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Catherine E. Clark, *Paris and the Cliché of History: The City and Photographs, 1860-1970*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xi + 310 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780190681647; \$72.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780190681659.

Review by H. Hazel Hahn, Seattle University.

Paris and the Cliché of History, the first book to systematically explore the entwined history of Paris and photography over a century, is a captivating and stimulating interdisciplinary work. In the introduction Clark reevaluates the historiography of works on memory and asserts the importance of utilizing photographs and other actual images. She notes that historians of twentieth-century Paris have largely conceived the idea of the city as image metaphorically. A case in point is the highly influential work on memory directed by Pierre Nora, in which “image” frequently refers to a mental image. Positing that “memory” as a category of analysis has become too all-encompassing for the study of cultural object, Clark proposes a new method of analyzing “particular messages embedded in and produced through the reuse of actual photographs” (p. 5), and to use the concept of “historical imagination” instead of “memory.” Clark argues that several new modes of viewing photographs emerged and evolved at particular points in time, marking broad shifts, especially in the twentieth century, in how the Parisian public at large came to view and use photographs for understanding and approaching history. The reader might wonder, then, whether Clark establishes the specificity of the history of Paris in the evolution of such modes of viewing. Her statement that “traumatic and disruptive events in Paris, from war to urban renovations, inspired Parisians to collect pictures as a means of preserving the changing city” (p. 2) might well be applicable to a great number of cities in the world, just substituting “Paris” and “Parisians” with the names and denizens of other cities. However, this is just a starting point of Clark’s arguments, which highlight how particular social, cultural, and material changes in Paris influenced not only what Parisians saw in old and new photographs but also how they began to envision that future citizens would come up with unforeseen ways of viewing photographs. The answer to the question of specificity, then, is a resounding yes. Clark’s focus is really the entanglements of photography and history as two continuously evolving, dynamic fields. At the same time, this approach provides an important point of comparison with other cities’ histories. Clark emphasizes the intellectual, artistic, social, and material aspects of the history of photography including the practices of collecting, archiving, classification, display, and publication. At the same time, an overriding aim of the book is establishing that photographs and how they were interpreted affected people’s perceptions and actions in the world. As a methodological principle Clark highlights the relationships of photographs, conceived as mass-produced objects, with other types of images and texts. To this end she notes that the common meaning of the “cliché” as an

overused idea originated in the late nineteenth century and highlights two earlier meanings having to do with mechanical processes of photography.

The fascinating first chapter begins by unraveling how the extensive urban planning Paris underwent during the Second Empire required a new historical narrative, and also spurred heightened interest in the history of Paris, including preservation efforts through the documentation of the changing city. Municipal historical institutions expanded their historical collections, paving the way for the eventual establishment of the Bibliothèque de la Ville de Paris (BHVP) and the Musée Carnavalet, in which photographs had an increasingly important place. The chapter discusses some of the significant ways in which the material, institutional, and social history of photographs intersected with the history of the preservation and consumption of Paris in images. While it is well known that Charles Marville, official photographer to the City of Paris under the Second Empire, was commissioned to photograph disappearing aspects of Paris, Clark provides a fleshed-out, institutional history of photography as a means of urban preservation. Delving deep into the origins and evolution of aforementioned institutions, Clark traces the practices of various contributors, in particular the curators Georges Cain, Fedor Hoffbauer and the archivist Marcel Poëte. Cain and Hoffbauer favored the visual representation of history simultaneously as scientific and romantic, but the practice of visual reconstruction gradually gave way, by the late nineteenth century, to positivist methods emphasizing the study of original documents and systematic archiving as practiced by Poëte. Here, in probing the tension between science and reverie, fuller definitions and some more examples of “historical reverie” would be helpful. Clark argues that, in addition to—and in spite of—vague ideas of photographs’ evocative powers, increasingly value was placed on the documentary role of photographs, leading the Bibliothèque historique to collect and exhibit photographs more, so that after the major flooding in 1910, the library purchased thousands of photographs and postcards depicting flooded Paris. Ironically, Clark shows that in the same period the collectors who established the Société d’iconographie parisienne for the purpose of classifying pictures of Paris and developing a method for rigorously analyzing “the representation’s correspondence to the reality of things” (p. 41) deemed photographs unsuitable for this purpose, for being too objective and not an art form. The chapter implicitly suggests that the contrasting views of Poëte and other staff at the Bibliothèque historique, on the one hand, and the iconophiles of the Société d’iconographie parisienne, on the other, reveal that photograph’s perceived capacity, or the lack thereof, for evoking the viewer’s imagination—its artistic value contrasted to or associated with the function of “scientific” documentation—remained its primary characteristic and point of contention.

