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Mi Gyung Kim, *The Imagined Empire. Balloon Enlightenments in Revolutionary Europe*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. xxv + 427 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$54.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780822944652.

Response by Mi Gyung Kim, North Carolina State University.

A founding myth for the historical profession, objectivity is supposed to guide the process of historical inquiry and writing.[1] What if, though, the archive contains the words of only a thin slice of the population? How do we represent the people whose voices cannot be discerned from written documents?[2] In recent decades, historians have scrutinized many reasons why the boundary between fact and fiction is compromised in historical writing,[3] as well as in archival representations, the most important being the power differential between the dominant and the dominated.[4] Non-reflexive scholarly works, the “empiricist or realist description” the reviewer calls for, often naturalize dominant (and/or our current) cultural assumptions and worldview under the banner of objectivity. A narrative that conveys a clear, linear progress of European sciences is deliberately “over-determined” by the archive and the standing historiography to perpetuate their self-evident superiority and to expand the scientific-cultural *imperium*. [5]

Writing a cultural history of ballooning in a critical (and anti-imperial) mode posed serious challenges, due to the dated historiography (mostly nineteenth century) and the balloon’s supposedly universal affect in lifting human spirits.[6] In view of these constraints, I chose to define the historical collective as “a spatiotemporal complex of humans and *things* that act in unforeseen ways” (p. xxiv; my added emphasis) to highlight the (real or imagined) flying machine’s movement through time and space as a part of human history. Doing so meant, first, blurring the longstanding historiographical divide between aeronautics and mechanical flying, which allowed me to mobilize the pre-history of mechanical flying for the balloon story. Temporal translations of Ovid’s tale of Icarus, discussed in the Prologue, entitled “Flying through Time,” can help us appreciate the intensity of flying dreams expressed through imaginary inventions and literary characters. Their subversive capacity, most expressively captured in the figure of the “cosmic spectator” (p. xviii), would acquire significant resonance in the Enlightenment experience of spectatorship. The Enlightenment quest for emancipation grew on the classical literature printed throughout the period “to constitute a stable diet and a shared cultural memory for the rapidly growing reading public” (p. xviii).

Second, I had to find different ways of selecting and assessing balloon archives. Although I judiciously sought out major collections (such as the Gimbel collection, the Smithsonian, and

the Bibliothèque nationale de France, for example) and untapped archives (the Tissandier collection, the Huntington Library's *aeronautica* collection, provincial archives, etc.), they mostly contain materials that support the triumphalist narrative of the French/European conquest of the air—an imperial imaginary that also served the needs of social imperialism. Despite its unprecedented size, the balloon crowd does not have a proportionately scaled voice in the archive or in the historiography. In order to interpret this silence [7], I characterize the balloon ascent "as a 'contact zone' between the political, commercial, and educated elite and the lowly people, a space of inward colonization and integration that stabilized an outward discourse of the aerial empire" (p. 112). Instead of accepting the seemingly consensual "public transcript" based on the *Journal de Paris*, Faujas's semi-official publications, and the Montgolfier family archive (on which Charles Gillispie relied almost exclusively)[8], I consciously searched for inconsistencies, or the "hidden transcripts" (the *Nouvelles à la main*, more opinionated weeklies, pamphlets, correspondences, provincial archives, etc.) that have been written out of balloon history.[9]

Given the scarcity of critical literature on ballooning, the pamphlet literature hitherto suppressed in the balloon historiography deserved special handling. Potentially a hundred times larger in contemporary circulation than Grimm's *Correspondance*, pamphlet literature played a significant role in forging the public opinion and its imagined tyranny. By the 1780s, the royal administration had judiciously implemented censorship, a network of spies, and their own pamphleteering to control public opinion. How to control the balloon crowd would have been a matter of serious concern when pamphleteers made a conscious analogy between the balloon's deliverance of humanity from the chain of gravity and the people's potential emancipation from their social chains.

Third, the balloon crowd's historical agency was construed from the French historiography on royal spectacles (rather than by imputing motives to human groups with "consistent political sense" as the reviewer expects). Characterizing the balloon ascent as an "entertainment" and/or an "experiment" in our definition would not capture its agency in the pre-revolutionary context supercharged with human intentions, actions, discourses, and institutions. Theatricality constituted absolutist polity and sociability (the "king-machine" in Jean-Marie Apostolides's definition), as well as resistance to this cultural hegemony. The strength of absolutist "theatrical polity" (pp. 2-3) and its popular reach through "material spectacles" (p. 26) can help us understand why the ancien régime elite looked at a majestic "scientific spectacle" (pp. 10-11) as public theater that could consolidate a "nation" of royal subjects. It also helps explain, ironically, why the proto-revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat deeply admired the intrepid aeronauts and bitterly mourned Pilâtre's fall to death, should we desire documentary "evidence...that attendance was in hope for liberation," as the reviewer does. Satirical pamphlets also indicate a sincere desire for liberation. Material politics involved a broad range of *politiques* without determining their actions or discourses.

