

BOOK REVIEW

Matthias de Groof, ed. *Lumumba in the Arts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020. 400 pp. Illustrations. Map. Bibliography. Index. \$79.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9462701748.

“No single form of art seems to escape Lumumba” (3). This powerful statement sums up the ambitious and significantly rich project led by Matthias de Groof and the contributors to *Lumumba in the Arts*. In a profound and well-articulated reflection, this book engages in a rigorous dialogue (or marriage) between historiography and iconography. The dynamics that structure this uneasy pairing, in a pendulum movement of mutual influence, far from tension-free, perfectly suit a global and historical figure such as Lumumba, who is at the same time both admired and hated. Alongside real images are fictitious ones, reflecting joy, dignity, and violence, which are all open to debate. From Lumumba as a subject and as an icon, it is possible to extract the methodological and analytical challenges in historical narratives and in the formation of collective and popular conscience all around the world. Rare are the political figures who are able to inspire such exhaustive artistic creation.

By gathering varied and little-known artworks, ranging from cinema, theater, photography, poetry, and comics to music and painting, including in the public space, the contributors avoid falling into the trap of beatification. On the contrary, the work highlights the complex mechanisms of construction and deconstruction of memory in the past and the present. Patrice Lumumba, whatever the idea, metonym, symbol, or attached figure used to represent him, meets no indifference and turns back the hands of time, by making people react from the 1960's until now, for instance, in rap music (280–323). The book appears as a long walk through time and space, revealing a multitude of cultural forms that awaken the senses of sight, sound, and touch. Thus, it is a fabulous “interdisciplinary parallax” (12) that reveals the diversity of analytical possibilities according to the disciplines chosen to tackle the object of study, “Lumumba.” The choice of contributors (in literature, film industry, art criticism, history, philosophy, and anthropology), most of them already recognized for their Lumumba-related work, lends the book a solid and eclectic edge.

The first part, “Lumumba in Historiography: From *bête noire* to beatification,” provides historical details about the man himself, highlighting the diversity of feelings he aroused among different groups, some of whom appropriated his ideas and images in sincere, glorious, or opportunistic ways. This part also examines the impact of the work of artists, as witnesses of the Lumumba period, on the issue of writing history, revealing contrasts and gaps in Lumumba’s historiography.

The second part, “Iconography of Lumumba,” is incredibly abundant. The diversity of the art forms is further enhanced by an analysis of the comic book genre, a growing medium for the telling of Lumumba’s story. *Les Jardins du Congo* by Nicolas Pitz (270–79) is interesting in the way it presents the memories of a grandfather and a grandson. In doing so, it enumerates the postcolonial changes and points out generational debates currently taking place in Belgium. The medium of theater, as a site of live performance, ensures continuity and liveliness to Lumumba’s legacy by playing on the spectator’s sensory and emotional experience, the physical resemblances of the actors, and the codes of drama.

This point is well emphasized throughout the book: the large imagery reinforces Lumumba’s presence everywhere. It is assisted by his promoters in a variety of geographical areas. We cannot ignore that the focus is male-dominant. However, women also play a role in the historical visibility of Lumumba, as we remember Pauline Onango, pictured (and later painted) walking in the streets of Leopoldville asking for her husband’s body (362), or as we see women in the streets of Ghana demonstrating after Lumumba’s assassination in early February 1961 (39); we can also see Lumumba’s wife painted beside him in the work of Jean-Claude Lofenia (138). Although the question of gender and Lumumba’s masculinity are carefully addressed by Karen Bouwer through a study of the work of film director Raoul Peck (180–91), it is regrettable that there is no political or artistic analysis of Lumumba through the more original but still marginalized lens of female creation. An exception can be made for those women briefly presented as actresses and playwrights in the theater world (224).

Current events call for another line of questioning. It is certain that the mystery surrounding the absence of Lumumba’s body has contributed to the production of Christian and canonical representations. Finally, on June 30, 2022, the Congolese authorities organized the eagerly anticipated burial ceremony of the late prime minister. One wonders whether this ceremony, part of history in the making, will maintain the iconicity of Lumumba’s image, help to renew the artists’ view of him, or simply initiate a more humanizing representation.

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