H-France Forum
Volume 17 (2022), Issue 4, #2

Hall Bjørnstad, *The Dream of Absolutism: Louis XIV and the Logic of Modernity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xii + 230 pp. Color plates, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $95.00 U.S (cl). ISBN 9780226803661; $30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226803838; $29.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9780226803975.

Review Essay by Andrea Gadberry, New York University

Hall Bjørnstad's *The Dream of Absolutism: Louis XIV and the Logic of Modernity* is about many things, including the very thing its opening sentence says it is "not…about": Louis XIV. As the book examines absolutist cultural productions, Bjørnstad's disclaimer—"This is *not* a book about Louis XIV" (p. xi)—is not so much the scholarly version of Magritte's *La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*, this time with the likenesses of the Sun King filling in for the pipe in question, but rather something like its opposite. For *The Dream of Absolutism* offers neither knowing demystifications nor ironic playfulness in discussing the games of representation to be found within "absolutist artifacts" but instead a sincere engagement with the "sense of a superlative presence" to be found in absolutist culture and politics (p. 206). Through the guiding metaphor of the dream, Bjørnstad shows how absolutism's disenchantment has produced a distinguished body of scholarship ready to demystify, explain, and catalogue the pomp and pageantry of the cultural production surrounding Louis XIV but, with some frequency, weirdly incapable of, or just plain indifferent to, reading it. This is a shame, and it is one Bjørnstad's book is well equipped to remedy as it rejects the designations (transparent excess, mere propaganda, or sycophantic tedium) that the literature and art of the absolutist epoch accrue to varying degrees.

Still, in its attunement to disenchantment's shortcomings, *The Dream of Absolutism* succeeds, perhaps in spite of itself, in a kind of disenchantment of its own. In centering the *Mémoires* that Louis XIV writes to his son the dauphin, more often treated as "in no way original" (quoted p. 53); the critically ignored mirror nested within Le Brun's *Le Roi gouverne par lui-même* within the Hall of Mirrors; and the absolutist absurdities within fairytale and encomia in praise of the king, this book offers much for scholars of Louis XIV and for dix-septiémistes working across literature, art, and of course, politics. But for scholars less invested in Louis le Grand himself, the book will be generative, too: early modernists working comparatively in other national literatures will find plentiful resources for thinking about power and art well beyond the boundaries of Versailles. Bjørnstad's rich formulation of dreaming, for instance, made it impossible for this reader, at least, not to want to revisit Calderón's dramatic experiments in thinking about kingship and succession anew; indeed, the dramatic poet's celebrated lines, "*la vida es sueño, / y los sueños, sueños son* (life is a dream, / and dreams are dreams),"[1] offer themselves as material to continue the conversation Bjørnstad undertakes in his discussion of early modern skepticism in Descartes and absolutist culture (pp. 78-79). The book's rich meditations on the symbolism and technology of the mirror will, meanwhile, send other readers back to *Hamlet* Act III to reread the bard's famous mirror scene, and its monarchical relationships [2], with an eye newly alert to the mirror's "present tense" (p. 140). I could go on, and while there is much to say about Bjørnstad's contributions to early modern studies writ large—and those who *want* a book that *is* about Louis XIV will be

rewarded, too—I want to accept Bjørnstad's invitation to understand this book as "not…about Louis XIV." For as important as the exquisite close readings of absolutist artifacts and their import for studies of early modernity are this book's theoretical implications: the oneiric imperative within the dream offers a path to revisit the wager that "we have never been modern,"[3] to be sure, but it also invites its reader to think about how the dream, and the language in which it is expressed, comes to be interpretable at all.

For Bjørnstad, the dream of absolutism is polysemous. It is at once "displayed" and "enacted" (p. 2), available both in the fullness of its "loose, intuitive, metaphorical sense" (p. 34), and in its aspirational dimensions as an object of desire, as glory in search of adequate form (p. 184). The dream of absolutism likewise conjures an at-times uncanny capacity for self-authoring and for the creation of origins, productive of a temporal warp strong enough to permit Bjørnstad to dilate François Hartog's observation that "L'absolutisme est un présentisme" (p. 158n13). This produces fascinating and illuminating close readings of both image and text: Bjørnstad observes the Dorian Gray-like doubled visage of the king on Le Brun's ceiling painting in the Hall of Mirrors, and in doing so, the classic problem of the king's two bodies becomes that of the king's two faces. Or take the collapse of historical, mythic, and present time in Jean de Préchac's fairytale "Sans Parangon," where the fairytale prince, a stand-in for Louis XIV, occupies a Möbius-strip-like temporality thanks to the fairytale king's "second birth" (p. 185). The shock of the present that *The Dream of Absolutism* makes visible may well encourage readers to become freshly sensitive to the fairytale's commonplace temporal marker "once upon a time (il y avait une fois)," which stops seeming so banal as the absolutist present elicits its strange modes of participation and seems not to have abated as much as one might have assumed.

