

Grøtta on Wicky (2015)

Wicky, Érika. *Les Paradoxes du détail: voir, savoir, représenter à l'ère de la photographie*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015. Pp. 246. ISBN: 978-2-7535-4022-4

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There is a paradox about details, Érika Wicky tells us in her well-researched study *Les paradoxes du détail: voir, savoir, représenter à l'ère de la photographie*. When we think we are deepening our knowledge by inspecting details, the object actually risks dislocating or dissolving itself. We may be set adrift until we can no longer tell how the details relate to a whole. And if we are scrutinizing the details of a painting, our nose risks hitting the canvas.

Wicky invites us to consider the paradoxes of the detail in French visual culture of the second half of the nineteenth century, known as the age of photography. In this period, the lenses through which reality could be perceived multiplied because of the proliferation of devices that organized human perception in various ways, such as microscopes, photographs, albums, and exhibitions. This entailed not only disputes about the correct distance for apprehending different objects, but also epistemological challenges as to the relation between part and whole. In this situation, Wicky argues, the notion of the detail emerged as a theoretical tool for the perception of images and thus became essential to discussions of representation.

Wicky's book offers a textual approach to the notion of detail, examining a wide range of written documents related to the reception of images, mostly art criticism, but also novels and scientific works. Through seven chapters she identifies various practices, modalities, and strategies related to details. Under the heading "the faithful detail," she discusses the question of reproduction, and more specifically the quarrel between engravers and photographers that followed "La pétition Goupil" (1859), a protest against illegally reproduced works of art. Wicky shows that the debates about representation took on a new dimension with the advent of photography, exacerbating positions and increasing the stakes. Next, she turns to the detail as index and indication [*indice*] in a chapter on the art historian Giovanni Morelli's method. Influenced by scientific ideals, Morelli developed a science of art that required systematic knowledge of details (such as a painter's depiction of ears), and Wicky highlights the way this method opposed an older paradigm based on taste and attention to the work's totality.

Other chapters examine "the distinguishing detail" (in portrait photography), the use of details to convey historical truth (Jean-Charles Langlois's panorama and Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammô*), and the difficulty of organizing and accounting for details (at World's Fairs and in historical paintings). The final chapter takes the notion of the detail to its extreme, considering the crisis of representation in the domain of painting, when numerous artists left figurative art behind to explore materiality. Wicky compares the way this crisis is treated in the domains of painting and literature, arguing that novels about art, such as Honoré de Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, remained, to a certain degree, committed to figurality, thus failing to do justice to the question of materiality.

Wicky's book succeeds in reconfiguring well-known topics in nineteenth-century visual history, and its tour through debates about details is certainly interesting. Nonetheless, her discussions sometimes lack depth and would have benefited from the rich research already carried out in this field. For instance, the book's discussion of reproduction might have referenced Walter Benjamin's influential work on the status of the work of art in the age of reproducibility, especially his points about the ways photography allowed beholders to draw the object closer, isolating and enlarging details.

Further, Wicky's discussion of the dissolution of hierarchies in the aesthetic domain could have been illuminated by Jacques Rancière's work on the processes of democratization in the arts, breaking up the old, mimetic regime, loyal to hierarchic value systems, and opening up a new aesthetic regime. Moreover, Rancière's work on Flaubert could have informed her analysis of the way literature responded to the crisis of representation. He reveals that Flaubert, the author, triumphed over his character Emma Bovary by assuming an aesthetic posture and dedicating himself to style, whereas Emma remained in the figurative regime, desperately attempting to copy art in her life. Such perspectives could have given more nuances to Wicky's last chapter.

Nonetheless *Les paradoxes du détail* deserves praise for its interdisciplinary perspectives and for its treatment of the empirical material. The book takes the reader on a stimulating journey through terrain that may be to some degree familiar, but seen from a new perspective and reinterpreted on a new scale.

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