

What's in a *Chrononyme*?

by *Vanessa R. Schwartz*

The term “Belle Époque” has as rich and colorful a history as the period itself. In his latest book, Dominique Kalifa endeavors to understand the twists and turns of this time period and asks us to consider the modern representation of time itself.

Reviewed: Dominique Kalifa, *La véritable histoire de la Belle Époque*, Paris, Fayard, 2017, 296 p.

Early in the last century, the banker Albert Kahn spent a significant chunk of his vast fortune sending cameramen around the globe to capture it in still and moving images because he knew things would never be the same. He wanted to use these relatively new media to apprehend what seemed like eternal customs about to disappear in the swirl of fast-paced change. Of course, everyone who has ever lived has had the bittersweet experience of knowing that over the course of their lifetimes, the world would be different from the one they entered. But somehow, around 1900, many of the colorful people including dancers, painters, journalists and fashion designers invoked in Dominique Kalifa's whirlwind narrative, “La Véritable Histoire de la ‘Belle Époque’”— saw it as spinning faster.

The meaning of the Belle Époque

But whether in fact it did is not the subject of this book by one of France's great experts on the period that we have come to unthinkingly call the Belle Époque. Instead, Dominique Kalifa asks us to interrogate the very term itself as an “*imaginaire historique*” (historical imaginary) of what he calls a “*passé recomposé*” (reconstructed past)(21). The period around 1900 may be belle or beleaguered, the end of one thing or the start of something else. But this is not Kalifa's question. Rather, this wide-ranging book explores how the expression “Belle Époque” came into existence and common use in a variety of contexts: literary, visual,

popular and academic, French and foreign. Kalifa's narrative takes readers on a journey over the course of a century. He concentrates for the most part on the sixty-year period since the emergence of the term as a useful concept during the Occupation of France in World War Two when looking back could appear sufficiently apolitical to both German occupiers and their French victims alike. He traces the term and the period's representation all the way until today's post-modern retro-futurist steam-punk crazy salad of visual references in films such as Baz Luhrman's "Moulin Rouge." That Belle Époque has become so emptied of meaningful reference to the details of an actual time and place that it is pure style; merely evocative; a cascade of references to references.

Periods, events, and watersheds have long been the bread and butter of the historian's craft. In fact, every student of the past tests their knowledge by formulating alternative frameworks: should we call it Victorian England or The Railway Age? Do we speak of the Interwar Period or a Thirty Years' War of the Twentieth Century? But Kalifa raises the question of how time became a matter of consciousness, how a name for a time was constructed over a period of time, and how it became an object of history. The Belle Époque, he suggests, is produced by nostalgia. But nostalgia is not an "actor," and so one must ask, "whose" nostalgia? As historians such as Peter Fritzsche have argued, nostalgia is a form of emotion created by a new temporal consciousness and the experience of dislocation by those who lived through the French Revolution. Its radical changes gave birth to "moderns" who had a new sense of time. On the other side of that experience, in the nineteenth century, for the first time, people yearned for a lost past. Other scholars such as Svetlana Boym and Reinhart Kosellek have seen the history of nostalgia as more specifically tied to the modern history of media and representation.¹

Kalifa's study, however, is not a history of media form but a history of the Belle Époque as depicted in a variety of media across time. Although he ends his study by arguing that history is non-linear and kaleidoscopic, the book's narrative unfolds in chronological order. We learn that the term "Belle Époque" was not an invention of its own moment -- very few chrononyms are. The century instead opened by looking backwards during the Exposition of 1900 instead of forwards by making proclamations and plunging head-forward into the century about to unfold.

After the First World War, 1913 Paris, rather than 1900, retrospectively came to be seen as a key moment of cultural innovation that had been arrested by the great international conflict. That moment then became subsequently marshalled by historians in order to create continuity between past and present to salvage a nation that actually never did recover from the devastations of world conflict early in the century. France and Paris would never look as good as they had before the war. During the Occupation beginning in 1940, radio broadcasts

¹ Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) Reinhart Kosellek, *Futures Past. On The Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); original German collection published in 1979 and originally translated into English in 1985.

and music hall performances afforded Parisians, occupiers and the nation alike a cheerful way to avoid being deluged by forms of German propaganda. Ever since, the appeal of the Belle Époque chrononym resided in its ability to invoke a generalized sense of the “good old days” regarding a past that was simultaneously different enough to appear remote and familiar enough to seem modern.

