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Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson & Daniel Chartier (eds.),
Iceland and Images of the North (Collection Droit
 au pôle), Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec
 2011, ISBN 9782760530874, xi + 611 pp.

A book about Iceland and images, published in 2011 and dealing with both historical images and their contemporary extensions, will inevitably be read in light of developments over the last few years. Even if the underlying research goes back some time before 2008, one could justifiably expect some reference to the events of that year and the following ones. The much-commented collapse of the Icelandic banking system was, among many other things, also an image crash. For a few years preceding it, the idea that Iceland was transforming itself into an international financial centre had become the “mythomotor” of Icelandic neoliberalism. This lunatic nonsense (there is no other word for it) was accepted by a majority of the population; the exact statistics are a matter of debate, but the general picture is beyond doubt. It changed abruptly in October 2008; the consequences are still unfolding, and the long-term outcome unpredictable. How much the Icelanders have learnt from the experience is highly debatable (one of the more worrying recent signs is the triumphant re-election, four years after the crash, of a president who before 2008 toured the world with the good tidings that Iceland had pioneered a superior system of financial management, based on the Viking heritage). In any case, the self-image that went up in smoke has not been replaced by a more coherent one. If we shift the focus to Iceland seen from elsewhere, the aftermath of the crash is no less bewildering. Myths about Iceland having nationalized the banks, resisted the demand to pay for the excesses of its financiers, and set itself a new constitution have enjoyed astonishing currency. By the time this review is published, at least some of these misconceptions will have been laid to rest.

Finally, the reference to images of the North has a particular bearing on the present situation. The boom years saw a semi-official attempt to disconnect Iceland from the Nordic world, supposedly left behind, and rebrand it as a country emulating the United States. As everybody knows, this *imitatio Americae* came to a deservedly absurd end; but the return to Nordic values, proclaimed by the centre-left coalition that took office in 2009, has not proved easy to achieve. A Scandinavian political scientist—whose name I have forgotten—once argued that it was a mistake to think of Iceland as just another Nordic country; its political culture was, as he saw it, so peculiar that places like Sicily or Albania might be more comparable. The aftermath of the crash—including the parliamentary election at the end of April 2013—suggests that this idea should not be rejected out of hand.

Reviews telling authors what kind of book they should have written are generally not well received. But here we are dealing with an extreme case. If ever there was a country afflicted with an image crisis, it is post-crash Iceland, and writing on images in that context cannot but incur certain obligations. Read with this in mind, *Iceland and Images of the North* is rather disappointing. Only two contributions, by Katla Kjartansdóttir and Kristinn Schram, deal directly with the imagery and image marketing of the boom years. Katla Kjartansdóttir

describes the Viking heritage boom that accompanied the banking spree and infected the whole community, from restaurants in search of customers to a head of state in pursuit of world fame. Her portrayal of the “Viking wave” is very effective (and for those of us who would prefer a book more attuned to recent history, this is the most relevant chapter), but the analysis overstates construction and calculation, thus neglecting the genuine obsession that clearly went beyond all image-building strategies. This is a recurrent problem with work in the tradition of cultural studies, and the objection applies even more to Kristinn Schram’s paper on banking and *Borealism*. The latter term is explicitly coined in analogy with Said’s *Orientalism*, and suffers from the same defects as other constructs of the same kind. If the original is useless (as it is in my opinion, for reasons too complex to be explained in a review of a book by other authors), imitations will not do better. But the description of the bankers’ *þorrablót* is a memorable contribution to the ethnography of Icelandic venture capitalism on the loose. This approach is especially pertinent today, when a determined attempt to refashion memories of the boom years is going on. However, the emphasis on “building identity on irony” downplays the authentic *hubris* that drove the bankers and the see-what-we-can-get-away-with message they were addressing to each other and their domestic constituency.

An explicit reference to the image crash (“a reputation in ruins,” p. 376) is also to be found in the paper by Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, on the use of English in Iceland (pp. 373–404). The author considers the question of English as *lingua franca* and its impact on the Icelandic language community in light of the situation after 2008. The notorious proposal to introduce English at the headquarters of Icelandic banks, made in 2007 by a prominent banker, should be seen as a part of the fantasy world which the banks created among themselves, but the reactions to it reflected the weight they had acquired in the Icelandic national imaginary. One commentator could even write that the bank crash had removed the greatest threat to the Icelandic language. This overheated controversy can, as the author shows, serve as a starting-point for analyses of a more complex background. The irresistible rise of English in the role of *lingua franca* poses specific problems for each non-English culture. In the Icelandic case, the situation is defined by two main features. On the one hand, the exceptional importance of language for Icelandic national identity, together with the very small size of the language community, made the problem particularly sensitive; on the other hand, the growth of international connections, the rapidly increasing number of immigrants (many of whom knew no Icelandic and only basic English) and the wave of venture capitalism going global added up to a formidable linguistic challenge. The author develops a lucid analysis of this constellation. But I am less convinced by the proposal to explain it in terms of a straightforward power conflict (with reference to Bourdieu). Neither the gatekeepers nor the globalizers are easily identifiable with groups wielding power. It seems more appropriate to speak of a cultural-political complex eroded by multiple forces.

