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Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. 224 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1846318849.

Review by Fiona Barclay, University of Stirling.

From the earliest years of France's involvement in Algeria, the visual economy has been central to Western perceptions of the Maghreb. A long and well-established tradition of Orientalist thought depends in large part on the visual images of the Orient and its inhabitants which developed in the nineteenth century thanks to paintings by artists such as Antoine Jean Gros and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and which established conventions which colored the Western imagination. Yet there was nothing realist about these representations. Perpetuated by artists, many of whom had themselves never visited North Africa, representations of the Maghreb assumed a momentum of their own, driven, as Lisa Lowe points out, by the repetition of discursive clichés which came to constitute a form of intertextual shorthand, standing in for the features of the land and its inhabitants, and influencing future conceptions of France's colonies and protectorates.[1]

Visual representations therefore constituted an important element in underpinning the colonial project, and creating the Saidian orient as exotic, at once fascinating and inaccessible. The persistent influence of this colonial tradition is perhaps best exemplified by the afterlives of Delacroix's celebrated painting, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834). Dating from the inception of the colonial relationship between France and Algeria, the painting epitomizes the dynamics of power through the Western (male) gaze penetrating the idealized feminine space, whilst reinforcing the exoticist stereotypes of opulence and languor. In the years since Algerian independence, Delacroix's painting has continued to provide inspiration for a range of artistic works, from Picasso's series of fifteen paintings of the same name, produced during the first months of the Algerian war, and Assia Djebar's 1980 collection of short stories, which juxtaposes colonial past and post-colonial present, to Kamal Dehane's 1992 documentary of the same name.

The influence exerted by French artistic representations of Algeria and its role in contributing to the development of colonial relations, is incontrovertible, and has been well documented. It is perhaps for this reason Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle have, in their recent monograph, chosen not to retrace the development of the Orientalist imagination, but instead examine the wider visual culture which has developed in recent decades, but which has rarely figured in scholarly assessments of Franco-Algerian identities. Their volume sets out to address this absence by tracking "the visual economy of the Franco-Algerian relationship across different periods, from the colonial to the post-colonial" (p. 7), an aim reflected in the structure of the book which is divided into two parts entitled, respectively, "Algerian Pasts in the French Public Sphere," and "Mapping Franco-Algerian Borders in Contemporary Visual Culture." In practice, the colonial representations selected are confined to the latter stages of the colonial project from the 1950s onwards, with the majority being published only after independence. The decision to focus on the developments which have occurred in the last fifty years allows the authors to concentrate on material which has been little studied to date, and to illuminate it with a degree of historical contextualization and theoretical analysis which sets it apart from comparable works such as Mary Vogl's *Picturing the Maghreb* (2003).

The decision to take independence as the *point de départ* has a further corollary, as independence signaled a new and more equal relationship between France and Algeria. Leaving aside debates about neo-colonialism, Algeria's status as a sovereign state leads Welch and McGonagle to read the relationship, following Etienne Balibar, as a single space: "At once an entity which resembles a vast frontier zone of contact, co-mingling and *métissage*, it is also a space with global resonance through the way it highlights the currents of trade and migration symptomatic of the contemporary world" (p. 4). Balibar's approach is a necessary corrective to the more traditional Paris-centric view of French studies, which regarded the Centre as the only proper subject of study. Nonetheless, it may be overstating the case to "question the extent to which France and Algeria could be considered two separate nations" (p. 4). Certainly if, despite the claims of the European population, Algeria under French rule was never fully considered to be French, it might be disingenuous to suggest that the two states are imbricated to the extent that one may not cross *between* them but rather only move amongst or within the tangle of cultural and historical strands which bind them. There are moments in the volume, therefore, when the afterlives of France's colonial project (in putatively creating a single Mediterranean border zone) appear to be amplified whilst ironically, at the same time, the continued influence of the colonial ideology and attitudes apparent in the Orientalist paintings discussed above is neglected. However, such moments are rare: in the main the authors make a compelling case for the centrality of the two nations' shared histories to their development as contemporary nation-states.

