

Gilbert, James: *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009. ISBN: 978-0226293103; 232 p.

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A re-evaluation of the World's Fair held in 1904 in St. Louis is just one of James Gilbert's intentions in his new book. Despite the focus on the exposition, he addresses a much larger issue: how to write history. A world's fair, an event both real and imaginary (or imagined), which engages the past, the present as well as the future, seems well suited for such an endeavor. Gilbert examines the ways in which historical scholarship and collective memory have shaped perceptions of the exposition, and he contrasts his findings with „experience“, a more unstable category defined by individual, often idiosyncratic encounters and associations with a historical subject.

Held eleven years after the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (on which Gilbert has also written a book, „Perfect Cities“), the St. Louis Fair was another highlight of its kind in the United States. At the time, St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in the country, profiting from its location as a crossroads of the Mississippi and railroad lines from the West to the East Coast. And yet it was more or less obvious that St. Louis had already lost the competition for regional dominance against its neighbor Chicago – an acknowledgment which had a strong influence on the way the fair was remembered: as the most important event in the city's history, ever. Like other World's Fairs, it was a national (and international) event as well: The exposition was held as a centennial celebration of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803/4, which had drastically enlarged the territory of the United States.

The set-up of the fair was similar to the one in Chicago or in San Francisco eleven years later: Its center was an assemblage of „high-culture buildings,“ educating visitors on the advancements made in all areas of society with the help of science and technology. Attached to it, in a stark visual contrast, was an amusement zone called the „Pike“ – the equivalent of the „Midway“ in Chicago or the „Zone“ in San Francisco. Most importantly,

the exposition was a place to bring people together and then disseminate their impressions: journalists and professional visitors who attended conferences as well as tourists and relatives of the inhabitants of St. Louis.

James Gilbert, a professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, has been practicing cultural history for much longer than the past fifteen or twenty years during which period the field has come to define itself and also to exert a certain kind of dominance in historical inquiry. Always open to new approaches but wary of fashionable theories, Gilbert is usually not the pioneer in an emerging field – foregoing participation in jargon-filled methodological battles – but rather a critical and prudent voice reflecting on its main issues and raising new questions, always based on his close readings of the sources. This was the case with his last book, „Men in the Middle“¹, a most valuable addition to postwar gender history, and also applies to „Whose Fair?“, which makes important contributions to one of the most interesting debates of the past decade, on the relationship between history and memory. Gilbert's recap of this debate provides a good overview but should have mentioned the important work of Aleida Assmann. I may add at this point that the book includes a few too many editing goofs, among them a repeated paragraph on p. 114/115.

Gilbert shows that most historians focused on what the elite organizers of the St. Louis Fair, aided by official guidebooks, intended the public to learn from it. His admiration for the work of Robert Rydell notwithstanding, he claims that Rydell's influence in the field has resulted in fairly uniform interpretations of this and other expositions. (I find that Rydell, in his more recent work, has embraced the contested nature of World's Fairs more emphatically than Gilbert cares to admit.²) He then shows that most visitors chose to ignore the lessons the fair organizers had prepared for them in the main exhibition buildings

¹Jürgen Martschukat: Rezension zu: Gilbert, James: *Men in the Middle. Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*. Chicago 2005, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 11.12.2006, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2006-4-190>>.

²Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century-of-Progress Expositions, Chicago 1993*, u. d. ers. / John E. Findling / Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America. World's Fairs in the United States*, Washington, D.C. 2000.

– for instance, the anthropologist William J. McGee’s absurd but elaborate racial hierarchies – and instead recorded in their diaries „amused or shocked reactions to the exotic and erotic aspects“ (p. 99) of displays in the amusement section, such as the alleged dog-eating of the Igorots, natives hauled in from the Philippines, the recently acquired U.S. colony. More often than not, Gilbert notes, visitors constructed meanings of the fair through spectacle and entertainment rather than encyclopedic instruction.

This analysis alone may not seem original, but Gilbert places his readings of what visitors saw at the exposition and what they remembered in novel contexts, such as the imagery of the fair. He shows that stereographs – photographs with a three-dimensional effect sold in sets – reflected the confusion and crowdedness of the Pike, thus representing the „feel“ of the evolving modern age much more authentically than, for example, photographs of the orderly pavilions in the official guidebooks. The book includes a whole chapter on a single photograph – „Mrs. Wilkins, teaching an Igorrote-Boy the Cake Walk“ – in which Gilbert delineates brilliantly both the ambiguity and the possibilities of imperial experiences. As individual consumers or immigrant groups, visitors at the exposition – in 1904 but later as well – were in search of old and new identities, as the fair „provided the possibility to affirm the many layers of American nationalism.“ But, as Gilbert does not cease to emphasize, they did it „on their own terms and in their own vocabularies“ (p. 188).

This conclusion is reinforced by Gilbert’s chapter on the collective memory of the fair and perhaps best exemplified by an exhibition in 1996, which well-meaning historians had set up to critically examine the fair and its legacy. Its visitors, the baffled designers concluded, refused „to trade enjoyment for analysis“ and „left as they had come, chatting about collectibles that reminded them of the glorious summer when St. Louis was the center of the world“ (p. 97). Impressions such as these may disconcert historians (and journalists like myself). Are we wasting our time explaining the world to an audience which is unwilling to listen? Gilbert does not fall for this trap. He views the fair visitors’ reacti-

ons neither as trivial nor, as some historians would have done, as necessarily progressive or even subversive. Instead, he acknowledges their potential, hoping to restore „a respect for the actors of the past and their making of that past“ (p. 4). This goal is achieved masterfully both through the book’s tone and its analysis.

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