

Rexer on Raser (2015)

Raser, Timothy. *Baudelaire and Photography: Finding the Painter of Modern Life*. Legenda, 2015, pp. 132, ISBN 978-1-909662-51-3

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In 1859, two decades after the patent for the photographic process was purchased by the French government and released to the public, the new medium finally made an appearance at the great artistic event of the year, the Salon. That same year, the poet Charles Baudelaire used a lengthy section of his review of the salon, entitled “Le Public moderne et la photographie,” to denounce the medium in now oft-cited terms. Bemoaning the fools ignorant enough to believe that the exact reproduction of nature constituted art, Baudelaire wrote, “Un Dieu vengeur a exaucé les vœux de cette multitude. Daguerre fut son messie. Et alors elle se dit: ‘Puisque la photographie nous donne toutes les garanties désirables d’exactitude (ils croient cela, les insensés!), l’art c’est la photographie.’ À partir de ce moment, la société immonde se rua, comme un seul Narcisse, pour contempler sa triviale image sur le métal.” Baudelaire was far from alone in his rejection of photography; the new medium’s startling verisimilitude troubled many other contemporary artists, authors, and critics. Yet Baudelaire’s formulation stands out among the other detractors in its eloquence and in its severity, and has remained one of the most notorious denunciations of early photography.

Baudelaire’s anti-photographic reaction is the inspiration for a new volume by Timothy Raser entitled *Baudelaire and Photography: Finding the Painter of Modern Life*, in which Raser sets out to answer the “stupid” question (by his own admission): How could Baudelaire be so wrong? The error of interest to Raser includes not merely his rejection of photography, but also his choice of Constantin Guys as the “peintre de la vie moderne” in a world when photography was already laying claim to the role as the exemplary “modern” mode of expression. By asking why Baudelaire was so “wrong,” Raser aims to offer a new insight both on the strange choice of Guys as Baudelaire’s paradigmatic modern artist, and into a difficult relationship between man and medium that has already received much critical attention.

In order to answer this question, Raser turns to Baudelaire’s art criticism. Each of the chapters triangulate back to *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire’s evolving notion of modernity, and in some cases, photography. The opening chapter on George Catlin sets up this lesser-known American painter as an early example of the visual qualities Baudelaire would later come to appreciate in Guys. The second chapter examines Baudelaire’s critique of copying-as-art in his 1859 *Salon* (including his famous section on photography), his praise of the imagination, and the impasse that arises out of his attempts to formulate the beautiful without himself falling back on the description (copying) he decries.

The next section, on absence, addresses his writings on Meryon from the *Salon* of 1859 (Meryon’s etchings were absent from the show; Baudelaire discussed them even more indirectly still by means of a poem by Hugo). From there, Raser moves to a pair of chapters on modernity, the first treating the topic in Baudelaire’s writings other than *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, the second setting up Baudelaire’s modernity as an escape from the problems created by the Kantian definition of beauty and the universality of aesthetic judgment. These chapters on modernity are followed by a psychoanalytical reading of Baudelaire’s reaction against photography that hinges on the association of Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage and the mirrored surface of the daguerreotype image. The discussion of photography is brought to a close with a brief chapter on blindness that posits that photography forced Baudelaire to “reconsider the role of the referent” and thus contributed to the rejection of canonical aesthetics essential to his idea of the modern. Finally, a concluding chapter presents Baudelaire’s photographic legacy via the writings of Mallarmé, Barthes, and Derrida on photography.

By the end of this ramble through Baudelaire’s prose, Raser has made a compelling case that “Baudelaire wrote *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* to get beyond the impasse he had encountered as he tried to use a Kantian aesthetic model to account for the unusual, ‘bizarre’ and up-to-date works that he appreciated” (83). Indeed, reconsidering Baudelaire’s modernity in these Kantian terms clarifies much of what is bizarre in Baudelaire’s art criticism and his personal aesthetic judgments. The book’s treatment of photography, however, is less satisfying. Despite the title, this is not a book primarily dedicated to photography, but a book about modernity in which photography figures secondarily. While it is in some sense fitting that a study of Baudelaire and photography would consign the medium to remain (in Baudelaire’s own formulation) “the very humble servant” of other scholarly concerns, this subordination of photography is nonetheless something of a disappointment.

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