migration and architectural heritage as soft power. UNESCO serves as a point of departure to reveal the practices, documents and events that have shaped an understanding of the 'other' cultures in the Cold War era. While unearthing the agency's visual material and narrations related to an Atlantic Global South building culture, this project demonstrates that these narrations, rooted in colonial history, resonate still.

Karen Diane Oslund



Karen Oslund is a professor of world history at Towson University. Since 1995, she has been studying the global Arctic and sub-Arctic, with a particular focus on environmental history, colonialism and postcolonialism. She has authored Iceland Imagined: *Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic,* co-edited two volumes in global colonial history and translated two Icelandic sailors' journals of voyages to China.

Karen's project examines temporal disconnection at the sites of whaling ships frozen into the Arctic in the 19th century and how the emotional meaning of this dislocation impacted these sailing communities and the world these ships supplied with energy. Temporarily or permanently stranded in the Arctic, these whalers were cut off from the time from which they came and from the marking of time to which they contributed by producing whale oil for lighting around the globe. This stranding and its time-sense was carried to the modern world at the end of the whaling season as an emotional resonance of the Arctic, which impacted the understanding of the Arctic and the consumption of its resources in the interconnected modern world.

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Infrastructures and forms of community in informal art spaces in a global context

1–2 December 2026

Concept and Organisation:
Burcu Dogramaci
Nina Möntmann



Buch Handlung Welt (1976—1983), Hamburg, photo: Michael Kellner

Please register by 25 November 2026

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Bobby Smith



Bobby Smith is a practitioner-researcher based at Warwick University. He collaborates with artists, researchers and communities to explore themes including climate crisis, conflict and justice through socially engaged arts. Bobby is a co-editor of *ATR: Socially Engaged Performance,* and his recent publications include *Theatre and Global Development: Performing Partnerships* (2024) and a co-edited issue of *Research in Drama Education exploring climate crisis* (2024).

At gd:c, Bobby's project examines how socially engaged arts respond to the global polycrisis. Considering case studies including art co-created with young people, and festivals and performances involving transnational collaboration, Bobby asks how socially engaged arts function as relational practices to foster solidarity and critical reflexivity. The goal is to identify how socially engaged arts expose and navigate tensions between globalised ideologies and local agency, policy and reality, centre and margin. Disconnection can hinder solidary and change, while offering spaces in which to reimagine power and futurity from the edges.

Liliia Tsyganenko



Liliia Tsyganenko is a historian specialising in southern Ukraine, gender studies, the impact of late Stalinism, memory studies, transnational connections, migration and repatriation. A professor at Izmail State University of the Humanities, she holds a PhD in history. She has authored 260 publications, including monographs, textbooks and document collections and visited Regensburg as a fellow of the Gerda Henkel Foundation (2022–2024) and the *Denkraum Ukraine* programme (2025, Regensburg). Her academic work bridges regional history with broader European contexts of cultural heritage, borderlands and ethnic diversity.

Liliia's project explores letters written by Soviet women to the Red Cross after WWII, seeking lost loved ones. These epistolary traces reveal ruptures, silence and attempts to reconnect. Framed through dis:connectivity, the study links historical trauma to present-day migration and separation. Combining gender studies, post-memory, and archival affect, it recovers unheard voices and proposes new tools for memory research. Her archival work in Munich will focus on Russian and Ukrainian letters, tracing how absence becomes a form of historical presence.

Sören Urbansky



Sören Urbansky holds the Chair of East European History at the Ruhr University in Bochum. He specialises in Chinese-Russian relations, migration, infrastructure, racism and border history. He previously worked at the German Historical Institute Washington, where he headed its Pacific Office based at UC Berkeley. He has also held research and teaching positions at the universities of Freiburg, Cambridge and Munich. Sören has authored four monographs, including *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* (2020) and, with Martin Wagner, *Entangled Empires* (2026).

Sören's project explores the relationship between migration and race in the Russian (Soviet) Far East and North America. Focusing on Vladivostok and San Francisco at the turn of the 20th century, it examines how negative stereotypes fuelled conflict between Chinese and European communities across the Pacific, shaping social, political and cultural relations. Based on research conducted in multiple countries, it moves beyond discourse analysis to trace how xenophobic fears structured interethnic conflict, while also highlighting strategies of resistance among the Chinese diaspora.

Marina Vinnik



Marina Vinnik is a postdoctoral researcher specialising in the intersections of gender studies, art history and feminist theory. Her recent project, *Object-Oriented Ontology and Bauhaus,* explored the integration of textiles in modernist architecture and their sensory and structural contributions. She holds a PhD in art history from the University of Leipzig, and her dissertation focussed on the roles of women artists in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and modern Russia. Marina's current research highlights the in:visible networks and maps the practices of Russian-born feminist artists in exile and inside of Russia.

In her project *Group portrait in exile*, Marina is crafting a narrative about feminist artists and activists with whom she worked in Russia in the 2010s, most of whom have been living in exile since 2022. She connects footage of the artists filmed in Moscow in 2018 with the new realities of their lives today, in which the cities and spaces around them have been transformed. Marina is also producing a video that contributes to broader understandings of the global feminist movement and its transformations, foregrounding the experiences of exile.



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static: thoughts and research from global dis:connect

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