The dream, moreover, is the vessel of "an extra-rational, premodern knowledge," and, as such, the dream of absolutism offers itself as "the *other* of demystification…the *other* of the modern reduction of absolutist artifacts to mere propaganda" (p. 35). This framework—one explained in greater detail in the book's introduction and the intriguing seven theses that close the volume—permits Bjørnstad to take objects held to be mere propaganda and deem them interesting enough for interpretation, a move which, I think, is particularly promising for understanding the complexities of absolutism's audience as well as that which Bjørnstad astutely describes as its enduring appeal. In this, *The Dream of Absolutism* finds itself in unspoken conversation with recent scholarship, across disciplinary boundaries, that takes as its objects things more often deemed unserious, uninterpretable, or just the self-evident stuff of common sense. Reading Bjørnstad's approach to the king's *Mémoires*, for instance, I found myself seeing a strange and serious precursor to the ideological category that hides in plain sight called "common sense" and other forms that unite the excessive with the "obvious," as in the often-comedic "gimmick."[4] Its historical frame notwithstanding, *The Dream of Absolutism* issues a diagnosis that exposes critical problems of our present: the mystification implicit in a critical overconfidence alternately characterized as "a faith in the evidence of self-evidence" (p. 78n44), the taste-making judgments of deeming some objects "too conventional…to have any intrinsic interest" (p. 53), and the pre-fab categorization of that which is, or is not, worthy of "a serious analysis, as if the meaning and implication of these words were self-evident" (p. 117n38).

But the book's dream likewise resonates meaningfully with the dreamwork, so to speak, that the book never mentions outright. I will take the liberty of naming names: Freud. The book is diligently

attentive to its historical materials and to the scholarship, and its theoretical apparatus is likewise rigorous, so the absence of the dream's most famous interpreter is not exactly a glaring omission so much as an intriguing one: the frequent affinities between Bjørnstad's interpretation of absolutism's dreams and Freud's interpretation of the more pedestrian variety (the ones to which we are subject nightly) only make the book's stakes still more suggestive. Of course, *The Dream of Absolutism* does not want for or shy from psychological insight, with the "reasons that reason doesn't know" (p. 34) an important touchstone for the multiply-signifying dream. Bjørnstad likewise illuminates the desires upon which absolutism relies and which it produces—desires he carefully indicates might be foreign and even ridiculous to the very readers who, today, might see in absolutism's excess mere propaganda or a bombast unworthy of analysis. In his own interpretation of absolutism's dream, Bjørnstad freely understands many of the cultural artifacts in question to be subject to overdetermination, a language for multiple causality that appears, incidentally, for the first time as *Überdeterminierung* (overdetermination) in Freud's description of a dream he had about (among other things) his habit of voracious reading.[5]

But Bjørnstad's suggestion that absolutism be understood as a dream is right on the Freudian nose for another reason: the problem of dismissing absolutist art as mere propaganda beyond interpretation names the same kind of critical crisis Freud himself encounters in daring to interpret dreams in the first place. It was more common to be "tempted to agree with the philosophers and the psychiatrists and, like them, rule out the problem of dream-interpretation as a purely fanciful task,"[6] deeming the dream instead "something wholly and completely incapable of interpretation."[7] In his analysis of the premodern dimensions of absolutism's dream, Bjørnstad's book finds itself, too, in (unconscious?) agreement with his dream-interpreting forebear: when it comes to the dream, "I have been driven to realize that here once more we have one of those not infrequent cases in which an ancient and jealously held popular belief seems to be nearer the truth than the judgement of the prevalent science of today."[8] In the participatory, collective dream of absolutism, *The Dream of Absolutism*'s concerns are naturally quite different from those voiced by Freud, but in demanding that the uninterpretable be an object of interpretation, Bjørnstad's work joins a wider interpretive community and establishes its own theoretical import for studies of absolutism but also for thinking about the possibility of interpretation itself.