When collected, Clark underlines, photographs tended to be perceived as copies of objects and buildings that in turn allowed artists to create copies and historical reconstructions; in other words, photographs were used as the means for artists to create images that had the power of evoking the past in the viewer. Nonetheless, Clark notes that by the early twentieth century photographs became the de-facto medium for documenting the city as well as illustrating history. A comprehensive history of how this became so would be a vast topic requiring multiple studies, for which this book illuminates some significant strands. The place of photography actually takes up a minor portion of the first chapter which deeply contextualizes changing modes of understanding and using photographs in the conceptions of history. In this regard, this chapter is different from all the other chapters, each of which focuses on a short period (chapter 2) or a photographic event (chapters 3-5) in the twentieth century. This organization seems to parallel the gradual expansion of the place of photography in society in

the period covered in the book, from a minor to a ubiquitous one.

In the second chapter, which treats what she calls “photohistories”—history books illustrated with photographs—Clark argues that after World War I a new mode of viewing old photographs as a way of emotionally accessing the past became popular. The chapter begins by briefly tracing some of the reasons for this phenomenon, such as some technological developments, nostalgia for a bygone era in the wake of the Great War, sudden increase in the popularity of amateur photography in 1918, and developments in the illustrated press. All of these are significant research subjects on their own. Clark articulates some of the key ways that seemed to enable the viewer’s emotional connection to the past, with the aid of editorial tools such as cropping and layouts. One popular technique was the trimming of photographs to isolate particular objects, creating unmediated views of the objects. Another key trend, on which Clark devotes the latter part of this chapter, was the interpretation of photographs as “uncanny snapshots of the past” (p. 70), seen in André Warnod’s *Visages de Paris* (1930) and Louis Chéronnet’s *A Paris... vers 1900* (1932). This approach partook in a broader 1930s Europe-wide tendency of acutely sensing the loss of the prewar period, as Europeans saw the war as having ruptured the rhythm of change. For Warnod and Chéronnet, photographs were the most emotionally powerful means of documenting the past. Whereas photographs had previously been used for the study of history predominantly as one-to-one copies of monuments and buildings, for Warnod and Chéronnet photographs of the everyday, people, and events were just as important, for bringing the past back to life fragment by fragment. This newly perceived capacity of photographs, at the same time, redoubled the sense of distance from the past, and also changed how new photographs were viewed, for the first time as “the future of an uncanny access to the past” (p. 78).

The third chapter’s main topic is what Clark terms “repicturing,” a practice of placing new photographs next to prints or old photographs of historical scenes depicting identical locations, a new mode of photography that emerged during the occupation and liberation of Paris during World War II. Clark provides a succinct and gripping account of the period of the occupation, when German soldiers took a large quantity of photographs of Paris while Parisians were publicly banned from photography. By this time photographs were widely embraced as both objective and able to elicit intense emotions in the viewer. Clark demonstrates that the liberation of Paris was an occasion made for photography so to speak; Parisians partaking in efforts to defy the occupiers took a large number of photographs, ranging from the spontaneous to the staged. Parisians were aware of both the historic significance of the moment and the acceleration of time, marked by the sense that the traumatic events of the war irrevocably changed so much of daily life and sense of history. The popularity of the Liberation books illustrated with photographs was short-lived, as it could not withstand the scrutiny of wartime activities as well as the rapid dissipation of a momentary sense—or an illusion—of a prewar national unity felt at the Liberation. This awareness, in turn, was a key motivation for the practice of “repicturing,” Clark convincingly argues.

