

## Raser on Grøtta (2015)

Grøtta, Marit. *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and Nineteenth-Century Media*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Pp. viii + 205. ISBN 978-1-6289-2440-4

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Baudelaire poses quite a puzzle for students of modernism: his is, indisputably, one of the most important theories of modernity, and yet he was violently opposed to two elements of most current discussions of the subject: the doctrine of progress and the inclusion of technology. This apparent contradiction has stymied many scholars, but it is nowhere more important than in assessments of media aesthetics, where technology's role is a necessary one, and where progress, if not accepted, is at least not excluded from consideration.

Further, it is important when one compares different media not to subordinate one to another: not to subordinate, say, the analysis of pictures to the narrative structures of literature, as did Baudelaire when he praised Delacroix as a "poète en peinture" while disparaging Hugo as a "peintre en poésie." One way of avoiding such begging-of-the-question in discussions of media is to put narrative—one of the principal tools of discourse—aside. This is just what Marit Grøtta does in her *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics* when she consistently uses verbs such as "prefigure" or "foreshadow" to articulate the relation of Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin: the chronological relations of the two writers is the least of her concerns, as indeed should be the case in a book that discusses Baudelaire's relation to film, to photography, and to mass media in general.

Even if it is not chronological, Grøtta's approach is nonetheless historical, for she has provided the context—prior and contemporary—to Baudelaire's writings in a large number of areas: fascinating glimpses of public amusements, optical toys, slang expressions, as well as explanations, market considerations, and interpretations. This wealth of information makes her arguments—clearly restated at chapter's end—easy to accept, at least on a factual basis. For to say that Baudelaire formulated Benjamin's ideas before Benjamin did so himself reverses expectations of influence and concepts of reading, even if these expectations and concepts are imposed by a canon, a canon that brings its own problems of chronology.

For what Grøtta does is essential to a deeper understanding of Baudelaire: despite Baudelaire's aversion to photography, she detects in it a cult of the image and a concept of identity that would only become widespread with the advent of the twentieth century and its use of identity cards. The camera "arrests time and enlarges details" (53) and thus reveals a hitherto-unknown world—the "optical unconscious"—and makes public the secrets that had until then made up private life. The resulting displacement of boundaries defining public and private is essential to an understanding of Baudelaire's later works, prose poems like "Les Foules" where he speaks of "cette sainte prostitution de l'âme."

Likewise, although Baudelaire presents his thoughts on toys as peripheral, toys embody new technologies, and hence, new relations between people and the world. Further, since toys are the accessories of people-in-training, i.e., children, their formative, disciplinary function can hardly be overstated. Gadgets such as phenakistoscopes and kaleidoscopes break down images and reassemble them in different ways, forcing new views of the world. One learns, in the case of the former, that motion can be divided into tiny, successive steps, and in the case of the latter, that images can be reassembled according to laws of symmetry just as well as according to the laws of perspective. Thus the emphasis on composition in the *Salon de 1859*, on reconstruction in the essay on Guys, and thus also the fragmentary, disjointed presentation of the "passante."

While one side of these arguments—the smooth, shiny "literary" side where they are read as metaphors—has enjoyed the spotlight in the last decade, the other side—the seamy media-technology side—has been neglected: views of poets are much more appealing if those poets somehow give birth to "creations" full-grown, as though from the thigh of Zeus. Instead, Grøtta traces Baudelaire's debts, and these debts are not to the usual authors and creditors, but to fields, devices, and practices that the poet explicitly disdained: the press, and its use of commonplaces; photography, and its appeal to the masses and their uncritical acceptance of its "truth"; toys, and their vulgarity.

What emerges is a Baudelaire who is not the Luddite he claimed to be: a man in touch with the media technologies of his time, who meditated deeply on them and their implications for those who used them, who phrased these meditations in his later works, especially his prose poems, and whose works consequently display a unity, albeit a unity at odds with the portrait of Baudelaire we have learned to recognize.

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