Review of Roy Grundmann's *On Shoreless Sea-The MS St. Louis Refugee Ship in History, Film, and Popular Memory***. Paperback : ISBN 9798855803761, 476 pages (2025).$ 29.95**

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The contemporary world appears divided between two cultures: one propelled by the booming spectacle of social media, where attention is fleeting, memory dissolves, and consumption becomes the only form of engagement and another haunted by the lingering realities of war, occupation, and forced disability. The question, however, is not simply who suffers or what precipitated such suffering, but how colonialism continues to function as a system that both produces and erases memory according to political necessity. History has shown and often obscured the devastating consequences of wars waged in the name of homeland and identity. Displacement and occupation, then, are not exceptional crises but enduring conditions of modernity.

As the world witnesses the continuing devastation in Gaza and grapples with the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks and Israel's subsequent military response, Roy Grundmann's *On Shoreless Sea: The MS St. Louis Refugee Ship in History, Film, and Popular Memory* (2025) compels a more fundamental inquiry: what historical and racialized structures made such crises inevitable? His book traces the biopolitical logic that displaced Palestinians and enabled the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, situating this within a longer genealogy of colonial modernity. By returning to Europe's refusal of Jewish refugees aboard the *St. Louis* Grundmann reveals how humanitarianism and exclusion

coexist within the same global order where the sea becomes both a conduit of hope and a site of perpetual suspension. As Achille Mbembe's notion of *necropolitics* elucidates, the governance of life and death often determines who counts as a subject worthy of rescue (Mbembe 2019, 66). Grundmann's reading of Western refusal and selective humanitarianism echoes Mbembe's critique of racialized sovereignty.

In *On Shoreless Sea*, Roy Grundmann returns to the 1939 voyage of the MS *St. Louis*, when over nine hundred Jewish refugees were denied refuge by Cuba, the United States, and Canada, only to face annihilation upon their return to Europe. Grundmann's book charts the afterlife of Europe's imperial conscience through the memory of the MS *St. Louis* voyage, a ship that becomes, in his reading, both a vessel of historical guilt and a floating emblem of racial biopolitics. What might once have seemed a singular humanitarian failure emerges here as a symptom of a broader colonial design. Drawing on archival material, including Captain Gustav Schröder's own account, Grundmann dismantles the convenient moralism that casts the West as a passive bystander. Instead, he situates the voyage within an unbroken continuum of imperial power, where mobility, citizenship, and racial worth are determined by the same hierarchies that once structured colonial governance. His argument both historical and urgently contemporary, reveals how the *St. Louis* still drifts through the politics of today's border regimes, its denial of asylum replayed across a new global order of exclusion.

In tracing how Holocaust remembrance folds into Cold War humanitarianism and postwar liberal empathy, Grundmann exposes the persistence of a colonial logic that structures even the most benevolent narratives of rescue. The *St. Louis*, denied safe harbor, sails not merely through physical waters but through the moral turbulence of a world unwilling to dismantle its own hierarchies. What emerges is an unflinching study of how the West redeems itself by rehearsing its failures, an odyssey of endless ascent toward an unavertable death.

In one of its most incisive sections, the book rereads the 1938 Évian Conference as the moment when Europe's humanitarian crisis exposed its colonial core. Convened to address the escalating Jewish refugee problem, the conference became a spectacle of moral paralysis, each nation performing sympathy while reaffirming racial boundaries. Grundmann reveals how Britain and its dominions, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand invoked "lack of infrastructure" and "assimilability" as coded reassertions of whiteness, masking racial exclusion under administrative reason. As Australian Lt. Col. T. C. White declared with chilling clarity, "As we have no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging a scheme of large-scale foreign migration" (Grundmann 2025, 29). This statement encapsulates the racialized anxiety that framed the so-called refugee crisis: Europe's Jews were rendered too foreign for Europe, yet too European for Africa, inhabiting a liminal zone between whiteness and its Others. Far from being a bureaucratic failure, the conference signaled a deliberate continuity between Europe's colonial management abroad and its racialized containment of refugees at home.

What began at Évian as a discourse of racial exclusion found its economic corollary in the operations of the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Aktien-Gesellschaft (HAPAG), one of Europe's largest shipping lines and a crucial site where humanitarian crisis was converted into commercial opportunity. Although HAPAG did not originally design the St. Louis for refugees, its 1939 voyage to Cuba became symbolic because it blurred the lines between cruise and exile, commerce and catastrophe. The same colonial logic that denied refuge on the grounds of racial "incompatibility" enabled corporate actors to turn exile into enterprise. HAPAG's commissioning of the *St. Louis* under Victor Neumann's rhetoric of "efficiency" and "replacement capacity" translated moral abandonment into logistical rationality. Jewish mobility was not merely managed, it was monetized. The ship's aura of luxury and freedom stood in agonizing contrast to the refugees'

precarity, transforming the voyage into a media spectacle that exposed the contradiction between Europe's self-professed civility and its racial exclusion.

Both the Évian Conference and HAPAG's commissioning of the ship illuminate how modern governance manages undesired populations not through open violence but through institutionalized delay, delegation, and profit. Grundmann writes that the St. Louis was "big enough to invoke the glamour of ocean-liner travel," yet the "atmosphere of glamour, comfort, and freedom" for its Jewish passengers was fragile and "shattered upon arrival in Havana" (ibid.,78). The ocean becomes not a passage but a condition: a space where movement endures without arrival, and humanity persists without recognition where racialized life is rendered administratively and commercially disposable.

