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## Martin Jay & Sumathi Ramaswamy's Empires of Vision

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By Lydia Pyne



[Empires of Vision: A Reader](#)

Edited by [Martin Jay](#) & [Sumathi Ramaswamy](#)

Duke University Press, 2014, 688 pages.

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something that you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.” – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

“Seeing is an art...which must be learnt.” – William Herschel

The relationship of history and empire is nothing if not complex. While the history of European empire has traditionally been written through conventional cultural frameworks – say, economy, politics, or even science – these *longue duree*-type narratives can leave a lot of imperial history untold. In the spaces between grand narratives live micro-histories, artifacts, and images. Oft-overlooked aspects of history like images, visions, and pictorial practices, add a tangible dimensionality to the complexity of empire. The integration of broad topics like empire and postcolonialism through smaller, more detailed slices of history is an ambitious endeavor. And *Empires of Vision: A Reader* is one such determined project.

In *Empires of Vision's* introduction, editor Sumathi Ramaswamy tells readers what brought the collection together. “The essays collected here consider the transformations undergone by these technologies, practices, and subjectivities as they get entangled in empire-building, nationalist reactions, postcolonial contestations, and transnational globalization.”<sup>[1]</sup> In other words, how does scholarship-writ-large deal with the material parts – artifacts? objects? practices? – that are inexorably intertwined with the very process of writing about “seeing” empire and its postcolonial existence? *Empires of Vision* brings those elements full circle – the essays examine how image and picture come together to make, convey, and experience empire. In order to tackle something so overwhelming, the editors remain firmly committed to the interdisciplinary and, indeed, cross-disciplinary nature of work that such a collection necessitates.

*Empires of Vision* highlights recent trends in scholarship that ask readers to consider the reciprocal nature of the link between “object” (or “image”) and “empire.” Ramaswamy asks “Does the empire not only speak and write back but also look back in unexpected ways, and at whom and with what effect?”<sup>[2]</sup> For the authors –21 of them in addition to the two editors –the images of empire, colony, and postcolonial history are not mere representations. The images are where the struggles for narrative control are painted, printed, and dissembled to audiences. The image, the editors suggest, exists in a very Derridean sense, where the history of the image is between the seeing and the looking. All of the authors describe the pattern of “seeing” and “looking” as having a particular historical contingency – that the temporal chronology of that same seeing and looking (of an image being made and interpreted) extends the archives of European nation-building and empire-making.

*Empires of Vision* is broken into two main sections (The Imperial Optic and Postcolonial Looking) with six sub-sections (Empires of the Palette; The Mass-Printed Imperium; Mapping, Claiming, Reclaiming, The Imperial Lens; Subaltern Seeing: An Overlap of Complexities; Regarding and Reconstituting Europe.) The twenty-one chapters address pictorial

semiotics, from Serge Gruzinski in “The Walls of Image” to Christopher Pinney’s treatment of photography in “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism.” Simon Gikandi’s “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference” and Krista Thompson’s “Picturesque in History and Art in the Postcolony” show that imperial history does not simply “stop” with the “end” of empire; rather, essays from the section Postcolonial Looking demonstrate that the colonial and postcolonial are dialectic parts of a historical relationship.

Editor Martin Jay argues, “It is clear that no simple generalisation about the “imperial eye” or “colonial gaze” will do justice to the plethora of different examples we have of the visual cultures in different periods and empires.”<sup>[3]</sup> Each author brings a unique set of research and topics to the table.

