

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

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 Harriet Stone, Washington University in St. Louis

Hall Bjørnstad has written an erudite yet playful, comprehensive yet focused, and synthetic yet highly original study of absolutism that explores an impressive range of texts and images associated with Louis XIV. I found it a pleasure to read a work whose interdisciplinary approach is compatible with my own research into court culture.[1] Bjørnstad defines the “dream of absolutism” as a participatory creation collectively realized by the king, his ministers, and the artists and writers in his orbit. He describes the aspirations and the ideals of absolutism that emanate from Louis XIV, that he embodied, and that the elite helped to cultivate. Louis XIV fostered absolutism through his example and via his directives to others, fashioning the splendor of Versailles as an expression of the glory of his kingship. Sumptuous decorations, magnificent fêtes, and expansive praise of the king notwithstanding, the illusion could not forever outrun reality.

In my work, I adopt the term “French imaginary,” to suggest a shared sense of practices, symbols, and knowledge, a collective experience of court culture during Louis XIV’s reign. The imaginary refers to texts and visual arts committed to expanding the heroic narrative that glorifies the king. As the overriding cultural context for the arts at Versailles, the imaginary shaped the reception of individual works by members of the court; their perceptions were intrinsic to the process. Understood to be a mode of thinking, the imaginary becomes an analytic tool: I argue that the illusion of absolute power expressed through allegory was challenged, and effectively dethroned, by realism and the rise of empiricism. Bjørnstad probes a series of examples, nearly all different from my own, to dissect the dream of absolutism, exposing its political and aesthetic roots. Taking us from the heights of a flourishing culture honoring the king to its inevitable decline into disillusionment, Bjørnstad masterfully examines a collection of works from this period, including Louis XIV’s memoirs and paintings by his *premier peintre* Charles Le Brun. Bjørnstad incorporates an impressive array of supporting literature from the period outside the theater. Still, the *spectacle du pouvoir* is in full evidence, as Louis XIV’s victories, his magnificence, and his authority, or, more precisely, his image, is consistently on show.

To acknowledge the hold that the spectacle of court life had on the collective imagination does not imply, of course, that everyone had an identical reaction to celebrations of Louis XIV. Some members of the elite would have comfortably proclaimed: “This is not propaganda; this is my king, my glorious ruler.” To understand such intense validation of the crown, we need think only of Russian supporters of the 2022 war in Ukraine who declare Vladimir Putin their beloved leader and who see the Ukrainians as the aggressors. Certainly, some of Louis XIV’s subjects were deluded by his grandeur. Even the group of nobles and bourgeois who felt unqualified support for

the king included many individuals capable of identifying exactly who pulled the strings, who produced the elaborate Versailles décor: they were aware of the outsized ambition of the king and his ministers. Of those, some tolerated the system, believing that a glorious king benefitted not only the nation but also themselves as beneficiaries of his favors. Others understood exactly how politics intersected with artistic production and condemned it, some in private, some openly. We have triumphant accounts of Louis XIV's reign from the period, as well as satires and direct critiques. From the authentic believer to the cynic, from the naïve and deluded souls to the piercingly analytical writers and artists, all courtiers were players, consumers of the culture that developed around the king. Life at court was, as Bjørnstad perceptively explores, a participatory exercise dedicated to promoting absolutism, to keeping the dream alive.

That the royal mission/commission to promote the king came from the top, evidence of what Bjørnstad dismisses as top-down propaganda, is irrefutable, in my opinion. Yet this perspective in no way diminishes the critical fact that the monarch's will to be unsurpassed—and the crown's idealized projection of the king's image—meant that the absolutist dream became a shared ambition, part of a collective response. Today a student investigating the reign of Louis XIV learns quickly that encomium, hyperbole, allegory, and the insistence and relentless pursuit of glory were part of the script for kingship. This understanding was essential to the briefs for architects and ingrained in the not-so-hidden requirements of texts and paintings commissioned to celebrate the king's achievements. For official works sanctioned by the crown, the courtiers' public applause was *de rigueur*. These conditions for literary and artistic production were deadly serious because, for all their excesses, they were integral to the functioning of the monarchy. Absolutism, Bjørnstad explains, required full-time maintenance.

I invoke a range of attitudes among members of the court rather than a single fixed response to introduce another point about heroic narrative as it conveys the dream of absolutism that Bjørnstad investigates. Bjørnstad's readings, from the memoirs through fairy tales are spot on; they are meticulously researched and well argued. It is by no means a critique of these accounts to note that they form part of a larger dynamic, a more fluid order of things. The king's portraits, his own articulation of his role, and the praise directed at him all resist enclosure within a final intellectual frame, be it encomium, allegory, mirror, or political theory. I mean "dynamic" as it pertains to human movement, and also, more generally, as a characteristic of experience and interpretation of texts and images supporting Louis XIV.

