

BOOK REVIEW

**CARLA RODRÍGUEZ
GONZÁLEZ & RUBÉN
VALDÉS MIYARES, EDS.
*HISTORIA Y
REPRESENTACIÓN EN LA
CULTURA GLOBAL*
OVIEDO: KRK
EDICIONES, 2008**

*David Walton
Universidad de Murcia*

How do you adequately sum up twenty eight sophisticated contributions to a book in a short review? You can't – especially (and ironically) when the volume to be considered often questions the whole idea of globalizing histories. However, what is possible is a series of ruminations on the first part of the book as an introduction to the kinds of questions and arguments the reader can expect from the rest of the book. Thus, I begin with an apology to the contributors who may feel offended that their particular contribution has only been mentioned in passing – it is to be understood not as a form of devaluation but as a sign of the impossibility of doing any kind of justice to a book of this kind. This is intensified by the sheer variety of the theoretical models which now constitute cultural studies and, as will be seen below, the very wide range of subjects that the book addresses.

Considering for a moment the importance of Carla Rodríguez González's and Rubén Valdés Miyares' *Historia y representación en la cultura global* (2008) to cultural studies one might refer to a new anthology of cultural studies edited by Michael Ryan (2008). Ryan offers readers over 1300 pages of essays divided to thematic sections as varied as Policy and Industry, Place, Space and Geography, Identity, Lifestyle and Subcultures and Transnationality, Globalization and Post-Coloniality (a list that far from exhausts the book's scope). Even a superficial

glance demonstrates that a very large number of the contributors are aware of the importance of historical contexts and appreciate the highly problematic notion of representing “history.” What Ryan’s *Cultural Studies: An Anthology* leaves out, however, is precisely what González and Valdés put into their anthology: a series of self-conscious meditations on the nature of history itself. This does not weaken Ryan’s book but it helps to situate and explain the importance of *Historia y representación*.

Historia y representación continues the publications that have grown out of the annual Culture and Power conferences that have taken place in Spain and Portugal since 1995 and this volume is a selection of the papers given at the twelfth conference dedicated to “Plots of History.” Those who have attended the Culture and Power conferences will be aware that considerable interest has been shown over the years in the forces of globalization (see especially Cornut-Gentille *et al.* 2005) and the book under discussion brings the concept into useful alignment with the idea of the representation of history. The volume brings together essays written by distinguished academics working in Spain and a number of international scholars of the stature of Hayden White and Keith Jenkins.

As the editors indicate in their introduction, the essays collected together in this book are organized into five independent sections, each one exploring the relations between historical discourses and other strategies of representation found in contemporary culture. The five sections correspond to: (1) Theories of History; (2) Gender Perspectives on History; (3) History and Cinema; (4) Myths and Literary Representations of History and, (5) Histories and Cultural Identities. The editors provide a very useful introduction (written in Spanish) which not only outlines the basic contents of the book but asks a number of questions which many of the contributors to this collection address. The questions include: What is the role of history today? Is it still possible to think of a reliable relation between events and their textual expression? Should history be regarded as another literary genre, or are there reasons to believe that it belongs to a different narrative domain? Is global history possible in a world that is increasingly globalized?

The first section of this volume, dedicated to theories of history, begins with a collaborative effort in which Rubén Valdés sets up a number of key questions, related to those outlined above, which the other contributors are asked to respond to. Very simply put, the questions to be addressed are as follows. To begin with, how far do cultural studies and postmodern historiographical approaches differ? Thinking within the binaries of language and “the real,” of the two approaches, which may “claim a more practical commitment to current issues?” (Rodríguez & Valdés 2008:22) and finally, if there is such a thing as an “irreducible real” (Belsey

2005:60), should it, or could it, take the form of global history? As the editors indicate in their introduction, these questions provide an analytical framework for the rest of the essays in the collection while reflecting some of the most important controversies within cultural studies and historiography.

A warning: if readers expect the contributors of this collaborative essay to answer these three questions in depth then they will be disappointed. When reading this essay, it should be kept in mind that it grew out of a round table debate and the limitations that this kind of forum imposes on the speakers (the interventions tend to be constrained by time and are sometimes uneven in length). Nevertheless, each speaker responds with observation of sufficient interest to warrant careful reading and each one tends to emphasize certain questions (except Keith Jenkins who reflects on all three –see below). My purpose here is not to outline the intricacies of each response (and thus fall into a Borgian trap where the map can no longer be distinguished from the terrain it proposes to represent) but to indicate some of the points I think are of particular interest.

