

The art of orientation

Every city map, and every map in general, contains stories about the time at which it was produced. At the **Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte** in Rome, art historian **Tanja Michalsky** is studying how people have measured the world. Her research is expanding the area covered by her subject and even includes films by Federico Fellini and David Lynch.

TEXT **MARTIN TSCHECHNE**

From the roof of the library, the city unravels like a to-scale map. Fantastical maps of this kind have been contrived by novelists such as Umberto Eco, while others, including Jorge Luis Borges and Michael Ende, have created images that conform entirely to reality but must be understood as a paradox and nothing more than an idea. In this realm, literature enjoys almost unlimited freedom. Here, however, the observer is presented with a work of art in real life, as though spread out for study purposes: an undulating sea of roofs and gables, towers and churches protruding out from them with the cupola of Saint Peter straight ahead – a bright spot just in front of the horizon. From the right, the Palace of Justice thrusts itself like a limestone gray bar in front of an entire city district.

Tanja Michalsky steps onto the terrace of the Bibliotheca Hertziana and lets her gaze wander. To the left, in the south, the monumental column structure of the national monument to Vittorio Emanuele II towers over a former empire. It is a temple built according to the Greek model and is less than

a century old. My host's extended arm picks out the Pantheon and Trajan's Column from the swirling mix of different epochs – triumphal remnants of Roman antiquity. Far below on the Via Gregoriana, the narrow street in front of the building, cars and rattling Vespas push their way between the people walking by. This is Rome, in the spring of 2019. The present day. A courtyard opens out on the opposite side, and from the vantage point of the high-up research Institute, a roof garden can also be seen, with a rusty railing running between red bricks, chairs, a rotary clothes dryer, and a few pots with sprawling green plants.

ROME IS A JUXTAPOSITION OF ASYNCHRONICITIES

These places of retreat span the city like a cobweb. Has anyone ever recorded them on a map? Has anyone recognized them as a further layer, high above the places that have sunk and been buried, the antique, medieval and the modern, the commercial and representative levels of life? They would tell of warm evenings under the stars, of

the yearning to ascend beyond long-gone eras, at least for a while.. Did this city actually exist before it was invented by Federico Fellini? Or did the great director merely create a perfect image of it with films such as "Roma" or "La dolce vita"?

"Go to the Fontana di Trevi," the art historian advises me. "Experience the crowds. And ask yourself what the idea is that makes so many people want to go there." Day and night, the police are on hand to prevent visiting couples from climbing over the edge of the baroque fountain into the light blue water kissing as passionately as Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni did in Fellini's 1960 classic, with its story of the sweet life of Rome's elite. "However," Michalsky adds, "everyone, absolutely everyone, throws a coin into the basin to make a wish for the future and to make sure they will return to this place one day."

It is precisely this juxtaposition of asynchronicities, the researcher explains, that not only determines the feel of the city, but also provides the topic and direction for her work. "Here in Rome, art didn't have to invent



Own direction:
Tanja Michalsky is taking
art history research into
unknown regions.



everything for the first time," she says, explaining the starting point for her research. "There was so much that was already there!" What emerges from this in relation to the structures and practices of her craft is that everyone needs to lay down paths, to follow trails, and to define contexts. And with each step on one level of time, to avoid losing sight of the others.

Tanja Michalsky grew up in Duisburg, and occasionally, you can hear that she comes from the "Ruhrpott" region. What meaning does such an accent have? Is there an intention behind it? She wears jeans and flat shoes, her light blond hair is cut short, and she has a direct manner about her. Anyone who wants to tell a story in a new and different way should refrain from allowing themselves to be easily cowed. She adds that her husband, Klaus Krüger, Professor of Art History at the Freie Universität Berlin and a specialist in Italian art from the medieval and early modern periods, is currently in town buying a new battery for their car. A Cinquecento? "No," says Michalsky, "a Toyota." Everyday life is banal, even in Rome. The traffic moves tortuously through the city, it's loud, and the garbage hasn't been collected for a long time. All this is registered by the art historian.

Three years ago, she returned to the Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Rome as its Director. During the 1990s, she used Rome as a base from which to explore the tombs of the

Angevin kings in Naples for her dissertation. She scratched the earth from stone plates and deciphered weathered inscriptions in order to locate a medieval French dynasty in the sheer unending chain of foreign rulers of Naples, and to identify the complex interactions between local and imported cultures.

THIS HAD TO DO WITH POWER POLITICS, NOT PURGATORY

"How do you interpret strange artifacts from past eras?" she says, by way of describing the main focus of her project in her own casual, trenchant way. "And what makes a tomb such an important witness to a political situation?" She must have enjoyed the work. By the time she had finished her investigative detective work putting the pieces of the puzzle together, she had a solid result: "This had nothing to do with 'save me from purgatory' – that was the least of their concerns! The memorial culture of the Middle Ages focuses mainly on reinforcing and securing one's own genealogy. Pure power politics."