It is not the purpose of this review to survey every contribution at the same length. But two more chapters in the section on contemporary images should at least be mentioned in passing. Heiða Jóhannsdóttir’s paper on the Gorbachev-Reagan summit (pp. 435–460) describes an extreme example of media construction “in only a tangential relationship with reality” (p. 446); it raises—

implicitly—the question whether this over-the-top spectacle did not count for something in the scenario that began to unfold after 1990. Edward Huijbens's paper on nation-branding (pp. 553–582), the last in the volume, does mention the much-ridiculed nation-branding initiative of the Icelandic government (launched in 2007), but this highly revealing episode would deserve more extensive treatment; much of the chapter is devoted to a rather de-contextualized discussion of branding. And Huijbens would probably win a contest for the least comprehensible sentence in the book:

With space talking back, as stated in the opening quote to this section, what I argue is that being part and parcel to the excess of communication and encounters, a vitalist future-oriented spatial politics makes brand management untenable in terms of destination. (p. 574)

It may be objected that the historical section of the book (the first part is subtitled “Historical Images”) should not be judged unilaterally in terms of its relevance to recent and contemporary events. There is no denying the informative value of some contributions to this group of papers. Julia Zernack traces the development of German approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic culture, and the role of this connection in the constitution of German national consciousness; there was, as she shows, a long history behind the well-known National Socialist appropriation of Nordic themes. Clarence E. Glad presents a very interesting account of the Greco-Roman—and particularly the Greek—heritage as an ideological resource for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Icelandic nationalists. This seems to be an important part of the genealogy of nationalism in Iceland. Marion Lerner writes about images of the Icelandic interior as sublime nature and as a culturally interpreted North; this is also a topic that has been given less than its due. But precisely here we find a connection to more recent Icelandic history that the author has not taken into account. Lerner quotes from a German collection on the sublime “between liminal experience and megalomania,” but the latter aspect does not enter into her argument. Megalomaniac trends are certainly not rare in modern nationalism, but some cases are more pronounced than others, and if we were to attempt a comparative study (which has, to the best of my knowledge, not been done so far), there is little doubt that the Icelandic experience from the 1990s would stand out as a particularly grotesque example. The sources are multiple, but all the aspects mentioned above are of some importance. The image of pioneers confronting an ultimate wilderness was conducive to a particular kind of self-titanization. On another level, the undeniably hubristic notion of a “Nordic Hellas” could—within a more restricted circle—give rise to disproportionate expectations. And the influence of German variations on Nordic themes reinforced other romanticizing trends. Some other problems of the historical section should at last be mentioned in passing. There is, on the whole (not to the same degree in all cases), an over-reliance on constructivist approaches and a tendency to use them in the spirit of Said and his followers. The problems caused by this bias are perhaps most evident in Sumarliði Ísleifsson's paper on medieval and early modern images of Iceland and Greenland, based (as he explicitly says) on the research traditions of imagology and postcolonial studies. Discussing medieval European ideas about Iceland, as represented most notably by Adam of Bremen

and Saxo Grammaticus, he first attributes to these writers the creation of an image that was practically the opposite of the way of life of civilized Europe; then he argues that they also engage in an idealization of the primitive, and that their picture of Iceland resembles monastic communities on the continent; “Saxo in particular seems to be rather describing the learned society of the monastery” (p. 44). If it is taken for granted that constructions of the other involve both distancing from and assimilation to the self, it will be easy to fit pretty well everything into the space between the two poles. But it might be more fruitful to move out of the closed constructivist-cum-postcolonial universe and try to grasp the relationship between experience and interpretation. High medieval Iceland was a distinctly anomalous offshoot of Western Christendom; cultural transfers from the mainland outpaced institutional ones to a degree unknown elsewhere, and this gave the Icelandic version of the twelfth and thirteenth century renaissance its peculiar characteristics. The accounts written on the mainland were trying to make sense of this atypical constellation.

I should admit that neither the connections to recent events nor the complaints about their absence are quite as easy to substantiate in the historical section as in the contemporary one. The former does include self-contained pieces of considerable value. Sverrir Jakobsson’s paper on the emergence of the North as an identifiable region (pp. 25–40) traces the development of this notion in Old Norse medieval texts. This variety of regionalizing discourse has some specific characteristics. It is to a very high degree developed at the extreme western rim of the geographical space in question. It shifts between a bipolar and a quadri-polar frame of reference; the former scheme works with a generalized opposition of North and South, the latter with more concrete demarcations from neighbours on the western, southern and eastern side. Finally, the regionalization of the North involved a strong emphasis on its distinctive historical past. All these points are relevant to the comparative study of regionalizing discourses, now actively pursued by conceptual historians. Another instructive piece is Gylfi Gunnarsson’s paper on “Old Norse poetry and new beginnings in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature.” Here the European sources and connections of the Icelandic literary revival are analysed in a novel way. Against assumptions about an unbroken continuity of Icelandic literature, the renewal of contact with the Old Norse heritage is shown to have been dependent on prior European reception of these sources, and on pre- or proto-romantic dissent from classicism.

In short, this book contains a wealth of information on diverse and sometimes disparate subjects, but readers coming to it with some prior interest in current Icelandic affairs are likely to conclude that something is missing.

Jóhann Páll Árnason
 Faculty of Human Studies
 Charles University, Prague
 Czech Republic
 johann.arnason@fhs.cuni.cz