Louis XIV's appearance in Roman armor amidst the gods in Le Brun's painting, *Le Roi gouverne par lui-même, 1661* anchors the design for the ceiling vault in the *Galerie des glaces* and serves as the centerpiece of Bjørnstad's study. The centrality of this image is consequential, as it orients the art and architecture of the hall, not only through its physical position within the ceiling composition but also because it contains a *mise-en-abîme* of the king, whose image is reflected in Minerva's shield. In his comprehensive *Catalogue iconographique*, Nicolas Milovanovic explains: "le visage du souverain se réfléchit dans le bouclier de Minerve: c'est une très habile évocation de la Prudence dont le symbole principal est le miroir, car le prudent s'observe pour bien se connaître."^[2] This *mise-en-abîme* validates the king's glory: he is the exemplary figure worthy of representation, that is, of re-presentation. Louis XIV trains his eyes, or rather his visible right eye, on his image in the shield. Given the height of the gallery and the shading around the figure in the shield, one could be forgiven for thinking that an observer might first *project* and then *see* this gaze.^[3] Regardless,

to interpret the reflected image in the (discernable) shield as returning the sovereign's gaze, sign of his self-affirmation, is consistent with the construction of the king's portrait, in Louis Marin's sense, throughout Versailles, with the added dimension of interiority that Bjørnstad interrogates.[4] Digital enlargements of this section of the painting indicate that Louis XIV does go eyeball to eyeball with his reflection. But we can also trace a straight line from his iris to Minerva's hand. Looking up from the gallery, an observer likely first takes in the figure of Louis XIV as he contemplates his reflected image, and then Minerva's outstretched hand, pointing to Glory atop the clouds above, which gesture Louis's own hand in some fashion (but not exactly) imitates: "Minerve toute proche du roi montre que c'est la Sagesse qui lui inspire la décision de quitter le repos et la paix pour assumer les charges du gouvernement et acquérir la gloire." [5] The second sightline complements, without completing, the first. The clouds beckon, and the observer must follow the king's profile to its reflection, and then his hand, via Minerva, to Glory wearing her gold crown, to have a proper context for the elements in the painting. Bjørnstad describes Louis XIV in a private moment, "visible only to him," in which he contemplates his own reflection in the shield (p. 153). Le Brun builds out from this double portrait of the king, commemorating the start of his personal rule with the encouragement and protection of Minerva (wisdom). Glory is aspirational still—for him, for France, and for posterity. We do well to acknowledge that the future holds not peace, but rather war: glory involves both Louis XIV's capable administration and his military prowess, a message lost neither on him nor on us. Mars, god of war, also points the king toward Glory.

Absolutism, as Bjørnstad demonstrates, incorporates contradictions and excesses. Fragmentation, I note, also figures prominently. Not all of it is "fractal-like": each part is not a reduced image of the whole (p. 143). The mirrors in the hall reflect only segments of the ceiling paintings, and the dimensions of these segments change according to one's position in the hall.[6] The perfect *mise-en-abîme* extension of *Le Roi gouverne par lui-même* would be its fully legible reflection in the bank of mirrors below. But such perfection—a *Las Meninas* effect, if you will—does not occur.[7] Visual distortion (blurring) aside, the mirrors reflect segments of the ceiling paintings on the opposite side above the windows. Situated above the mirrors, the image of Louis XIV contemplating his reflection in Minerva's shield is not captured as a reflection in the hall.

Bjørnstad interrogates the effects of presentness, beginning with the wizardry of vanishing that grounds mirror optics. When the subject walks away, no trace of him remains on the mirror surface. Indeed, standing in the hall, Louis XIV could not simultaneously contemplate his full image as painted by Le Brun and his image as reflected in the hall mirrors. Moreover, the king, like others in attendance, is able to observe his mirrored image as he enters and crosses the hall, but unless he stops, that image moves, as in a modern film or video. The actual mirrors do not hold the real king's portrait in place any more than they do the changing shapes and colors of the clouds above the Versailles garden. The elements of the *Galerie des glaces* that are *décalés*, sequential, and ephemeral all structure a dynamic space in which the glorious image of the king, despite its ubiquity, is always in the process of becoming. To conceive Louis XIV's history as a heroic narrative, we must consider his image to be suspended between the past and the future.

Bjørnstad depicts absolutism as operating through space (the priority of verticality), time (absolutism as presentism), and mood (celebration). The omnipresent celebration of the king at Versailles reinforces the hierarchical order of the court, with Louis XIV positioned on top, in close proximity to the gods. Presentism, however, is a more challenging concept. The dream, as Bjørnstad describes it, recognizes only the present, the here and now. He posits that a mirror,

lacking depth, is “pure presence, which makes it an instrument for forgetting the past” (p. 149). Here physics meets philosophy, and one cannot but approve. So it would remain if these mirrors were not framed, literally and metaphorically, in the architecture of the past at Versailles. Running the length of the hall, seventeen decorative arches surround the mirrors, which double the arched windows on the opposite wall overlooking the garden. The polished marble panels of the arches slow the return of light. Whereas the mirrors’ reflecting surfaces are capricious, the arches that they bedeck are stable elements; they convey remembrance, commemoration, and the surviving legacy of Louis XIV.

