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Julian Brigstocke, *The Life of the City: Space, Humour, and the Experience of Truth in Fin-de-siècle Montmartre*, Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014. xv + 230 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$119.95 ISBN 978-1-4094-4896-9 (hb), \$95.96 ISBN 978-1-4094-4897-6 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-4094-7170-7 (epub).

Review by Margaret Werth, University of Delaware.

Julian Brigstocke's book offers a new analysis of fin-de-siècle Montmartre from the point of view of its engagement with its urban environment. For an art historian conversant with histories of Montmartre in this period, his book represents a strikingly different approach based in Historical Geography.^[1] Brigstocke contrasts his work with descriptive accounts and previous theoretical paradigms oriented around the notion of urban "spectacle" or the emergence of the cultural avant-garde and of mass culture, and foregrounds "non-representational" practices that "actualize[d] a new urban geographical imagination and a transformed art of urban living" (p. x).

Montmartre emerged as a place associated with counter-cultural creativity and urban vitality in a very specific spatial and historical context. Once a rustic village outside Paris, it was annexed in 1860 and became a working class neighborhood whose distinct character and spatial and social marginality were re-asserted in the 1870s and 1880s in the context of conflicts over the meaning and legacy of the Paris Commune and of the political turmoil of early Third Republic France. Brigstocke frames urban cultural conflict in this period in terms of a struggle for "authority": rather than simply refusing authority the Montmartre avant-garde "attempted to deploy new forms of immanent authority" based on the "vital energies of embodied experience" (p. x). His book presents "conceptual 'diagrams' of an ethos of modernity--a stance toward life, truth, authority" of the biopolitical urban culture of fin-de-siècle Montmartre (p. 195).

Brigstocke's work is informed by Michel Foucault's late writings on biopolitics and more recent discussions that analyze liberalism's regulation of the biological life of populations through doctrines of liberty and apparatuses of security that form technologies of power.^[2] Foucault's discussions of the relations of power, knowledge, and truth, and the elaboration of forms of authority, experience, truth telling, affect, and spatial practices are key to Brigstocke's analysis. According to Brigstocke, the artists, writers, and performers of Montmartre in the post-Commune period--the period of the rise of liberalism in France--intervened in the biopolitical urban economy by valuing embodied experience and affect over tradition or rationality and used humor in the production and contestation of urban space. He argues, however, that their redefinition of the "life of the city" does not, in the end, escape complicity with the biopolitical regime of Third Republic France where "life" became the means through which individual and population were regulated and managed. "Artists' experiments with urban community meshed with emerging biopolitical strategies of urban governance that emphasized the pluralization of individual freedom, the impossibility and undesirability of total government control, and a vigorous concern with the health, vitality, and dynamism of the population and its urban environment" (p. 5). The fin-de-siècle counter-culture of Montmartre inspired later avant-garde movements, but Montmartre itself became a commercialized and touristic site that produced commodified images and experiences of creativity, bohemianism, and rustic nostalgia.

The introduction lays out the Foucauldian biopolitical approach, contrasting it with theories of spectacle and of the avant-garde that have focused on relations between art and life, particularly Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre in their critiques of the “society of the spectacle” and of “everyday life,” respectively.^[3] Brigstocke criticizes Debord and Lefebvre for not recognizing the ways in which “life” and “experience” were being “maximized” by modern urbanism (p. 14). The “life of the city” signifies the “circulation of bodies, diseases, crime, vice, degeneration, destitution and delinquency” (p. 18) and this “life” was a matter not only of technical administration but also of cultural experimentation and contestation. The city was “a privileged site of the intersection of art, the everyday, and biological life” (p. 18) and artists found ways to experiment with an ethos of the “art of living” (p. 21) that pursued “limit-experiences” and stylized a new “aesthetics of authority” (p. 23). Challenging contemporary norms and institutions, the counter-cultural community of Montmartre was not only anti-authoritarian, but sought new forms of immanent authority, often based in humor and closely tied to “vitalist theories of embodied experience” and to the creation of a “distinctive sense of place and marginality” (pp. 25-26).

Brigstocke instantiates his argument through analyses of three selected aspects of fin-de-siècle Montmartrois culture: the black cat in art and literature as a figure for the modern experience of truth; the artistic cabaret Chat Noir with its parodies of bourgeois culture, counter-displays, and use of humor to re-imagine the city; and anarchists’ violent acts of “propaganda by the deed” and use of humor and derision to attack bourgeois society.

