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Élise Pavy-Guilbert, *L'Image et la langue: Diderot à l'épreuve du langage dans les Salons*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014. 470pp. 49€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-3176-0.

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At the time he was writing the *Salon de 1765*, his fourth such review of the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculptures's* biennial exhibition, Diderot had a great deal of confidence in his rhetorical powers. "Je vous décrirai les tableaux," he writes, "et ma description sera telle qu'avec un peu d'imagination et de goût on les réalisera dans l'espace et qu'on y posera les objets à peu près comme nous les avons vus sur la toile." [1] It was, as he said in a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland, "certainement la meilleure chose que j'ai faite depuis que je cultive des lettres." [2]

The tone became decidedly different in his following *Salon de 1767*. Addressing the *Correspondance littéraire's* editor Melchior Grimm in the introduction, he expressed how difficult it was to write on the arts for the journal's distant, princely subscribers: "Obtenez des personnes opulentes auxquelles vous destinez mes cahiers, l'ordre ou la permission de faire prendre des esquisses de tous les morceaux dont j'aurai à les entretenir; et je vous répondrai d'un Salon tout nouveau... vous liriez ma description, et vous auriez ce croquis sous les yeux; il m'épargnerait beaucoup de mots, et vous entendriez davantage." [3] The idea of including sketches with his review shows how sensitive Diderot had become to the problem of rendering the semiotic complexity of the visual into words. In 1765, he thought that the writer could make the absent images of the artworks materialize in the minds of his faraway readers. In 1767, he was decidedly less sure.

Élise Pavy-Guilbert's *L'Image et la Langue: Diderot à l'épreuve du langage dans les Salons* is the latest in a long line of studies devoted to the question of language in the *philosophe's* art criticism. Born, as the author notes, from a 2011 dissertation, the book is divided into three general parts. In the first, broadly titled "Le Discours sur l'image," Pavy-Guilbert takes an original approach to Diderot's *Salons*. Rather than focusing on the textual strategies that Diderot used to write on the arts (the descriptions, "tales," "fictions," and dialogues for which the *Salons* are well known), she examines Diderot as a critic, correspondent, and "salonnier," analyzing how Diderot's art criticism participated in a dynamics of "sociability" that was central to eighteenth-century culture. In Pavy-Guilbert's account, the written *Salon* is seen as an extension of the intellectual salon governed by the codes of polite and pleasant conversation and acceptable social interaction.

Drawing on Dominique Maingueneau's concept of a "scénographie épistolaire-conversationnelle," Pavy-Guilbert examines the various rhetorical and social implications of "epistolarity." The *Salons's* "scénographie épistolaire-conversationnelle" allows Diderot to construct an exemplary image of himself and to account for his "pensée en formation" (p. 77) that would justify the many digressions and dialogues from which he constructs his texts. Through this particular staging of his writings, she argues, Diderot attempted to create complicity between himself and his readers, the ultimate goal of which was to shape the artistic tastes as well as the political and ethical beliefs of his royal readership.

By focusing on the issues of epistolarity and sociability, Pavy-Guilbert offers an innovative and intriguing take on the *Salon*-writing enterprise. Unfortunately, this very interesting take often gets lost (or at least muddled) in the many deviations and detours the author takes as she contemplates some of the more theoretical implications of epistolarity and sociability. The winding and circuitous character of her analysis is felt all the more acutely when paragraphs start with one idea and end with another; when content and ideas are repeated from one page to the next; when authors' names are misspelled (Régis Michel becomes "Roland" in a note on p. 94; Diana Guiragossian is referred to as "Daniel" on p. 121); when the same passage is quoted in both the body and the notes (p. 59 and p. 81); or when certain assertions seem to contradict one another (on p. 50, we are told that "Seule la politique reste un sujet tabou" in the art of conversation that dictates the *Salons*, while on p. 53, "Avec la religion, la politique est l'autre sujet de prédilection qui infiltre le discours sur l'image"). Working through the meandering prose and occasionally stumbling over these awkward repetitions and other problems in editing, I was often left with the impression that Pavy-Guilbert had not fully fleshed out the ideas of some of her passages and not carefully proofread others. This is unfortunate, because many of her assertions (for example, that Diderot influenced not only the aesthetic but also the political and ethical beliefs of European despots through his art criticism) merit a more thorough and systematic analysis.

Less encumbered by problems in editing, the second part, titled "Langage et imaginaire," reads much better than the first. Here, Pavy-Guilbert rejoins the ranks of the majority of other Diderot scholars who have worked on the *Salons* by examining the *philosophe's* attempts to develop a critical language suitable not only for describing and judging works of art but also for making them come alive in the minds of his readers. It is divided into three subsections: "Visible, lisible, dicible"; "Langage et espace"; and "Le Langage des passions." Beginning with a presentation of the classic *ut pictura poesis* problem, the first subsection explores the various ways in which Diderot "sees," "reads," and "says" the various images on display at the Salon exhibition. As Pavy-Guilbert relates, he narrates the domestic dramas represented in Greuze's tableaux, while Boucher's exercises in rococo frivolity leave his imagination decidedly unsparked. Chardin's much-admired realistic still lifes are rendered by an "austérité descriptive" in Diderot's account, while Vernet's landscapes inspire him to imaginatively "enter" into the spaces of their representations.