This moral and political paradox finds its most human expression in Captain Gustav Schröder's *Heimatlos auf Hoher See* (Homeless on the High Seas 1949), a personal chronicle of the St. Louis voyage that Grundmann includes in translation. Schröder's account provides a counter-narrative to the bureaucratic and commercial frameworks of exile, revealing a captain torn between obedience to orders and compassion for the stateless. His description of the ship as "a hospitable world in the middle of the ocean where optimism and hope flourish" (ibid.,104) stands in poignant contrast to the refugees' actual fate. For a brief moment, the St. Louis became a space of suspended humanity, its luxury decks and swimming pools allowing Jewish passengers, as Eric Dublon's diary records, to temporarily repress the trauma of their displacement. Yet, as Cuba and the United States successively denied entry, this floating refuge transformed into a prison, with suicides marking the ship's descent from hope to despair.

Grundmann's inclusion of Schröder's memoir is crucial to the book's neocolonial argument: it personalizes the structural violence of racial biopolitics, showing how humanitarian gestures were themselves

circumscribed by the same geopolitical hierarchies that governed refusal. The blame, initially directed at the United States for its denial of asylum, was soon displaced onto Cuba, a maneuver that mirrors how imperial powers externalize guilt while preserving moral authority. This shifting of responsibility exemplifies the neocolonial logic the book exposes: Europe and its allies maintained control not by direct domination but through the orchestration of abandonment.

In the next chapter, Grundmann turns to the afterlife of the *St. Louis* in film and media, tracing how cultural memory continues to shape public understanding of exile and displacement. When *Voyage of the Damned* (1976) brought the *St. Louis* to the screen, historical trauma was recast as a cinematic spectacle. The film translates Jewish displacement into a grammar of liberal pity and colonial moralism, transforming Cuba into a picturesque foil for European civility. As Grundmann notes, this exemplifies "condescending liberalism" (ibid., 211): a gesture that condemns persecution while displacing guilt. Even though the St. Louis voyage predates the camps, the film retrospectively projects this victim differential onto its characters. The refined, educated Jews, clad in evening attire and dancing to conga beats, embody a cosmopolitan whiteness that seeks redemption through culture and civility. However, the unseen "Muselmann," invoked by history rather than presence, hovers as a spectral reminder of those stripped of dignity, agency, and humanity. In this sense, Grundmann's analysis resonates with Michael Rothberg's idea of *multidirectional memory*, where the recollection of one atrocity opens space for interrogating others, exposing the shared yet uneven structures of exclusion that persist across time (Rothberg 2009, 5). Thus, even within persecution, the colonial logic of gradation persists: not all suffering bodies are equal, and not all exiles are equally visible.

Grundmann's reading situates the film within a larger meditation on how visual culture converts trauma into spectacle, how remembrance itself becomes a form of forgetting. The film's aestheticization of trauma, what Dominick LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement,"

ultimately neutralizes critique by turning suffering into spectacle (LaCapra 2001, 41). Grundmann's reading makes visible how cinema translates guilt into empathy without accountability. This makes the film central to his project, illustrating how colonial hierarchies and moral evasions persist in the very mediums meant to preserve memory. Most crucially, by erasing American responsibility and removing U.S. officials from the narrative altogether, the film transforms a story of Western exclusion into a tale of Latin incompetence.

If *Voyage of the Damned* historicized the refugee crisis through the lens of moral spectacle, later films such as *Ungewollten: The Unwanted* (2019) and Complicit (2012–2014) reframe it within the visual politics of the present. Grundmann's inclusion of these films underscores how memory culture remains dynamically transnational: the Jewish refugees of 1939 become precursors to today's displaced migrants crossing the same waters under different geopolitical regimes. Through this intermedial analysis, *On Shoreless Sea* shows how cultural memory is not static commemoration but a living archive, one that continually negotiates between past and present atrocities, between what is remembered and what remains politically unacknowledged.

Following his discussion of cinematic memory, Grundmann turns to the realm of political cartoons, extending the St. Louis's legacy into the visual and moral imagination of the present. In Chapter 8, he examines Art Spiegelman's *The St. Louis Refugee Ship Blues* (published in The Washington Post), where the artist revisits the voyage not to reproduce its history but to interrogate the very act of remembrance. By critically reflecting on how the American press once failed to condemn the U.S. government's refusal to grant asylum, Spiegelman turns his art into a form of ethical reckoning.

In its closing gesture, *On Shoreless Sea* becomes less a study of a voyage and more a reflection on the ethics of remembering. Grundmann situates the *St. Louis* not as a closed historical episode but as a recurring

moral allegory, its echoes audible in every refugee crisis that follows. Just as the passengers of the *St. Louis* once saw the lights of Havana and Florida flicker beyond reach, today's displaced communities, Palestinian, Rohingya, Syrian, or Sudanese continue to see their own shores recede beneath the tides of politics and indifference. Grundmann's book does not simply recount the *St. Louis* tragedy, it is reminding us that the sea, still shoreless, mirrors our collective suffering, a world where the wounds of exile and exclusion remain unhealed.

Works Cited

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