

Ara Güler's Istanbul

Foreword by Orhan Pamuk. Thames & Hudson, London, 2009. 184 pages, with 157 duotone illustrations. Hardcover £32.00, ISBN 978-0-500-54386-3.

Typical touristic images of Istanbul tend to reproduce clichés about the city, such as a bridge between the East and the West. No such frames are to be found in *Ara Güler's Istanbul*, which brings to the English-speaking audience a wonderful set of affecting black-and-white street photographs of Istanbul taken by the renowned Armenian-Turkish photographer Ara Güler (b. 1928), and introduced by a specially written short text by the Nobel Laureate Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952). Güler's Istanbul photographs have won him nicknames at home such as 'the eye of Istanbul', 'the last poet of Istanbul', and 'the photographer of Istanbul'. Most of them are from the 1950s and 1960s, produced at the beginning of his career when he worked as a photojournalist for local magazines and newspapers. They depict the streets of the city, in particular the lives of its poorer residents at work or engaged in other ordinary activities. Güler's depiction of the everyday necessarily excludes upper and middle classes and their consumption habits in favour of the poetics of narrow streets, nooks and crannies in historic dilapidated quarters. This is an Istanbul he considers to have vanished (see Ara Güler, *A Photographical Sketch on Lost Istanbul [1950–1990]*. Istanbul, 1994/2008).

Despite his prolific career, local fame, international assignments, recognition, including membership to the Magnum Photo Agency in 1961, exhibitions and awards, Güler is not included in surveys of the history of photography. *Ara Güler's Istanbul* is a timely but not necessarily an 'original' compilation. Most of the pictures are familiar to those following the photographer's work. Since the 1990s, Güler emerged as the official and popular photographer of choice for Istanbul. And it seems like it is the same small set of images that are reproduced and circulated from his much larger portfolio, said to consist of 800,000 images. Why is it that in 2009 a selection of Güler's Istanbul photographs that have thus far been consumed by a local audience appeared from Thames and Hudson? The rise of Istanbul into the ranks of global cities must be credited for arousing general interest in the topic. Publication data at the end of the book identify Les Editions du Pacifique as the original version. The gallery Editions du Pacifique in Paris exhibited thirty-five pictures by the photographer in 2009 as part of the Turkish Cultural Season in France (see <http://www.digitalbridges.eu/?p=21>). The nine-month 'Season' that aimed to introduce Turkey's culture in France was planned during the presidency of Jacques Chirac but ironically realised during that of Nicolas Sarkozy, who is known for his anti-Turkey rhetoric, vocalising the anxiety over Turkey's increasing presence and influence in Europe. The publication to accompany this exhibition in Paris, *Ara Güler's Istanbul*, features many more photographs than shown at the gallery.

A similar catalogue, *A Photographical Sketch on Lost Istanbul (1950–1990)*, in 1994 presented his selected Istanbul work in print for the first time in Turkey, to be followed by others. That collection was published in two versions, in English and Turkish, by a local publisher, and it was prefaced by Güler himself and introduced by his friend Onat Kutlar (1936–1995), a prominent Turkish writer known as one of the founders of the Turkish cinemathèque and later the Istanbul International Film Festival. Still in print due to the ever-increasing popularity of Güler, *Lost Istanbul* features 189 photographs grouped into sections with titles as: 'The Light of Istanbul', 'The Mystery of Labour', 'Flight from the fear of tomorrow, Escapism or Salvation', 'Refuge in Faith', and 'Who cares ... Life Goes On... and'. Although available in bookstores in Istanbul, this volume does not circulate abroad.

In *Ara Güler's Istanbul* by Thames and Hudson, there is a new ordering, layout, and framing of almost the same set of photographs that were compiled for *Lost Istanbul*. The new book features 153 duotone photographs. At the very end, two maps show locations from which they were shot and a portrait of the photographer taken by Imogen Cunningham concludes the volume. Several photographs are overlaid on gray background; and there is no thematic grouping as in *Lost Istanbul*. Pamuk is the choice of author to introduce the collection here because, since its publication in English in 2005, his memoir-cum-urban history, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, has become the lens through which foreigners have come to view and experience Istanbul. Pamuk's autobiographical portrait of Istanbul breathes melancholia (*hüzün*) and longing for the lost glory of the former imperial city. Through his novels, most of which are set in Istanbul, and memoir, Pamuk has turned into an authority on the city. This is the second collection of photographs prefaced by him – the other one is Alex Webb's *Istanbul*. Pamuk's memoir *Istanbul* makes ample use of black-and-white photographs, many of which are by Güler, and the writer elaborates on seeing the city in 'black and white' in a chapter with that title.

