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## НАСЛЕДИЕ

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*Katsaridou I.*

«MARE NOSTRUM» REVISITED:  
PHOTOMED'S DISCOURSES ON MEDITERRANEAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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Born in Sanary-sur-mer, on the Var coast of France in 2011, the Photomed festival is an annual event devoted to Mediterranean photography. Result of a collaboration between various institutions (municipality of Sanary, department of Var, province of Provence) and the *Cultural Council of the Union for the Mediterranean*, the festival was meant to present each year photographers and visual artists using a variety of modes of photographic expression, from documentary testimonials to pure artistic creation, with sole aim «to showcase and highlight Mediterranean beauty». Following the success of the Sanary event, a Lebanese edition of the festival, the Photomed Liban, has been created in 2014 in Beirut. As its mission statement mentions, it is an event that «beyond the political, social, and religious upheavals that occur», seeks to promote the Mediterranean as «a region full of life and movement». First, the paper will seek to shed light on the reinvention of the «myth of the Mediterranean», exemplified by stereotypical cultural repertoires such as «Mare Nostrum», the «oldest cradle of civilizations» or the «homeland of the three monotheist religions». On a second level, an association will be attempted with the main aspects of Mediterraneanism, a general discourse that, according to anthropologist Michael Herzfeld among else, shares similarities with Edward Said's Orientalist romanticism, reflecting the power relations between authoritative Western (neo) colonial powers and the Mediterranean people. The analysis aspires to address its political implications, among which the creation of the «Union for the Mediterranean» organization along with its subsequent failure to develop an active role or the most recent refugee crisis.

**Key words:** photographic festivals, Mediterranean photography, Mediterraneanism, Union for the Mediterranean, neocolonial discourse, art and refugee crisis

### **Introduction: a festival for Mediterranean photography**

«Founded in Sanary on the Var coast of France, Photomed has endeavored to embrace its coastal roots by inviting artists from Mediterranean countries to participate in its yearly event. For the past six years, Photomed Festival has been showcasing and highlighting Mediterranean beauty. From documentary testimonials to pure artistic expression, photography is a way to register and comprehend the world from several points of view. Beyond political, social, and religious upheavals, the Mediterranean is, above all, a region full of life and movement: it is similar to Photomed Festival which every year brings together young talents and well known artists and photographers»<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://photomedliban.com/en/about-us/> (last visit 14.12.2017). The majority of the texts quoted in this article were retrieved from the websites of *Photomed Liban* and *Photomed* in Sanary-sur-mer:

The above excerpt forms part of the call for contributions to this year's edition of *Photomed Liban*, the annual festival that has been taking place in Beirut since 2014, showcasing photography exhibitions dedicated to Mediterranean photography. The festival was launched as an extension of the *Photomed* photographic festival, which has been taking place in Sanary-sur-mer, Toulon, since 2011. Created by Philippe Heullant, publisher and Philippe Sérénon, consultant in the photo industry, the festival, at least according to the founders, was intended to fill a gap in photographic events, and has become an institution dedicated to «Mediterranean photography». Already since its inaugural edition, *Photomed*'s founders have staged more than fifteen exhibitions, as well as photography workshops, portfolio reviews, aspiring to give «a global dimension» to the event, and to reinforce interactions between the citizens of Sanary, the visitors, and also, the internet users<sup>2</sup>.

Having realised early on the need to establish a recognisable brand name for the festival, Heullant and Sérénon proposed to Jean-Luc Monterosso, director of Paris's *Maison européenne de la photographie*, to take over the artistic directorship of *Photomed*. Monterosso is a photography theorist and exhibition curator who, since 1976, has contributed to the foundation and creation of brand name institutions. These include *Paris Audiovisuel*, *La Maison européenne de la photographie*<sup>3</sup>, *Le Mois de la Photo*, Paris<sup>4</sup>, the European Month of Photography<sup>5</sup>, and *La Biennale des Photographes du Monde Arabe contemporain* (2015). In 2011, Monterosso used his acquaintances to secure the participation of high profile photographers for the newly founded festival, and exploited his previous professional experience to establish *Photomed*'s curatorial discourse. This came with a recognisable brand name for *Photomed* as institution. Thus, for Monterosso, «*Photomed* has made a name for itself as a festival for discovery or rediscovery»<sup>6</sup>. In branding the new festival, Monterosso emphasizes its two main aspects. First, it is the festival of a specific region that is the Mediterranean region, which presents «a rare richness for photographers»<sup>7</sup>. Second, it is the festival of a specific medium that is the photography that has the capacity of mediating a «positive influence in a general negative environment»<sup>8</sup>. Starting from these two aspects in the context of this article

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<http://photomedliban.com/>; <http://festivalphotomed.com/>. *Photomed Liban* website is bilingual (English-French), while *Photomed* website is only available in French. In the framework of this article, I use the original English quotes in the texts retrieved from *Photomed Liban*, while the quotes retrieved from *Photomed* or other French-speaking websites are my translations in English.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.six-fours.com/photomed-les-fondateurs.html> (last visit 14.12.2017). Despite the announcements that favored the festival's visibility on the internet, the website of *Photomed* did not keep a stable presence and underwent several changes during the seven years of the festival's existence. Hence, the festival's previous editions do not appear on the current festival's website.

