

Paulus Bijl, *Emerging Memory: Photographs of Colonial Atrocity in Dutch Cultural Remembrance* (PhD Utrecht University 2011; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 258 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 590 6, e-ISBN 9789048522019).

In this challenging book, Paulus Bijl seeks to explain Dutch reluctance to confront the (realities of the) nation's imperial past. The book builds on a revisionist discourse emerging within Dutch academe heralded in this journal for instance by Utrecht historian, Remco Raben (*BMGN-LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 5-30). In employing the concept of 'emerging memory', Bijl offers an explanation for the continuing national inability to articulate – to come to terms with – its colonial past and to show how reference to it emerges and is submerged over time in the wider context of the nation's 'cultural aphasia'.

Bijl elaborates this thesis through a discussion of the reception of a selection of eight iconic photographs over the last century. These record one moment in the long colonial war against the state of Aceh that defined the last expansionary phase of the Dutch imperial project. (For reasons not made clear the Dutch spelling, 'Atjeh', rather than the Indonesian and internationally accepted 'Aceh', is used throughout the book.) Although these images of military atrocities form a 'portable monument that provides access to a past possible world' (34) that in fact have always been available, they have mostly been 'hidden'. For Bijl, these photographs provide the 'imagetext' around which to construct a history of a national 'anxiety' (a term Bijl wants to emphasize) about its imperial past that continues to haunt the present.

Central to this thesis is what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the 'visual turn'. In this perspective the photograph is not a static or mute addition to a public discourse: rather, the photograph speaks, its voice re-awakened by each (generation's) viewing and reordering of perspectives, or framings. Mitchell has suggested that images can be important historical agents at 'turning points in human affairs and human understanding'; and that the exploration of such images can constitute 'a moral and political task' and a potential site for 'inter-disciplinary turbulence' ('An interview with W.J.T. Mitchell', <http://www.visual-studies.com/interviews/mitchell.html> (2 September 2015)). Bijl effectively demonstrates this by employing an examination of the reception over time of his selected group of photographs to critically

scrutinize the Dutch national narrative, the legacy of the generations of Dutch historians and politicians who have helped maintain it.

The account of the sightings (as it were) of the selected photographs is divided into four chapters that Bijl defines as turning points in Dutch history and historiography: the specific imperial moment (1904); the last decades of the East Indies colony (1904-1942); the immediate post-imperial decades (1949-1966); and the most recent past (1966-2010). After a tightly argued 'Introduction' that defines the rich theoretical framework for this discussion, the first substantive chapter, 'Imperial Frames 1904', establishes the historical context of the photographs under discussion. More than simply a record of military action, at the time they were produced the images already formed part of 'a whole set of scholarly, educational, economic, ethical and nationalist institutes and enterprises'. This context then forms the original 'imperial distribution of the perceptible within which the photographs were produced and semanticized' (76). Subsequent chapters, focussing on specific moments when 'gaps' opened up in the Dutch national narrative, show how 'the possible distribution of the perceptible' – the narrative frameworks that have characterised public discourse and which allow the photographs to be 'seen' or 'hidden' – have changed in the course of the twentieth century.

In Chapter Two, 'Epistemic anxiety and denial, 1904-1942', the photographs are considered in terms of how they were referenced in debates on 'ethical imperialism', a concept that long defined the way twentieth century Dutch colonial policy has been presented at home and abroad. Here '(t)he imperial perceptible order of the photographs clashed with an ethical distribution of the perceptible' as the photographs 'forcefully pulled emerging frames to the centre of (national, J.C.) attention' (133). In this period then, it is in the 'gap' between the old and new frames – in what elsewhere Bijl refers to as Derrida's '*pass-partout*' – that the photographs were able to 'speak'. It is the periodic recurrence of such confrontations that constitute the nation's 'aphasiac moments'. These are the moments when the Aceh photographs play their role as 'portable monuments' for what Bijl defines as the 'emerging memory'.

In Chapter Three that examines the decades following the official Dutch relinquishment of its East Indies colony, Bijl considers Dutch 'postcolonial memory', employing the term in what appears to have developed as a uniquely Dutch interpretation (see for instance Gert Oostindie, *Postkoloniaal Nederland* (Amsterdam 2010)). Central here is the post-war elaboration in the Netherlands of '*tempo doeloe*', a nostalgic image of the supposed good old days of untroubled, tropical, white colonial dominance. This was intersected by the first popular history of Dutch imperialism, Loe de Jong's 1966 televised (and later published) history of Dutch colonization of the Indies, reputedly watched by more than one third of the Dutch adult population. For Bijl this becomes a watershed moment when, for the first

time, 'the imagined mnemonic community of the Netherlands at least for one moment saw the 1904 massacres through the eyes of the Atjehnese' (183).

In the final section, Bijl examines how the photographs re-emerged in the national conversation on the colonial past since 1966. In particular, he is concerned to explain why, despite the growing prominence of a critical voice 'that wished to give colonial violence a prominent and structural position in Dutch cultural memory, (it, J.C.) failed to convince the nation that this should be the case'. He argues the same processes were again at work as before, except that, unlike at the beginning of the twentieth century, the 'anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial distribution of the perceptible had become more pronounced' (186).

Readers well acquainted with Dutch historiography may want to quibble with Bijl's choice or definition of 'frames' but given the book's broad scope and innovative approach, disagreement on this score should not be allowed to detract from the important overall argument of this work. On the other hand, notwithstanding the importance of the sophisticated theoretical framework that Bijl employs, it may be asked how much closer we come to understanding why the Dutch national narrative has been resistant to a critical review of its colonial past. While an understanding of the 'distribution of the perceptible' provides an effective means to survey the broader 'mood of the nation', a more immediate target might be to explain the continued institutional resistance to the critical theory that has long underpinned English-language scholarship on European imperialism.

Nevertheless, this book is essential reading for anyone with the slightest acquaintance with modern Dutch history. Bijl's book will undoubtedly also be valued by readers with an interest in visual theory for the model it provides for reading (atrocious) photographs.

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