
Sectional View of a Belle Époque Steamer on the Lake of Geneva: a Visual Exploration of the Politics of a Ship Crew

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Abstract

On Belle-Époque steamers, different trades need to work together for the proper functioning of the ship. Their collaboration depends on trust and solidarity, but also on a clear division of competences and a strong hierarchical organization. This paper aims to investigate the politics of the relations between the different occupational groups present on the ship. Visual methods will be used as a tool to describe and emphasize the politics of work organization.

This paper is based on a collective fieldwork conducted during a gastronomic cruise on a Belle-Époque steamer on the Lake of Geneva. Beside ethnographic observations as well as interviews with the different members of the crew (the sailing crew, the mechanics and the catering crew), we took pictures.

Our results show that each professional group has its own ecology made of rules, spaces, technical devices and areas of competence. The architecture of the boat – from its communication infrastructures to its spatiality – is shaped by these power relations and participates to enact not only the work organization, but also the prestige of the Belle-Époque steamers. These results will be used to discuss how visual methods might help us investigate the politics of work ecologies.

Keywords: ecology of work, politics, Lake of Geneva, ship

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