

Rob Kroes, *Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History*

Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2007. 199 p.

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- 1 In his latest opus, Rob Kroes gives us a very personal meditation on images, as well as a powerful and engaging semiotic voyage through America and Europe. Although the subtitle reads “Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History”, it is too modest to the point of being misleading. In this book Kroes writes with “elegance, wisdom, and originality” (to quote Richard Pells’s reaction to the book) as the true polyglot humanist he is, a man who has extensively traveled throughout the US and Europe, and he gives us a great lesson in cultural understanding.
- 2 The singular feature of the book is that it does not start in the traditional academic fashion but with a direct, personal and most intimate questioning on “the image” and its relation to the author’s life, memory and love. Kroes, as Barthes before him in *La Chambre claire*, tells us about facing images of the loved one when the loved one has just died. In a personal chapter that reads as part testimony part intellectual autobiography, he revisits his life in photographs (ch.1). Through the story of his wife, his marriage, and his life as an Americanist — all of which are woven in/with pictures — he extends his own private sphere to make it part of our shared common space, opening his family album to the world of his students and readers. Kroes’s main thesis is that although there is no perfect continuity between the public and the private spheres, nowhere better than in photographs does one lead into the other— which is why he devotes his second chapter to the function of photographs in the private correspondance of Dutch immigrants to the US, showing in conclusion that their images are not so much pictures of the present or records of the past as “visions of the future”. In this field, as Kroes himself grants, the material is particularly complex to handle as significant series are difficult to create, but his approach gains in insight what it lacks in depth.

- 3 Many of his eight chapters begin with broad synthetic summaries (of the history of images, of the history of the United States, of American images) which make the book excellent reading for students who can gain a much better understanding from those welcome contextualizations. The old hand will pass those quickly but will relish the rich, subtle and stimulating propositions that Kroes offers in the course of his discussion of the material. “History of Photography / Photography of History” for instance ends with an illuminating analysis of the images of Kim Phuc, the world famous napalm girl (Nick Ut photographer, 1972), and of the summary execution of a Vietcong prisoner by a South Vietnamese Police chief (Edward T. Adams photographer, 1968). In particular, Kroes shows how the photographer selected a particular shot with the purpose of iconicizing the image by erasing the presence on the (real) scene of other cameramen, and thus making the encounter in the image of the viewer with the scene elemental (or self-enunciating, as it were). Kroes then invites us to look at portraits of soldiers in the Civil War, which enables him to raise the issue of what produces the “lifelike quality of photographs” and to conclude that their iconic quality is gained by the fabrication (or “arrangement” as he puts it) of reality itself (98).
- 4 When he turns to Cold War photography, it is with a view to exploring the way in which the production and consumption of images affect their very nature, thus reintegrating historicity in his discussion (as historicity has worn a little thin in most discussions on iconicity). Indeed when focusing on reception (and here particularly, as he starts with a most personal approach of images) and calling forth Barthes’ *punctum*, there is always a risk of falling into the idiosyncratic perception of the picture as a trace of the reader’s unconscious, thus turning “reading” into something closer to a personal projection test than a social act. This leads Kroes to discuss American cultural diplomacy in the Cold War and one-worldism with a particular focus on a photo show, the *Family of Man*, which, together with Marianne Hirsch and Eric Sandeen, he shows us to be a much more ambiguous statement than some of the left-wing critics, Roland Barthes among them, had it. Similarly, in a most stimulating and original chapter (“An eye foreign eye”), he casts a fresh look at the publishing history of Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, and proposes an apt comparison of Robert Frank and William Klein. Chapter 7, “Imaginary Americas in Europe’s Public Spaces”, may well be the true climax of the book’s argument, at least as I read it. The last chapter (ch. 8), on 9/11, did not fully convince me although Kroes makes a two important points in it: he asserts that in the experience of the 9/11 tragedy, still images were more important than videos (a point that I fully share), and that the weight of the experience of WWII on the visual perception of injustice, through “iconic memories”, whether in the Middle East, the Balkans or now Irak, makes European and American perception of what has been happening in these recent conflicts (and the reaction of public opinions to it) radically divergent (a point I would quite willingly share as I am also convinced of the decisive shaping force of WWII on European consciousness, even 60 years after the event). It is also for him the occasion to tell us a most personal, moving and traumatic event of his boyhood in occupied Holland which reminded me of Harry Mulish’s *The Assault*. To come back to chapter 7, a complex question we all face as Europeans is raised through the study of the iconographic representation of America in Europe. Rather than facing the vast and unsolvable question of the Americanization of the world, or that of the export of American culture, or even worse of American cultural imperialism, Kroes chooses to look at those images as *signs* with the eyes and the mind of a semiotician and of a European citizen who knows America so well that he also feels

perfectly at home there. And this he does through many personal observations in various European countries. The question he raises right at the beginning of the chapter sounds like a provocation: “Where does Europe end?” (143) In fact he has us realize that far from being an imperialism of forms, the iconography of America (read “the United States”) is probably *what* makes us European. But also that the very American experience should help us rethink the borders of Europe, just as the reading of Edward Atiyah’s *The Arabs* made the young undergraduate Kroes rethink the borders of his world view. This meditation leads him to make a cogent statement on a real program for a true European curriculum with a view to forging a historicized, comparative, and multi-cultural consciousness of our Europeanness as opposed to a static and chauvinistic European identity (151-52). And in this process, looking critically and politically (that is, for Kroes, *semiotically*) at Europeanness means using both “the” East, “the” South and the United States as partners in an uninterrupted dialogue.

- 5 Kroes is a true Renaissance man, atuned to the world around him, finely sensitive to signs, a man of the world, and, as we begin to discover in this autobiography of a European Americanist, a true guide.

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Thèmes : Comptes rendus

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