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DOI
10.25969/mediarep/19733

Publication date
2023

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
NECSUS

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Vélez-Serna, M., & Stauff, M. (2023). Ports: On the material and symbolic mediation of global capitalism. *NECSUS*, *12*(1), 9-30. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19733

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Download date:08 Sept 2026

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES
www.necsus-ejms.org

Ports: On the material and symbolic mediation of global capitalism

María Vélez-Serna and Markus Stauff

NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023

Abstract

Introducing and contextualising the contributions to the thematic section on ports, we discuss the conceptual and empirical productivity of the port for media research. As material infrastructures, ports mediate between land and sea, nature and culture, centres of power and colonised/extracted peripheries. As logistic nodes, ports connect transport and communication, technological innovation and revolutionary agency. Their ambivalent and managed visibility makes ports an intriguing motif of media representations that is harnessed for dramatic narratives, cognitive mapping of capitalism, or for city branding. As such ports help to rethink ideas about the relationship between material and symbolic aspects of mediation, between technological innovation and cultural heritage, between metaphorical and literal media ecologies.

Keywords

extraction, infrastructure, elemental media, media ecology, ports

A 2018 film by Oliver Ressler shows a group of activists breaking into the port of Amsterdam's coal terminal, to shut down its contribution to climate change if only for a short time. Surrounded by dark mountains and framed by hulking cranes, the protesters write slogans against 'fossil fuel capitalism' while expressing 'solidarity with dockworkers'. The coal, says the narration, comes from Colombia. There, fishing communities have been displaced by several generations of coal ports connected to the inland mines.[1] Ressler's images are both visually arresting and rhetorically effective: ports manifest the relationships that make up capitalism, extractivism, and climate injustice. But ports are also cultural melting pots, refuge for outcasts and fugitives, and romantic points of departure or encounter in myriad films. Fundamentally, ports are sites of mediation, giving place to layered and heterogenous arrangements of connections and their entanglement with power, exploitation, technology, and cultural practice. This thematic section seeks to amplify the rich resonances between ports and media practices with a set of contributions that demonstrate the multidisciplinary potential of this framing.

What do we talk about when we talk about ports? A more abstract formulation would say they are 'intermediary spaces defined by the juncture between motion and stasis, fluidity and friction, mobility and immobility'.[2] The contributions in this section mostly focus on the literal sites and infrastructures that allow and regulate circulation across land and sea. However, it is worth remembering that we interact with other, minuscule ports all the time – e.g. the interfaces that connect electronic devices with peripherals. As anyone who has struggled with a new video projector knows, both are places of especially intense mediation and thus of heightened socio-technological drama.[3] As infrastructure that connects infrastructures, ports offer scenes of rigid standardisation (from shipping containers to EU standards for phone chargers) and of unruly movement (whether of people, drugs, data, or viruses). Ports enable media convergence and actualise technical compatibilities through increasingly heterogenous intermediaries and local fixes, thereby permitting, impeding, and regulating movement along social and cultural hierarchies. Their drive for efficiency, flow, and 'plug-and-play' produces spectacles of scale and frictionless movement, but also moments of resistance and stoppage. Ports, that is, offer a rich and challenging field for media studies, that also

helps to rethink ideas about the relationship between material and symbolic aspects of mediation, between transport and communication, or between technological innovation and cultural heritage.

Very basically, the seaport is the condition for transport and hence for capitalism,[4] inseparable from the ongoing histories of slavery and colonialism. Port cities are places that are shaped by the materiality of the ships and the corresponding work force but just as much by the 'multiple mobilities' of diasporic cultures, of merchants, migrants, military, and pilgrims.[5] As such, the port is a key mediating mechanism of global culture. Not least, it is a precondition that shapes the circulation of the raw materials for media production and of the finished cultural products. Throughout the twentieth century, for instance, US films arrived in Europe through its port cities, which were at the vanguard of cinema culture. Disruptions in shipping such as those caused by war made ripples in European film industries.[6] Electronic components and devices have arrived in containers to enable the adoption of mass media and the rise of digital cultures, also dependent on the fossil fuels shipped directly to European power stations. The mounting waste from ever-faster consumer cycles gets shipped out through the same

docks, allowing Europe to externalise the costs of capitalism.

