
Book Review

Reviewed by Satwinder Bains

Email: satwinder.bains@ufv.ca

The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories

by: Sten Pultz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen and

Moritz Schramm (Editors)

Published 2015

by I.B Tauris Co. Ltd.

6 Salem Rd, London W2 4BU, UK, 346pp

ISBC: 9781754533106

The editors of this volume explore a diversity of artistic representation in society to address migration by providing an in-depth exploration into the extenuating transformation of the world's history, aesthetics and its politics. The book provides a significant academic contribution at this time, in this decade as complex migration crises make headline news in the world. The plurality of perspectives provided by the authors bring into sharp focus the dilemmas of xenophobia, border security, social exclusion of migrant (immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers) community settlements and the complications that arise from othering in cross-cultural settings.

In the three sections of the book, the intersectionality of politics, aesthetics and history across the disciplines and in academic discourse is investigated through the tropes of culture and migration. In part one, the politics of borders as artefacts of national sovereignty which exclude those seeking entry (aliens), and of othering their claims to territory by placing them in detention camps, compellingly highlights the rise of xenophobia within structures of power based on difference. However, in opposition to borders, globalisation's impact on art and culture questions the traditional idea of the polis as migration, movements, mobility and multiplicity of experiences have produced the normality of transnational post-migrant realities in urban centres. This reality has in particular forced the exploration of representation as never before where art is socially and actively experienced by many, pushing the boundaries of a domain that has traditionally been the purview of the bourgeoisie. Vanguard succession has been replaced by personal identification and meaning making by the subaltern with, "a space which serves as a platform and laboratory for unconventional thinking and design in collaborative forms" (Terkessidis, p.76). While migration forces the creation of new identities for individuals they seek to also retain authenticity even as they struggle with great impermanence, contradictory lives and multiplicity of cultural expectations and experiences. Activist artists, playwrights, writers and producers of aesthetic interventions and political transgressions are immersed in portraying the universalism of struggle and who would fittingly say "home is where the struggle is" (Schramm, p.87). Art as an expression of migration and its ensuing interactions between diverse peoples, cultures

and politics comes from the inside forcing the outside to peer into the intricacies and make sense of it.

In the second section of the book, the editors move the aesthetics of universalism and the ontologically limited world around us to a global recognition of exclusion, un-rootedness and hybridity amongst people. The idea to move away from the artistic object to creating a transgressed understanding in order to transcend cultural difference towards global citizenship is explored in this section. By way of example, cultural theorist and critic, Mieke Bal suggests an aesthetic understanding by deploying strategic universalism, the intercultural acts of exoticism, exclusion, condescension, polite arrogance, and ultimately indifference can be avoided (p.147). Within this frame, migration is examined as the internal idea of leaving behind a state of being (family, community, intimacy, life and living) and the external expectations of unaffectedly starting anew bereft of and severed from the original form, even as most human movements aspire towards similar life trajectories as everyone else. However, the human vulnerability of migration journeys cannot be underscored. An example is the US-Mexico border where a literal wall to keep out the Mexicans itself has become the artists' canvas. Their many installations portray the struggles of undocumented illegal forays by thousands of Mexicans every year across the hostile, sporadically walled and patrolled US border spaces, even while guns and drugs move across apparently seamlessly. Installations that seek reconciliation question how many an imaginary line across various nation states is demarcated by tall walls that seek to keep out the 'other'. With intense securitisation of borders and human security seen as that which keeps the individual safe from the 'other', irregular immigrants face perilous seas and journeys, living precariously both in the past and present at any given time. The politically charged yet ethical aestheticisation of these journeys is to be emphasised so that the kind of trope that suggests that these migrants have no agency and are passive actors in the market of human trafficking can be countered. Film studies professor Eva Jorholt posits that films can expose the unsubstantiated dominant difference discourse as a social construct since we all share the same basic human features and experiences (togetherness-in-difference). A greater appreciation of how difference can produce a potential for rich cultural diversity is at the heart of cinema's aesthetic artistic exploration in films like *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Cheba Louisa*, etc. which seek to subvert the burden of representation by embracing cultural differences. In a companion manner, the narrative art form has provided answers to the question that remains with us: how do we as humans experience each other and how does art contribute? The chapters in this section construct the discursive space and place where reality and imagination come together.

In the third section, history and memory come together to tease apart that history that is negligent and neglectful of a full record and memory. As artists of colour and minority artists work to negotiate their spaces that supports a continuous narrativisation of history, and in a truly authentic manner (as in post-migrant aesthetics), the democratisation of views come full centre for scrutiny and rehabilitation in cultural and artistic representation. "The transmission of cultures of survival does not occur in the ordered canon of national European cultures but is constantly reinvented as new and the future, rather than a long-standing historical fact" (p. 251). This conflict where certain minor histories are always just occurring negates the long history of diverse (racial and ethnic) peoples in the region, subsumed by dominant narratives, images and portrayals. Artists in theatre, for example, are working to invigorate and re-call the capital that is history by interjecting their long forgotten and ignored stories and experiences into the construction

of exclusively portrayed dominant historical records. A perfect example is how photographer Geresht (p.259) uses ambiguity in his photographs to suggest that while almost total recall of any memory (e.g., violent migrations) is impossible, remembering is vital to making that which is absent present and through this the possibilities of a revised history are explored. As well, artists explore how urban migrations interface with physical metropolis spaces brings change to hitherto ascribed meanings of space and time by bearing witness to new identities being formed through the changing ebb and flow of humanity. In this section of the book, the discursive self and the other diverge in a number of spatial art projects where the question of difference is aesthetically positioned against the backdrop of literature, photography, theatre, cinema, art, documentaries and other representations. While migrations have the power to create national narratives, the book presents compelling theoretical discourses how art pays homage to the vast and dense plurality of interlinked perspectives related to memory, politics, journeys, conflicts, identities, spaces and time.