Chapter four treats the 1951 *bimillénaire* of Paris—the celebration of two thousand years of Paris’ history—which Clark argues was a deeply flawed hodgepodge of a large number of events organized by conservative authorities in a period of increasing insecurity regarding the place of France, and Paris, in the world. Clark demonstrates that besides looking to the past nostalgically, and the promotion of tourism, professional photography in Paris became an important component of the celebration, alongside the practice of the repicturing of Parisian

scenes widespread in the illustrated press. The chapter highlights several new conceptions regarding photography in this period. The first was an awareness of historicity integral to photographs. The second was an idea that historical traces were embedded in contemporary images of people—and not just buildings—brought on not only by the acceleration of time but also the tension between modernization and protection of tradition. Finally, “rephotography,” the practice of taking photographs of scenes of old photographs, became popular by the late 1960s, documenting and even criticizing modernization, a practice which Clark notes predated similar practices in the American West.

Chapter five treats the amateur photography contest “C’était Paris en 1970,” which was organized by FNAC and produced 100,000 black-and-white photographs and color slides that were catalogued and archived at the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris. Clark insightfully observes that this singular event, taking place in a period of significant urban redesign, was “driven by the same desire for a comprehensive record and totalizing view of Paris that was at work in the reconstructions of Fedor Hoffbauer” (p. 166). The title of the contest made clear the assumed historical value of the photographs to be produced, that the competition itself was sensed as history in the making. Clark analyzes some of the striking photographs submitted for the contest. In spite of the title, and the publicized emphasis on the purpose of the contest—namely capturing a historical moment—the two prize-winning photographs were ahistorical ones depicting water features. Clark sees a profound disconnect between the jury and the stated purpose of the event, implying that perhaps the jury, which did not include a historian, was driven foremost by the desire to affirm photography as a form of art. The photographs and slides of the collection produced through the “C’était Paris en 1970” obviously constitute a fertile source of further research. For instance, the collection could be examined for an evolving sense of Parisian geography, to see for example which areas may have been the privileged loci of photography and why. The book ends with a short conclusion that traces the establishment of the Vidéothèque de Paris in the 1980s that collected new visual and sound technologies; Clark reaffirms her argument that the production, diffusion, and preservation of pictures are integral to the history of urban change.

The approach of examining photographs as deeply embedded in historical contexts produces significant analysis of textual elements. The most sustained in this regard is the examination of the ideas surrounding photographs, such as the establishment and evolution of the Musée Carnavalet and other institutions, as well as the photographic events treated in later chapters. In comparison, the analysis of the dynamic between photographs and texts, whether notes on postcards with photographs, captions for photographs, or texts in illustrated books or journals, is relatively minor in the book and could be further researched. As mentioned above, given the ample scope of the book, and the richness of the book’s contents, the book yields numerous other research topics. One topic is the practice, widespread until the early twentieth century, of the illustrated press publishing lithographed or engraved images that were based on photographs; the resulting images were never exact copies but were rather altered images.[1] Another topic is the criticism of the manipulative aspects of photographs. While Clark makes a compelling argument about how photographs went from being seen as completely emotionally cold to emotionally powerfully evocative, further research could be focused on the evolution of the criticism of photographs for their capacity to manipulate viewers’ understanding of the past, through staged photographs, editing, or retouching. Yet another topic is publisher’s photographic archives, which Clark mentions. The book is richly illustrated with more than eighty photographs in good quality, although none in color. *Paris and the Cliché of History* is an

impressive and thought-provoking interdisciplinary intervention in the historiography of Paris, photography, the illustrated press, and other related fields.

NOTES

[1] On this topic see Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

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