<sup>3</sup> *Chapier H.* Le projet. Présentation // *Maison européenne de la photographie*. <http://www.mep-fr.org/la-maison/le-projet/presentation> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>4</sup> *Hébel F.* Mois de la Photographie du Grand Paris, Avril 2017 // Mois de la Photo Paris. [http://moisdelaphotodugrandparis.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Dossier\\_MoisdeLaPhoto-1.pdf](http://moisdelaphotodugrandparis.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Dossier_MoisdeLaPhoto-1.pdf) (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.europeanmonthofphotography.org/> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Monterosso J.L.* *Photomed 2013: Mediterranean Photography Capital* // *Art Bahrain*, 28.04.2017. [http://artbahrain.org/web/?os\\_artguide=photomed-2013-mediterranean-photography-capital](http://artbahrain.org/web/?os_artguide=photomed-2013-mediterranean-photography-capital) (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>7</sup> *Monterosso J.L.* Faire de *Photomed* un rendez-vous majeur // *Var Matin*, 25.05.2011. <http://archives.varmatin.com/article/arts/j-l-monterosso-%C2%ABfaire-de-photomed-un-rendez-vous-majeur%C2%BB.545152.html> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Tempier E., Marcaggi P.* *Photo'med: l'interview de Jean-Luc Monterosso* // *L'encre de mer*, 11.05.2012. <http://www.l-encre-de-mer.fr/2012-05-11-photomed-linterview-de-jean-luc-monterosso> (last visit 13.12.2017).

I will seek to analyze the institutional discourse developed by the Photomed festival in Sanary, and its subsequent Lebanese edition, Photomed Liban.

First, I will attempt to define the term «Mediterranean» in the context of the two festivals. Thus, attempting a comparative reading of the Photomed's institutional discourse and the photographs exhibited in the festivals, this article seeks to point out how the festival's discourse reflects long established, pre-determined notions of an eternal unified Mediterranean basin, which, against recent turmoil in the area, seem to reinvent what has been commonly called the «myth of the Mediterranean»<sup>9</sup>.

On a second level, the paper will examine Photomed's discourse on the photographic medium. Starting from the belief that photography has the ability to communicate across boundaries of language and nation, Photomed endorses the widely-held notion of photography as universal language. Moreover, related to photography's universality is the tendency also traced in Photomed's discourse that seeks to ascribe a Mediterranean identity to the photographic medium itself. In the context of this article, I will seek to contextualise Photomed's discourses on the «Mediterranean medium of photography» within the broader social and historical framework of the last decade, with an emphasis on the recent Mediterranean policies launched by the European Union.

### **The ahistorical model of *Mare Nostrum***

Literally describing the geographical region around the Mediterranean Sea, the Mediterranean has long been a highly-charged term. Its varied definitions depend on the origin of the source, the period, and context in which the term is used. Likewise, a simple search of the term «Mediterranean photography» on the internet reveals thousands photographic representations of the Mediterranean landscape from the invention of photography onwards. Hence, taking into consideration the term's vagueness, many questions are raised regarding what the organizers of Photomed mean by «Mediterranean photography». Is there a certain photography that could qualify as «Mediterranean»? And if so, what are the special features that distinguish it from other types of photography?

In order to answer whether there are distinguishing features that form the regional identity of a specific photography, one should examine the broader discourse developed on «the Mediterranean». In general, one can trace the definition of the Mediterranean basin as a geographical entity back to the 19th century<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, the discourse on the Mediterranean as we know it was established in the mid-20th century, thanks to the work of the French historian Fernand Braudel who was affiliated with the Annales School. Writing on the period of the reign of Phillip II of Spain (1556–1598), Braudel identified the Mediterranean Sea and the lands which enclosed it as a unity. A unity that, for Braudel, was first geographical, then social; he traced the Mediterranean along the lines of the human communities that lived in those lands that were bound together, directly or indirectly, by the sea, a great unifying inland waterway<sup>11</sup>. For the French historian, thus, the Mediterranean has «a history and a destiny of its own, a powerful vitality», which deserves «something better than the role of a picturesque background»<sup>12</sup>. Having lived in Algiers for a number of years in the 1930s, Braudel was intensely influenced by the history of French colonialism, which partly defined his views on the

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.macba.cat/en/the-mediterranean-to-come-shore-to-shore-dialogues-on-art-economy-and-society> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>10</sup> Ruel A. L'invention de la Méditerranée // Revue d'histoire. 1991. Vol. 32. P. 7–14.

<sup>11</sup> Trevor-Roper H.R. Fernand Braudel, the Annales, and the Mediterranean // The Journal of Modern History. 1972. Vol. 44 (4). P. 474.

<sup>12</sup> Braudel F. The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II. New York, 1972–1973. P. 20.

Mediterranean<sup>13</sup>. The colonial policies of the era advanced the vision of the Mediterranean as a space of continuity, where France and the Maghreb formed part of the same geopolitical space. In contrast, however, the belief that the area was divided along cultural and religious lines also emerged. Typical of this conception of the Mediterranean was that articulated by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne who influenced Braudel<sup>14</sup>. According to Pirenne, there was an irreversible schism between East and West created in the 8th century as a result of the Arab conquests of the Mediterranean. He maintains that this division brought a definitive end to the Mediterranean unity<sup>15</sup>. This is an ambivalent position that, according to historians such as Ariel Salzmann<sup>16</sup>, inspired Samuel Huntington's reactionary views on the conflict between Christianity and Islam several decades later. Huntington defined the Mediterranean in terms of the tension between rival civilisations of the Christian West and the Islamic world. He also claims that cross-civilisation migration might endanger the integrity of national identity<sup>17</sup>.