Ara Güler's Istanbul starts with an epigraph from Pamuk next to a page-and-a-half photograph by the photographer of a Turkish poet seen from above and behind, walking in an autumn garden, far beyond the branches of a tree – a melancholic picture *par excellence*. 'When Ara Güler presents us with a view of the city', Pamuk says, 'what affects us emotionally are the people inside it. Set against the city's breathtaking scenery, those people can seem more fragile than ever'. There is no breathtaking scenery in this picture, however, but the titillating promise of the eye of the poet that the following pages will help the viewer/reader acquire.

Following this opening, the short text by Orhan Pamuk, interspersed by grainy cityscape photographs, explains the importance of Güler's photographs for the famous writer. Firstly, Pamuk explains, 'The Istanbul of the 1950s and 1960s [...] is nowhere as well documented, preserved and protected as it is in the photographs of Ara Güler'. This is reflective of a sense of loss that permeates public discussions on the city. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, Pamuk admits: 'I have seen some of Güler's photographs so many times that I now confuse them with my own memories of Istanbul'. This statement is similar to another one the author makes in his *Istanbul*, in relationship to old black-and-white Turkish films, again from the 1950s and 1960s, that are being recycled on private television channels. The circulation of black-and-white old Istanbul pictures, be it photographs or cinema films, in contemporary media provide what Alison Landsberg calls a 'prosthetic memory' for imagining 'Old Istanbul' for the larger public may not have personal or transmitted lived memories of that Istanbul and have to rely on technologically reproduced representations (see Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. 2004). While the time frame may not be that 'old', their black-and-whiteness helps situate these pictures far away in temporal distance and gives them a melancholic tone.

In his position as the photographer of his city, Güler can be compared with Eugène Atget of Paris. Self-admittedly much influenced by Cartier-Bresson, Güler experimented with many different approaches to street photography over the years. It may be futile to focus on probable inspirations in any detail, at least in the space of this short review; what is important is that Güler's photographs reveal conversations with the works of prominent photographers of his day as well as his awareness of seminal precedents.

Local critics praise Güler as an artist – a label of which he never fully approved, in favour of the appellation of 'photojournalist' or a 'visual historian' (see Nezih Tavlaş, *Fotomuhabiri Ara Güler*. Istanbul, 2009). Güler's work constitutes an archive that is personal and through circulation and reception collective rather than official. The analysis and interpretation of his photographs would contribute to the history of photography in the Ottoman-era and Republican Turkey, which has thus far focused on the state's self-representation in response to Orientalist depictions, and expand our understanding of the visual culture of modern Turkey. There is little critical writing on Güler and his contribution to photography in Turkey or abroad, which this new book by Thames and Hudson may well initiate.

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Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil

Esther Gabara. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008. 360 pages, with 67 black & white illustrations. Softcover \$15.99, ISBN 0-822-34323-3.

Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity

John Mraz. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009. 344 pages, with 53 black & white illustrations. Softcover £14.99, ISBN 0-822-34443-8.

National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment

Roberto Tejada. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2009. 215 pages, with 71 black & white illustrations. Softcover \$27.50, ISBN 0-816-66082-7.

Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti, and Alvarez Bravo

Leonard Folgarait. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008. 252 pages, with 29 black & white illustrations. Hardcover £25.00, ISBN 0-300-14902-7.

On the stimulating evidence provided by these ground-shifting works, the study of Mexican photography has become the premier site of interdisciplinary analysis in Latin American visual culture studies. Photography is being accorded an unprecedented centrality. Its study in relation to the diverse cultural spheres it penetrated (avant-garde literature, mainstream media, cinema, politics, multimedia art, the social sciences) is helping to rethink and recast narratives of aesthetic currents, national traditions and local practices that construct perceptions of Latin American cultural history. The pool of methodologies and references that source this centralising strategy is wide-ranging, including cultural studies, film theory and history, visual anthropology, gender and body theory, semiotics, sociology, art history, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. With varying degrees of painstaking exfoliation, the four books reviewed here seek to reconcile methodological heterogeneity while pointing to analogue photography's foundational, or at least prescient, intermediations. So for instance, Leonard Folgarait, an established art historian of Mexican muralism, self-consciously writes against the acquired habits of art historical critique (suppressing obvious parallels to pictorial imagery in the 1920s and 1930s) as his respect for the irreducible difference of the mechanical medium forces him to test the boundaries of multimedia image analysis.

The progressive radicalisation of approaches to the expanding archives of images and periodical collections in Mexico, South America and the United States may in time produce a meta-history of photography divested of any proprietorial or essentialist belief in the print as an instrument of identity politics or empiricism. If one can generalise about the effects of such