In part one Brigstocke focuses on the figure of the black cat as a signifier of Montmartrois urban modernity and a “distinctively modern experience of truth” (p. 29). He traces the black cat to Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire in the eighteen-forties and to “contradictory, ungraspable and unrepresentable” forms of modern experience (p. 41). He then turns to the cat in Edouard Manet’s 1863 painting *Olympia*. He sees the cat’s hostile gaze as the “negative image” of Olympia’s: her body registers presence and the cat absence, such that the painting concerns not only a truth about nineteenth-century sexual economy but “a truth about truth.” Since the painting’s truth concerns absence, not presence, truth would now be found in “the silent horror of a black night” (pp. 45-46).^[4] He links this to Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* and the commitment of the Cynic philosophers to truth-telling and living a truthful life, an ethos, he says, that was carried forward by modern writers and artists such as Poe, Baudelaire, and Manet, who represent a “cynicism in culture” that would be appropriated, along with the figure of the black cat, by the bohemians of Montmartre (p. 47).

Brigstocke identifies three models of authority in early Third Republic France: transcendent, experimental, and experiential authority. The Basilica of Sacré Coeur, for example, was a potent urban symbol of transcendent authority based on traditional religious values and the past; experimental authority was tied to positivism, objectivity, and developments in science and technology that increasingly defined what was understood as “society” in the Third Republic. The avant-garde of Montmartre explored the dynamism, creativity, and embodiment of experiential authority. Brigstocke builds a case for this third kind of authority based on experience through a discussion of Walter Benjamin’s writings on the withering of “aura” and the power of the commodity and of the contemporary writings of the philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau, which emphasized experience and biological life. In addition, Baudelaire’s poetry staged an encounter with the truth of modern experience as alienation and fragmentation. Montmartre was a “spatial marker of ideals of urban revolt, autonomy, and freedom” in the eighteen-eighties, and the “life of the city” was redefined through humor and a new authority of embodied, lived experience that challenged emerging biopolitical discourses (p. 77). Performances of hysteria and other pathological states in the cabarets of Montmartre parodied scientific demonstrations and Montmartre artists uncovered “new forms of urban vitality” through “experimental embodiments” of psychological maladies” that made “the limits of life *visible* and *felt*” (p. 97). However, the relative freedom of Montmartre urban culture from censorship worked in favor of both the avant-garde and liberal experiments with the regulation of urban life.

Part two takes up the Montmartre cabaret Chat Noir. It was an enduring symbol of radical culture in the eighteen-eighties and “at the center of attempts to reimagine the possibility of urban community and to engineer a deeply felt experience of place” (p. 103). Presenting itself as the height of modernity—a sign at its entrance exhorted passersby to “Be Modern”—it used humor to create an intensified sense of vitality. This humor was based in self-alienation, irony, and contradiction, and allowed “a new affective experience of place” that combined an iconoclastic anti-traditionalism and autonomy with nostalgia for authenticity and rootedness (p. 112). The comic pantomime figure Pierrot was a “personification of Montmartre’s urban imaginary” (p. 113). Rather than a “republican framing of urban vitality in terms of organic health and free circulation,” Montmartre represented “an alternative experience of place based upon irony, buffoonery and an ethos of affirmation” (p. 122). While he recognizes the phenomenon of the increasing commercialization of Montmartre in the eighteen-nineties, Brigstocke’s discussion of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster *La vache enragée* fails to place it in that context (p. 120).

The Chat Noir attacked bourgeois culture by targeting its cultural forms and institutions.

It parodied the museum by creating an “anti-museum” that presented a “displaced present” and a “jumble of time” (pp. 127–28). Declaring itself modern, the cabaret nonetheless suggested a medieval hostelry and created an indeterminate historical temporality by decorating the interior with eclectic, largely outmoded bric-a-brac for which the owner created a catalogue with invented provenances and erroneous entries that parodied museum discourse. The cabaret’s journal also produced a series that undermined Paris as a center of modernity and progress. The “Voyages de découvertes” were narrated by naive explorers from Montmartre who traveled to central Paris as to a foreign land that was sterile in its uniformity and order. Unable to decode its signs they misconstrued its major monuments, taking the Opera for a tomb and the Cathedral of Notre Dame for a morgue (pp. 140–42). Such humorous performances of error were aimed to provoke an experience of a more truthful life, exposing the “failures of dominant modes of visibility” (p. 146).

