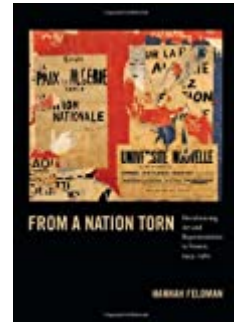




Hannah Feldman. *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. xvi + 317 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5356-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5371-3.



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Hannah Feldman's *From a Nation Torn* critically addresses mainstream art-historical approaches to French modernism and the cultural context that shaped its production and reception. Specifically, Feldman contests the dominant appellation *postwar* as describing the history of France from the late 1940s into the 1960s. The visual culture of this period, argues Feldman, should instead be considered *art-during-war*, given France's uninterrupted involvement in imperial wars in Southeast Asia and North Africa between the conclusion of WWII and Algerian independence in 1962. Focusing on the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), Feldman analyzes the complex interactions between political philosophies, public culture, and visual production during the decades of decolonization, highlighting the ways in which the dissolution of France's colonial empire impacted the development of arts and aesthetic theory within French national borders. In so doing, she seeks not only to reimagine the history of French modernism as *transnational*, influenced and rooted in the experience of the colonies as well as the metropole, but to position *art objects* and the visualities they engender as primary sites of theorization and analysis, rather than as secondary or tertiary epiphenomena in the broader context of modern French history (pp. 8,15).

This framework of inquiry supports Feldman's tightly woven dialogue between official national culture, contemporary art practices, and photographic representations of political events. She begins with a nuanced and fascinating historical analysis of André Malraux, the first French minister of cultural affairs, who served this role for a decade beginning in 1959. This analysis, which spans two chapters, addresses Malraux's early interest in the *psychology of art* and its later impact on his urban planning policies. Feldman here underscores Malraux's belief in art as a *universal* phenomenon, the primary value of which was the nebulously defined *style* rather than anything culturally or historically specific, and the ways in which such a belief, *instead of serving a public*, would come to limit and proscribe it (p. 40). She connects this exaltation of style and its attendant negation of historical specificity to France's contemporary need to redirect its national identity, suggesting that a *new focus on culture* was meant to obscure recent imperial failings while protecting itself against their implications (p. 43). Furthermore, she cites its influence on architectural preservationism and urban planning under Malraux, which restored and rebuilt areas of Paris in a way that *drew upon the imperial habits* of colonial urbanisms equally rendered as *style* (p. 62). In-

deed, a primary contribution of this work is its proposal of new and compelling parallels between contemporary architectures in France and in the colonies; here, Feldman stays true to her conception of transnational modernism in suggesting that currents of influence flowed both ways.

Concluding her discussion of Malraux, Feldman extends her inquiry into conceptions of urbanism to address the works of Isidore Isou and Raymond Hains. In her discussion of Isou, she reconsiders the limitations of Lettrism, the artistic movement of which he was a founding member and in which he was active during the decades of decolonization. She argues that Lettrism is the aural and visual fabrication of a supposedly universal culture that ultimately works to obscure alterity, and is thus bound by the same kinds of humanist universalisms seen in Malraux's conceptions of art and architecture (p. 204). Conversely, Feldman sees the collages of Raymond Hains as explicitly historically and politically grounded in French resistance to the war in Algeria. Here, however, Feldman criticizes the dominant scholarly tendency to accuse Hains of having missed an opportunity to pronounce a grander, more articulate and politically acute critique in the name of the marginalized (p. 155). Instead, she locates the work's success precisely in its ambiguity, which acknowledges the impossibilities of representation inherent in both the spaces of the art world and in modern electoral politics.

Feldman's penultimate chapter discusses the events of October 17, 1961, when thousands of Algerians took to the streets of Paris in a demonstration orchestrated by the FLN that was subsequently and violently quelled by the police. Feldman's account focuses mainly on the photographic representation of this event, focusing on the ways in which this widespread protest constituted a radical move by Algerians in France to reclaim and assert their citizenship rights in the context of urban public space. In her discussion of this demonstration, Feldman distances herself from the vast majority of scholarship on the subject, which has largely argued that photographs of the events did not circulate in mainstream French media. Using a contemporary issue of the news magazine *Paris Match* as a primary case study, Feldman argues that images of the demonstration, while certainly circumscribed by the police, did appear in mainstream publications. These images fall into two genres: one that situates the protestors in plenitude within the spaces of the city and another which depicts catastrophe or horror, including dead bodies and evidence of police bru-

ality (p. 192). Though the status of the subject in each genre is radically different, Feldman argues, they equally represent the incursion of these subjects into the visual field and their repurposing of the circuits of capitalist consumer visibility in favor of a decolonizing visibility. Carrying her critique into the present moment, Feldman remarks that the images circulating in recent texts on the subject of the demonstration emphasize police brutality to the detriment of Algerian agency. This is not to say that she denies the reality of such violence; on the contrary, she reconsiders the gruesome repression of these protests as inextricable from questions of visibility and exclusion from civic space, plotting another fruitful coordinate in her eloquent discussion of Parisian urbanism and cultural belonging. Compellingly, she argues that the eclipse of images of the marchers' confirmation of their right to the city in favor of their victimization encourages the sense that the most important aspect of the demonstration remains its suppression, thus continuing to pace the question of history and its narrative out of the hands of those Algerians who protested (p. 193).

In conclusion, Feldman shifts her attention to a contemporary film, Michael Haneke's *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005), in which a Parisian intellectual comes to understand that his life is under surveillance by an Algerian French man who had been orphaned during the 1961 demonstration. The film evokes these events only by their absence, and according to Feldman encourages the viewer to consider the history of the imperial and colonial representations that motivates willful blindness and which a history of aesthetic favoritism enables (p. 208). She thus returns to her essential project, which she has successfully accomplished over the course of this book: making visible the intersections between universalizing aesthetic principles, French imperialistic representation, and the collective memory of a fraught period in French history.

Overall, Feldman's work represents a powerful synthesis of historical and theoretical methodologies that truly exemplifies responsible interdisciplinary scholarship. Drawing from fields of social history, philosophy, spatial and postcolonial theories, as well as from art history, Feldman offers a promising glimpse at future studies of European modernism, which will necessarily engage such a spectrum in order to grapple with similar histories of overlooked alterities. Ultimately, this work represents an important step towards the project of decolonizing art, described in Feldman's own words as learning to see in plain sight what is already there (p. 219).

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