



Susie Protschky, *Images of the Tropics. Environment and Visual Culture in Colonial Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011, 184 pp., ISBN 978 9 0671 8368 0).

In *The Birth of the Modern World*, C.A. Bayly addressed ‘the breach between the older history of economic and political processes and the new histories of representation and discourse’ (101). Though this distinction is partly false – between the lines, the ‘older’ histories have many reflections on mediation, and discourse is itself a historical reality –, it does point towards an institutional division in the work on colonialism where ‘classic’ historians often use a realist discourse to convey knowledge of the past and ‘postcolonial’ scholars focus on literature, images and other representations in order to deconstruct the discursive formations that underpinned colonial practices. Many studies ignore one or the other body of scholarship. Susie Protschky’s *Images of the Tropics*, however, combines them, resulting in a rich and convincing history of how paintings, drawings and photographs made in the Dutch East Indies were both the product of historical processes and themselves, as she writes, ‘constitutive of social, political and economic models of Dutch imperialism’ (9).

In this beautifully written and edited book, Protschky focuses on images of the Indies’ landscape from the seventeenth century to the 1940s, which she divides in five thematic clusters. The first chapter discusses cartography, images of coastlines, and still lifes of fruit from the nineteenth century that harkened back to seventeenth century Dutch visual culture so as to lay a historical claim to the land and its ‘tropical abundance’. The second chapter is about colonial landscape images in relation to empire building, and discusses representations of the botanic garden at Buitenzorg and the Great Post Road. Chapter three treats the naturalization of Dutch conquest through idyllic images of *mooi Indië* (beautiful Indies), chapter four the representations of Hindu-Buddhism and Islam (or, rather, the absence of the latter) within landscapes in relation to the conquest of Bali and Aceh, and chapter five addresses the relation between, on the one hand, race, class, and gender and, on the other hand, landscape and nature in depictions of bathing and leisuring Natives.

From beginning to end, Protschky pays equal attention to what W.J.T. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want?* has called ‘the social construction of the visual field’ and ‘the visual construction of the social field’ (345). Her discussion of Abraham Salm (1801-1876) throughout several chapters is exemplary in this respect: he is positioned in terms of his

professional occupation (a tobacco planter) and his view of painting as leisure, several of his idyllic landscape paintings are discussed in detail, and finally these images' roles are characterized as capturing 'the strategic and commercial value of colonized land while conveniently eliding the practical details of its conquest' (73). A number of chapters include analyses of literature as well, partly because of the author's view that it is important 'to examine the relationship between images and their contemporary texts', and in part because of *Images of the Tropics*' realist impulse apparent in the assertion that colonial images of Indies landscapes 'tend to dazzle the eye with ideals rather than darken the viewers' minds with concerns' (14). Literature is therefore also discussed to 'correct' (the word is mine) the rosy picture painted by imagery.

This book brings together a number of important fields to make its argument: colonial history, postcolonial analysis, visual culture studies, and art history. It is, nevertheless, clearly the work of a historian. From an art historical perspective, it limits its readings of the images to content analysis, and pays little attention to formal aspects such as color, spatial organization, and light, all of which can give a deeper insight into how images work. It also devotes few words to the social life of these pictures: the texts (titles, captions) and other images that have surrounded them, and how the travel of images across various institutional contexts alters and layers their meanings. The book is also silent on visual techniques and materiality: paint, canvas, and camera remain mostly undiscussed. One field of critical investigation that is missing altogether is ecocriticism, an emerging field which produces politically engaged analyses on the relations between textual, visual and other representations and the physical environment.

On the other hand, insightful information is provided concerning the institutional side of the production of visual culture in the Indies: artists, photographers and their financiers are clearly positioned within colonial culture, and Protschky offers elaborate and important backgrounds on colonial conceptions of nature, land, time, race, and gender. This book also does an excellent job of positioning the images it discusses within the history of visual genres. One aspect that makes it particularly convincing is its sustained emphasis on historical specificity: throughout, it discusses images in relation to European and other colonies' visual cultures, but it never brushes over differences. This book is necessary reading for scholars working on colonial visual culture and colonial history of Indonesia.

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