

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Simon Dell. The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary. Photography between France and Africa 1900-1939. Leuven University Press, Leuven 2020. 247 pp. Ill. € 55.00.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3hc9w7b5>

Journal

International Review of Social History, 66(3)

ISSN

0020-8590

Author

Bloom, Peter J

Publication Date

2021-12-01

DOI

10.1017/s0020859021000614

Peer reviewed

least 2.5 billion Mao badges were produced at the time when China's population was about 700 million. Gerth illustrates how Mao badges as political symbols in 1966 quickly became a fashion, gained market value, and ultimately became a commodity for speculation. This did not end until a state crackdown on speculation in 1970–1971, following a comment Mao allegedly made on the military industry's loss of aluminum to badge-making: "Give me back the planes!" Gerth concludes that the Mao badge phenomenon signaled that "the Cultural Revolution did not end capitalism, even momentarily, but rather served as the apotheosis of self-expanding and compulsory consumerism during the Mao era" (p. 228).

This is an unusually well-researched book. Gerth carefully and systematically delineates the multiple layers of consumer activities and state involvement in everyday transactions. He reveals the actual social life that lay beneath the political bombast and ideological rhetoric that so often diverts our attention from the everyday activities of real people.

The belief that consumerism undercuts Communist revolution is based on the notion that, as conventional wisdom has it, consumerism is an integral part of capitalism that is corrosive to revolution. This raises the broad question of the relationship between capitalism, including state capitalism, and consumerism. One may argue that it is debatable that consumerism exists only in capitalist societies or that traces of consumerism in a socialist country can be seen as "unending capitalism". Yet, Mao was obsessed with what he regarded as the imminent danger of "capitalist restoration" in the PRC and fought mightily to prevent it. Lenin's warning that small-scale production produces capitalism "daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale" was frequently quoted in the Mao years to back up both the claim that capitalist restoration lurked just around the corner and the often frenetic policies to thwart its comeback. In an interesting serendipity, what Gerth has found in Mao's China has echoes of what distressed – or, perhaps, terrified – Mao some fifty years ago.

Regardless, Gerth's arguments are supported by an impressive array of source materials (a third of the book consists of notes with source citations), ranging from published works to government documents, newspapers, personal memoirs, and archival materials. Source material on Gerth's subject – consumer culture, material culture, everyday life, etc. – are scattered and fragmentary, and require sharp eyes to identify them and painstaking efforts to gather them. Gerth has done a remarkable job in presenting a work that people interested in consumerism, social history, urban studies, Communist and post-Communist studies, and Mao's China should read.

Hanchao Lu

School of History and Sociology, Georgia Institute of Technology
221 Bobby Dodd Way, Atlanta, GA 30332-0225, United States
E-mail: hanchao.lu@hsoc.gatech.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020859021000602

DELL, SIMON. *The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary. Photography between France and Africa 1900–1939*. Leuven University Press, Leuven 2020. 247 pp. Ill. € 55.00.

Simon Dell's monograph addresses the centrality of portraiture to modeling what he describes as the French colonial imaginary under the Third Republic (1870–1940).

Underlying this focus is a challenge to methods in art history through an emphasis on philosophical ethics. Towards this end, he adapts the thematic of “the other” in the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–1995), particularly *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and explains that he seeks to “[...] divest the other of absolute alterity, produced as a useable other” (p. 22). It is then the production of the other through the colonial imaginary that serves as a through line for the four chapters of the monograph, bookended by an introduction and epilogue, and fifty-eight significant illustrations consisting primarily of photographs. The book proceeds from a consideration of how the French Third Republic crystalized and renewed the revolutionary ethos through the “making of men” called upon to project a vision of Greater France beyond the Hexagon. The 1797 portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley (1746–1805), born in Senegal, but a political figure closely associated with Saint-Domingue (present day Haiti and Dominican Republic), serves as an important starting point for Dell’s address to the portrait as index of the colonial imaginary that began with claims about universality and the rights of man. Revolutionary consciousness foreshadows the emergence of colonial ideology that takes shape in the monograph. Dell points to the iconography of the 1889 Universal Exhibition and the roles played by Albert Sarraut (1872–1962), a key political figure and educational reformer, and Élie Allégret (1865–1940), an influential Protestant Missionary. For Dell, the expansion of the Republican vision found its footing through colonial expansion during this era in the name of education as the shaping of subjectivity. The second chapter examines the expedition to the Congo by André Gide (1869–1951) and Marc Allégret (1900–1973), Élie’s son, who also became Gide’s polyamorous lover. Their expedition not only resulted in Gide’s important travelogue *Voyage au Congo*, but Marc Allégret’s eponymous film that premiered after their return to Paris in 1927. Dell suggests that there is a marked shift in perceptions of otherness buoyed by Gide’s reworking of the travel narrative genre to underscore the brutality of the rubber trade that gave purpose to a voyage that was explicitly undefined at the outset.

