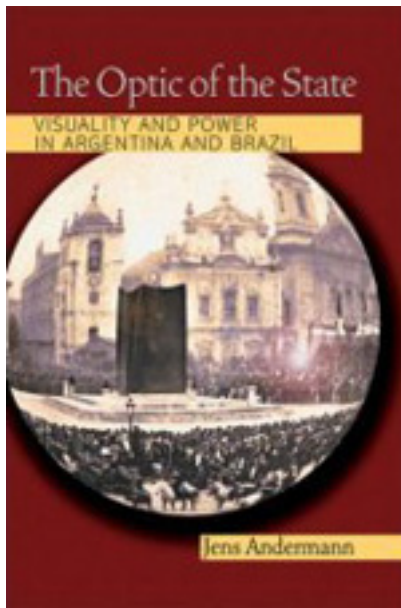


The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil by Jens Andermann

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In *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil*, author Jens Andermann starts with the premise of the state as a visual form, both as a way of looking and as the objects themselves that command observation. Andermann is specifically interested in visual representations of nature and history and how they are turned into figurations of the nation, ultimately giving them what he considers a hegemonic function. The book is split into two large sections: the first is dedicated to the museum, and the second to the map. He uses both map and museum figuratively and historically in order to think about boundaries of national space and its internal relations, and collecting and exhibiting as a symbolic practice of making sovereignty visible. Through his analysis of museum displays, photographic travelogues, landscape and historical paintings, maps, and atlases, Andermann unfolds what he coins the optic of the state.

Section one opens with a comparison of the transformation of Argentine and Brazilian museums of natural history over the second half of the last century, specifically the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro and the Museo de la Plata in Buenos Aires. From there, Andermann shifts his focus onto a specific event, Brazil's Anthropological Exhibition of 1882, in order to further elaborate the ways in which the relation of a gaze and its object might result in the construction of a national modernity. Andermann examines initial attempts at defining what he calls a "national heritage of historical memorabilia" and how they influence the place and status of the past in

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the present (9). He devotes special attention to the material documentation and display of indigenous peoples and their cultures in order to demonstrate their use-function as a means to sustain “an archival fiction of colonial and imperial power” (61).

In section two, Andermann compares two frontiers—the Brazilian Republic’s reappropriation of the *sertão* (the backlands of the interior) as the center of the nation and site of the new capital city, Brasilia, and Argentina’s expansion into Patagonia and the Chaco. While it is a section on maps, he devotes a significant portion of his analysis to photography, arguing that much of the violence of expansion is most strongly evident in the staging and execution of images. The book is almost exclusively historical in nature; it draws occasional correlations to modern day, but for the most part his argument unfolds retrospectively, looking back to the time of the frontier and to the museums’ foundational years. Ultimately, Andermann attempts to prove that the state of the visual form is not found in maps, museums, and photographs, but in the way of seeing that they called forth.

In many ways, this book is about the importance of the archive and the necessity of opening it up to new readings and multiple possibilities, and Andermann makes a compelling argument for the central role scientific and cultural institutions play in the shaping of national mythology. Andermann employs diverse methodological tools, and his work easily finds a home in visual theory, postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, history, and cultural and historical geography. His critical readings reference list reads like a “who’s who” of theorists, including Giorgio Agamben, Luis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Jonathan Crary, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari, and Susan Sontag, among many others.

Inevitably, one of the book’s biggest strengths lies in its archival research, and there are over 50 images of maps, photographs, and other visual texts spread throughout. His use of visual theories is careful and methodical, and the points he makes as he goes through each image are clear and articulate. This stands in interesting contrast to his larger claims, many of which read as unclear and overflowing with jargon. Furthermore, I was not always convinced that the arguments he made supported his conclusions, even while, in a larger sense, I often ultimately agreed with those same conclusions. This sticking point aside, Andermann is able to make a strong case for engaging these two often quite seemingly disparate countries side by side, and his interdisciplinary approach opens a space for new understandings of this time period. This text is a welcome addition to the field of scholarship interested in relations of power and space in Brazil and Argentina, and it proves once again the importance of looking for answers in unlikely places.

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