This antithetical pair of a «Mediterranean of unity» and a «Mediterranean of conflicts» has constituted the basis on which the modern representation of the region has been developed in the theoretical and institutional discourse on art. More specifically, in terms of photography, indicative are the theses by Joan Fontcuberta, the Catalan photographer and photography researcher. In 1984, Fontcuberta attempted to define the character of Mediterranean photography, and resorted to stereotypical schemes that highlighted the region's singularity, a region that, in his words, «propagated such important movements as Jewish monotheism, Greco-Latin civilisation, Christianity, the Phoenicians and maritime trade, the Arabic influence on Europe»<sup>18</sup>.

A similar sense appeared in texts written within the framework of the Biennial of Young Artists from Mediterranean Europe<sup>19</sup>, a festival that first took place in 1985 in Barcelona. In the discourse developed by the Biennial, General Secretary Alessandro Stillo uses the term *Mare Nostrum* to define the Mediterranean. For Stillo, it is a region that consists of «territories where conflicts had torn souls and bodies apart, like the Balkans for example»; or of «areas where tensions are still unsolved, or rather, where they are one of the causes of instability in the contemporary world like the Middle East and the Maghreb». Despite the fractures however, as Stillo concludes, the Mediterranean, as «cradle of the old world», maintains its unified vision. Thus he returns to a Braudelian view of the sea as a communicating waterway<sup>20</sup>.

Following this tradition of contested discourses on Mediterranean art and culture, the Photomed festival seems to assume the concept of the *Mare Nostrum* as the institutional discourse of

<sup>13</sup> Borutta M. Braudel in Algier. Die kolonialen Wurzeln der 'Méditerranée' und der 'spatial turn' // *Historische Zeitschrift*. 2016. Vol. 303 (1). P. 1–38; *Esposito C.* The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb. Plymouth, 2014. P. xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Braudel F. *Écrits sur l'histoire II*. Paris, 1990. P. 9–30.

<sup>15</sup> Pirenne H. *Mohammed and Charlemagne*. New York, 1957. P. 284–285.

<sup>16</sup> Salzmann A. The moral economies of the pre-modern Mediterranean. Preliminaries to the study of cross-cultural migration during the long sixteenth century // *Living in the Ottoman Ecumenical Community. Essays in Honour of Suraiya Faroqi*. Ed. by V. Constantini and M. Koller. Leiden, 2008. P. 454.

<sup>17</sup> Huntington S.P.: 1) *The Clash of Civilizations?* // *Foreign Affairs*. 1993. Vol. 7. P. 22–49; 2) *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Fontcuberta J. *Mediterranean Photography // European Photography*. 1984. Vol. 5 (4). P. 8.

<sup>19</sup> The institution was later to be renamed into Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and Mediterranean; original title *Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (BJCEM)*. See <http://www.bjcem.org>

<sup>20</sup> Stillo A. Twenty years of history of the biennial. In *Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs d'Europe et de la Méditerranée (BJCEM) 2005* // [http://bjcem.flyer.it/fr/original/history/history\\_1048.htm](http://bjcem.flyer.it/fr/original/history/history_1048.htm) (last visit 12.12.2017).

the festival. The festival, thus, continues to propagate a stereotypical representation of a timeless and anti-historical Mediterranean that remains unchanged over centuries. As the mobilization of the term Mare Nostrum implies, the Mediterranean as a geographical space is reduced to an abstract notion that can be traced to the Roman period. That is, the definition of the Mediterranean refers to a period when, under the military control of Rome, commercial exchanges, and a common culture flourished in the basin, uninterrupted for several centuries. With this definition, the illusion of a time-space continuity of the region is created that endorses a discourse, that, in turn sees the common history of the Mediterranean basin as positive, while any conflicts, uprisings and social tensions just seem to happen, without being explained, so that at a later stage they can be silenced. Accordingly, from this perspective, Photomed's founders, Heullant and Sérénon, place the Mediterranean at the geographic centre of human activity, in a region that, since antiquity, has revealed itself as «the melting pot of our civilization», extended over «three continents, Africa, the cradle of humanity, a gigantic Asia, which today forms the economic power of the world and a “small” Europe»<sup>21</sup>.

The Mare Nostrum model of representation is strongly opposed to the reality of the recent history of the Mediterranean: the events not accounted for by this definition include the consequences of the Arab Uprisings, and ISIS attacks, the civil war in Syria, the millions of refugees to the region, the terrorist attacks, as well as the economic crisis that continues to torment Italy, Portugal, Spain and Greece. The organizers of the festival dedicate only two phrases to these events, seeking to overlook them. According to them, the purpose of the festival is to offer to every visitor a moment of evasion, poetry and beauty<sup>22</sup>.

Disregarding the Mediterranean's complex polysemic amalgam of political, linguistic, social, cultural and economic sub-systems, the use of the unified Mare Nostrum model in the institutional and theoretical discourse on art reduces the region into an ahistorical, vague and generalized geographical concept. Having its roots in the repudiation of the «grand narratives»<sup>23</sup>, the disregard for historicity has been apparent since the 1980s in exhibitions that abandon the traditional chronological arrangements, a trend summarized by Deborah Meijers in what she names as «ahistorical exhibitions»<sup>24</sup>. In this same line, reducing geographical regions to abstract concepts with generalized features has been a common practice in art events and biennials over the last decades. Some examples of these can be found in Dak'art, the biennial on African art in Senegal since 1992<sup>25</sup>, the Guangzhou Triennial that was to incorporate the Asia Biennial in 2015<sup>26</sup>, and the Cosmopolis biennale on Balkan Art, the sole edition of which took place in Thessaloniki in 2004<sup>27</sup>. Photomed falls easily into the long tradition of art events and exhibitions dedicated to the Mediterranean region, such as the Mediterraneana, the Biennial of Young Artists from European and Mediterranean<sup>28</sup>, the Mediterranean Biennale of contemporary art<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.six-fours.com/photomed-les-fondateurs.html> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.2e-bureau.com/03\\_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/DP\\_PHOTOMED\\_2013\\_frBD.pdf](http://www.2e-bureau.com/03_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/DP_PHOTOMED_2013_frBD.pdf) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>23</sup> Lyotard J.F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis, 1984. P. 14–17.

