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Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xxi + 215. \$22.50 U. S. (pb). ISBN 0-8166-4782-8.

Review by Caroline Ford, University of California, Los Angeles.

Marni Reva Kessler has undertaken an absorbing study of the ubiquity and popularity of “veils” among bourgeois women in Haussmann’s Paris and explores the significance of their representation in modernist painting between 1852, when Georges Haussmann came to power, and 1889, the year of the Universal Exhibition. She concentrates primarily on the images of the artists Edouard Manet, Gustave Caillebotte, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot and draws on a wide variety of other sources, which include photographs, medical tracts, contemporary fashion periodicals, memoirs, letters and fiction. She ultimately seeks “to interweave social history, close formal analysis of images, cultural studies, feminist theory, urban studies, and postcolonial theory” (p. xxi) in order to explore the significance of the veil and its representation at a particular historical moment in the history of Paris. Placing her work in the context of a number of recent studies of the construction of modern life in the City of Light, including the significant work of T. J. Clark (to whom, oddly, she does not explicitly refer in the text), she sets out to show how the veil was a powerful metaphor implicated in the construction of modernity during the Second Empire and early Third Republic.[1]

The book is divided into four chapters and each explains through a different lens why wearing a veil became fashionable among secular bourgeois or “respectable” women, who are the primary focus of this book, and the significance of how they came to be represented in the visual culture of the period. The first chapter examines the centrality of the veil in the literature on public hygiene and medicine as well as the call to wear it to screen out the dangerous dust and disease associated with Haussmannization and modern urban life. Chapter two shows how fashion journals and etiquette books also made gauzy veils fashionable in this period, and ironically promoted them for reasons of health and respectability while at the same time highlighting their seductive potential in articulating a certain (delete) seemingly contradictory ideal of bourgeois femininity.

The first two chapters bring a wealth of new material to bear on the depiction of veils by the impressionist painters of the period, and this material is put together in interesting and imaginative ways. However, the arguments that Kessler makes about dust and debris becoming an increased focus of social anxiety regarding the perceived breakdown of class structure and moral behaviour in the period of Haussmannization suggests that she puts the cart before the horse. Surely it was in the wake of the great cholera epidemic of 1832 that anxieties about disease and dirt were at their greatest. Haussmannization was intended to make Paris safe from revolution after 1848, but it was also fundamentally justified in a discourse centering on hygiene. While T. J. Clark indicated the ways in which the rebuilding of Paris led to the democratization of public and leisure spaces and anxieties about urban social indeterminacy, following Kessler’s argument, veils may indeed have been a means of attempting to differentiate oneself as a bourgeoisie from the laundress, servant, “public woman” or prostitute. However, Clark and others have suggested that the latter increasingly had the means to mimic the manners and dress of the bourgeoisie successfully. Moreover, on the basis of the evidence Kessler presents, it is unclear how prevalent the wearing of what one might call gauzy or lacy face coverings was from 1852 to 1889. Even in the large group painting that Kessler analyzes, Manet’s *Music in the Tuileries Garden*, the difference in the veils that are worn (from thin to thick) and the fact that they are by no means universal must give rise to further reflection and a need for more evidence of their

general presence than she presents. Moreover, the most conspicuous face covering in the painting is worn by Manet's mother, who is advanced in years. Should not the variety of "veils," their purpose, the role of age (and not simply of gender) be taken into account in explaining what kind of metaphor they allegedly were in this period?

This question lies at the heart of the book's fourth chapter, "The Other Side of the Veil," where Kessler shifts from a discussion of the popularity of the French bourgeois veil to nineteenth-century preoccupations with the Muslim veil, which was highlighted in the displays devoted to North Africa at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889. Given the current controversy surrounding the Muslim veil in France, it is interesting to see the extent to which a certain kind of fashionable "veiling" was an acceptable part of French secular middle class dress in the nineteenth century, but there are (and were) "veils" and "veils." It is as difficult to equate the Muslim veil — which also came in many varieties (*hijab*, headscarf, *burqa*) — with the bourgeois lace and gauze of the 1860s as it is to equate the "voile islamique" with a Parisian woman's Hermès scarf of the 1990s.