Nicholas Thomas’s chapter, “Objects of Knowledge: Oceanic Artifacts in European Engravings,” seems to balance all of the thematic threads of the essay collection. Thomas notes, “The particular power of engravings may also be derived from the long-prevalent notion that visual images have a special capacity to convey truth that words do not.”<sup>[4]</sup> What Thomas’s chapter conveys, interestingly, is the notion that “truth” can be found in – or at least, that narrative can be constructed around – the explanatory power that actual, tangible images had in networks of European empires and their systems of exchange. These images – engravings in the mid-eighteenth century to film in the twentieth – have traditionally been within the textual domain of anthropologists and art historians. Thomas’s take is to refocus how images of non-Europeans have operated within the realms of private collectors and other less institutional agendas. For example, Thomas cites the popularity of images of non-Europeans from Captain James Cook’s 1770s voyages and that Cook’s books and similar voyage works were exceptionally popular and frequently reprinted for the audience of empire, once the images were physically present. For Thomas, the image as an object has a particular staying power.

In “Mapping an Exotic World,” Benjamin Schmidt examines what, exactly, Dutch geography of the eighteenth century mapped. Schmidt notes the universal attraction to eighteenth-century Dutch geography and asks the reader to consider how the framing and creation of the map, itself bounded notions of materiality and ideas of empire. “Consider the fantasy cabinet of Jan van Kessel, which purports to portray a collector’s ideal ... Whatever the panel’s many charms, one is hard pressed to identify a single them, or a signal object, that draws the view into this undeniably compelling collection. On the contrary, one is struck by the abundance and variety of stuff and by the shapeless bric-a-brac quality of its arrangement.”<sup>[5]</sup> In such an example, the “fantasy cabinet” (or cabinet of wonder/cabinet of

curiosities) is the material manifestation of exotic and the image depictions of things within the cabinet further exemplify wonder and amazement at the reaches of colonial empire.[\[6\]](#)

If we pursue the idea that images are objects, then the rhetoric used by Thomas and Schmidt shows that these images have a very deep life history or even a biological-cultural identity. Early twentieth-century philosopher Ernst Cassirer argued that understanding very nature of such objects required such an integrative approach. Although Thomas and Schmidt (or the other nineteen essayists in *Empires of Visions*) don't specifically call out Cassirer's *Objekt*-philosophy or notions of object-ness, there is a sense that each object (or, more specifically, each image) contains a physical, psychological, and cultural element – Cassirer's writing intended that triad to include history.

In other words, it isn't enough to simply have a physical tangibility and psychological meaning; to really read and understand objects, one has to read and understand their history. "For the physical, the psychic, and the historical do in fact necessarily belong to the concept of the cultural object [*Objekt*]. They are the three elements from which it is constructed...It must be situated historically in its place in time, it must be examined with respect to age and origin, and it must be understood as the expression of certain fundamental psychic attitudes, with which we can, in some way, empathize. Thus physical, historical, and psychological concepts continually enter into the description of a cultural object."[\[7\]](#) For projects like *Empires of Vision*, it is difficult to imagine any essay in it not conveying this kind of historical reading; this seems to be at the very core of the collection's scholarship.

The power of *Empires of Vision* is in its trans-disciplinary scope, but is also in its ambition. The themes and essays come together and prod the reader to consider the multi-dimensionality of image and empire. It moves beyond mere collections and museums; it moves beyond observed and observer. *Empires of Vision* examines the nature of empire through oft-forgotten and frequently overlooked historical characters.

It gives voice and presence to those who are visually depicted in the projects of empire writ large, but it also gives presence to the act and staying power that such depiction created. The editors leave us with their assessment, "Without attending to the role visual cultures does play, no history of imperialism can ever claim to be complete. Nor, so these essays also make clear, can a history of Western visually afford to look past to defining role played by the dialectics of recognition and misrecognition, gaze and countergaze, visibility and invisibility that at once undergirded and undermined the imperialist project."[\[8\]](#)

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[1] Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Empires of Vision: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014), pp. 1.

[2] Ibid, pp. 3.

[3] Ibid., p. 617-618.

[4] Ibid., pp 142.

[5] Ibid., pp. 258.

[6] Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (Zone Books, 1998).

[7] Ernst Cassirer, *The Logical of the Cultural Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 57.

[8] Jay and Ramaswamy, *Empires of Vision*, p 618-619.

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