<sup>24</sup> Meijers D.J. *The Museum and the Ahistorical Exhibition // Thinking about exhibitions*. Ed. by B. Ferguson, R. Greenberg, S. Nairne. London; New York, 1996. P. 5–14.

<sup>25</sup> <http://biennaledakar.org/2016> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>26</sup> [http://asiabiennial.gdmoa.org/home/Exhibition\\_information/Exhibition\\_2014/13/en/](http://asiabiennial.gdmoa.org/home/Exhibition_information/Exhibition_2014/13/en/) (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>27</sup> Cârnelci M. *Cosmopolis— a Balkan Experience // Third Text*. 2007. Vol. 21 (2). P. 154–161.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.bjcem.org/> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.mediterraneanbiennale.com/en/> (last visit 13.12.2017).

Having established Photomed's perspective on the Mediterranean, I will show how the event's institutional discourse has developed. In particular, I investigate the concept of photography that is propagated in Photomed's discourse, and the iconography chosen to present this discourse.

### **Photography: a «universal language» and a «Mediterranean» medium**

Regarding the medium as the second element of the festival's identity, the power of photography constitutes a concept that is often repeated in Photomed's institutional discourse. Hence, Heullant and Sérénon even proclaim their belief in photography's power to surpass conflict arguing that «art and the photographic medium in particular is a means to go beyond the limits imposed by partisan stakes». They also declare that they are «decisively optimistic» and committed to contribute «no matter how limited this contribution is, to the designation of a better Mediterranean future»<sup>30</sup>.

Photography's power derives from the view of the medium as «a universal language par excellence», which can «promote the diversity and richness of Mediterranean cultures, but also to bring people together, to create common interests and to promote exchanges on the issues of this region of the world»<sup>31</sup>. It is this flexible «universal language» that, according to Heullant, «allows everyone to form their own idea of the representation that the creator wished through the prism of their own culture»<sup>32</sup>.

The discourse that treats photography as a universal language, as a global visual means of communication has the potential to overcome barriers of nation, language and illiteracy. The discourse can be traced to the immediate decades after World War II, within the framework of postwar reconstruction. Interwoven with the objectives of organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)<sup>33</sup> or the Fédération internationale de l'art photographique (FIAP)<sup>34</sup>, and exhibitions such as the renowned *The Family of Man*, the ideological scheme of photography as a universal language was instrumentalised to support the apolitical narrative of the postwar liberal consensus<sup>35</sup>.

In the postwar utopian demand for peace and mutual understanding between peoples, photography assumed a humanist role as a means of communication that could overcome any obstacles of nation, class, or race. This view, so vague, abstract and apolitical in stance, was in fact highly charged; it was institutionalized by the US government and the Western Allies as an ideological concept representative of the free society of the West and in stark contrast to the cultural policies of the Soviet Union<sup>36</sup>. Under the pretext of photography's

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.2e-bureau.com/03\\_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/DP\\_PHOTOMED\\_2013\\_frBD.pdf](http://www.2e-bureau.com/03_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/DP_PHOTOMED_2013_frBD.pdf) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.six-fours.com/photomed-les-fondateurs.html> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>32</sup> <http://photomedliban.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Dossier-de-Presse-Photomed-2015.pdf> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>33</sup> *Allbeson T.* Photographic Diplomacy in the Postwar World: Unesco and the Conception of Photography as a Universal Language, 1946–1956 // *Modern Intellectual History*. 2015. Vol. 12 (2). P. 383–415.

<sup>34</sup> *Tifentale A.* The Misunderstood «Universal Language» of Photography. Summary of unpublished paper presented at the conference Art, Institutions, and Internationalism: 1933–1966 in New York City, March 7, 2017 // <http://www.alisetifentale.net/article-archive/2017/3/2/the-misunderstood-universal-language-of-photography> (last visit 12.12.2017).

<sup>35</sup> *Sekula A.* Traffic in photographs // *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*. Halifax, 1984. P. 90–91.

<sup>36</sup> *Scott-Smith G.* The politics of apolitical culture. London; New York, 2002. P. 1–2.

universality, a Western or Euro-centric dimension can be traced in the use of the medium, in which the prewar history of colonialism, and also, the postwar dominance of transatlantic nations in the field of cultural production is always present<sup>37</sup>. Founded in a widely-held belief that photography has the ability to communicate across boundaries of language and nation, Photomed's universal language of Mediterranean appears as a descendant of the postwar discourse on liberal consensus, aspiring to promote the diversity and the richness of the cultures in the Mediterranean<sup>38</sup>.

Pertinent to the Euro-centric dimension of photography's universality is the tendency traced in Photomed's discourse that seeks to ascribe a Mediterranean identity to the photographic medium itself. «Photography owes a lot to the Mediterranean», Photomed's organisers confessed<sup>39</sup>, reminding us of Fontcuberta's claim that photography is a purely Mediterranean invention, a view he based on other thinkers such as Vilém Flusser and Nelly Schnaith<sup>40</sup>. Hence, on the official site of the Municipality of Sanary, one of institutions that co-organise Photomed, the festival is described as a: return to the roots in a basin that saw the very term photography being born long before technology and materials could permit it. Photographein: «writing with light, as the Greeks understood that the sun could draw shapes solely by exposure to its rays»<sup>41</sup>.

