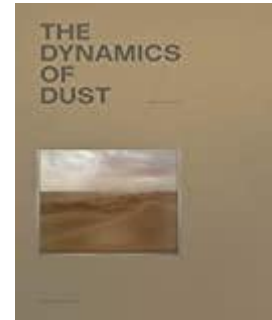




Philippe Dudouit, Emilio E. Manfredi. *The Dynamics of Dust*. Zurich: Edition Patrick Frey, 2019. 210 pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-906803-92-0.



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Published on H-Africa (July, 2021)

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The *Dynamics of Dust* by Philippe Dudouit is a timely and impressive collection of photographs, maps, and everyday life stories of the inhabitants of the Sahel. Inspired by the dramatic transformation of the region in the past two decades, the Swiss photographer is one of the few Westerners still accessing the remote areas at the intersection of the highly unstable colonial borders. For ten years he crisscrossed the region, from the Malian Adrar des Ifogas to Niger's Ténéré and Libya's Idhan Murzuq. The region, which sits at the intersection of European, sub-Saharan, and Islamic worlds, hosts dense, intricate, and interdependent networks of social, economic, and political relationships. Encompassing a sensible and humanizing series of portraits, combined with tableau-style landscapes, Dudouit shatters discourses of emptiness and incomprehensible violence pervasive in many Western societies. While capturing these complexities, this beautifully presented book goes beyond first impressions to provide an in-depth artistic and intellectual exploration of the dynamics of poverty and violence in a region at

the heart of Western imaginaries and that French historian Fernand Braudel describes as the “second face of the Mediterranean.”[1]

Years of violence by state and nonstate actors, including Islamic terrorists, have profoundly impacted the socioeconomic structure of the region. In the introduction, Emilio Ernesto Manfredi underlines the inhabitants' awareness of the “dangers that have multiplied with [the] destabilization” (p. 4). Dudouit testifies to this reality. He centers his photographs on the ever-present arms and military or paramilitary installations. The new dynamics of the drug trade from Latin America, the conflict in Libya, and the flooding of the region with Gaddafi's weapon stocks and the attractiveness of the soil's riches all combine to create a volatile environment. The destabilization of the region followed the toppling of Libya's powerful strongman in 2011 and the dispersion of large weapons stocks and a well-trained military, especially members of the Tuareg minority.[2] In particular, the new mining boom both empowered authoritarian regimes and led to a wave of viol-

ence and resource capture.[3] The proliferation of armed groups and militias, supported by the extraction and trade of precious metals in unformalized mines that were prompted by a historical and geographical power vacuum, is well illustrated by Dudouit. Driven by dynamics of extreme poverty, the gold rush currently provides a significant source for the livelihoods of thousands. With a Human Development Index between 184 and 189 out of 189 countries, the region's profile attests of the level of precarity of its population and the attractiveness of artisanal gold extraction.[4]

The Dynamics of Dust is not only a testament to the violence, insecurity, and permanent transformation of the region but also recognition of the life trajectories of its inhabitants. Through the eight annexes, Dudouit immerses us in specific events, persons, and places, from the site of a plane crash to a Nigerien Tuareg blues band. The narrative which the photographer embraces brings a humanizing perspective on the socio-economic and security dynamics in the region. Going beyond the ethnographic boundaries of traditional anthropological research, *The Dynamics of Dust* brings a fresh approach to the use of photography in research. The book is inscribed in the critique of "ethnocentric [and] oppressive agendas in which scientific anthropological uses of photography during the colonial period were implicated".[5] Dudouit avoids the pitfall of sensationalist photography of a region viewed with fear by Westerners by contextualizing his work through interviews and other sources. While not inscribed in the discipline, it distills the life stories of the inhabitants of the Sahel region in a powerful way. As Elizabeth Edwards argues when describing the twenty-first century's use of anthropological photography, "photographic 'affect,' as a mode of history, memory and identity, becomes the focus of anthropological analysis."[6]

Dudouit's work would benefit from an anthropological account of life in the Sahel region. Going beyond the traditional visual anthropology and

ensuring a dialogue between photographs and ethnographic research is a much-needed endeavor that would strengthen this beautifully crafted book. As Edwards states, "photographs and responses to them are woven into the very fabric of contemporary experience and the negotiated relations between past, present and future, and living and dead, spirits and ancestors, and places and spaces of connection." [7] Nevertheless, recognizing the honesty of this book, and its ability to avoid the temptation of a reductionist narrative of conflict, poverty, and death, Dudouit reiterates the agency of individuals too often negated by damaging Western views.

Notes

[1]. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II* (Paris: Colin, 1949), 171.

[2]. Georg Klute, "Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in Northern Mali," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 35, no. 2 (2020): 53-67.

[3]. Luca Raineri, "Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking," *International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 100-17.

[4]. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020 Human Development Index Ranking, accessed May 12, 2021, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>, 19.

[5]. Sarah Pink, "Photography in Ethnographic Research," In *Doing Visual Ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London: Sage, 2007), 2.

[6]. Elizabeth Edwards, "Anthropology and Photography: A Long History of Knowledge and Affect," *Photographies* 8, no. 3 (2015): 235-52, 235.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 248.

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Citation: Raphael Deberdt. Review of Dudouit, Philippe; Manfredi, Emilio E. *The Dynamics of Dust*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

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