

Rice on Clark (2018)

Clark, Catherine E. *Paris and the Cliché of History: The City and Photographs, 1860–1970*. Oxford UP, 2018, pp. ix-310, ISBN 978-0-19-068164-7

Shelley Rice, New York University

In late 1999, I was a Fulbright Senior Professor, teaching in Istanbul at Bo?aziçi University. Having just finished *Parisian Views* after twelve years of immersion, I was hyper-sensitized to the relationships and tensions between past and present that have characterized French culture since the nineteenth century, and aware of having been a player in shaping an ongoing public narrative about the capital's history. Turkey was, in this context, a shock. The assumptions I had made about the universality of the past's impact on the present, about the ubiquity of nostalgia in the formation of cultural awareness, were upended by students and friends. Living amidst an astonishing richness, a layering of historical time not only in public spaces, but also in the neighborhoods, winding streets and urban dwellings of this sprawling metropolis, my students were, quite simply, *differently* moved by their impending decay and loss. Sheep and bums lived amidst the stones of the country's ancient monuments, but the vagaries of time, and the prospect that the nation's historical achievements could simply disappear from the earth, did not give rise to mournful laments by my Turkish compatriots. Baudelaire's nostalgia seemed, in comparison to their fatalism, to be excessive, even melodramatic. It was then that I began to surmise that the relationships between the past and the present, between the living and the dead, in any given culture are constructed. This is the issue at the heart of Catherine Clark's *Paris and the Cliché of History*, which demonstrates that the complex stories the French have told themselves and the world comprise a great and ongoing saga, conscientiously assembled—one photo, one drawing, one poem, one *flâneur* or one archive at a time—since Haussmannization ruptured both time and space in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Describing a “social history” of photographs of Paris (one that emphasizes not the technical progress or stylistic evolution of images but their role in shaping Parisians' understanding of their past), Clark has embedded pictures within an institutional chronicle of their collection, preservation, and presentation in public museums and archives. This is an analysis of photos as material culture, where the collective uses and contexts of pictures are inscribed into their impact and meaning. Starting with the founding of the Musée Carnavalet and the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris during the Second Empire, and ending with the Vidéotheque de Paris, the author chronicles the changing role of documents, objects, art works, moving images, and especially photographs, which become increasingly important as both records of and portals to the past. “What is the history of Paris' photographic history?” she asks in the introduction. “What is the history of preserving, writing, exhibiting, theorizing, and imaging the history of Paris photographically? How, when and to what end did photographs become interesting as evidence...of the history of Paris—and to whom?” (1–2).

Interestingly, as Clark narrates the history of these institutions and collections, she tells a multi-faceted story of changing tastes and, more importantly, changing relationships between the living and the dead in the minds of Parisians. As media evolve, as drawings and paintings are supplanted by a trust in photographs as the keys to history, viewers too are changing, altering their understanding of time, of physical and emotional truth and of the relationship between memory and experience. With advancing technologies, the widespread dissemination of photographs of Parisian history—in books, newspapers, and magazines—that marks the early twentieth century begins to mediate inhabitants' experience of the present, overlaying visions of the past on contemporary life, transforming the city into a multi-dimensional, living museum. As Clark describes it, each new trauma or major milestone—the two World Wars, the Liberation of Paris, the weakening of France's global stature—has affected and altered the images produced and consumed, allowing Parisians to embody, modify, and interact with their changing self-awareness in time and space.

In fact, it is precisely this interactivity that I find so engaging about *Paris and the Cliché of History*. This book is not simply an institutional history, or a dry reading of the evolution of material artifacts in the age of mass reproduction. It is much more: the story of a dynamic culture of shifting images, a complex description of the ways in which people make photographs and then, in turn, are made by them. Pictures are PLAYERS in this tale, not inert objects, and *flâneurs* encounter not only their fellow *piétons* but also the mirages of the past that live among them. Clark's narrative begins with Charles Marville and Eugene Atget, those masters who preserved the traces of a receding age, and continues through *C'était Paris 1970* (a massive amateur photo contest which, in this context, seems somewhat anti-climactic), describing a present that relies on ubiquitous images of the past to access not only its contemporary self-image but its future.

Clark's conclusion, well-argued indeed, is that “pictures of Paris are not simply windows onto urban change; their production, preservation, and use are part and parcel of that history” (7). She is not alone in this understanding. There is a growing body of

scholarship, by Elizabeth Edwards, Joan M. Schwartz, and James R. Ryan among others, that traces the impact of photographs—both high art and popular imagery—on material culture and the historical imaginary. Catherine Clark's *Paris and the Cliché of History* makes a compelling and site-specific contribution to that ongoing, and eye-opening, discussion.

Volume: 48.1–2

Year:

- 2019