Hayden White is the first to respond and, as a historiographer, doesn't try to distinguish postmodern historiography from cultural studies approaches. He prefers to consider what kind of history might be written in a so-called "global age." White's approach also includes the idea of challenging those who refuse to acknowledge that phenomena like global warming and the capitalist culture of waste are contemporary problems that need to be addressed. However, in line with his many books dedicated to problematizing the mechanics of narrating history (e.g. White 1973, 1978a, 1978b, 1999), White poses more questions –and rather than offer a neat set of answers, asks how global history might be possible, if we need it, if it is necessary or desirable, or even conceivable. For White, following thinkers like Derrida, "the globe" is fundamentally an ideological construction that needs to be deconstructed. In this way White combines postmodern deconstructive strategy with a politically committed approach which refuses to side-step the political implications of theory. It is this commitment to theory and politics that I believe unites most of the contributors to this collection and which helps to give the book its relevance and sense of importance.

Sara Martín, in considering the paradigms associated with cultural studies and postmodern historiography, laments that in our attempts to understand ideas like globalization, we are still working with concepts that are not only "deeply unstable" but are in need of renewal. Martín introduces an unexpected turn in the debate by claiming that the genre of Science Fiction is ahead of academic debate in so far as it has already provided a useful paradigm for the understanding of globalization. This is because it has often conceived of the Earth as a single, if highly complex, entity

as if seen at a distance by a Martian. Sara Martín, by showing how cyberpunk has been able to fictionalize how U.S. military and multinational corporate interests are implicated in globalized culture, combines (like White and the other contributors) theoretical awareness and critical acumen. Furthermore, Martín's awareness of Japanese cyberpunk, in the form of *animie* and *manga*, offers other possibilities for understanding globalization while her reflections on contemporary Catalonia help to outline where postmodern historiography and cultural studies may be found lacking.

Keith Jenkins valiantly and provocatively addresses all three of the questions proposed by Rubén Valdés. Jenkins begins by deconstructing the terms of the first question by making the point that there is no necessary connection between any kind of history and any specific way of realizing it. In this way the discourses that make up cultural studies don't have a method that can be defined in any simple way – it takes (like feminism or any other approach) what it *needs*. This basic point leads to a brief discussion of the implications of the postmodern historiographical position which challenges the empirical approaches and questions their assumption that the “real” has a particular purpose or meaning. In addressing Valdés' second question, Jenkins prefers to ask (among other things) “who, in specific social formations, has the power to realize the putative real?” (Jenkins in Rodríguez & Valdés 2008:32). This leads to another provocative and pragmatic observation: if you are looking for which theoretical approach is the most practical with regard to the present, it is the one that best allows you to achieve whatever goal you set for yourself.

To the third question (on the possibility of global history) Jenkins develops a number of interesting ideas partially indebted to Baudrillard and concludes that global history would inevitably be yet another failed representation and, if attempted, would have to be governed by the three coordinates of “complexity, particularity and awareness” (33).

Felicity Hand's intervention, like Sara Martín's, tends to be more wary of the claims of postmodern historiography and, like White's and Jenkins', combines both a theoretical and political set of reflections. Hand asks if global history is actually just a euphemism for Western history which reduces everything to a convenient Western paradigm in order for the dominant imperial powers to organize society and nature “for their own benefit.” The last phrase is Simon During's (2005:53) and Hand's use of it forces readers to consider how Western paradigms, and particularly postmodern approaches, can be seen as culturally specific and self-serving. She does this by pointing out that in traditional African thinking, where “reason,” “man” and “history” were never made absolutes, a postmodern crisis makes no sense –it

being in Denis Ekpo's words "nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of overfed and spoilt children of hypercapitalism" (Ekpo 1995:122)

In this way Hand poses a challenge to postmodern historiography from the cultural margins and illustrates her ideas further by interrogating the narratives of the 1964 Revolution in Zanzibar to reflect on the central question of whether global history is either necessary or desirable. The vicissitudes of Zanzibar's history, as Hand develops it, complicate any straightforward reply to this question. Furthermore, the theoretical tensions, dangers and ambiguities are brought out when Hand emphasizes Dipesh Chakabarty's arguments that while universals are necessary "to produce critical readings of social injustices" these same universals and their analytic procedures "ultimately evacuate the place of the local" (Chakabarty 2000:254-5). So it is that Hand re-emphasizes the need for history to recognize that the *now* of history contains "a multiplicity of presents" and that the *here* implies a "plurality of contexts" (Hand in Rodríguez & Valdés 2008:36).

If the consideration of these questions is of interest then I believe that the rest of the book will prove to be of great value. The theoretical impulses of the opening debate are continued in two additional papers in the section on theories of history which consider the ontological, epistemological and ethical consequences of postmodern approaches to history and the importance and challenges of contemporary history, if it is to have any kind of future. Both of these are written in Spanish, as are almost half the contributions to the volume (including the introduction), something which means that the book may also be of considerable value to those working in areas outside English Studies –where students may not have the linguistic competence to negotiate the complexities of the contributions written in English.