How the balloon crowd became a "mass public" is a central facet of this book that could establish the "tenuous, hidden connection between the Enlightenment public and the revolutionary crowd" (p. 8). By characterizing the balloon crowd as a mass public, different from the representative, bourgeois, or plebian public in Jürgen Habermas's temporal classification, I acknowledge the elite effort to conceive an expanded public—which excluded the illiterate and dispossessed—by deploying the existing mechanisms of opinion-making. The balloon crowd differed in size and composition from the audience of science lectures or royal

theaters, however, which made it difficult for the ancien régime elite to gauge and control its political relevance.

In characterizing the balloon as a "people-machine" (pp. 6-7), I meant to capture its liminality (*à la* Victor Turner [10]) and indeterminate agency—designed as an expansive royal spectacle, yet visualizing a nation of citizens, a republican yet non-democratic political imaginary as seen in Mercier's underground bestseller *L'An 2440* (1771). A majestic scientific spectacle brought this elite dream to the mass public, but it did not determine the course of history in subsequent years. In other words, the book is not meant to identify another "cause" of the Terror but to probe the dynamics of a historical collective that includes things and characters beyond human actors at a historical moment when the strengths and the weaknesses of the existing order come into full view.

These interpretive strategies—an archeology of mass silence and a genealogy of the mass public—helped me select relevant materials and compose a somewhat cohesive, if indeterminate, narrative.[11] Constructing an unconventional framework for multiple scholarly audiences in the history of science and technology, science and technology studies, literature, and European history made the interpretive vocabulary ("confusing and infelicitous phrases" according to the reviewer) a necessary evil, but the body retains a narrative form (mostly free of interpretive vocabulary so as to reach an undergraduate audience) in three parts, the first two covering the well-known contour of French ballooning from the Montgolfiers's first public experiment to its spectacular fall from the royal and public grace a year later.

The first three chapters in part one, "Invention in Theatrical Polity," place the invention of the "aerostatic machine" in the ancien régime culture of distinction which fostered systemic "duality of servile existence and chimerical desire" (p. 26); establish hitherto unsuspected connections (between, for example, Parisian material sphere, Rousseauian generation, and imperial geography, among other things); diffuse the myth of their genius; account for their choice of a spectacular novelty over useful machines (hydraulic pumps); configure the journalistic balloon transcript that transformed a humble paper machine into a venerable scientific machine and provincial papermakers into national heroes; excavate suppressed stories such as the rivalry with the hydrogen balloon and the duc de Chartres's (master of French Masonic organizations) popularity campaign; discuss the co-emergent mechanism of national policing; and shore up the apotheosis of Jacques Alexandre Charles, seen as a true philosopher-voyager who would supplant the mythical figure of Columbus. His ascent against royal prohibition validated the crowd's power. These chapters show the balloon's historical agency in mobilizing the crowd and why the ancien régime elite sought to forge hegemonic public opinion on its identity as a scientific spectacle.

The next four chapters in part two, "Philosophical Nation," introduce hidden transcripts to configure multiple perspectives and, most importantly, the ideal of republican monarchy that carried the vision of scientific *imperium*. They contrast the Academy's governing role against extant pamphlets that disrupted the public transcript and against the fluid politics involving airs and the mesmeric fluid to contextualize the scandalous success of Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*. Diverse visions of the nation emerging from the provincial ascents at Lyon, Dijon, and Bordeaux, most notably around the visit of the self-styled philosopher-king Gustav III of Sweden, attest to the exceptionality of Parisian ballooning. In tracing the decline of the balloon fever in 1784, these chapters also expose the limitations of ancien régime institutions in

controlling the balloon crowd when its scientific and technical promise--utility for the public good--failed to materialize.

The political imaginary of republican "nation-empire" that would "guarantee the people's happiness by cultivating useful sciences" and build "a scientific empire without domination" for humanity (p. 293) may be "impossible to see," given the diverse strands of historiography that emphasize the radical Enlightenment and mathematical reason as the essential ideological ingredients of the French Revolution.[12] Republican idealism had a long pedigree in French political discourse, however, which made Fénelon's *Telemachus* an eighteenth-century bestseller. It also became a viable subterranean desire, as seen in Rétif de la Bretonne's *La Découverte australe par un Homme-volant* (1781). The term "nation-empire" captures my realization that the imperial imaginary was an integral part of consolidating the nation-state, as well as the global empire, or that "the nation-state in French elite desire was an imagined empire with plastic boundaries, rather than an imagined community of citizens as the philosophes wished for" (p. 8). Although it will need more work, the term serves to emphasize the role of science in homogenizing and subjugating the colonial subject simultaneously at home and abroad.