The senses were incorporated into biopolitical discourses concerning the life of the city in discussions of the synthesis of different sensory organs, pathologies of perception, and the sensory overload of the modern city. Here Brigstocke primarily relies on the work of Jonathan Crary, as well as that of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Siegfried Kracauer.^[5] The phantasmagorical landscapes and parodies of pathological sensation created by the artists and writers of Montmartre attempted to “creatively reappropriate... forms of urban alienation” to explore new “forms of urban vitality” (p. 160). The Chat Noir destabilized the perceptual experience of the city through ghostly and synesthetic performances of poetry and shadow theatre that exposed the city’s deathliness. Stylizing new forms of urban vitality involved, paradoxically, courting the “abyss” of death, unnatural confusions of the senses, and new forms of sensory totality, and Montmartre was “a uniquely phantasmagorical space of urban modernity” (pp. 151, 154). In a dense and sometimes elusive conclusion to this part of the book, Brigstocke draws on theories of romanticism from the Jena Romantics to Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe to find in the Montmartre avant-garde an ethos of “unworking sensation,” “unworking the work,” a discovery of totality in nothingness, and a transformation of representation into affect that allowed them to stylize an experimental “life of the city” (pp. 163–65).

Part three includes a single chapter on how anarchism reconfigured the life of the city, and a brief conclusion. The chapter on anarchism, which Brigstocke calls a “theoretical diagram,” is the least developed in the book (p. 192). He argues that life and creativity were linked in biopolitical discourses with violence. He draws on recent studies of anarchism, particularly Simon Critchley’s work on neo-anarchist ethical subjectivity and tactics engaging the comic.^[6] Returning to Foucault’s discussion of Cynical *parrhesia* or truth telling, he situates fin-de-siècle anarchism within a genealogy of ethics and argues that anarchist practice, like the Montmartre avant-garde, was a cynical ethics based on a styling of life and an assumption of authority outside legitimate authority (p. 177). For anarchists like Peter Kropotkin anarchist violence was a way of awakening thought: propaganda by the deed was “a shock

that would awaken the truth” and a new non-representational language of affect in which language could become embodied (pp. 179–80). Propaganda by the deed was a new spatial practice through which the life of the city could transform itself, and anarchists attempted to establish experiential authority and used humor to make a claim to vitality. Brigstocke discusses a startling text by Victor Barrucand, “Le rire de Ravachol,” published in *L’Endehors* in 1892, which exulted in the expression of the executed anarchist Ravachol’s severed head: its derisive laughter affirmed the vitality and creativity of anarchism, countering charges of degeneracy and madness (pp. 169–79). But Brigstocke concludes that in the use of humor, as in the use of violence, the anarchists were complicit with biopolitical discourses rather than “constructing a political rationality” that would be a “militant refusal to take life as the key source of value in modern society” (p. 192). He never outlines what that refusal would look like or what the alternative to “complicity” could have been for either the anarchists or the Montmartre avant-garde. Current debates about biopolitics as well as new interpretations of Foucault’s late work suggest there might be more positive avenues of analysis.

Brigstocke’s theoretical framework has both advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes the wide range of theoretical touchstones and the all-encompassing biopolitical thesis overwhelms the historical materials, overgeneralizing, blurring distinctions, and oversimplifying competing approaches (the dismissal at the outset of Debord on spectacle and Lefebvre on everyday life, for example). It is not always clear where he draws the line between the “non-representational” and “representational” or what constitutes embodiment or affect. The book does offer a strong reinterpretation of fin-de-siècle Montmartre by drawing on an impressive range of ideas in philosophy and literary theory, among other fields. Brigstocke provocatively analyses the contradictory dynamics of the Montmartre avant-garde community and shows how humor was used to contest traditional and scientific forms of authority and work against prevailing modes of subjectivation. He is attentive to urban spatial practices and the ways in which the Montmartre avant-garde developed an alternative ethos of life and experience of place that countered the dominant biopolitical “framing of urban vitality in terms of organic health and free circulation” (p. 122).

NOTES

[1] Notable works on fin-de-siècle Montmartre include Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw, *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde 1875–1905* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Gabriel Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: University of Rutgers Press, 2001); Richard Thompson, Philip Dennis Cate and Mary Weaver Chapin, eds., *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005); and Louis Chevalier, *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime*, (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1995).

[2] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978); Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2007); Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2008).

[3] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 2000) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2014).

[4] A surprising omission in Brigstocke’s discussion of the nude and the cat in Manet’s *Odalisque* is T. J. Clark’s influential and extended discussion in *The Painting of Modern Life*. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[5] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*

(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999)

[6] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007). Brigstocke also directly draws on Howard Lay's "Beau Geste! (on the Readability of Terrorism)," *Yale French Studies* 101 (2001):79–100. Among the many writings on French anarchism in the period Brigstocke references are Joan Halperin, *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-De-Siècle Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); John Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); Robin Roslak, *Neo-impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics, and Landscape* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Richard Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). See also my discussion of anarchism in Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in France, circa 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

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