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Review of: Robert A. Davidson, *Jazz Age Barcelona*

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Davidson, Robert A. *Jazz Age Barcelona* (Studies in Book and Print Culture). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. ii + 240, illus, index.

From its evocative title onwards, Davidson guides us through a vivid Barcelona between World War I and the Second Spanish Republic. Through close readings of print culture – periodical and novelistic, words and illustrations – Davidson illuminates modernities, mass culture, and conflicts that speak to global transformations while highlighting the urban context and the people who created public discourse. His scrutiny of *El Escándalo* (1926), *Mirador* (1929-31) and *Imatges* (1930) and his analyses of Francisco Madrid, Sebastià Gasch, Josep Ma. Planes, and J.M. de Sagarra should provoke discussion among Iberianists and beyond. Indeed, Davidson's book suggests that interdisciplinary study of such a rich period has only begun to yield insights.

While Davidson identifies this period as “a somewhat forgotten time” (212), his literary focus resonates with many recent works by scholars of history, architecture and urbanism, and social sciences. His spatializations and perspectives on class, for example, should be reread in the light of José Luis Oyón's magisterial *La Quiebra de la ciudad popular* (2009), whose detailed reconstructions through census materials, and other documents illuminate the experience of the working class (and other sectors of society) from 1914 to 1936. Similarly, the prodigious volume accompanying the Cleveland Museum of Art exhibit on Barcelona and Modernity underscores the intersections between urban and artistic changes in this era including Gaudí, Picasso and others offstage in Davidson's interpretations.¹ Michonneau's work on the monumental city, *Barcelona: Memòria i identitat* also explores the many readings of key sites like the Poble Espanyol.² Davidson's work complements these and other analyses of this exciting period without directly engaging them.

Davidson's use of “jazz” as an organizing motif underscores the global flows of ideas and lives in the city at this time although he generally does not

¹William H. Robinson, Jordi Falgàs and Carmen Belen Lord, eds. *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí*. Published by the Cleveland Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007.

²Stéphane Michonneau. *Barcelona: Memòria i Identitat. Monuments, commemoracions i mites*. Vic: Eumo Editorial, 2001-2. See also M. Carmen Grandas. *L'Exposició Internacional de Barcelona de 1929*. Barcelona: Llibres de la frontera, 1988.

pursue such processes extensively. He begins with a straightforward portrait of “Barcelona Boom Town” that draws heavily on Carr (1966), Hughes (1992) and Huertas and Fabre’s journalistic *Barcelona* (2001). While this sets the stage for a novice reader, one might wish for a longer discussion of the complex social, political and cultural/creative issues and spaces that shape this period. Davidson undertakes systematic analysis with *El Escándalo 1925* and Madrid’s *Sangre en Atarazanas*, key sources highlighted in Boatwright and Ucelay da Cal’s seminal 1984 article in *L’Avenç*.³ Davidson brings alive the voices of journalists in depicting Barcelona’s District 5 (Barrio Chino/Raval), but this spatialization demands more attention to earlier delineations of this neighborhood and to global models as well; Angel Becquer’s account of a school for young thieves, for example, may be read for “the level of detail in the article’s revelations” (47), but it also evokes classic depictions of poverty from *Oliver Twist* onwards. Davidson elegantly presents a journalistic imaginary, but an analysis of the intersection of journalism and urban experience might well go further into the social historical complexities of this working-class neighborhood.

Jazz moves to center stage via critic Sebastià Gasch and his association with figures such as Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí. Davidson underscores links of modernism, spectacle and mediation in Gasch’s readings of cabarets and chorus girls, drawing a parallel to Krakauer’s work on similar themes in Berlin. Yet he chooses distinctions over deeper comparisons: “That Gasch did not expand his theories beyond a journalistic concern for the moment of reception, or the limited era in which aesthetics were developing, ought not to be held against him. He was not a Catalan Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Krakauer or Teodor Adorno” (102). Given arguments by Oyón and others for more dynamic integration of Catalan studies into European debates, this seems to limit the possibilities inherent in the material.⁴

Davidson expands on urban spatial practices and conflict through an analysis of another urbane review, *El Mirador*, and its reading of the mediation of city, culture and politics through the 1929 World Exposition. Again, one wishes for more recognition of urban studies that might nuance journalistic discourse, whether Grandas’ classic geographical studies of the fair, or deeper consideration of the catalytic figure of Nicolau Maria Rubió Tudurí as architect, urbanist and politician. Davidson’s subsequent reading of the short-lived review *Imatges*, though, illuminates the post-Exposition hangover and the ongoing motifs of

³ Dorsey Boatwright and Enric Ucelay de Cal ““La dona del 'Barrio Chino.'” *L’avenç* (Barcelona), no. 76 (November 1984): 26(870)–34(878).

⁴ José Luis Oyón. *La Quiebra de la ciudad popular: espacio urbano, inmigración y anarquismo, 1914-1936. Barcelona de entreguerras, 1914-1936*. Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2009.

journalistic discourse in deft readings of photographic images that turn us to Gaudi, Vertov and Chaplin. Here, he might have expanded references to Le Corbusier and the rise of GATEPAC; this architectural group's review, *A.C.*, which appeared in 1931, speaks to both to urban modernities and the meanings of the Barrio Chino.

The book ends, then, with a longer analysis of Josep M. de Sagarra and his scandalous 1932 novel *Vida privada*, through which Davidson reprises the spaces of upper class and underworld. Still, it is jarring to end explorations in a "forgotten age" with a work so scandalously well known from its publication onwards; *Vida Privada*, in fact, has been required reading for university-bound secondary school students in Catalonia.

Jazz Age Barcelona traces important urban threads spun together by jazz, modernism, Europeanness, violence, class, sex and spectacle during a critical decade in the modern city and highlights the need to understand journalism and mass mediation in relation to urbanism. One cannot help wishing, however, that he had been even more ambitious. In an era so rich in social data and heteroglossic records, should we not focus greater attention on the relation between journalistic representation and diverse social changes? For a time when mass media preoccupied the Frankfurt school and Hollywood became global, should we insist on Barcelona's uniqueness or do position it within these wider flows? Davidson's book reminds us of how much work remains to be done and should, I hope, spur us forward.

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