

Panel report:

Behind the Scenes I: The Materialities of Images. Labour and Institutional Spaces

Lucerne, July 9, 2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

Organizers: Mireille Berton / Anne-Katrin Weber

Participants: Jessica Schupbach / Léa Ritter, Roxane Gray

Report by: Ramon Wiederkehr, University of Lucerne

The interest of the panel lay in the invisible and institutional work involved in the production of images, where film does not serve the purpose of entertainment but knowledge production ('useful cinema'). The panel explored the norms and practices of those working behind the scenes such as administrative staff, broadcasters, assistants and other forgotten professionals in – among others – government, military, and medical institutions. The goal was not only to uncover the material conditions and tools of how images are made but also how they are embedded in hierarchies of power. The panel, organized by **MIREILLE BERTON** (Lausanne) and **ANNE-KATRIN WEBER** (Lausanne), represented the first instalment of a two-part series titled: "Behind the Scenes: The Materialities of Images", the second one focusing on infrastructures.

JESSICA SCHUPBACH (Lausanne) and **LÉA RITTER** (Lausanne) presented on the materiality of film strips and brain research in the context of mid-20th century science. They examined the Waldau film collection, comprising 200 scientific and research films of patients made by psychiatrists between 1920 and 1960. They emphasized the importance of understanding the physical and resource-based aspects behind these films as part of a wider multimedia research project that includes paper archives of letters, budgets, and scientific articles. As such, Schupbach and Ritter advocated for an interdisciplinary approach to the historicization, conservation and restoration of the Waldau collection. A case study involving a film by Swiss-German psychiatrist and neurologist Ernst Grünthal from around 1950 illustrated how the production context of the images (filming, intertitling, selection and cut, editing, etc.) intertwined with the material practices of brain research (measurements, cuts, immersion, celloidin blocks, histological slides, coloration, photographs). They shed light on the temporality of both film and brain research, comparing physical film splices and multiple versions of films with the longitudinal study of brain tissues, highlighting how images and biological data are embedded in epistemic practices. The concept of the "infrastructure of the medical gaze" was central to understanding how images construct and materialize medical knowledge.

ROXANE GRAY (Lausanne) examined the behind the scenes roles of women at the *Télévision Suisse Romande* (TSR) between the 1970s and 2000s, focusing on secretaries, assistants, and production managers. Her research is based on a series of interviews with (former) TSR professionals and on the written and audiovisual archives. The presentation critically studied the marginalization and symbolic erasure of these ‘below the line’ professions, often feminized and undervalued. Gray’s analysis traced the historical development of these roles, revealing gender biases and hierarchies within television institutions. She discussed how women, despite taking on more responsibilities due to staff shortages – such as administrative management – remained confined to supporting roles, often invisible in professional, career-centered narratives. The arrival of computers brought some relief by automating many administrative tasks and opening up new resources but did not fundamentally alter the perception of women as mere executors. Within this “asymmetry of recognition” they needed to fight for valorization, while being excluded from decision-making and editorial spheres. The presentation thus highlighted the complex, strategic, yet undervalued work performed by women, emphasizing the ongoing challenges in career mobility and recognition within the industry.

The panel fostered a rich conversation on parallels between the two case studies, particularly regarding the documentation of micro-tasks and invisible labor. Questions arose about the representation of women in archival sources – many created by men but involving women in laboratories, hospitals, television sets and offices – and how terminology like ‘assistants’ or ‘shadow work’ might reinforce their secondary status. Ethical considerations regarding the use of scientific footage and the role of film in knowledge production were also discussed, emphasizing the importance of critically examining sources and acknowledging the (gendered) labor behind visual materials.

Ramon Widerkehr

Panel overview:

Jessica Schupbach / Léa Ritter: At the Borders of the Film: Objects, Materials, and Off-Screen Elements in Medical Institutional Films

Roxane Gray: Femmes de l’ombre à la Télévision Suisse Romande: les attachées de production

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