Reviews

The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. xv + 256 pp. Jens Andermann

Where can the visual manifestation of state power be located: in the monuments, memorials and icons that it constructs, or in the ways of seeing that such objects evoke? Jens Andermann, in his exploration of visuality and the project of nineteenth-century state building in Argentina and Brazil, diverges from conventional histories by suggesting that the particular form of state that emerged in Latin America was but one option among many, rather than an inevitable outcome of long-term social and economic processes. He argues that the seeming inescapability of this state-form stems from the hegemonic influence exerted by forms of visual representation such as monuments, museums, photographic travelogues, history paintings, maps, and atlases. Andermann provides significant insight into the complex and often contradictory processes that inform the relation between such visual signifiers and the sacral myths that bolster nationalistic narratives of natural or historic destiny. Moreover, he also demonstrates how the scopic regimes at work in late nineteenth-century Argentina and Brazil constructed and simultaneously disavowed the condition of "bare life." In doing so, Andermann argues, they prefigured the destruction that would be wrought by dictatorships in both countries in the twentieth century, "the moment when biopolitics [turns] in thanatopolitics" (p. 18).

Andermann divides his study into two sections: one dedicated to museums and the other maps. He opens the section on museums with a well-researched and densely-theoretical analysis of exhibits of natural and national history in Argentina and Brazil in the second half of the nineteenth century. If Andermann's approach is at times excessively referential—often invoking four or five different theorists in his discussion of a single object—his text nevertheless makes a salient contribution to the growing body of critical and historical studies on the emergence of the modern museum by illuminating the role that such institutions have played in Latin America. Andermann begins by examining how museums of natural history and anthropology enabled and justified state control of both the natural resources and indigenous populations of Argentina and Brazil. Institutions, such as the Museo Público in Buenos Aires and the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, conveyed natural and anthropological specimens from remote regions to these urban centres, where they could be classified, catalogued, and displayed. The museums then circulated catalogues and scientific texts, imparting value and meaning to those objects of "bare life." Museums thus became, in Andermann's words, "centres of calculation", whose taxonomies made it possible to subsume indigenous bodies and lands into systems of economic and cultural capital—measurable and

exchangeable like any other commodity (p. 28). Here Andermann locates the silent threat of the museum: the way in which "the power and authority of the museum are continuously based on the possibility that it might be a trap" (p. 57). In other words, museum space produces a disembodied gaze consuming the objects on display, yet the viewer never ceases to be embodied, sensing that it too could be so measured, exchanged, and displayed.

Andermann examines the 1882 Brazilian Anthropological Exhibition to investigate shifts in imaging the indigenous population of Brazil. He reveals how emerging scientific discourses implicated in systems of classification and display within the Exhibition displaced Romantic Indianism as the centrepiece of the Imperial state's political iconography. Particularly evocative is his account of the inclusion of members of the Xerente and Botocudo tribes in the exhibit, themselves one of the event's most popular "attractions." For Andermann, the remaining traces of their presence—"pictures of replicas, representations of representations"—reveal the politics of concealment at work in the Exhibition as a whole, echoing and reinforcing the trope of the Amerindian as part of a virtuous yet vanquished stage of human evolution, one which the modern state had supplanted (p. 73).

The "Museums" section concludes with Andermann's account of how museums in Argentina and Brazil became, at the end of the nineteenth century, vehicles for the communication of a national civics lesson, defining a national heritage of historical memorabilia that endorsed the official state narrative of history. He frames this study as an exploration of how the competing logics of the archive and the museum shaped this project of consolidating national history. Yet he rarely traces how these different approaches manifest themselves in his accounts of educational reforms, new national icons, or monument construction in fin-de-siècle Brazil and Argentina. One notable exception occurs where Andermann outlines how antiquarian and archive-driven approaches shaped efforts to rebuild the original 1810 May Revolution monument in Buenos Aires. For the most part, his analysis deals more generally with the way that museum memory contains and controls the voice of the past/other. Insofar as these museums of national history denied the fluidity and hybridity of "bare life," Andermann rightly identifies them as sites where "the rational, emancipatory contents of the modern project already announce their eventual falling-over into pure destruction" (p. 17).

The second section of the text examines the visual means employed to map geopolitical expansions into 'frontier' landscapes. Specifically, Andermann charts expeditions into the backlands of Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century in search of a suitable site for a new capital, as well as Argentina's violent campaigns against the indigenous tribes and the establishment of dominance over Patagonia in the 1870s and 1880s. Draughtsmen, artists, photographers, and cartographers travelling with these expeditionary forces rendered nature in two conflicting yet often

overlapping ways: either as the mythic enemy that must be defeated at the moment of the emergence of the modern state, or as the sublime, monumental image of power to which the state aspired. In support of both of these narratives of nature, the visual forms of maps, landscape sketches, history paintings, and photographs were activated as instruments of violence that marked sovereignty on the very surface of the earth.

Andermann makes a strong case that these visual forms and their ways of seeing reinforced the state's geopolitical ambitions. Drawing on Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Michael de Certeau, he analyzes how methods of measuring and marking distance on expedition maps worked to disassociate the world from the bodily experience of it, making space abstract and inert – and therefore prime for re-ordering. While Andermann's iconographic and symbolic analyses are admirable, where his study seems to falter is in the consideration of the materiality of the objects he discusses. For example, in his analysis of Flávio de Barros's photographs of the Brazilian government's siege of the penitential community of Canudos in 1897, Andermann quickly moves away from "whatever the ultimate function and use of Barros's images" may have been (p. 197). He instead focuses his analysis (drawing on Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and others) on how the images' vertical and horizontal geometries bespeak both empowerment and subjugation. In a chapter comparing these photographs to those of Julius Popper's "scientific expedition" to Tierra del Fuego in 1887, it is only in the last paragraph that Andermann makes brief reference to the fact that "of course, there were fundamental differences in form and function between the capitalist adventurer Popper's gift to the state… and the expeditionary photographer Flávio de Barros's state-commissioned visual narrative" (p. 204). Unfortunately, the implications of such differences in patronage and viewership are not adequately explored, nor are questions of circulation.

These criticisms aside, however, Andermann's text nevertheless remains a successful and highly original analysis of the first attempts in Argentina and Brazil at hegemonic visual articulation of national society, one that hints at the unique post-colonial processes at work in Latin America.

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