The mediating power of ports is not predicated only on their material characteristics, but also on their operation within the dynamics of logistics. Both of these dimensions make ports attractive subjects for the factual genres that celebrate technology and process.[7] Additional layers of media and communication technologies enable and regulate mobility: visas, forms, certificates, news, weather reports, and market updates are needed to organise movement – or to prevent it.[8] The steam ship's dominance co-evolved with the telegraph and its 'availability of news about international trade, finance and politics'.[9] Nowadays, port logistics are highly reliant on computer vision for automated container handling within just-in-time operations organised from across the world. Additionally, by enabling the installation of undersea cables, ports are integral to the infrastructure of the internet.[10]

As Stephen Turner argues in his contribution to this issue, social media platforms intensify the entanglement of communication and transport through the ever more frantic depiction of consumer goods that

are desired, ordered online, and then shipped. Some ports left behind by the changing tides of global logistics have found new uses as studio lots or media quarters, as part of seaside regeneration schemes favouring creative industries. Finally, the port is a visually intriguing and culturally rich motif for all sorts of cultural narratives and representations. Like other infrastructures and technologies, the port can be considered 'a semi-finished good', semiotically, condensing cultural meaning, stock characters, and historical clichés that are taken up and moulded in different media and genres. Farewells and reunions, contraband and intrigue, escapes and new beginnings all unfold amidst the sea-going ships, the outsized cranes and mazes of container stacks. The sailor, the spy, the sex worker, the agitator, the bartender, the explorer, the tourist, the fisher, and the oil rig worker inhabit cinema's depictions of the port. Defined by transience and encounter, ports – as the industrial version of the beach[11] – undermine and re-organise established cultural binaries, and have given media culture some of its most memorable scenes. Some of the contributions to this issue reconsider the narrative and symbolic role of dockside locations in contemporary political arrays of deindustrialisation, gentrification, and globalisation. As times have changed

for maritime transport, so has the signification of the port as a visual shorthand.

All contributions to this issue deal in one way or the other with the layered and ambivalent visibility of the port, which results both from its material organisation and from the manifold media representations with their myths, stories, and visual spectacles. In all these cases, the infrastructural mediations – the (dis-)connections created by ships, ports, port-cities, authorities, paperwork, cables landing at the port – and the representations should not be too neatly separated. Discussing documentaries on hydroelectric power in the context of the New Deal in the US, Joni Hayward Marcum used the term 'infrastructural cinema' to highlight that such films 'work as an extension of material infrastructure to develop ideas about how emergent systems like dams control energy'.[12] Complex infrastructure like ports is dependent on visual representations that connect highly specialised and often black-boxed procedures with the imaginaries, practices, and institutions that are required to let the machinery work, and not least to negotiate the technological transformation.

At the same time, in documentary and factual media, ports are key sites in stories of labour, migration, protest, war, and trade. They allow for the visualisation of otherwise abstract relations and thus become a key site for cognitive mapping:[13]

> What one sees in a harbor is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction.[14]

The technical drama of logistics calls out for critical contextualisation, as ports are nodes in networks of capital and trade, as well as interfaces between human and non-human worlds. They connect material and symbolic layers to operationalise (dis-) connections between maritime and land-based infrastructure, between nature and culture, between the nation and the global, between legal and criminalised movements. Their special spatial status made ports into places at which experiments with new management techniques met with strong worker activism. Overlaying this with the stories of mutinies on ships provoked anarchist hopes and bourgeois fears that the port could bring revolution into the city.[15] By now, as some of the contributions in this section show, such potentialities of the port are rather transformed into an asset for city marketing or become topics of political nostalgia.