The role of media in creating new forms of historical consciousness

Some of the book’s most interesting moments come when the author brings to the attention of historians texts that are better known to scholars in fields such as film studies and photo history, and which show the way certain media, especially new visual materials, provoked new forms of historical consciousness.² As film theorist André Bazin understood regarding film, “*Le cinéma est une machine à retrouver le temps pour mieux le perdre.*” (“Cinema is a machine designed to find time, only to lose it again”). Bazin made this remark in relation to a review of the compilation documentary by Nicole Vedrès *Paris 1900* (1947) which he argued “*marque la naissance de la tragédie spécifiquement cinématographique: celle du temps.*” (“marks the beginning of a tragedy unique to cinema: that of time”) (p.105) It is a great service to make these important texts better known to historians, but the context in which they are introduced, Kalifa seems to suggest that such retrospection first emerged after World War II, thus skipping over a first generation of film historians, most especially the extremely fascinating life and times of Henri Langlois who, in the 1930’s, had been creating archives in his bathtub and showing the first films by Méliès and Lumière well before Vedrès made her documentary. That there was a parallel consciousness in the 1930’s also building in the United States where MoMA created a film library also suggests the transnational nature of this late-nineteenth media culture and its memory.

The focus on the power of visual sources to create a new kind of historical consciousness also draws attention to the differences between verbal and visual expression. What does it mean to use the phrase “Belle Époque” rather than to depict it in images? The book strangely suffers from having a paucity of images (it reproduces two); films are treated primarily as narratives rather than as visual fields. Readers might have benefitted from a tour through the artist Albert Robida’s three dimensional reconstruction of *Le Vieux Paris* at the Exposition of 1900 which might have offered the occasion not only to ask what it meant to walk through a reconstructed past (is that different from a restored Notre Dame?), but it also

² See Antoine de Baecque, *L’histoire-caméra* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), Catherine E. Clark, “Capturing the Moment, Picturing History: Photographs of the Liberation of Paris.” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (June 2016): 824–60; Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It’s So French: Paris, Hollywood and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Schwartz “Walter Benjamin for Historians.” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1721-1743.

might have illuminated certain tantalizing questions regarding temporality. For example, just how far back did one have to go in 1900 for something to seem “old”? In 1900, they looked back 900 years to 1100 to muster “the good old days.” And, why, by the middle of the twentieth century, did the production of “retrospection” and “nostalgia” seem to have sped up so significantly that by mid-century Parisians only had to look back fifty years to 1900 to see “the past.” Historical consciousness may well be the object of Kalifa’s study but by focusing on the term Belle Époque and its uses, we miss such nuances. Put otherwise, many today will argue that our current media culture has flattened our sense of time, leading our students, among others, to think they can study ten years ago as if it were “history.” By identifying the history of historical consciousness, a study such as this promises to shed light on an important problem but without greater attention to the specificity of how media work as shapers of time and historicity, images simply function as vehicles that deliver the characteristic contents of a chrononym which change due to factors external to the modes of representation themselves such as economic modernization, the loss of Empire, or vague terms such as nostalgia.

The geography of the Belle Époque

One of the most intriguing of the study’s observations concerns the geographical expansion of the purview of the Belle Époque beyond Paris and into the French countryside and also in international scholarship and museum culture in the 1970s and 1980s. In a vivid section about the fad for old postcards from French villages as well as one regarding publications about the vanishing French peasantry, Kalifa identifies an important dimension of the changing history of this chrononym: over time, the Belle Époque took on a new geography.

His explanation is strongest regarding what happened in France where he pinpoints that geography to specific internal changes: to the modernization of Paris (or its assassination as Louis Chevalier decried); to Pierre Nora’s “lieux de mémoires” project regarding memory and place to issues of the institutionalization of patrimony, more generally. But was this change not also a result of developments in the history of media and representation themselves? As images increasingly became the source base of history as well as its mode of dissemination in magazines, films and television, and as new media simultaneously reflected and helped construct a more globalized framework of history, time itself has not simply become kaleidoscopic or non-linear. History has become increasingly spatialized.³ This did not begin in the 1970s. In the Belle Époque, Henri Bergson, surrounded by the emergent material transformations of his age, including documentation and narrative via the image, was

³ Consider both the “global turn” in historiography and also a more geographic and spatial turn. Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: Norton, 2014); Patrick Boucheron (avec Nicolas Delalande, *Pour une histoire monde* (Paris: PUF, 2013); Philip Ethington, “Placing the Past: ‘Groundwork’ for a Spatial Theory of History” in *Rethinking History* v. 11, n. 4 (December 2007): 465-494.

also one of the banker Albert Kahn's close friends. This philosopher knew that time was not just being lost or changed but rather that its relation to space would also redefine its very meaning as part of a fundamental epistemological transformation that would rock the century that began in 1900 and the way we study every moment – and its duration -- in the past and for the foreseeable future, whatever we call it.

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