

Book Reviews

Mediated Bodies: The Production of the Colonized Francophone Subject

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French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism by Peter J. Bloom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 265 pages. \$75.00 hardback, \$25.00 paperback.

The French Third Republic (1870–1940) coincided with the invention not only of cinema but also of many other technologies—including Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography of bodies in motion, the *microphonographe* (a precursor to the hearing aid), and the ergograph (which measured muscle fatigue)—which in turn were yoked to the state and to the imperial project of examining, classifying, and representing different kinds of human bodies. Through the use of these technologies, the body of “natural man,” the colonized subject under French colonial rule, was set in opposition to the French (male) body. The various recordings and measurements taken of the colonized body, according to Peter Bloom’s *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism*, helped to justify French colonization as part of a humanitarian, civilizing mission, a mission that Bloom suggests is perpetuated even now in images that seek to justify Western humanitarian intervention in developing nations. In preparing this book, Bloom conducted extensive archival research, and he puts a vast array of diverse objects—from postcards, advertisements, and films, to scientific inventions and schools of philosophy—in dialogue with

one another in order to theorize the way in which French colonial documentaries created an image of the French empire as a unified space and an image of the colonized subject as requiring colonial aid. While there are places in which the connections between some of these objects could be more clearly drawn—for instance, in his discussion of the link between the Jungian “imago,” wartime shell shock, and the colonial subject—Bloom directs our attention to the important role played by industrial, medical, and educational films in terms of their function within and their reflection of the French colonial project.

During the late nineteenth century, the idea of “natural man,” which was generally associated with the colonized subject, gave rise to comparative studies of different “types” of bodies and also led to particular conceptions of the human body itself. Philosophers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Sensationalists, and the Ideologues, theorized “natural man” at a time when various technologies that extended human perceptions encouraged an understanding of the human body as a machine. Moreover, these ideas about “natural man” and such prosthetic technologies came about within the context of a French nation in need of national rejuvenation after France’s humiliating loss in the Franco-Prussian War. Much of this rejuvenation was centered on the physical body. In fact, Bloom reveals, in France before the era of the Third Republic, one assumed that physical conditioning was based on geographical milieu, not on physical training. However, as physiological studies were applied to military training, the idea of physical education emerged, allowing French men to increase and prove their virility through exercise and physical feats. Not surprisingly, technologies of indexical representation were quickly engaged in the study of human strength and motion. And indeed, Marey’s collaborator, Georges Demeny, ran the Circle for Rational Gymnastics before turning toward technologies of representation, which underscores the close link between the development of cinematic devices and the study of human physiology. And, of course, the bodies of colonized subjects were consistently placed—through the sciences of phrenology, anthropocentric measurement, and craniometry—within hierarchies of bodies that put them at the bottom. This hierarchy was intimately tied to the camera. In contrast to “natural man,” who was equated with a premodern past, the camera represented modernity. Bloom shows how these various technologies of bodily measurement reinforced the notion that the French colonizers were needed to civilize and “save” these colonized bodies.

One such body was that of the Senegalese sharpshooter. Re-examining the image of the Senegalese sharpshooter that Roland

Barthes identified as a mythic figure embodying and naturalizing the “split subjectivity” of the colonized subject who is also simultaneously an obedient French soldier, Bloom argues that the figure of the sharpshooter served as an image of both the assimilation of the African subject into French civilization and the threat of miscegenation. Bloom locates the cinematic images of the sharpshooter within the context of postcards and advertisements, particularly the image of Bamboula, the Senegalese character who graces the box and advertisements for the breakfast product Banania. The sharpshooters were alternately portrayed as fierce warriors, assimilated subjects, and obedient, buffoonish children. These images, however, excluded the many Senegalese soldiers who ended up in French psychiatric hospitals suffering from shell shock due not only to the trauma of modern warfare but also, Bloom suggests, to the trauma of colonization. These structured absences, he asserts, were necessary in order to justify the French civilizing, humanitarian mission.

Bloom continues his analysis of the mobilization of colonial imagery for consumerist fantasy in his analysis of the utilization of cinema by French automobile manufacturers, who sponsored films featuring their vehicles. One site of European phantasmatic desire was the Saharan desert. Although there was talk of building a railway across the Sahara (and even throughout Francophone Africa, connecting disparate parts of the French empire), Andre Citroen sponsored Saharan “crossing” films in order to promote the use of his company’s “half-track vehicles,” which could be driven across sand. These films also promoted an image of the Sahara as a land of adventure where French tourists could indulge their exotic fantasies of the North African desert. Bloom argues that these crossing films marked a shift away from colonial conquest toward a civilizing mission that assumed that the presence of the French colonizers would continue indefinitely. At the same time, French expeditions returned with films and other artifacts to be put on display in the metropole, mapping and containing colonial difference in the process.

In addition to ethnographic and crossing films, educational films also proliferated during this period, including medical films intended to promote better hygiene among the colonized. In the early 1900s, the new awareness of the potentially dangerous spread of microbes gave rise to a wave of medical hygiene films made by French organizations like the Pasteur Institute and production companies like Pathé and Gaumont. These films were used as a means of internationalizing modern European medicine. In *Trypanosoma gambiense: Agent de la maladie du sommeil* (Gambian

Trypanosomiasis: The Agent of Sleeping Sickness, 1924), for instance, a production in which pioneer of ultramicroscopic filmmaker Jean Comandon participated, technologies of magnification combined with cinematic recording offered a means of making invisible dangers visible and of training colonized subjects in issues of public health. These films, however, were not ideologically neutral. In his analysis of *Trypanosoma gambiense*, a medical education film about sleeping sickness, Bloom shows how the African subjects are associated with sleeping sickness linked to contagion and flies, coding African illnesses as pathological and therefore demanding French intervention. Hygiene and sanitation became the basis for intervention into the everyday lives of colonized subjects. European modernity was asserted as the “cure” to both medical and social ills.

At the same time, however, the French authorities did not want cinematic images to have a subversive effect on either the French masses or audiences in the colonies. For this reason, the Colonial Film Committee was established to produce and reedit films for the 1931 Parisian Colonial Exhibition in such a way that the films would encourage the crowd to support colonialist imperatives. Thus most of the films shown at the exhibition were short educational films that, as a whole, projected a totalizing space of a unified French Empire. At the same time, the colonial authorities, for fear that indigenous crowds in the colonies might pick up the wrong ideas, censored certain films, particularly American films such as *The Mask of Zorro* (Fred Niblo, 1925), that were regarded as having a potentially disruptive effect on the colonized crowd. Bloom traces the way in which “imitative contagion” was perceived or imagined by colonial authorities who both hoped and feared that colonized people might replicate behaviors they saw on the screen.

The sheer quantity and density of names, titles, places, facts, and dates in Bloom's book sometimes threatens to overwhelm his arguments, and the level of detail suggests that this book will be most useful to a reader already well versed in the basics of French colonial media history who wants to dig deeper into the complex machinations of the colonial media apparatus. Bloom's overall conclusions are, to some extent, unsurprising: colonial documentaries supported and extended the colonial mission. However, his book situates these films within the context of postcards, advertisements, inventions, expeditions, exhibitions, psychiatric case studies, archives, and philosophies that, in combination, offer a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the role documentary film played in promoting the colonial attitude toward the colonized “other,” an attitude that is unfortunately replicated in media images even today.

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