Following the first section on theory are the thematic sections, named above. In these sections there is an impressive range of theoretical and cultural reference. However, the book does not focus obsessively on Anglo-Saxon cultures taking in, as it does, the historical novel written by Spanish women in the last few decades, a consideration of the plots of Chicana History, the plight of widows in India, the construction of tourist identity in Northern Spain, history as satire in Austria, the representation of trauma and catastrophe in films in the ex Soviet Union, and historical reconstruction in African cinema.

The section on Gender Perspectives on History includes the first three essays mentioned in the last paragraph and pieces on forgotten queer identities; the historical victimization of women with relation to the successive privatization of land in the Renaissance and in the era of globalization, and the violation of working-class women's rights in Victorian England. It also includes reflections on

women, power and manipulation in the works of Elizabeth Bowen and Muriel Spark. What tends to unite these essays is an abiding interest in gender, and especially in the way women have been manipulated, repressed or reflected negatively within cultures that systematically privilege men.

The essays collected in the section on History and Cinema explore (including the representation of trauma and catastrophe in the ex Soviet Union, and the historical reconstruction in African cinema, mentioned above) the theoretical question of film genre and constructions of history. Other themes are structured around interracial intimacy in US cinema, the ideological bias of Raj revival films in 1980s Britain, and the importance of cinematic representations in the perpetuation of a mythical Scotland. The section is completed by a meditation on how cinema is able to revisit the Shakespearian history plot to explore more contemporary contexts of politics and power.

The fourth section, dedicated to Myths and Literary Representations of History, takes in, like the sections on gender and cinema, very broad historical perspectives. The first essay takes up the question of how the Middle Ages have been constructed and how these representations can be seen as distortions or myths perpetuated into the present through popular cultural forms like film and comics. Related essays are one dedicated to an analysis of the witch, where past representations are related to present conceptions of this “myth” and another which explores the historical fate of terror effects within narrative. Further contemporary issues are reflected in studies dedicated to the plotting history with relation to historiographic metafiction and science fiction, the “myth” of the “British way of life,” and the making of the presidential myth in the United States.

The section on Histories and Cultural Identities rounds off the volume and kicks off, as it were, with an essay that examines the relations between football songs and the construction of cultural identity with relation to the Scottish team Celtic Football Club. Following this is an essay on how, within the discourses that promote tourism, “plots” are constructed which create identities of place –in this case “Green Spain”– that is, the cases of Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria and the Basque Country. Other contributions to this section consider the historical construction of the intellectual as cultural history, space as a social construction (with relation to the denaturalization of space within the work of Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja) and, finally, an essay on the Austrian writer Karl Kraus, which sees Kraus’s output as media critique and satire as history.

The above list far from represents the thematic limits of this collection and by way of conclusion I would say that, within a carefully structured volume, there is something for just about everyone. If I had to quibble with the book I would say

that not all the contributors reflect adequately on the questions that were to provide an analytical framework for this collection (What is the role of history today? Is it still possible to think of a reliable relation between events and their textual expression? Should History be regarded as another literary genre, or are there reasons to think that it belongs to a different narrative domain? Is global History possible in a world that is increasingly globalized?). There is, then, a certain unevenness with relation to these stated aims and some contributors don't reflect on the key terms of the book's title. For example, some of the writers might have been asked to consider the relations between History and representation and others to outline in what ways their contributions may relate to the notion of global, or increasingly globalizing, culture(s).

It is also possible to question the placement or inclusion of some of the essays –some of them seem to have been “squeezed” into sections for convenience and others only seem to have tangential relations to a section title. Yet this is a difficulty (or even an occupational hazard) that anyone who has edited a volume of this kind has had to confront and the editors have generally made great efforts to make the volume as coherent as possible –quite an achievement given the sheer breadth of the contributions and the multiple theoretical legacies that now make up cultural studies. All in all, however, I believe the editors and contributors should be congratulated on the production of a very wide-ranging and engaging book which admirably continues the very high standards set by the previous volumes in the Culture and Power series.

REFERENCES

- Belsey, Catherine. *Culture and the Real, Theorizing Cultural Criticism*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Chakabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Cornut-Gentile, Chantal *et al.* *Culture and Power: Culture and society in the age of globalization*. Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2005.
- During, Simon. *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2005.

- Ekpo, Denis. "Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism." *Textual Practice* 9.1 (1995): 121-135.
- Rodríguez González, Carla & Rubén Valdés Miyares, eds. *Historia y representación en la cultura global*. KRK Ediciones: Oviedo, 2008.
- Ryan, Michael, ed. *Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- . *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978a.
- . *The Writing of History Literary Forms and Historical Understanding*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978b.
- . *Figural Realism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

How to cite this article:

Walton, David. Review of Carla Rodríguez González & Rubén Valdés Miyares, eds. *Historia y representación en la cultura global*. Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2008. Published in *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 31 (2010): 309-316.

Author's contact: dwalton@um.es