

Hydroelectric Projections: The Culture of Water Power in 1950s European Industrial Films

Fabian Zimmer

In the 1950s, hundreds of films about the construction and use of large dams and hydroelectric plants were produced all over Europe. At the intersection of a boom in dam construction after the war and a boom in documentary filmmaking, these films became both documents and *mises-en-scène* of the profound landscape changes occurring in this decade—a decade that has been characterized as a central turning point in the interrelations of technology, nature, and society in recent debates about the Anthropocene. In my dissertation I analyze and contextualize this body of audio-visual media focusing on material produced and screened in the Alpine region and in Scandinavia—the two central hydroelectric regions of Europe.

Along with other media, these films formed a diverse public visual culture of hydroelectricity, which, I argue, is much more than a neat “reflection” of modern technology. Rather, this visual culture is deeply ingrained in public conflicts and negotiations about the aesthetic and moral value of landscape that accompany the expansion of landscape-changing infrastructures, such as hydropower plants, throughout the twentieth century. My project thus uses these films as a lens through which to study these negotiations, and the underlying imaginaries of technology, nature, and society.

Since these films are not primarily produced as pieces of art, but produced to serve organizational and rhetorical aims—to sell, to educate, to convince, and to persuade—they have to be analyzed as utility media. To interpret them, I combine a close reading of the recurring narratives, metaphors, and visual strategies that structure the films with a reconstruction of their historical contexts: the contexts of their production, exhibition, and reception, as well as the discourses and debates on hydroelectric projects that both shaped and were shaped by these films. My project thereby uncovers the conflicting ways in which contemporaries made sense of the dramatic landscape changes wrought by hydropower constructions. And, on a more general level, it provides new insights into the contested and often ambivalent imaginations of modernity in the twentieth century, also shedding light on current debates surrounding hydroelectricity; our use of large-scale, landscape-changing energy technologies; and the role visuals play in the debates that rage around them.