The fact that Kessler does not adequately take into account the all important issue of religion in either metropolitan or colonial France in her discussion of veils is astonishing and presents problems for her overall argument. This is precisely the period in which an anticlerical, if largely male, bourgeoisie was increasingly attempting to unveil women in religious orders and congregations. The period between 1852 and 1889 was the beginning of the great anticlerical crusade that led to the laïcization of education and to the dismantling of female Catholic congregations in France. How does one take into account another important discourse regarding the need to expose the veiled religious women in this period, as reflected in Charles Sauvestre's immensely popular *Les congrégations religieuses dévoilées*, published in its fourth edition in 1879?^[2] Not grappling with the issues of religious difference presents similar problems for the parallels and juxtapositions that Kessler makes between the French secular fashionable veil and the Muslim veil and their alleged relationship in the "composition of late nineteenth-century French imperialism" (p. xxix). To assert that "the connection between the French veil and the Muslim veil of the French colonies in North Africa (mainly Algeria and Morocco) resonated deeply in Paris, *even if no one was consciously aware of it or cared to admit it*" (p. 95) (my emphasis) is, by definition, a claim that is open to question and must be proved. There were certainly orientalist fascinations in France that extended back a century, as Kessler suggests, but there is simply no tangible evidence to conclude that "keeping Parisian women veiled continued the cycle that feminized the Orient, for the sighting of a veiled woman on the street served as a reminder of this colonial counterpart and thus reinforced an understanding of the Orient as being enigmatic, distant, and seductive" (p. 126).

It might have been more fruitful for Kessler to have considered the relationship between the representation of the veil in impressionist art and the religious visual culture of nineteenth-century France more generally, which has been largely neglected by art historians, Michael Driscoll's fine *Representing Belief* notwithstanding.^[3] The representation of veiled religious women abound in pictorial art throughout the nineteenth century, as paintings such as Joseph Bail's *Bénédictité à l'hospice de Beaune* attest. However it was not only Salon or kitsch Saint Sulpice artists who painted the Catholic religious veil, this was a central motif in the modernist Nabis movement associated with Maurice Denis and Paul Serusier, among others, in the 1890s. One need only consider Maurice Denis' *Procession Under Trees in Saint Germain* of 1892. Even Pablo Picasso represented women with their heads covered repeatedly during his "Blue Period," evoking a religious imagery that is, for example, also present in "The Visit" of 1902. The relationship between the religious and secular "veil" in modernist art in the late nineteenth-century France is a fascinating subject that still remains to be properly explored.

By far the most compelling chapter of *Sheer Presence* is the third, which explores the complex relationship between Edouard Manet and Berthe Morisot and how he came to represent the female artist who would become his sister-in-law. He executed no fewer than eleven portraits of her between 1868 and 1874 and still kept seven in his collection at the time of his death. Kessler deftly analyzes

changes in the way she was painted and how these changes were mediated by both desire and artistic rivalry. Her use of letters and memoirs is sensitive and careful, and her final discussion of Morisot's own self portraits is riveting. For this reason I am somewhat surprised that the subtitle of this book was not rather the "Veil in Morisot's Paris."

While *Sheer Presence* does not live up to its very ambitious desire to combine social history, an analysis of images, cultural studies, feminist theory, urban studies, and postcolonial theory effectively, the author's identification of the veil as an object of representation and a metaphor for the construction of modern life is intriguing. I suspect that after reading this book I will no longer be able to look at familiar paintings, such as Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Pont de L'Europe* and Edouard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries*, in quite the same way again.

NOTES

[1] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[2] Charles Sauvestre, *Les congrégations religieuses dévoilées: Enquête par Charles Sauvestre*, 4th ed. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1879). Also see my *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[3] Michael Paul Driskel, *Representing Belief: Religion, Art and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

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