And what about the art? The art historian gives her routine answer. The popes, the Curia returning from Avignon in the early 15th century, who felt an urgent need to present to the world at large the beginning of a new, refined era, and the protagonists of this new dawn being heroic figures such as Leonardo, Michelangelo or Raphael, were all great material for her subject field. The

successes of the researchers at the Institute, which was founded in 1913 by the patron Henriette Hertz, were spectacular – covering antiquity, the heroes of the Renaissance, the illustrious art and architecture of the Baroque period. And it isn't that long ago that her predecessor, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, saved the world from a flood of paintings that were falsely ascribed to the great Baroque painter Caravaggio.

Yet Tanja Michalsky is steering her work in a new direction. It is a myth, she claims, that Rome lay dormant for a thousand long years, that it was a field of rubble with almost no inhabitants, a great city of years gone by waiting to be finally kissed awake again. And she refers to Erwin Panofsky, who himself is something of a hero among art historians. His groundbreaking book "The Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art", published in 1960, toppled several myths. Note the plural form! Even Charlemagne was already quoting ideas and examples from antiquity and referred to them in order to present himself as the emperor of a – nota bene – Roman Empire of the German Nation.

"There was in fact not just one Renaissance," the Director of the Institute in Rome explains. "There were several: a Carolingian Renaissance and another Renaissance during the 13th century, to name just the most important ones. Unfortunately, we are not so familiar with the names." For this reason, she talks of appropriations of antique cul-



Best outlook: the roof terrace of the Bibliotheca Hertziana opens up a view over the rooftops of Rome, with the cupola of the San Carlo al Corso church (left), the national monument to Vittorio Emanuele II (white monumental building, center) and the cupola of St. Peter's cathedral (right).

ture – and by this, she means the techniques and results of the appropriation, rather than a historical event. The statues and buildings from antiquity were already there, after all. They were part of everyday life. Anyone could observe and study them. And many people did just that.

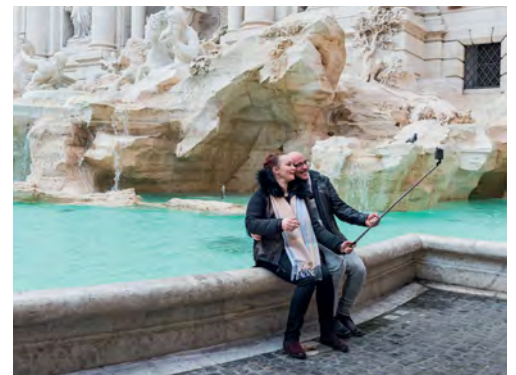
In other words, more Middle Ages. More present-day. And a greater awareness of the migration of people and culture, of the multifaceted links between the Italian south and the rest of Europe and the world, which she experienced in such concentrated form in Naples. Anyone who wants to study the history of a city, the ultimate embodiment of urbanity, must be prepared to peel away one by one the many layers it contains, to filter all the ingredients of this amalgam and to reconstruct the way they fit together: Angevin tombstones and Greek columns, Goths, Hohenstaufen, Spanish and Bourbons, national monuments and roof gardens. She has spent long enough scraping away at these hidden, overgrown, weathered links. And the same principle applies to Rome as it does to all cities.

That's why, together with Tristan Weddigen, the second Director of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, she decided to expand the Institute's program to cover earlier eras and places beyond the south

of Italy, and to connect all this with the present day. Tanja Michalsky loves taking the discussion forward to as yet unknown regions, where there are new discoveries waiting to be made.

As a result, the desk in her office is now full of medieval city maps. On the bookshelf behind it, there are DVDs with classic films by Fellini or the enigmatic levels of reality created by David Lynch, that are layered like gossamer-thin films. In "Lost Highway", the mysterious expedition into film as a medium, hunted by dark fantasies, the art historian sees a model for research in her own field of activity. From Rome, colleagues explore the face of Europe beyond Europe, reconstruct the global network of Italian art since the early modern era, and seek out the mutual exchange between directors and producers from the Cinecittà film studios. And through all this work, they come considerably closer to the complex nature of this city.

The layers of urban life, the links between eras and cultures, the open and hidden motifs of any reduction of reality... Was it not wonderfully ironic that half an hour previously, the journey to the Institute on the Pincio on the edge of the inner city already gave an indication of the complex interplay between reality and fiction? Rome is built on hills, and some roads wind uphill in



Source of longing: since Federico Fellini immortalized the Fontana di Trevi in his film "La dolce vita", with Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni, the fountain has become one of the major tourist attractions in Rome.

broad curves. The helpful porter in the hotel took out one of those handy city maps designed for tourists and marked two crosses on it: this is where you are, and this is where you want to go.

However, the map did not show the many narrow streets and passages. Junctions and crossroads were incorrectly placed, even for larger roads, and the proportions were distorted. Yet on the uniform light red color depicting built-on areas, there was enough space to mark out a bar, a pizzeria or a moped hire service. The people who published the map had paid for this manipulation

An informative map: the map of Rome drawn around 700 years ago by Paolino Minorita shows among other things that at that time, the view was directed eastwards, towards the orient – hence the term “orientation”.

of reality from their advertising budget. And, as could be seen from the map, tourists were not encouraged to wander through the city without any orientation points, but to seek out shops and generate turnover. Isn't that appalling?