It is in the second subsection of part two that Pavy-Guilbert reminds us, in fact, of the many "spaces"—literal and figurative—that mark Diderot's art criticism: the physical space of the *Salon carré* where the exhibition took place, the space of the painting or sculpture with its depiction, the literary space of notes written in the margins of an exhibition program or an autograph manuscript of the written Salon, and the mental space of Diderot's mind in which the various images are captured and recreated until given form on the page. The imaginative space of Diderot's mind obviously factors most heavily into Pavy-Guilbert's inquiry as she examines the various rhetorical strategies he employed to "roll out" ("dérouler"—a verb often used throughout the subsection) the image, or the sensations that the image gives rise to. The third subsection of part two, devoted to the passions, opens up to a broader discussion of the relationship between "affects" and "effects" in the experience of the work of art and addresses how Diderot chose to communicate these "effects" in his written account.

While the first part of *L'Image et la Langue* tackles the issue of sociability and language in the *Salons*, and the second part examines the various ways in which the *philosophe* writes on particular works of art, the third part focuses primarily on Diderot's thoughts on language. This leads Pavy-Guilbert to make a number of contrasts and draw certain similarities. For example, Diderot's 1751 *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* is juxtaposed with the well-known "promenade Vernet" passage from the *Salon de 1767* in order to demonstrate a continuum in his thoughts on the "hiéroglyphe poétique" and on language's loss of expressive power over time. In other places in part three, Pavy-Guilbert contrasts Diderot's desire to reconnect with "une langue originelle," "primitive," and "poétique" with similar ideas found in the works of Rousseau and Condillac. For a section devoted to the question of language, it might make sense to demonstrate how certain ideas first formulated in the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* reappear in the *Salon de 1767*. It might also make sense to compare Diderot's ideas on language with those of his philosophical

peers. What is a bit more difficult to discern in this section is how these various strains of thought are actually tied together.

This part of the book is ostensibly about the difficulty of translating images, or the experience of images, into words. It is about the limits of representational language, that is, the extent to which language can literally “re-present” an absent object. This, as we saw, was the classical word-image dilemma that confronted Diderot in the *Salons*. It is a topic that has been addressed by other scholars, including myself. However, as Pavy-Guilbert’s analysis of the philosophy of language in Diderot moves from author to author, text to text, and as one observation gives rise to another, a central, unifying thesis fails to materialize. I was thus often left with the feeling of being led on an intellectual journey by a guide without a very detailed map. This feeling was reinforced by a return of the organizational problems that plagued the first part of the book. The repetition of passages, ideas, and analyses culminates with the very last chapter of part three, which, as Pavy-Guilbert tells us, is a modified version of an article already in press. While publishing a reworked article in a book may not be a bad thing in itself, this particular section culls much of its material from the previous ones and adds little to the book as a whole. For the sake of brevity and readability, it perhaps would have been best to leave it out.

Ultimately, *L’Image et la langue: Diderot à l’épreuve du langage dans les Salons* is an interesting book that could have benefitted from more editorial supervision. In its introduction, Pavy-Guilbert hypothesizes that the *Salons* are more about language than images, and this is undoubtedly true, especially as Diderot became more sensitive to the difficulty, if not actual impossibility, of describing works in such a way as to make them visible in the minds of his readers. In the same introduction, she also outlines her book’s three basic objectives: 1. “Remettre les *Salons* au cœur des pratiques d’écriture des salonniers,” this last word meaning other art writers of the time; 2. “explore[r] les *Salons* en les plaçant au cœur de l’ensemble de l’œuvre de Diderot”; and 3. “relier la critique d’art aux aspirations, expérimentations et interrogations diderotiennes” (pp. 24-26). These objectives are only partially met in *L’Image et la langue* for the simple reason that, in the hypertrophic miscellany of ideas presented and explored, one growing from the next, they simply get lost in the mix.

Pavy-Guilbert clearly knows Diderot’s works well and has given considerable thought to the relationship between word and image in his art criticism. She knows the works of the other *Salon* writers and art theorists of the period, and she engages with the critical literature devoted to Diderot’s art criticism (Bukdahl, Chouillet, Starobinski, Delon, and others, although there is a notable absence of scholarship written in English in her book). She is able to use the work of contemporary art historians and philosophers, such as Georges Didi-Hubermann, to arrive at new insights into Diderot’s understanding of language, especially in relation to the visual arts. But these are insights in need of structure. In the *Neveu de Rameau*, the Diderot/Moi character famously remarks, “J’abandonne mon esprit à tout son libertinage.... Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins.”^[4] It is, in part, this “libertinage,” this tendency to follow ideas wherever they may go, that makes Diderot’s works so engaging. Scholarship, however, does not get to enjoy such freedom. In order to be compelling, it must have a clearly demarcated line of argument that it follows assiduously. In his correspondence with Sophie Volland, Diderot often complains about the demands that his editor Grimm placed on him for his reviews. If Grimm had only given him some more time to complete his review of the Salon of 1761, he laments, “j’aurais été meilleur et plus court.”^[5] I do not know if Pavy-Guilbert needed more time to write *L’Image et la Langue*, but she could have used a careful editorial hand to help her sort out some of the problems found in her book, problems which undermine her many keen observations and fine analyses.

NOTES

[1] Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, Annette Lorenceau and Else Marie Bukdahl, eds. (Paris: Hermann, 1984), p. 26.

[2] Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, George Roth, ed. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955), vol. V., p. 167.

[3] Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, Annette Lorenceau, Else Marie Bukdahl, and Michel Delon, eds. (Paris: Hermann, 1995), pp. 55-56.

[4] Denis Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Herbert Dieckmann, Jacques Proust, Jean Varloot, et. al. (Paris: Hermann, 1984), vol. XII, p. 70.

[5] *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 305.

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