If the balloon lost its status as a representative artifact of the (coming) philosophical nation-empire, it still traveled abroad as a marvelous display of French material and scientific civilization. Part three, "Material Empire," takes ballooning beyond French borders with a chapter on British appropriation and two chapters tracing the French aeronaut Jean-Pierre Blanchard's commercial ventures from London (and Dover) to The Hague, Frankfurt, and Hamburg, interspersed with French border towns. While insufficient for a fully comparative history, these diverse settings should at least highlight the unusual features of Parisian ballooning--the heroic stature of the inventors, the public transcript, the convergence of royal and public support, strong police control, the involvement of academic scientists, etc.--in comparison especially with British ballooning which lacked royal, academic, and elite support, while enjoying a more advanced commercial infrastructure and numerous foreign adventurers. Reservation on the part of respectable scientists and media; satirical balloon images and literature; and the Irish Protestants' ballooning claim to nationhood accentuate the rival empire's robust political culture that "could wield the critique for a meaningful reform" (p. 211). In the context of the lost American War, Britons aimed to own the "theoretical invention" of the balloon and to utilize it in their imperial diplomacy (Plate 12; p. 266).

Blanchard's continental itinerary charts an uneven or liminal geography of French cultural empire mapped by the watery routes of transport, the infrastructure of the Grand Tour (e.g. London Hotels), aristocratic (often Masonic) desire, and patriotic resistance. I have noted balloon diplomacy in the revolutionary Dutch Republic, its integrative agency in the French border zone, the imperial aristocracy's enthusiasm at Frankfurt, initial rejections from Vienna and Berlin, Hamburg patriots' resistance, etc. in the hopes that future scholars would take on more detailed studies *without* subscribing to the triumphalist narrative. A scrutiny of cultural/material translations across political and/or linguistic borders could yield a complex topography of Enlightenment-cum-modernity that cannot be reduced to the center-periphery model of integration.

By configuring the exuberant historical moment when the balloon made a spectacular debut, this book is designed to historicize its invention and thereby to tame the objectivist history of

science and technology--that they were inherently rational forces that served to modernize the ancien régime culture and polity--without subscribing to the instrumentalist view of Enlightenment sciences which acquired a strong voice after the World Wars.[13] As the first effort to integrate the balloon affair as a part of French political culture and history, it would sit uneasily in the elaborate revolutionary historiography. It is my sincere hope, however, that future historians of the French Revolution would pay more attention to the initial utopian thread beautifully captured in Mona Ozouf's *Festivals and the French Revolution*. [14] The interpretive "overreach and uncertainty" the reviewer has identified may then bear some fruit by weakening the teleology of the Terror while shoring up the vision of a scientific nation-empire that survived the Revolution to bolster nineteenth-century European empires. Scientific/scholarly *imperium* is the most enduring facet of cultural imperialism.

The press bears no blame for my writing which tends to condense a large amount of information into interpretive sentences. The editor took on a project that would potentially require hundreds of images (reduced to 54 black-and-white and 16 color plates) and the production team managed to produce it at a moderate cost while accommodating my specific demands, including a glossary, an introduction to major collections, and a full bibliography, which should provide a good starting point for future scholars. Instead of using images as self-evident illustrations, often reproduced without captions in history books contrary to eighteenth-century usage, I sought to construct a visual narrative with a frontispiece (with captions and interpretation) for every introduction and chapter to indicate the theme. I would love to know if anybody noticed the neat arrangement.

NOTES

[1] For a critical assessment, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Mi Gyung Kim, "A Historical Atlas of Objectivity," *Modern Intellectual History* 6(2009): 569-596.

[2] Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995).

[3] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies II: writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 1-40.

[4] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[5] Charles C. Gillispie, *Edge of Objectivity: An Essay in the History of Scientific Ideas* (Princeton University Press, 1960). For a counterpoint, see Jason Sharman, *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[6] For a recent example, see Richard Holmes, *Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air* (Penguin Random House, 2014).

[7] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Dorset Press, 1989); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[8] Charles C. Gillispie, *The Montgolfier Brothers and the Invention of Aviation, 1783-1784* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

[9] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[10] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 13-14; idem. *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 28.

[11] Mi Gyung Kim, "Archeology, Genealogy, and Geography of Experimental Philosophy." *Social Studies of Science* 44(2014):150-162.

[12] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and subsequent publications.

[13] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

[14] Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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