

Forrest on Rykner (2014)

Rykner, Arnaud. *Corps obscènes: pantomime, tableau vivant et autres images pas sages, suivi de Note sur le dispositif*. Paris: Orizons, 2014. Pp. 250. ISBN: 978-2-336-30021-4

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In *Corps obscènes: pantomime, tableau vivant et autres images pas sages* Arnaud Rykner adapts Charles Baudelaire's imperative that art capture *la modernité* in all its fleeting complexity; he examines minor theatrical arts from the late nineteenth century, ones that would seem least poised to effect a dismantling of classical and symbolic discourse. Paradoxically possessing characteristics that Rykner identifies as both regressive and avant-garde, these arts return to a pre-linguistic stage of human development, and wrest the performing body away from the control of language in a very modern fragmentation of signifieds, signifiers, and referents. This fragmentation opens a space that facilitates an experience of what Rykner calls the "brutality of the real," in which artificially imposed social categories are undone. He characterizes the state of this "real" in these and related mediums as possessing a double nature: they are themselves and other in a space and time that is not that of language.

The first section is devoted to pantomime, which, among all theatrical arts, offers most fully a relation of the body to the stage in that it is the medium's means of expression and its very material (17). The gap that emerges in the pantomimist's dual state (performer *and* body) produces a space permeated by that vertigo identified by Baudelaire in "De l'essence du rire," and emptied of meaning as described by Jean Starobinski in *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (1970). If these arts are minor, their influence on the evolution of art theories and practices, Rykner shows, has been significant.

Rykner explores the intersections of pantomime and photography in Nadar *jeune*'s series of fifteen photographs representing Charles Deburau (son of the medium's most celebrated pantomimist) as Pierrot and the neurologist Guillaume Duchenne's photographic catalogue constituting his *Mécanisme de la physiologie humaine* (1862), itself an undeniable influence on J.-M. Charcot's photographic iconography of hysteria at La Salpêtrière. Nadar *jeune*'s serialized images, Duchenne's catalogue of facial expressions produced by electric shock, and Charcot's photographs of "hysterical" patients capture the disorienting paradox of pantomime in which the pantomimist is both performing figure and "pur objet visuel" (25). The photographic spasms of clinical neurology and psychology find themselves reappropriated by Paul Marguerite in his *Pierrot, assassin de sa femme* (1882) and by Camille Lemonnier in his adaptation of his novel *Le Mort* (1882) into pantomime. The spasm, which Rykner describes as the "désarticulation du corps," and which is at the heart of both pantomimes, offers a body that defies translation because it is unreadable, and epitomizes the crisis of the body in the nineteenth century (50, 52, 28). The potential for mechanization of the body (Duchenne's electric shock experiments, Charcot's hypnotism) comes full circle in the last chapter of this section in which Rykner proposes pantomime as an important model for early cinema, with the pantomimist's body being "la première machine à produire des images" and the medium being instrumental in teaching spectators how to watch images on a screen (86).

Rykner's shift from pantomime to *tableaux vivants* in part two is facilitated by a reference to Denis Diderot's designation of painting as the "modèle structurant du théâtre," and of pantomime as painting "en mouvement" (97, 99). The *tableau vivant*, described by Rykner as an "immobilité animée," concentrates the work of an entire pantomime performance (105) in one visual moment. Whether in a society salon setting or in a cabaret, this motionless body is existentially problematic because, while seemingly "clothed" in a flesh-colored leotard and promising to show what decency forbids yet what the male gaze desires (the female "nude" figuring prominently in these entertainments), the leotard is a second skin that reveals paradoxically nothing.

Tableaux vivants have only recently begun to receive serious historical and critical attention. Rykner focuses on the reappropriation of the society practice by Émile Zola (novel) and Maurice Maeterlinck (theater), and of Passion reenactments, notably by Fred Holland Day (photography) in the nineteenth century, and by Howard Barker and Wajdi Mouawad (theater) in the twenty-first. In *La Curée*, Zola not only critiques the social practice of the *tableau vivant*, but also incorporates the condemned medium's devices into the structure of the novel, playing on several levels with the idea that the more seemingly shown, the less one actually sees. Maeterlinck, too, reconfigures the *tableau vivant*'s production of existential ambiguity on the stage, injecting a disorienting distance and inhuman quality in bodies that communicate proximity and life. As for Fred Holland Day, his incarnation of Christ eerily offers both "real presence" and representation in the same space (185).

Corps obscènes is not a historical work, but the reader sometimes regrets basic historical anchors. In addition, Rykner often

sends his reader to other texts for explanations of terms and concepts that are integral to the development of his arguments. Nevertheless, the book's genial tone and its generally clear exposition make for a rewarding experience. It contributes richly to the growing theoretical exploration of so-called minor performance arts, but even more to a reassessment of their influence on art, literature, theater, and cinema since the nineteenth century.

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