

**Jörg Vögele, Luisa Rittershaus, Timo Heimerdinger, Christoph auf der Horst (Hg.), The Cruel Sea. Der Tod und das Meer – historische und kunsthistorische Perspektiven, Köln, Weimar, Wien (Böhlau) 2022, 248 S., 38 Abb., ISBN 978-3-412-52640-5, EUR 55,00.**

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»The Cruel Sea. Der Tod und das Meer – historische und kunsthistorische Perspektiven« can, very briefly, be summarised as roughly 250 pages of beautiful chaos. The volume is both conference book and exhibition catalogue, combining a selection of texts based on an interdisciplinary symposium addressing the »ambiguity between fascination and horror, adventure and disaster in the relationship between humans and the sea« (p. 11, translation AR), which took place at the University of Düsseldorf in April 2021, and an exhibition dealing with the same subject which presented works from the »Grafiksammlung Mensch und Tod« housed at Düsseldorf University's Institute for the History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine. In keeping with this twofold purpose, the book contains two major sections: one which presents 14 selected articles, and the »catalogue« section which introduces the exhibition. The latter follows a thematic structure of six chapters – »Forces of Nature«, »Death turned Pilot«, »Journey into Fear – War«, »Maritime Disasters – Sunk, Drowned, Shipwrecked«, »Death and Redemption – Sea Voyage as an Allegory of Life« and finally, »Man Made Disasters – Exploitation and Marine Pollution«. The titles of these chapters are given in English, while the texts providing information and context for each of the images exhibited, as well as the introductory remarks in the foreword, are written in German. In general, the fluctuation between German and English in this volume seems somewhat adventitious, but that does not spoil the experience of the book. Nor does the impression that the 14, relatively short, text chapters seem to rather randomly »happen« to the reader. The short introduction to the book supplies the reader/spectator with some information regarding the structure and concept of the catalogue-section, but provides only a very few sentences on the – much longer – text section, and no insights at all regarding the sequence of the chapters or any logic behind them. Thus, true to its own subject, the book demands immersion – the reader has to jump in and will either sink or swim. Those comfortable with a certain amount of chaos, such as myself, will soon discover the pleasure of swimming with the book's various currents, since the result is a complete avoidance of boredom. The volume takes the reader across disciplines, periods and regions, exploring the concept of the »Cruel Sea« from a variety of angles. While the notion of »the Sea« itself as a source of danger, death and disaster is present throughout, some chapters address specific natural challenges to seafaring humans, such as the terrifying ice of Melville Bay. Others, such as Jeffrey R.



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Kerr-Ritchie's text on America's 19<sup>th</sup> century Coastal Slave Trade, convincingly interpret the oceans as spaces made »cruel« by the atrocities humans commit against each other – spaces which, on the other hand, will time and again provide ways of escaping just that man-made cruelty. Timo Heimerdinger chooses yet another perspective in his contemporary history-text »The Cruel Ship«, which explores the German Navy's allegedly »accident-stricken« training vessel »Gorch Fock« and the precarious relationship between the realities of life on a sailing vessel and the need for safety and security prevalent in politics and public mentalities. Floating back to the early modern period, both Jan Simon Karstens and Franziska Hermes explore narratives of shipwreck, death and dying at sea, and the various cultural, political, but also individual functions these narratives fulfilled – presenting the sea, for example, as »a place of danger where man could witness the works of God or the devil firsthand« (Karstens, p. 96), but also allowing to convey the trauma of witnessing death at sea despite the indescribability of the events (Hermes, p. 149).

Reading »The Cruel Sea« means drifting from medical history to economic history, from memory culture to the »North-Sea-Poems« of Heinrich Heine, from maritime archaeology to burial places for anonymous »Beach Corpses« to Roman sea-monsters, from antiquity to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are technology-oriented chapters such as John Laurence Busch's highly entertaining text »Steaming to Death. Mortal Fears at the Dawn of the First High Technology«, and a rather spectacular safety analysis of a late-medieval trading ship presented by Thomas N. Kirstein, Jean-Emmanuel Leroy and Sebastian Ritz. Readers can hunt for the treasures aboard the sunken ship »Lutine« with Margrit Schulte Beerbühl or explore »Maritime Memory Landscapes« with Norbert Fischer. It is a very interesting and colourful collection which defies the dangers inherent in its problematic construction and manages to avoid catastrophe. While definitely stormy and sometimes a little inconsistent, »The Cruel Sea« is instructive, often fascinating and sometimes moving – and therefore highly recommended.



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