The Mediterranean basin appears as a cradle of photography, not just a cradle of civilization. Within the framework of the attempt to prove the Mediterranean origin of the photographic medium, the writers of the festival's publicity material exposed a historical inaccuracy; they ascribed the use of the constructed term «photographein» to the ancient Greeks. Photomed's discourse not only ignores the widely held view that the term photography constituted a mid-19th century neologism, likely used for the first time by Lord John Herschel<sup>42</sup>. It also disregards the fact that photography as a conception has an identifiable historical and cultural specificity. As Geoffrey Batchen argues, it only became possible to think of «photography» at a specific conjuncture around 1800 when the long history of different kinds of photo-experiments permitted and the desire to fix the image of the camera obscura emerged<sup>43</sup>.

### **In the service of the Union for the Mediterranean: Photomed's reassuring iconography**

What would be the photographic production chosen to present the discourse of photography used by the festival? Highly diversified in terms of style, techniques and genres, the photographs chosen for the exhibitions of the Photomed festival do not follow a single style. Documentary coexists with conceptual photography and poetic expressions; unmanipulated «straight» photography with digitally altered images. The only commonality to the images is their anodyne and reassuring iconography, as most of the photographs selected portray issues that avoid war, uprisings and social tensions that have troubled the countries of the region in recent years.

<sup>37</sup> *Allbeson T.* Photographic Diplomacy in the Postwar World. P. 410.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.six-fours.com/photomed-les-fondateurs.html> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.six-fours.com/photomed-les-fondateurs.html> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>40</sup> *Fontcuberta J.* Mediterranean Photography // European Photography. 1984. Vol. 5 (4). P. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Normand G.* Festival Photomed du 27 mai au 12 juin 2011. <http://www.bandol.eu/festival-photomed-du-27-mai-au-12-juin-2011.html> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>42</sup> *Rosenblum N.* World History of Photography. New York; London; Paris, 1997. P. 27.

<sup>43</sup> *Batchen G.* Burning with desire. Cambridge, MAS; London, 1997. P. 52–53.

The texts that accompany the images mobilise an accordingly reassuring discourse. Hence, the poetic black-and-white landscapes of Martine Voyer, for example, are addressed as forming part of an «atemporal» universe that is «inhabited by legends, myths and dreamy characters». Her images showcase «the Mare Nostrum without any make up», «from the glory of the past to the dynamism of the present»<sup>44</sup>. Similarly treated are Nick Hannes's colored photographs of banal tourist destinations, such as beaches or seaside canteens. Philippe Séréon, who signs the short text on Hannes's work, contextualizes the images first within the discourse of the timeless «sea in the centre of Earth». This is an allusion to the Greek definition of the term «Mesogeios», a sea that over the centuries has been the «cradle of the monotheist religions». Nevertheless, Séréon goes on to mention the tourist explosion of the region, as well as to make a short, but reassuring mention of the recent refugee crisis: «Historically a barrier of the Fortress Europe, Mare Nostrum is not any more an obstacle to refugees coming in great numbers from countries in war»<sup>45</sup>.

Sometimes there is a contradiction between what the viewer sees in the pictures and what their accompanying text implies. A typical example of this discrepancy can be traced in the way Massimo Vitali's large colored photographs of beaches by are addressed. Vitali's alienated views of overcrowded and banal Mediterranean beaches at first glance may point to a critical approach to the triviality of the Mediterranean tourist landscape. However, in Photomed's press kit Vitali's beaches are presented as the result of his vision that is a vision «of a Mediterranean deeply anchored in a culture that, since the Renaissance, cultivates the beautiful and the sensitive»<sup>46</sup>.

Although quite striking when taking into account the recent turmoil in the Mediterranean, the reassuring iconography and discourse of the texts can be explained if examined within the institutional framework of the festival. The institutions that organise the Photomed festival include, among others, Conseil Culturel de l'Union pour la Méditerranée (*Cultural Council of the Union for the Mediterranean*), an institution founded within the framework of the Union pour la Méditerranée (Union for Mediterranean) in 2008. The Union pour la Méditerranée was established a result of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean held in July 2008<sup>47</sup>. Initially, as President Nicolas Sarkozy's press conferences and speeches during his election campaign reveal, a new «Mediterranean Union» was conceived as an institution outside the framework of the European Union, which would only consist of coastal countries of the Mediterranean<sup>48</sup>. It may be assumed that France would informally have a kind of a «leading» role in the Union, not only due to its power, but also due to its recent colonial past in the Arab Mediterranean countries. The initiative of the French President encountered criticism at the highest levels of the European Union. The creation of a parallel organisation to the European Union was greeted with suspicion by the Northern, non-Mediterranean associates of the European Union, especially Germany. It was considered that the establishment of a «Union for the Mediterranean» would overlap, and thus, challenge existing EU policies in the region, summarized in the

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.2e-bureau.com/01\\_actu/plus\\_infos/DPresse\\_PHOTOMED\\_2012\\_UK.pdf](http://www.2e-bureau.com/01_actu/plus_infos/DPresse_PHOTOMED_2012_UK.pdf) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.2e-bureau.com/03\\_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/dp\\_PHOTOMED\\_2016\\_WEBfr.pdf](http://www.2e-bureau.com/03_culture/photomed/media/Dossier%20de%20presse/dp_PHOTOMED_2016_WEBfr.pdf) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.2e-bureau.com/01\\_actu/plus\\_infos/DPresse\\_PHOTOMED\\_2012\\_UK.pdf](http://www.2e-bureau.com/01_actu/plus_infos/DPresse_PHOTOMED_2012_UK.pdf) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>47</sup> <http://ufmsecretariat.org/history/> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>48</sup> Emerson M. Making sense of Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean // Centre for European Policy Studies. 2008. Vol. 155. P. 1. <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/making-sense-sarkozys-union-mediterranean> (last visit 12.12.2017).



Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or «Barcelona Process»<sup>49,50</sup>. The eventually agreed upon solution was a modest upgrading and re-branding of the Euro-med Partnership policies, still rooted firmly in an EU context and involving all EU member states<sup>51</sup>. A re-branding though that still involved few fields of interest, such as youth employability, woman's empowerment, and sustainable development. This idea gradually lost its appeal, but left its mark on organizations such as the Photomed, as Phillippe Heullant regretfully admits in his interviews<sup>52</sup>.

Photomed's reassuring discourse on Mediterranean photography seems to reflect the aspiration of Sarkozy's France to emerge as a dominant Mediterranean power. An heir of the Mare Nostrum model of the Roman era, the Photomed's discourse is promoted mostly in its Euro-Mediterranean dimension, ignoring that the Mediterranean is not only a broad geographical reference, but also, an ever changing construct, a constellation of socio-political and economic entities. Thus, in this Euro-centric framework, the reinvention of the myth of the unified Mediterranean functions as a cultural «excuse» for the European attempt to politically and financially invasion in the Middle East. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld was one of the first to highlight that «Mediterraneanism» as a discourse shares similarities with Orientalism, in the sense that Edward Said has given to the term. Namely, Mediterraneanism is a discourse that reflects the power relations between authoritative Western (neo)colonial powers and the Mediterranean people<sup>53</sup>.

To sum up, in Photomed's discourse the Mediterranean is not only the cradle of civilization, but also the cradle of photography. The Mediterranean identity ascribed to the medium «legitimizes» the festival's foundation itself: indicatively, the event's institutional discourse resorts to trace the origin of the term photography in the ancient Greeks, so as to consolidate itself. Integrating photography within the hegemonic «Western» canon of the modes of representation means that the medium is addressed only in its Euro-centric dimension. The medium's Euro-centrism also seems to inform the notion of photography as a universal language. A conceptual construct of the liberal «free world» societies of the West in the immediate

<sup>49</sup> Established in 1995, the Barcelona Process was a unique and ambitious initiative of the European Union to strengthen its relations with the countries in the Mashreq and Maghreb regions. The objectives of the Partnership included: the creation of common area of peace and stability, the reinforcement economic and financial partnerships and last, the encouragement of understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies. The policies of the EuroMediterranean Partnership thinned out with the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, when a struggle over the priority attached to Mediterranean policy emerged. In the end, the EU decided to integrate the Mediterranean issues into a broader European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), of which the Mediterranean and Eastern partnerships would be the twin pillars: *Teasdale A.* Union for Mediterranean (UfM) // *The Penguin Companion to European Union*. Additional website entry. [http://penguincompaniontoeu.com/additional\\_entries/union-for-the-mediterranean-ufm](http://penguincompaniontoeu.com/additional_entries/union-for-the-mediterranean-ufm) (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>50</sup> *Schäfer I.* The Cultural Dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: A Critical Review of the First Decade of Intercultural Cooperation // *History and Anthropology*. 2007. Vol. 18 (3). P. 334.

<sup>51</sup> *Teasdale A.* Union for Mediterranean (UfM) // [http://penguincompaniontoeu.com/additional\\_entries/union-for-the-mediterranean-ufm](http://penguincompaniontoeu.com/additional_entries/union-for-the-mediterranean-ufm) (last visit 13.12.2017); *Emerson M.* Making sense of Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean. <https://www.ceps.eu/system/files/book/1624.pdf> (last visit 13.12.2017); *Bicchi F.* The Union for the Mediterranean: Continuity or Change in Euro-Mediterranean Relations? // *Mediterranean Politics*. 2011. Vol. 16 (1). P. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Hadjithomas Mehanna T.* Photomed: Plus qu'un Festival photo, un véritable label de partage // *Tamyras*, 15.01.2014. <http://tamyras.com/emotions/photomed-plus-quun-festival-photo-un-veritable-label-de-partage/> (last visit 13.12.2017).

<sup>53</sup> *Herzfeld M.*: 1) Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for everything from epistemology to eating // *Rethinking the Mediterranean*. Ed. by W.V. Harris. Oxford; New York, 2005. P. 48; 2) The Horns of the Mediterraneanist Dilemma // *American Ethnologist*. 1984. Vol. 11. P. 439–454.

decades after World War II, photography's concept as a universal language is promoted as an unmediated global means of communication that can surpass any obstacles of race, nation or class. Ostensibly apolitical, the photography's universality becomes instrumentalised so as to enforce Western consensus in the countries of the so-called «free world» and their protégés. Photomed's institutional discourse seems to be reminiscent of this discursive scheme. It mobilizes the notion of photography as a «universal» language of images to communicate the Roman-originated model of a unified and tranquil Mare Nostrum, a model that is deprived of its historical contextualization. The ahistorical model of Mare Nostrum is illustrated through an anodyne iconography of the photographs displayed in Photomed, which choose reassuring Mediterranean themes, such as «eternal» poetic landscapes or eroticized Middle Eastern and North African cityscapes. That is a universal photographic language, an ahistorical discursive model and a reassuring iconography, all employed by the Photomed, revealing the aspirations of a neo-colonial policy of economic infiltration launched by France to the Maghreb and the Middle East.