The continued shaping of subjectivity through the portrait associated with Gide as writer, his companion Allégret, and their African interlocutors brings into focus a quality of face-to-face interaction, foregrounding the ability to bear witness and establish what Dell describes as an emerging ethical basis for the encounter. In other words, Gide is able to see himself by gaining some limited understanding of his interlocutors. The effect of the shifting perspective that Gide and Allégret developed through their experience in the Congo was evidenced by the reaction of the missionary community to the screening of Allégret’s film. As a response, Gide and Allégret came to emphasize themes of common humanity and reciprocity, as conveyed through Allégret’s photographs of the inhabitants in the region which are included and contribute significantly to the discussion. Dell’s analysis of the photographs describes how each of those portrayed were positioned to perform particular roles within a colonial vocabulary of physical, ethnic, and cultural difference. The “innocent” and the “colonized” enter into a new kind of staging of contingent identity attributions.

The third chapter continues to develop how the presentation of the French colonial context was staged and performed within the context of the 1931 French Colonial Exhibition. It functioned as the clearinghouse, if you will, of colonial iconography during the interwar era. Hubert Lyautey, closely associated with the redesign of the city of Rabat (Morocco) as Governor General, was appointed as commissioner of the exhibition, and his secretary, Marcel Olivier, was directed to edit the significant seven volume *Rapport général* about the sources and context for the exhibition in its aftermath from 1932–1934. This chapter

incorporates significant detail regarding the history of the exhibition, while also addressing photographs taken at the exhibition by the photographers Joseph Blanchet and Roger Parry, who captured the point of view of the many “native” performers who served as part of the living colonial villages scattered throughout the staging grounds in the Bois de Vincennes. This chapter addresses many themes examined in the expansive scholarship about the colonial exhibition. However, Dell seems to be interested in the relationship of the “natives” to their intended performance by reference to the photographic stills of Blanchet and Parry. Sylviane Leprun has considered related issues in her important monograph *Le théâtre des colonies* (1986) without the same focus on photographic iconography. Unfortunately, Dell’s address to these photographic practices and radical intentions, particularly with regard to Parry’s work, remains indeterminate. However, Dell is making the point that the emerging space of colonial humanism conveyed by photography experienced yet another shift in considering how themes of patriarchy and fraternity were under scrutiny from within. The fourth chapter brings together many of the strands mentioned previously by examining the complex situation that emerged in the Cameroonian Grassfields under King Ibrahim Njoya (1860–1933). The transformation of Bamum court culture into a museum was part of a process in which German and French claims are threaded into a discussion of the role of colonial photography as we learn about the emerging position of Mosé Yeyap (c.1895–1941) as Njoya’s rival. The story of Njoya’s exile and his eventual marginalization were to serve what later became the extension of French colonial governance through the edifice of museum culture, marked by the expropriation of cultural artifacts, including the display of Njoya’s thrones at the Musée du Trocadéro in 1935 (becoming the Musée de l’Homme in 1937), two years after his death while in exile in France. This final photographic illustration, picturing Charles Atangana (c.1883–1943), high chief of the Yaoundé-Bané, and his secretary Essomba, illustrates the process of political appropriation as aestheticization of the political artifact (p. 194). The fourth chapter and Epilogue serve as the culmination of a well-considered development of the colonial imaginary as an expansionist ethos grounded in Republican ideals with an ambiguous relationship to an ethical relationship to otherness espoused by Lévinas.