A mirror creates an image that lasts only as long as the subject stands before it, even a subject as imposing as the king. Louis XIV, however, came back time and time again to retrieve that image and to renew it by his presence. The same holds true for courtiers and ambassadors who reached the king through the hall. The mirror is reflection, and the mirror is return. The king’s presence and re-presence show that he alone resembles his image, as Bjørnstad argues. Yet the image that Louis XIV endeavors to retain of himself from the mirrors lining the *Galerie des glaces* does not record the king who walks on, aging, declining, but rather the king whose exceptional history continues, as in the ceiling design, one constructed view at a time. Studying his representations in Le Brun’s thirty ceiling compositions honoring the civil, diplomatic, and military accomplishments of his early reign, Louis XIV recognizes his glory. But he cannot hold his pose in the mirrors that line the hall. His pastless present, in Bjørnstad’s analysis, is the haunting absence signifying death, the risk of failure as history marches on.

The presentness of the past, the corollary of Bjørnstad’s pastless present, is evident today as Emmanuel Macron continues to stage history at Versailles. Recently, the *Galerie des glaces* served as a backdrop for France’s EU aspirations, in consort with Macron’s own political ambitions. Bjørnstad applies the concept of pastlessness to our contemporary consumer culture, analyzing how Dior’s “Secret Garden” advertising campaign featuring Russian model Daria Strokous used the Versailles mirrors in ways that connote beauty, self-indulgence, and superficiality. Versailles remains a site for political theater, the *état-spectacle*. Macron’s choice to hold a summit related to Europe’s defenses at Versailles this past March—a meeting organized before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—speaks to the presentness of the past.[8] Bjørnstad invites us to fast-forward to Dior in 2012. Recent history, however, has forwarded us still further in time—and back into this same space, with the specter of Vladimir Putin standing in for the beautiful Russian model. “To be sure,” Bjørnstad argues in discussing the Dior video, “the mirror image itself has no past; it is indeed an image of pastlessness, but here the backdrop, the framing, the slightly darkened reflective surface all seem to add an otherworldly depth to the flatness of the glass” to create “a promise of impending carefree happiness” (p. 150). The “already pastless present of the glorious mirrors of absolutism” visible in the Dior video, however, now frames another story, that of EU leaders gathered for a two-day summit (p. 150). The meeting at Versailles, a location outside Paris conveniently easier for authorities to secure, was intended to be the high point of France’s six-month EU presidency. Macron would bask in the light of Louis XIV, capitalizing on the enduring magnificence of the palace. Ironically, at the start of his presidency in 2017, Macron hosted Putin at Versailles.[9] The March, 2022 EU meeting became a crisis summit following Putin’s “brutal disruption of decades of stability in Europe.”[10]

If mirrors could talk, we would hear the whispers of Louis XIV's ghost prompting the French leader to recall the lessons of history. Presiding in the *Galerie des glaces*, the opulent space created to support the king as prime exemplar whose function Bjørnstad portrays so well, Macron extends his own, and by extension France's, dream for glory. In the presentness of the current moment, we add—hopefully, if not expectantly—a wish that posterity be synonymous now with peace.

NOTES

[1] Harriet Stone, *Crowning Glories: Netherlandish Realism and the French Imagination during the Reign of Louis XIV* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

[2] Nicolas Milovanovic, "Versailles et la Galerie des glaces: Catalogue iconographique," https://galeriedesglaces-versailles.fr/html/11/selection/page_notice-ok.php?myPos=9&compo=c17 (accessed May 31, 2022). I adopt this interpretation of the king's reflection in the shield, Stone, p. 42.

[3] Bjørnstad notes that, following the recent restorations, details are visible to visitors in the gallery, p.140n82).

[4] Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981). See Bjørnstad's discussion, pp. 14-16, pp. 39-40n66, and p.46n4.

[5] Milovanovic, op.cit. Bjørnstad similarly indicates that "the king's own gesture and gaze suggest that the essential elements lie elsewhere" (p. 135). He contextualizes this image historically to argue that, while the image overall conveys aspiration, the mirror image serves to reaffirm the king's authority and his own sense of his glory in the present.

[6] Stone, pp. 182-83.

[7] I discuss the geometry of Velázquez's masterpiece in my *Tables of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006), pp. 62-68.

[8] See the photo, with Macron seated at the center of the table facing the mirror: Radio France, "Le sommet de Versailles: l'Europe toujours unie? Emmanuel Macron, un candidat comme les autres?" <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-rendez-vous-de-la-presse-etrangere/le-sommet-de-versailles-l-europe-toujours-unie-emmanuel-macron-un-candidat-comme-les-autres> (accessed May 31, 2022).

[9] Ukraine was on the agenda at that first Versailles meeting: "Speaking to journalists at the Versailles palace, the two leaders said they had agreed to restart talks on Ukraine in the 'coming days and weeks' under the so-called Normandy format—referring to four-way consultations between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany. Nicholas Vinocur, "Macron and Putin's awkward first date," *Politico* online, May 29, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/> (accessed May 31, 2022).

[10] France 24, “Macron welcomes EU leaders for Ukraine crisis talks at Versailles,” <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220310-macron-hosts-eu-leaders-for-ukraine-crisis-talks-at-versailles> (accessed May 31, 2022).

Harriet Stone
Washington University in St. Louis
hastone@wustl.edu

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

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