

Johnson on Balducci (2017)

Balducci, Temma. *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur*. Routledge, 2017, pp. 236, ISBN 978-1-4724-4586-5

Sharon P. Johnson, *Virginia Tech*

Temma Balducci writes against the paradigm that separates social space into rigid spheres of the masculine and feminine, which, she argues, is implicitly encapsulated in Baudelaire's *flâneur*. For her, those constructs have "distorted theorizations of gender, gendered space and gaze in the scholarship of late nineteenth-century Paris" (1–2). She demonstrates that the conflation of bourgeois masculinity with the figure of the *flâneur* by scholars in history, literature, and art history over the last several decades limits our understanding of both fin-de-siècle masculinity and femininity—represented and actual. While many important theoreticians from the 1970s and 1980s come under scrutiny in Balducci's work, such as Pollock, Herbert, and Clark (and I agree with her critiques), other literary and historical scholars of the last two decades besides those mentioned in her introduction have in fact shown that gendered space is porous (Martin-Fugier, Johnson, Thompson). Balducci's book nonetheless examines the complex dynamic of fin-de-siècle Paris, a space in which, many types—not just the *flâneur*—frequented the boulevards, both bourgeois men and women looked and possessed the gaze, and men were comfortable in the interior spaces of the home.

Chapter one highlights artists who depict men and women of various classes in the public spheres of the last third of the century—especially the figure of the beggar—rather than predominantly painting the *flâneur*. Balducci goes so far as to suggest that previous scholars may have "made up" or at least overdetermined the importance of the *flâneur* in their scholarship for that period (22). At times, when countering long-standing interpretations of nineteenth-century cultural history that have been read through the lens of Charles Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life," Balducci diminishes other scholars' work in a manner that does not further her case. In the second development of this chapter, "Woman and/on the Boulevard," Balducci demonstrates that when looking at representations of the late nineteenth century, one finds woman's "very real participation in [...] public life" (37): walking, strolling, or taking public transportation to venues such as department stores, Universal Exhibitions, pastry shops, tea salons, or their employment. She delightfully includes songs, lithographs, and passages from etiquette manuals that explain how proper women should walk in public. Those multiple sources underscore that proper women (and occasionally white-collar workers) did circulate leisurely in the public sphere in a non-sexualized manner without being mistaken for a prostitute.

"Gazing Women," also focuses on late nineteenth-century Parisian public spaces in its questioning of the gender of looking. In this second chapter, drawing on bell hooks, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, Balducci argues that the gaze among individuals is "unique, intricate and multivalent" and that woman "were looking, often at men, thus underscoring the possibility, even the likelihood that power and the gaze are not always or necessarily mutually defining and reinforcing" (67). She attributes the existence of the feminine gaze to the rise of capitalism, the modernization of Paris, and its forms of leisure. Like her first chapter, her scholarly dialog is as impressive as is her archival research. The paintings, posters, and manuals that she analyzes range from the canonical to hitherto unstudied or understudied works. Moreover, comparable to her preceding chapter, she reframes feminist art history and its dominant paradigms since the 1980s. Balducci's analyses and interpretations show a dynamic gendered relationship that recalls Kaja Silverman's argument in her article on Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Lacan (1994) that men and women can simultaneously be the object and subject of the gaze.

Her third chapter analyzes another architectural feature of Haussmann's Paris—apartment buildings' large windows and balconies—to problematize several dichotomies in literature, art history, and popular iconography. Balducci considers the physical placement of artists in their works which "undercut conventional academic training of the period, but also challenge[d] entrenched scholarship about the importance of the I/eye in Modernism" (116). In so doing, she argues for the centrality of windows and balconies in avant-garde practice. Several unknown works (for me) show the fluidity between the private and public spheres, for example, Pierre Bonnard's *The Organ Grinder* (1895) and Jean Béraud's *Paris Kiosk* (c. 1879–80). Little distinction between interior and exterior spaces exists: people viewing others from their windows become part of the street spectacle, like those who gaze outside of their windows become one with the street's activities.

Interior spaces or portraits of men such as Édouard Manet's *Stéphane Mallarmé* (1886), Pierre Renoir's *Portrait of Albert Cahen d'Anvers* (1881), Émile Zola's Claude Lantier in *L'Œuvre* (1886) or Guy de Maupassant's Georges Duroy in *Bel Ami* document "not only the importance of the domestic sphere to men, but also the significance of the domestic interior to creative life" (156). In this final, fourth chapter, Balducci argues that the private sphere is not limited to femininity: "when

Manet, Degas and other artists represented themselves and their friends in interiors that evoke domesticity, they were [...] picturing men in their usual domain and surrounding them with the accoutrements of those spaces—to better reveal and define their subjectivity” (159). Hence, both the private and public spheres are “mutually defining” (167, 178). Again, she challenges “long-held notions about the singular importance of the boulevard-loving *flâneur* as a paradigm for bourgeois masculinity” (161), and she does so convincingly. This chapter also is richly researched, drawing from art history, literature, and etiquette and decorating manuals to demonstrate the importance of interior spaces. Upholstery, bibelots on mantles and furniture construct not only the nineteenth-century home and bourgeois masculinity but also stage an ideal space for artists’ creativity (173).

There are many strengths of this book: its close readings of myriad unknown or rarely analyzed works, its impressive critical apparatus and its insightful interpretations. Balducci has written a fascinating study for those interested in gendered representations of femininity, masculinity, and the gaze in Paris’s public and private domains. For specialists and non-specialists *Gender, Space, and the Gaze* offers marvelous new perspectives and frameworks that redefine men and women in both spaces—arguing that the figure of the Baudelarian *flâneur* has been detrimental to having a fuller understanding of leisure, pleasure, and domesticity, experienced by men and women in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Volume: 48.1–2

Year:

- 2019