

Review Essay: Mastering Colonial Disorder*

Les Maîtres du Désordre. Musée du quai Branly. April 11, 2012 through July 29, 2012.

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Ever since it opened in 2006, I have wanted to visit the Musée du quai Branly (MQB) in Paris, the institution that “contains the collections of the now-closed Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie and the ethnographic department of the Musée de l’Homme” (Wikipedia 2012). With a permanent collection of over 267,000 objects and nearly 3,500 of those on display at any given time, it is one of the most important anthropology museums in the world. The building itself is also an impressive piece of architecture by Jean Nouvel—the structure nicely setting off the collection. So I was happy to be able to finally visit the MQB in late June 2012. It was an awe-inspiring experience and I am just sorry I did not have a week to spend at the museum, since it is truly too much to absorb in a single day. The permanent collection is divided up into sections devoted to Asia, Oceania, Africa and the Americas. My recommendation would be to only try to visit one section per visit (and Oceania is so huge that it could easily accommodate two visits if you listen to the excellent audio tour).

I approached the museum as something of a naïf. Although I was aware of the controversies surrounding the founding of the museum, having read about them in the news at the time, I had not yet read Sally Price’s *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly* (Price 2007) or the excellent review of Price’s book that appeared in the Spring 2012 issue of this journal (White 2012). Both of these give important context and background for those interested in the museum itself. Instead, I have chosen to focus on a special exhibition that was on display during my visit: *Les Maîtres du Désordre* (Masters of Chaos).

Les Maîtres du Désordre reminded me of an MOMA exhibit that I had visited as a teenager: *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. That exhibit looked at the impact of the very African and Pacific works now housed in the MQB upon the development of modern art. Both were large, ambitious exhibits that sought to draw comparisons across numerous cultures. Both also sought to find affinities between modern art and “primitive” art. So it is worth looking at what James Clifford wrote about the MOMA exhibit before considering the one at the MQB.

In his essay “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern” (Clifford 1988) Clifford criticized the MOMA show on several grounds: the comparative method used was flawed (they could just as easily have found “primitive” art works that did not resemble Picasso paintings as ones that did), the works the MOMA curators chose were decontextualized and removed from their cultural and historical context, they chose works that were unproblematically “pure” in that they were free of

* Adapted from “Les Maîtres du Désordre vs. Les Maîtres Fous” (Friedman 2012). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

European or other obviously modern influences, and the African and Pacific works were seen primarily in terms of their importance for “our” cultural development from which “they” are excluded. (On the problematic aesthetization of traditional “art” also see Wyatt MacGaffey’s [1988] essay “‘Magic, or as we usually say Art’”)

To what extent was *Les Maîtres du Désordre* guilty of the same sins as the earlier Primitivism exhibit at MOMA?

The following text appeared near the entrance to the MQB show:

The constant fight waged by gods against demons in the cosmologies of many different cultures illustrates this fragile equilibrium of the world. Order and chaos, destruction and creation follow each other cyclically and are at the root of the founding myths of our societies.

It is somewhat ironic that an exhibit about chaos and disorder would so thoroughly embrace a rather dated structuralist view of religion, but doing so allowed curator Jean de Loisy to cast a large net, pulling together various disparate works into a single show. The exhibit was divided into themes related to liminality, trickster figures, shamans, healing, bacchanal, etc.—each room showcasing items from around the world and across several millennia. What this meant was that the modern works included in the exhibit were seen through the same structuralist lens as the works from the museum’s archives. In so doing, de Loisy avoided one of the main problems Clifford identified with the MOMA exhibit: the viewing of “Primitive” art in terms of the “Modern.” Here, instead, everything is subsumed by the same (out of date) structuralist theory. I personally am happy to see an exhibit attempt to make an ambitious argument and fail than fail to make an argument in the first place. Nor do I mind that the theory is dated if it allows the curator to do some interesting things, which, in this instance, it did.

At its heart, what made this exhibit succeed was the fabulous museum pieces (including many nice video art installations) that de Loisy had chosen to gather together. As with the MQB museum as a whole, each individual work is stunning. (Mostly, anyway. The final room, a “Feast of Fools,” lacked the aesthetic touch that made the rest of the exhibition so memorable.) While the physical exhibition was an exercise in decontextualization, seeking to make connections between works from vastly different historical periods and cultural frameworks by placing them together in the same physical space with minimal commentary, there was an associated audio guide that did provide extensive historical and cultural notes on many of the individual pieces. There was also a room that contained a floating wall of TV monitors, each showing ethnographic interviews on a continuous loop with phone-shaped handsets nearby, allowing you to listen to each interview. I was limited in my ability to appreciate these interviews by my rusty-French, but I also noticed that most of the native speakers either skipped this room entirely or listened for a few seconds before moving on. I think that the whole exhibit would have been much better if these interviews had been better integrated into the exhibit rather than being added, so it seemed, as an afterthought.

While I was excited about the exhibition's conceptual ambitions and aesthetics, I was ultimately disappointed by its failure to engage with the relationship between history and culture. This

disappointment is best illustrated by the failure to include one particular work that I fully expected to see: *Les Maîtres Fous* by Jean Rouch (1955). One can easily appreciate why this work was not included. Where Rouch sought to explain Hauka ritual practices in terms of colonialism, de Loisy seems eager to avoid any mention of the colonial encounter whatsoever. Where Clifford criticizes the MOMA exhibit for failing to discuss cultural appropriation, de Loisy embraces the cultural appropriation of traditional practices by the New Age movement. In this regard it would be interesting to compare this temporary exhibition with the museum's previous one: Lilian Thuram's show on "Human Zoos: The Invention of the Savage" but I unfortunately missed that one. Still, despite my reservations, I am really happy I did get to see this show. I would love to see more ethnographically informed museum shows with the same level of ambition. Perhaps one on 5,000 years of debt (Graeber 2011)?

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