

Call for Papers

Horizons of Uncertainty: Early Modern Storms and Obscured Vision

Conference date: **Friday, January 28, 2028**

Place: William Andrews Memorial Clark Library, University of California, Los Angeles



For early moderns, the storm was not merely a meteorological crisis but an ontological one. As maritime expansion pushed European vessels into the volatile waters of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the “tempest” became a central trope for the limits of human agency and, more crucially, the failure of human sight. We are interested in how the vanishing of the horizon – the navigator’s vital visual tool – became a site of profound anxiety. From the treacherous “Gulph of Lyons” to the vast, thick mists of the North Atlantic, the early modern storm was defined by the sudden erasure of the visual field. Tropes of the “hidden rock” or “shrouded coast” serve as metaphors for the inherent anxieties of maritime journeys – the fear that the world was becoming larger even as it became less visible. A storm did not just destroy ships; it dismantled the illusion of a transparent world, leaving in its wake a new kind of modern subject defined by the necessity of navigating through darkness. In this process, the storm evolved from a symbolic backdrop into a laboratory for atmospheric optics and epistemic doubt. Inland, phenomena such as alpine snows or freezing lagoons likewise disrupted sensory experiences with their material and optical properties; these events emerge

as barometers of transformation, recording shifting weather patterns, semantic volatility, and the porous contours of perception.

This one-day conference explores the intersection of early modern meteorology, sensory history, and the aesthetics of obscured vision, tracing the transition from providential readings of storms to a more skeptical empiricism. Bringing together scholars working across the histories of science and art, literary and performance studies, climate studies, and the blue humanities, the conference asks how storms – as more-than-human forces resistant to easy measurement, quantification, and control – press against disciplinary boundaries while preserving the specificity of different fields, as well as how they might foreground debates around climate change and early modern experiences. We invite papers addressing different geographical and cultural contexts to investigate how early moderns reported on storms, grappled with their impacts, and described transformative climate events in artistic and literary forms.

Potential paper topics:

- Sea mists, blinding spray, and snowstorms destabilizing the certainty of perspectival vision
- Cartographic failure
- Comparative approaches that bridge the Atlantic “Open Ocean” and the Mediterranean “Closed Sea”
- Atmospheric optics and realism: scientific and artistic interest in the scattering of light, density of air, and the rendering of “thick weather”
- The vanishing horizon: the “clouding” of sea-lanes and anxieties over a globalized, unreadable world
- Geographies of obscurity: the Atlantic “gray,” Mediterranean *sciaregni* (storm-clouds), and the perils of the scoglio (hidden rock)
- The storm as an immersive sensory environment and the theatrical staging of atmospheric phenomena
- Beyond the ocular: tactile and auditory reckoning across oceans, waterways, and alpine terrains.

Please submit a 200-word maximum abstract for a 15-minutes paper, and brief CV, by May 15, 2027, to:

Bronwen Wilson, UCLA, bwilson@humnet.ucla.edu

Elisa Antonietta Daniele, Independent Scholar, elisa.antoniettadaniele@gmail.com

Francesca Toffolo, Independent Scholar, ftoffolo1@gmail.com

Notification of acceptance by May 31, 2027.

Economy travel and accommodations for two nights (3 nights for international participants) will be covered by the Clark Research Center. Participants will receive an official letter from the Clark confirming travel details.

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