The book opens with a relatively brief introduction which, in foregrounding the significance of contemporary events to the Franco-Algerian relationship, sets out the ground on which the volume's broader analysis takes place. The decision to supplement discussion of the pre-planned commemorations of the end of the Algerian war in 2012 with an analysis of the Merah shootings which took place on the anniversary of the ceasefire signals the attention to historical context which characterizes the volume as a whole. The first part of the volume, which consists of three chapters, is dominated by photography. The opening chapter, which examines the increasing number of coffee table colonial-era photobooks by *pièdes-noirs*, reminds us that the complexity of transnational relations defies easy categorization. Photography is often conceived of through its relation to the temporal, offering a record of the vanished moment, but through their discussion of scenes of colonial Algiers, Welch and McGonagle explore the spatialisation of the past and the role which it plays in facilitating the nostalgia which is central to the *pièd-noir* project. As they point out, nostalgia is a mode frequently viewed with suspicion. In contrast, the generosity of their discussion allows an exploration which ultimately proves more productive, all the while remaining conscious of the restaging of colonial power taking place.

Images of the Algerian war are the focus of the second chapter, which examines the work of photographers, including Marc Garanger and Mohamed Kouaci, in documenting the conflict. The ambivalence of Garanger's position as a conscript hostile to the war recording images of both other conscripts and Algerian women is fully explored, as the importance of the photographer's position, highlighted through the very different experience of Kouaci. While it makes reference to films such as *La Guerre sans nom* (1992), the discussion of visual culture might usefully have been extended to include televisual texts, such as *Cinq Colonnes à la une*, which for many in the Hexagon were the primary source of images of the war, and the role of the army's media production service in regulating the images which appeared on television news reports. However, Welch and McGonagle's treatment of the relationship between photography and history will be relevant and valuable to a wide readership. The third chapter looks at the historical work done by photography, and the uses to which it is put, taking the massacre of 17 October 1961 as a case-study. Few events in Franco-Algerian history have been subjected to more sustained analysis in recent years, but Welch and McGonagle make a convincing case for viewing it, and its shifting social significance, in a new light.

The second part of the volume moves to the contemporary period with, as its title suggests, a renewed focus on the spatial. The three chapters encompass a range of visual media, including film, video

installation, press photos and other visual art in their treatment of childhood memories of the war, representations of the Mediterranean, and post-colonial spaces. Consequently there is a less unified feel to the second part of the book and, in the substantial sections on contemporary films, less sense of originality. The chapter on childhood in the Algerian war, for example, offers three solid readings of very different films--*Cartouches gauloises* (2007); *Michou d'Auber* (2007) and *Caché* (2005)--but it fails to land the kind of theoretical punches delivered in the first half of the volume. More successful is the chapter on representations of the Mediterranean. As the authors note, the Mediterranean was central to conceptions of French Algeria, whilst increasingly seas in general have become a subject of interest across academic disciplines in recent years, yet little attention has been paid to the visual representation of the Mediterranean. The chapter addresses this lacuna through a combination of press photographs of the *pied-noir* exodus, as well as documentary and video installation, bringing together a disparate set of texts to produce a wide-ranging picture of the sea in its various social and cultural significations.

The final chapter looks at journeys between the post-colonial spaces of France and Algeria, bringing together a number of films which visualize contemporary moments of contact in order to tease out the implications of viewing France and Algeria as one "thick" border or frontier zone of contact. Many of the films are relatively well known, but by bringing them together the authors succeed in producing a broad picture of contemporary relations, set against the backdrop of the civil conflict in Algeria. The chapter completes the historical review of the five decades of independence, fulfilling the book's aim of exploring how visual culture shapes our understanding of the trans-Mediterranean relationship.

Original and compelling, this book expands the field of Franco-Maghrebi studies, advancing a persuasive argument for the need to include visual culture in analysis of the relationship between France and Algeria, and making an important contribution to our understanding of colonial and postcolonial dynamics.

#### NOTE

[1] Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 2.

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