

In/Visibilities: Materiality, Practice, and Representation in Energy History

Annual Conference of the *Gesellschaft für Technikgeschichte* (gtg) 2026

LWL Museum Zeche Zollern (Zollern Colliery), Dortmund, Germany, 7–9 May 2026

Mines, coal cellars, pipelines, server farms and coffee machines – these are all part of complex energy networks that shape people’s political, economic and cultural activities. Energy sources, their infrastructures and forms of use, energy landscapes and linguistic images of energy shape the material and cultural conditions of human life, are historically changeable, and arise from the interactions between people and the environment.

In recognition of these connections, energy humanities has recently established itself as a dynamic field between the humanities and social sciences that examines energy in its material, political, cultural, ecological and technological forms. Whether energy history has the potential to become an independent historical sub-discipline and what consequences this would have for the history of technology or environmental history is the subject of current debate (Graf 2023).

All of this has prompted the *Gesellschaft für Technikgeschichte* (gtg) to focus its 2026 annual conference on the tension between the visibility and invisibility of energy, in collaboration with the EU Horizon-funded joint project on petrocultures: PITCH (<https://pitch-horizon.eu>). The conditions, contexts and practices of making energy (in)visible generates a broad spectrum of research interventions characterised by local and global perspectives and intense debate. Possible topics include, e.g.:

Energy transitions

Periodisations based on energy sources or patterns of energy production and use are being re-evaluated against the backdrop of current energy debates. Examining the genesis and structure of energy systems often reveals a complex picture; new energy sources did not necessarily replace old ones, but rather multiple forms of use often coexisted (Fressoz 2024). The conference invites critical contributions on periodisations and transitions in energy history. Contributions on pre-industrial or pre-fossil energy systems – for example, in antiquity, the early modern period or in non-European regions – are also invited.

Construction and operation of energy infrastructures

The history of energy infrastructures is always also a social history: their genesis and operation follow not only technical but also political, economic and cultural logics. We are looking for contributions that analyse production, distribution and consumption networks from a historical perspective, addressing issues such as conflicts of interest or government practices. Studies on maintenance, repair, technical accidents, and the often-invisible work of technicians or mechanics are just as welcome as contributions addressing modernisation strategies, deindustrialisation, reindustrialisation, and transnational flows of knowledge and materials. We also invite research showing how gender, working conditions, and environmental factors have influenced the construction, operation, or dismantling of energy infrastructures.

Energy in use: Stories of energy consumption and usage

Energy history is also a social history of everyday technical practices: norms and values determined everyday usage scenarios just as they shaped devices and infrastructures. Contributions may focus on microhistories of the household, studies of small- or large-scale forms of use (schools, factories, hospitals) or analyses of campaigns and regulation (e.g. energy saving, rationing). Particular attention should be paid to marginalised perspectives, as well as how different patterns of use stabilised or changed historical energy regimes.

Energy narratives: art, literature and media history

Energy appears not only physically, but also as images, narratives and sounds. Thus, the petrol station is both an everyday location of petromodernity (Klose/Steininger 2020) and the setting for a film genre of its own: the road movie. How did the media and the arts make energy visible, invisible or symbolically charged? In which images, metaphors and narrative forms was energy negotiated? What role did film, photography, visual arts, literature or soundscapes play in conveying ideas about efficiency, danger, progress or nostalgia? Who produced these representations and what social roles and values did they construct or question? Contributions on visualisation practices, propaganda, popular culture or aesthetic strategies of making things visible and invisible are welcome.

Extraction

Resources are not only the basis for periodisation, they are also an important part of energy history (the age of wood, the atomic age, etc.). The extraction and processing of resources – from logging to lithium mining – has had a profound impact on regions, working conditions and ecosystems. Questions could include: What cultural and legal frameworks regulated (or prevented) raw material extraction? How was extraction linked to global markets, political interests and technical innovations? Who profited from resource flows, and who bore the burdens (e.g. local environmental damage, expropriation or disease)? Central to this theme are studies of conflicts and collective practices (from trade unions to indigenous protests to government measures) as well as remediation processes and memory politics in former mining areas.

Industrial heritage and the fossil fuel era: technology and industrial museums in the context of decarbonisation

The consequences of the “great acceleration” (McNeill/Engelke 2014) – from regional prosperity to global climate change – pose a major challenge for technology and industrial museums, as well as other sites of industrial heritage. These monuments to a high-energy society are increasingly becoming the focus of debates about the ecological and social implications of fossil fuel use, as well as spaces for negotiating questions of historical responsibility and the interrelationships between technology, economy and the environment in the past, present and future. How are museums responding to these challenges and integrating new perspectives – such as those discussed under the term “petrocultures” – into existing narratives? How can objects and intangible knowledge be used to communicate industrial history in the context of climate change? What opportunities and risks do museum formats offer for science communication and collective reflection and action? We invite museological reflections, case studies and contributions on new approaches to communicating energy history.

Submission

The Gesellschaft für Technikgeschichte invites abstracts (max. 300 words in German or English) and CVs (max. 1 page) for individual contributions, sections or – by arrangement – formats other than the traditional presentation. Please send your proposal by 11 January 2026 to: jahrestagung@gtg2026.de

Bibliography:

- Fressoz, Jean-Baptiste: More and more and more. An All-consuming history, Penguin 2024.
- Graf, Rüdiger: Energy History and Histories of Energy, Version: 1, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, 29.08.2023, https://docupedia.de/zg/graf_energy_history_v1_en_2023.
- Klose, Alexander/Benjamin Steininger: Erdöl. Ein Atlas der Petromoderne (Oil: An Atlas of Petro-modernity), Matthes & Seitz 2020.
- McNeill, John Robert/Peter Engelke: The Great Acceleration. An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945, Harvard University Press 2014.