The focus on ports here is also a contribution to the wider turn in media studies that does not only highlight the dependency of all media (and media content) on infrastructures, but also uses the characteristics of infrastructures to introduce new concepts and concerns into the approaches of media studies, like questions of extraction and maintenance, uneven access and lock-in effects. Ports share a lot with this wider concern, yet they also can add particular aspects. First of all, ports have an especially long history, from 'natural' ports in ancient times via the sail ship ports of colonialism to the increasingly standardised steam ship ports of industrialisation and the fossil fuel-driven container terminals of the present. This creates a persistence of once established routes and their power imbalances that still shapes the routes and the distribution of undersea cables.[16] This also makes the port into a place where the tensions between nostalgia and technical progress and more specifically between different modes of production are acted out and symbolically negotiated. Thinking about ports is key to the critical project of 'literal media ecology',[17] and therefore to the possibility of environmentally responsible media and scholarship.

While the call for papers for this issue was not restricted to the idea of the port as a geographical location, the topic does offer an opportunity to reconnect media studies and the 'spatial humanities', a term which has fallen somewhat out of use after the 'spatial turn' of the early 2000s. The spatial dynamics of ports are culturally significant, and their location is not indifferent. Much more than railroads or postal systems, which often have a strong national organisation, ports create a partly independent layer: 'Port cities look out to the sea, often having more in common with their sister cities across the deeps and less with their hinterlands.'[18] Economically and legally, they open spaces whose power relationships modulate and translate the national framework. To defend Dutch colonial interests against the Portuguese in 1608, the jurist Hugo Grotius declared the oceans 'mare librum', arguing that 'historically the seas had been free for all to use'.[19] Ports (and even more the ships on the oceans) combine 'overlapping sovereignty' and became a model for 'free zones'.[20] Not coincidentally, the transition from national to global history often coincides with a focus on maritime history.[21]

This also indicates that ports, more visibly than for example railroads, which create an artificial landscape

with tunnels and bridges,[22] constantly mediate not only sea and land but also nature and culture. While most contemporary ports work across the tides, the tides still add a layer of visible and sensible temporality to the standardised one of the clocks. As such, the port is also an interesting location to discuss how 'elemental media'[23] (water, air, minerals, etc.) are less an independent or 'deeper' substrate of technical media but rather appear as part of an assemblage that connects communication and transport, trade and migration, symbolic and material elements. 'Mediation', writes Cubitt, 'is the primal connectivity shared by human and nonhuman worlds.'[24] In *Planetary Mine*, Arboleda proposes a materialist analysis that focuses on the forms or modes of existence of capital – 'to decipher global processes through their manifestation in the situated, affective fabrics of human and nonhuman existence'.[25] What better way to observe and systematise these phenomenologies of capital than through the encodings of an intensely mediated site in mediated sound and moving image? And does the accumulation of these visual traces offer other means to trace the histories of global trade, as logistics 'change the raison d'être of seaports', wrenching them out of a national/local frame and into supply chains?[26] What do thirteen decades of moving images have to tell us

about how urban landscapes and global interconnections were shaped by steamships, oil tankers, and containerisation? The contributions to this issue, while only covering some of the issues raised here, hopefully inspire further research.

To connect their insights to aspects of the port that might go beyond the methodological competencies of media studies, the section opens with an interview with Laleh Khalili, whose interdisciplinary work on ports focuses on political and economic questions while offering countless intersections with media studies. Her book *Sinews of War and Trade* (Verso, 2020) is the starting point to discuss how ports – through their material procedures and their media representations – contribute to the uneven visibility of the global economy and labour conditions. The managed visibility of ports offers insights into the infrastructural power relationships they emerge from and reproduce. This was particularly salient in the context of supply chain crises during the pandemic, which also exacerbated problems of labour exploitation and the restriction of human movement.

Developing this theme of visual value chains through social media 'eyelines', Stephen Turner's

contribution discusses how today's ports are increasingly a function of the image circulation on online portals. Modulating colonialist settler logic, images of goods and places create moments of 'first contact'. As actual places and as media representations, ports' tourist attractions and cruise ships' spectacles of consumption contribute to the creation of visual connections (eyelines) that sustain a 'parasitical economy'. Engaging with a broad variety of media forms (from experimental movies to reality television), Turner examines how images are part of and at the same time allow to disclose ports' entanglement with floating capital, consumption, class difference, and waste.