Perhaps nowhere are such interpretive stakes higher than when Bjørnstad asks his reader to think about audience and authorship apart from the usual story of mere propaganda. In passages that consider the oddity within absolutist authorship, the seldom contested facts of absolutist artworks—that they appealed to "a royal audience of one" (p. 94) or engaged in agonistic "competitions to praise Louis XIV" (p. 205)—become not the basis of a critical shrug redeemed primarily by the occasional interpretive good luck of making a strong case for subversion (see chapter three), but a starting point for Bjørnstad's investigations and the subsequent research his work invites. The strength of this reading permits the Hall of Mirrors to be read as neither the latest installment in a centuries-long series of mirrors for princes but also as a site of a kind of absolutist anamorphosis where the craning neck of the viewer permits a glimpse of the king's mismatched double visage only thanks to her own contortions. Indeed, in his attention to the exclusive "mirror that could qualify as 'private,' since it is only visible to the king" (133), Bjørnstad seems at times also to approach the philosophical problem of the "private language" in materials centuries older than its subsequently recognized formulation.[9]

Yet, if only the king glimpses the private mirror, it's not the case for Bjørnstad that the artwork exists entirely tucked away in an "innermost cabinet" (p. 192) but rather that the opacity of such private language cedes (and often owes) its vigor to that which Bjørnstad characterizes as absolutism's "participatory" qualities. In a suggestion reminiscent of Huizinga's "sacred seriousness,"[10] as well as Robert Pfaller's more recent formulation of "illusions without owners,"[11] Bjørnstad argues that "[T]he dream is not communication but participation, not theory but practice…. [C]ourtly pleasures…are not necessarily the opposite of absolutism but rather an extension of the dream. A play-like absorption that is not false consciousness but rather a split consciousness: the dreamer knowing it is a dream, yet dreaming on, at once inside and outside of the dream" (p. 206). The politics behind this dreamlike play—a politics that, as Bjørnstad notes at length, also plays freely with the stuff of nightmares and absolutist state violence – may itself be "not theory but practice," but it certainly recruits and offers theoretical frames to grasp its many dimensions and the languages—public and private, text and image—required for its operation.

The logic of modernity that *The Dream of Absolutism* deploys comes with a theory and method of its own, one that notably harnesses the power of the emblem in its attention to image and text, held in mutually illuminating and sometimes paradoxical tension. In this book, Bjørnstad offers many compelling routes whereby his readings of absolutist case studies have far wider implications, including beyond the historical period in question. While Bjørnstad concludes this fascinating book by suggesting that it has "developed some of the tools needed" (p. 207) to unpack further the power of absolutism's artifacts and their thrall, I think the book has likewise identified one of the most pressing objects for its method's future applications. In showing us a dream that renders uninterpretable objects the objects of interpretation, in offering a language of absolutism at once private and participatory, Bjørnstad gives his reader the equipment to notice something new about mere propaganda, regardless of the century in which one observes it. For this illuminating book impels its reader not to take such a dismissal at face value; it permits us to think anew about what mere propaganda contains within it. In *The Dream of Absolutism*, the absolutist artifact may remain mere propaganda, but its "mere" signifies otherwise, seizing the sense of mere from Latin *merus*, meaning "undiluted, unmixed, or pure," and likewise pointing its reader toward the Indo-European dimensions of the word where the "mere" evokes that which is "gleaming or sparkling."[12] To understand mere propaganda, Bjørnstad's book reveals, one must grasp its oneiric powers, its solicitation of collusion, in order to begin to read its spectacular, often terrible—and now no longer so illegible—shine.

NOTES

[1] Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño*, ed. Enrique Rull (Madrid: Taurus, 1992), lines 2186-2187.

[2] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006).

[3] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[4] On the "gimmick," see Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalism Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020). On "the exclusion of seriousness" in the comic register and on its relationship to claims to knowledge, see David Carroll Simon, "Vicious Pranks: Comedy and Cruelty in Rabelais and Shakespeare," *Studies in Philology* 116, no. 3 (2019): 423-450. Bjørnstad, too, locates in *le bon sens* of Descartes a kind of counterpoint to the "best" sense, so to speak, of the "exemplary example" of the king (pp. 85-87). For more on the ideological category of *bon sens*, "good sense" or "common sense," in the Cartesian context, see Andrea Gadberry, chapter 1, in *Cartesian Poetics: The Art of Thinking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[5] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, (New York: Basic Books, 2010). p. 301

[6] Freud, p. 125.

[7] Freud, p. 105.

[8] Freud, p. 125. There are countless other resonances worthy of further investigation. Consider the convergence of kingship and dreaming, for instance: "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (p. 604).

[9] Wittgenstein's now famous 1953 observation that "The words of this [i.e., private] language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language" (243) shine through in relationship to several of the works Bjørnstad analyzes where, in spite of the very authorship of writers and artists, the "real" legibility is only available to the king himself. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell, 1953).

[10] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

[11] Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*, trans. Lisa Rosenblatt with Charlotte Eckler and Camilla Nielsen (New York: Verso, 2014).

[12] S.v. "mere, v.1," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2022, https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/view/Entry/116732 (accessed May 1, 2022); and s.v. "mere, adj.2," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2022, https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/view/Entry/116731?rskey=FP4L2w&result=9&isAdvanced=false (accessed May 1, 2022).

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