EVERY MAP IS AN ABBREVIATION OF REALITY

Tanja Michalsky has to laugh. “Look,” she says, and opens up the computer in her office, a few floors below the roof terrace. A map of the City of Rome by Paolino Minorita from the early 14th century appears. The representation of a constantly changing world has been a subject of interest for the art historian since she studied Dutch landscape painting as part of her extended post-doctoral qualification period, which is

required for a full university professorship. And the cartographic systems of symbols are one way of documenting this world.

From the conquest of spaces, the growing ability to record and depict a place on the basis of its topographical data, progress in abstraction and earlier attempts at creating a bird's eye view through to a GPS satellite image which is accurate down to the last centimeter – all this can be read from just one map. However, at the same time, the scientist warns against systematic distortions inherent to the medium, the errors and temptations. “Every map is an abbreviation of reality,” she says, in summary. “And every abbreviation is made for a reason.” Sometimes, the reason is a bad one, and sometimes, it is simply bland commercialism.



Paolino Minorita: Cronologia magna, Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Lat. Z. 399 (=1600), fol. 98.

This Paolino Minorita would have been an honest man. He even registered the city's hills on his map as a lateral view, since it would be another few centuries before the realization took hold that peaks and ridges look very different when viewed from above than from the familiar perspective. The method of drawing them on a map on the basis of altitude lines originated in Switzerland. Tanja Michalsky grins when she points out where it came from. She gets pleasure from such choice new items of information. Of course, the Swiss, who else! The history of cartography has its very own stories to tell.

The cartographer of Rome during the late Middle Ages drew a network of streets and aqueducts; the Pantheon is recognizable from its classical columned portal, as is the Castel Sant' Angelo and with a certain amount of imagination, the Colosseum. The scientist's finger moves swiftly over the map as though it were her present that was recorded here 700 years ago. The author presented a dramatic composition, and every place has a role to play in telling the story of the city. Paolino linked the topographical anchor to other representation levels using explanatory texts, as though he had wanted to develop a medieval computer app.

The difference between this and the road map of the present, which brazenly brings the advertising targets into focus, is not that great. It's nice to see the wide river, which is clearly the Tiber. Instead of winding its way southwards through the city in the familiar way, it runs horizontally over the map. However, she is quick to provide an explanation: "The habit of always orienting our image of the world to the north only came about much later, in the 17th century," she explains. "Before, the view was directed eastwards, towards the orient – hence the word 'orientation'."

Incidentally, it would not be at all difficult to find your way around, even with a bad map. The Institute is located at the upper end of the Spanish Steps. It's impossible to lose your way. Everyone knows where it is.

All this can be seen from above on the roof terrace. All the connections appear to be a final statement of truth.



A view of different eras: in her research, Tanja Michalsky studies medieval city maps and contemporary feature films as part of her research.

Tanja Michalsky refers to the maps over which Eco, Borges and Ende spread their fantastical, unrealizable concept of total representation. She only needs to turn around to shift her gaze from the wide horizon of the city and down into the machine rooms of art history research as though through a funnel.

AN ATMOSPHERE OF CHEERFUL CONCENTRATION PREVAILS

Eight years ago, the Spanish architect Juan Navarro Baldeweg inserted a new building there, exactly above the garden of the legendary military commander and host Lucius Licinius Lucullus from 60 B.C., in the middle of the ensemble surrounding the 16th century Palazzo Zuccari. It cannot be seen from the road, but it is spacious enough to hold the 360,000 or so library volumes, around 870,000 carefully preserved and documented photographs from the art history collection, and 90 generous workspaces layered in a terrace structure. There are researchers there at all times. There is an atmosphere of cheerful, relaxed concentration. After all, the rule applies without exception that no book ever leaves the building. Never.

The new Director arrives when everything had been completed. Her predecessors had endured the stressful task of planning and building the library.

The scholar knows how fortunate she is. She can turn her attention to the actual purpose of the Institute with almost no distractions: carefully uncovering the history of art and culture layer by layer. Expanding her horizon, promoting meetings and initiating exchange. New levels of cooperation are also emerging with the Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Florence. Science and the movement of knowledge can no longer be defined by borders. Sometimes, she is worried that the generous space allotted to the depots might one day be inadequate. "We must conduct research," she says, while quietly struggling with the name of her Institute, which occasionally leads to false expectations: "We are not a library, but we do have one."

She has just re-read Stefan Zweig, with his biographical sketch of the Italian merchant and seafarer Amerigo Vespucci. The historiographer wrote that while he did not discover America, he did realize that it was America, which was something that the cartographers of his time were still only hesitantly dabbling in. As Tanja Michalsky says: "Maps create spaces. Their neutrality is a fiction." And she warns against the precision of satellite location, since their photographs, too, are still only images. And this means that they are always the means of transportation for a story. ◀