Dell’s emphasis upon portraiture, particularly photographic portraiture, as a rich resource that allows for the inclusion of multiple points of view is of great interest, but it also sidelines underlying photographic representational strategies. That is, just as the travelogues, expeditions, exhibitions, and intrigue surrounding museum cultural monuments were framed performances and staging of one kind, the realist narrative of photographic representation is of another, which could have been more actively interrogated along the way. However, Dell’s point seems to be that we read an ethics into the colonial imaginary and its historical shaping of “native” subjectivity by reconsidering the effects and transformation of revolutionary consciousness into a projective context for reform. This led me to wonder whether we are being led back into ontological arguments about the photographic image by other means, and the extent to which the ethics adapted from Lévinas’s work as a philosopher of Jewish religious texts is the most appropriate starting point for an ethics of art history. Further reference to how Lévinas’s philosophical writing has been adapted by postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy could have been more actively considered. Nonetheless, Dell has accomplished something important that will be of great interest to a readership interested in French colonial history and literature by opening up questions about how the photographic gaze enables an unexpected patchwork of archival sources as evidence for considering the logistics of colonial politics in action. African cultural artifacts of colonial pacification are shown to pass through the bloodstream of French Republican

institutional spaces, and their increasingly ambiguous positioning continues to resonate in spite of and because of arguments allied with calls for repatriation. The ethical question of contending with the construction of otherness bears some resemblance to Lévinas's philosophical approach, but it is more firmly grounded in how the circulation of meanings and arguments about the colonial predicament are staged and exhibited in the photographic record. Dell has made an important contribution largely because the photographs tell much of the story in relation to his descriptive text. I will continue to refer to Dell's discussion of ethics, and the provocative details of the Bamum Cameroonian legacy in future considerations. While the prose is sometimes obtuse in its theoretical aspirations, unraveling the story of the photographs included is a source of ongoing fascination. The reader might start with Atangana in front of the throne of Njoya while visiting the Musée du Trocadero with his secretary, paired with Dell's remarkable discussion of its significance. The level of detail and layers of meaning concerning the French colonial imaginary indirectly reference and go well beyond Roland Barthes's reference to the African youth's salute as the "exemplary figure of French imperialism" appearing on the cover of *Paris-Match* (25 June–2 July 1955) that takes center stage in *Myth Today* (1957).

Peter J. Bloom

Department of Film and Media Studies, University of California
2433 SSMS, Santa Barbara, California 93106-4010, United States

E-mail: pbloom@ucsb.edu

doi:10.1017/S0020859021000614

ZYSIAK, AGATA (*et al.*). *From Cotton and Smoke. Łódź: Industrial City and Discourses of Asynchronous Modernity, 1897–1994*. Columbia University Press, New York [etc.] 2018. 308 pp. Ill. Maps. \$60.00; £47.00.

This volume represents a comprehensive history of the Polish city of Łódź from the end of the nineteenth century to the post-communist transition. Łódź, often dubbed the "Polish Manchester", is an exceptional story amongst Polish towns: it was created during the late but rapid industrialization of the Russian Empire and since then has developed very differently to Polish centres such as Warsaw, Cracow, or Gdańsk. At the same time, it has been a contested place, where nationalism, capitalism, and modernity have been at the centre of contention in both local and national discourses. The authors have made a compelling collective effort to tell the story of Łódź. They focus on four distinct periods of urban development: the decades before 1914, the interwar era, the post-war introduction of Soviet socialism (1945–1949), and the post-communist transition (1989–1994). Thus, they concentrate on times of rapid social and cultural upheaval while backgrounding the period of German occupation during the two world wars (1915–1918; 1939–1945). Methodologically, they use the city as a prism to analyse how urban modernity as well as the rise and the crisis of capitalist production were negotiated in the Polish context.

Łódź's growth started with the rise of the textile industry. Initially, it was more a production hub than a proper city. From the beginning, national minorities – Germans and Jews, but also Russians – were present in Łódź. Many of its large mills were owned by merchants not considered Polish. It faced problems similar to those of other fast-growing industrial