### Photomed goes East

The six editions and growing prominence of Photomed over the years have confirmed the festival's success. This can be discerned in the festival's extension in 2014, when a second version, Photomed Liban, was launched to take place every January in Beirut. According to Philippe Heullant, in Lebanon «a new photographic scene has developed». It is a new photographic production that, as he hastens to clarify, does not comprise «the great photographers that have covered the war conflicts in Lebanon»<sup>54</sup>. It is the same model that is followed: the photography promoted by Photomed Liban steers clear of all real historical incidents, insisting on the ahistorical model of a timeless Mediterranean.

Likewise, Photomed Liban's discourse avoids all reference to Lebanon's recent and bloodied history, the impending danger of a civil or national conflict, or the refugee crisis that plagues the country<sup>55</sup>. The festival's discourse persists in treating photography as the universal language that can cultivate dialogue. Typically, Jean-Luc Monterosso, also artistic director of this event, envisions Photomed Liban «as a festival of human dimensions, where people meet, exchange, fraternize»<sup>56</sup>. For Heullant, «Culture can play a key role in counter-extremism and can promote the intercultural dialogue stimulated through photography. It can help raise and maintain common values against intolerance». The festival's main objective, he continues, is «to promote a positive image and debate in the Mediterranean region»<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.agendaculturel.com/Art\\_Le\\_Festival\\_Photomed\\_s\\_invite\\_a\\_Beyrouth\\_Jean+Luc+Monterosso\\_et\\_Philippe+Heullant](http://www.agendaculturel.com/Art_Le_Festival_Photomed_s_invite_a_Beyrouth_Jean+Luc+Monterosso_et_Philippe+Heullant) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>55</sup> Since its independence in 1941 Lebanon has often been at the centre of conflicts in the region, not only because of its borders with Syria and Israel, but also because of its numerous communities that make up a uniquely complex state structure. Thus, today the country's main population groups are Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Christians and Druze. A fifteen-year civil war tormented Lebanon from 1975 until 1990, in which most of the neighbouring powers got implicated. Today Lebanon has to address the crucial need of handling the war in Syria. Suicide bombings, clashes at the Syrian border and political assassinations place Lebanon in the eye of the hurricane. The number of registered Syrian refugees has long surpassed one million, which corresponds to a quarter of Lebanon's permanent population, and thus placing it in the first position as the country with the highest refugee density per-capita in the world. The effects in the country's economy and public infrastructure have beset the country.

<sup>56</sup> [http://www.agendaculturel.com/Art\\_Le\\_Festival\\_Photomed\\_s\\_invite\\_a\\_Beyrouth\\_Jean+Luc+Monterosso\\_et\\_Philippe+Heullant](http://www.agendaculturel.com/Art_Le_Festival_Photomed_s_invite_a_Beyrouth_Jean+Luc+Monterosso_et_Philippe+Heullant) (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>57</sup> <http://photomedliban.com/en/announcement-of-the-3rd-edition-of-photomed-liban/> (last visit 14.12.2017).

What then is this «positive» photographic production that is capable of opposing extremism? Of special importance to the program of the 2016 edition is the exhibition of Édouard Boubat's (1923–1999) *Mediterraneo* series. The series includes photos taken by the photographer in the 1950s and 1960s. Black-and-white poetic photographs of children playing next to the sea, old seaside cities immersed in light and romantic portraits of young women in early cosmopolitan beach resorts form the majority of Boubat's views. In the text accompanying the exhibition, Boubat's image of the Mediterranean is presented as «the place of all origins» without having though anything archaeological about it; it is the place where «the sea and the sky have no time for passing fancies, capturing the youthful beauties of yesteryear to confer upon them a kind of eternity with Homeric or Hesiodian overtones». And the secret of this alchemy, the text concludes, is «an incomparable light, whose interplay and presence the photographer relentlessly pursues»<sup>58</sup>.

Sun, light, sea, centuries-long history. The nostalgic curatorial discourse of an atemporal peaceful Mediterranean seems to be repeated in most of the exhibitions selected for the festival in Beirut. Hence, in the colored street photography of Karim Sakr, Lebanon is presented as highly diverse; taxi drivers, open air markets, colors, tastes, and forms seek to offer an image of an exoticised country. In her large-format colored Beirutopia series, Randa Mirza captures the portrait of a city, which after the end of the civil war in 1990, is seeking to renew its cosmopolitan myth at the crossroads of East and West. Her sublime cityscapes present Beirut as a modern metropolis of the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, the discourse of appeasement endorsed by Photomed takes on new implications when contextualized within the institutional framework of the festival's partners that is the Office of Tourism of Lebanon in Paris and the Byblos Bank. The Byblos is among Lebanon's most significant banks, which during the last fifteen years has been extended by founding branches in countries like Syria, Iraq, Soudan and Armenia. Byblos Bank has lately invested in the field of tourism, sharing thus the interests of the Office of Tourism of Lebanon in Paris, its co-organiser of Photomed Liban.

Since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, expectations have been expressed that the revival of the Lebanon's pre-war tourism industry might lead the way to economic recovery<sup>59</sup>. These aspirations reached their highest in 2010 when tourism corresponded to a fifth of Lebanon's economic output. However, the eruption of the civil war in Syria and the associated reappearance of sectarian tensions in Lebanon have severely shaken the industry and dissipated hopes of a return to the cosmopolitan prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s. The discourse of reassurance endorsed by Photomed implies Lebanon's, Europe's, even the West's in general, wish to disregard the political and social tensions, and to proceed with a goal of exploiting the region's economic opportunities. Hence, Photomed's reinvention of the myth of

<sup>58</sup> <http://photomedliban.com/en/announcement-of-the-3rd-edition-of-photomed-liban/> (last visit 14.12.2017).