A different aspect of media circulation is discussed in the article by Mats Björkin. The contribution argues that ports are a very much overlooked hinge in the distribution of films; they are quintessential for the trade of raw film to production sites and for international distribution. Focusing on Swedish ports in the 1920s and based on the archive of film distributor Oscar Rosenberg, the author details how established trade connections for ore and wood, railroad connection, trade restrictions, and

fluctuating exchange rates contribute to the transnational 'cinematic flows' at port sites.

What happens to ports and port cities when changing global trade connections make the machinery and labour force redundant? Focusing on two small Danish port cities, Ida Sofie Gøtzsche Lange, Marieke van Hulst Pedersen, and Lea Louise Holst Laursen discuss efforts of using the history of ports as resources for city branding. In their contribution they outline the symbolic and economic burden a declining port creates for a local community. Using more famous examples of successful transformations of port cities (like Barcelona) as reference points, they detail how both the media industry (in this case audio technology) and media representations are harnessed to remodel the relevance of ports for the reputation and the actual composition of a city.

The question of the historical transformation of ports and the related decline of a certain type of industrial, Fordist work is also at the centre of Ben Scott's article. The piece focuses on French movies that take ports or shipyards as settings to negotiate the tense juncture of past and present, of shared identity and individualism. Through the images of the industrial

site and through the characters' varied memories of the past and adapting to the present, these movies, Scott argues, also offer a relevant contribution to the debate if, or how, nostalgia for the social forms of the industrial port can be politicised.

To underline the many different ways in which ports provoke questions for media studies research and to signal the port as an emerging and highly interdisciplinary research field in media studies, this special section also offers a showcase of research projects that approach the cultural significance of ports from different geographical, methodological, and conceptual perspectives. The collection of six projects that we invited here does not claim to be representative; luckily research on ports is thriving and often the port is investigated as one element of research on (post)colonial history, on infrastructures, on extraction, on global capital flow, on urban history, and so on. Hopefully, these projects can indicate the plurality of aspects that emerge at the intersection of media and ports. They discuss the following: the shaping of musical styles and practices through a port city's diasporic culture; the appropriation of a port city's heritage through citizens; the artistic negotiation and the open access

collection of the historical transformation of ports; the contribution of ports to the carbon footprint of internet use.

The qualitative engagements with materiality and social life made possible by audiovisual media and creative practices around ports are rich in possibility for other areas of scholarship. Ports, conceptually and empirically, are challenging objects for media research. This work needs to be interdisciplinary by default, but media studies has much to offer to the discussion.

Authors

María A. Vélez-Serna teaches film and media at the University of Stirling. She studied at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and the University of Glasgow. She is the author of Ephemeral Cinema Spaces (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), on non-theatrical film exhibition, and has also written on film festivals, early film distribution and showmanship, and on Colombian films and audiences. Her current work focuses on the uses of audiovisual media in facilitating and contesting extractivism.

Markus Stauff teaches Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. where he is affiliated with the Television and Cross-Media team and the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. He received his PhD from the University of Bochum, Germany, with a thesis on Digital Television and Governmentality. Currently, his main research areas are theories of media change; visual and epistemic cultures of sports; traffic infrastructures. For publications see Zotero.

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Notes

[1] Tierra Digna 2015.

[2] Heerten 2021, p. 352.

[3] Braun 2013.

[4] Khalili 2020, p. 3.

[5] Huber 2016; see also Heerten 2021.

[6] Pafort-Overduin et al. 2020.

[7] Skvirsky 2020; Larkin 2013; Hediger & Vonderau 2009.

[8] Siegert 2006.

[9] Heerten 2021, p. 355.

[10] Starosielski 2015.

[11] Fiske 1989.

[12] Hayward Marcum 2020.

[13] Downs & Stea 1973; Jameson 1990; Toscano & Kinkle 2015.

[14] Sekula 2018, p. 14.

[15] Ibid., pp. 118-120.

[16] Thorat 2019.

[17] Caraway 2018.

[18] Khalili 2021, p. 215.

[19] Rozwadowski 2018, p. 89.

[20] Khalili 2020.

[21] Huber 2016.

[22] Schivelbusch 1986.

[23] Peters 2015; Starosielski 2019.

[24] Cubitt 2017, p. 4.

[25] Arboleda 2020, p. 6.

[26] Chua 2022, p. 130.