<sup>59</sup> After Lebanon's independence, tourism has evolved into a major source of income for the country. Integrated in the discourse of the Phoenician revival, which was propagated by Christian and mainly Maronite intellectuals of the francophile Beirut bourgeoisie, for a period of almost thirty years a new tourism model was established for Lebanon. This new model was best summarized by the notion of «Lebanon, Switzerland of the East». The term occurred in texts by the French writers Lamartine and Gérard de Nerval to refer to the mountainous natural landscape, but soon mobilized to signify the «Lebanese Miracle»: banker of the region, federation of sectarian cantons and a country that exploits its natural beauty in tourism, see: *Traboulsi. F. A History of Modern Lebanon*. London; Ann Arbor, 2007. P. 92. This success story was violently interrupted when the civil war broke out in 1975.

the Mediterranean is indicative of Mediterraneanism's neocolonial discourse of the recent decades. It is a discourse with a rhetoric that aspires to serve as a cultural «excuse» for the European and, more likely in this case, the French attempt for political and financial infiltration in the Middle East.

### **Conclusion: towards a Euro-Mediterranean identity**

«Always historicise!» Fredric Jameson's famous imperative<sup>60</sup> seems to emphasize the significance of historicisation for the interpretation of cultural production. This historicisation necessarily starts by disclosing the role that economic factors play in shaping cultural production.

Hence, seeking to historicise the discourse developed within the Photomed festivals, one has to inscribe it within the broader exhibition paradigm of the last decades. As already mentioned, this exhibition paradigm favors a tendency for «ahistorical exhibitions»<sup>61</sup> that often reduce geographical regions to abstract concepts with generalized features. It is a practice that is largely interrelated with the development of post-colonial theories on art, that seeks to bring into focus regions that are outside the Western narrative.

However, this brought with it, the direct or indirect implication of institutions related with capital investments<sup>62</sup>. The method and praxis of neocolonialism lies in its guise to internally replicate the European and Western propagation of policies that establish their socio-economic and political dominance in areas, which used to be former colonies. Culture and art in particular has a role to play in this power relation game, a role that prima facie is not apparent; it forms the disguise under which economic control is achieved, actually the «embellishment» that renders a region attractive for further capital investments and economic exploitation.

Understood within the context of neocolonial policies, the discourse of the Photomed festivals reinvents the Mediterranean myth. This ahistorical, vague and almost mythical concept of the Mediterranean descends from the *Mare Nostrum* of the Roman era when a common culture developed in the Mediterranean basin, and continued uninterrupted for centuries. This model of a unified and ever peaceful Mediterranean actually prioritizes the European dimension of the Mediterranean. It disregards the fact the region constitutes an ever changing construct, a constellation of multiple socio-political and economic entities. Immersed in its imaginative endless unity of landscape, people, traditions, the Mediterranean appears as something uniquely positive, while any fractures, or political, social and cultural tensions agitating the region are silenced and, thus, appeased.

Placed within the framework set by researchers such as Michael Herzfeld, the discourse of the Photomed festivals appropriates the power relations traced in neocolonial policies of EU countries regarding the Mediterranean region. Hence, Photomed's «Mediterraneanism» is launched in the line of the policies of EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership adopted in the mid-1990<sup>th</sup>. According to Isabel Schäfer, there is an ambiguous logic in these policies. On the one hand, the EU prioritises the invention of a common Euro-Mediterranean identity. As no equivalent institutionalised counterpart exists outside the EU, either economically, politically or on the level of cultural cooperation, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership emerges as the only institution dealing with relations in the region. In other words, the Partnership forms the result of the EU's projection of the EU policies onto the Mediterranean space. On the other

<sup>60</sup> *Jameson F.* The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. Ithaca, New York, 1981. P. 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Meijers D.J.* The Museum and the Ahistorical Exhibition. P. 5–14.

<sup>62</sup> *Avgita L.* 4th Biennale of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki. Everywhere but now // *Istoria tis technis*. 2014. Vol. 2. P. 168–176. (in Greek).

hand, according to Schäfer again, EU's Mediterranean policy seeks delimit the south and the east of the Mediterranean as an «antechamber» to Europe<sup>63</sup>. And it is certainly this second tendency that distinguished the recent EU policies treating the recent refugee crisis that followed the War in Syria.

A descendant of the European Union's earlier policies, the discourse of the Photomed festival is inscribed within the expectations of the Union for the Mediterranean. Although never realized, at least as they were envisioned by France's foreign policy, the aspirations for a «Mediterranean unity», which prevails over any «political, social, and religious upheavals»<sup>64</sup> informs Photomed's discourse.

Photomed's discourse activates the concept of photography as a «universal» language of images par excellence, over and above any interpretation and explication of the complexity of the medium and the region; the abstract and anti-historical model of Mare Nostrum and an accordingly anodyne iconography. This apparently apolitical discourse is instrumentalised to serve the neocolonial policy of economic invasion of France to the Maghreb and the Middle East, and to reveal its leading role as a dominant Mediterranean power. In its Lebanese version, this same discourse of Mediterranean unity seeks to designate a peaceful Mediterranean Lebanon. This same Lebanon faces the neighbouring Syrian conflict and the subsequent refugee crisis as a geopolitical event deprived of any causality. It effectively overlooks all diversity as a means to reestablish Lebanon's status as a tourist and economic paradise.

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<sup>63</sup> Schäfer I. The Cultural Dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: A Critical Review of the First Decade of Intercultural Cooperation // *History and Anthropology*. 2007. Vol. 18 (3). P. 337.

<sup>64</sup> <http://cdn.photomedliban.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Press-Kit-Photomed-2017.pdf> (last visit 14.12.2017).

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