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Timothy Raser, *Baudelaire and Photography: Finding the Painter of Modern Life*. Oxford: Legenda, 2015. Ix + 132 pp. Acknowledgements, list of Illustrations, list of abbreviations, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-909662-51-3.

Review by Dorothy Kelly, Boston University.

After the dissemination of Benjamin's work on photography and on Baudelaire sparked new interest in these individual topics, it is rather surprising that not much in-depth work has been done on the combined topics of Baudelaire, photography, and its place in his ideas on aesthetics. Timothy Raser's new work on Baudelaire fills this gap, and he has given us another fine book of careful, reasoned thinking about, and elucidation of, Baudelaire's ideas on art.

Raser is interested in the evolution of Baudelaire's thinking about aesthetics and modernity principally from the Salon of 1846 through the *Peintre de la vie moderne*. The concept of the modern in painting actually appears early in the Salon of 1845 and evolves in meaning and function over the course of the essays on art. As Raser shows, photography is important because, as a part of modernity and as a creative practice, it allows Baudelaire to construct his idea of aesthetics against the practice of photography. Baudelaire's dislike of photography shapes his considerations of the role of reference in art, and in this context he develops the idea of the "new," which as Raser argues, is not the beautiful but can be the exotic or the strange. Thus the modern and the new, photography, and Baudelaire's definition of beauty form the basis of the essays in this book. The chapters proceed more or less chronologically and are somewhat independent of each other, so they are treated independently below. The chapters do, however, combine nicely into a whole as they are connected by a handful of recurring themes, such as the role of imagination, absence, reference, and copying in art. The central topic of photography is not always present, but each chapter adds a new dimension that aids in the understanding of what photography was to Baudelaire.

Raser's main conclusion is that Baudelaire seems to be searching for a way to define and exemplify his appreciation of the new art that he liked—thus the subtitle of the book, *Finding the Painter of Modern Life*--but he came to an impasse in that quest because modern art, the art of the new, could not fulfill the dictates of canonical aesthetics. Raser argues that Baudelaire escaped from this impasse by separating beauty from modernity and allowing that, if the modern cannot be beautiful in a canonical sense, it can still produce an aesthetic reaction. Although Raser calls on literary theory, criticism, and philosophy sparingly, one senses the underlying influence of these theories on his thinking and the way they shape the particular topics that he finds essential in Baudelaire. Two of the themes mentioned above, absence and reference, are accompanied by familiar concepts from postmodern theory, such as the supplement, presence, imitation, the performative, and finally a hint of *Blindness and Insight* in the chapter title "The Blindness of Reference."

The bulk of the book is framed by an interesting prologue and epilogue that consider two particular photographs in Baudelaire's life: the first, a photo of Baudelaire himself that Raser skillfully reads

through his knowledge of all things Baudelaire; and the second, in the epilogue, a picture that Baudelaire wanted of his mother but which seems never to have been taken and which Raser uses to consider the vexed relation of photography to reality.

The introduction skillfully sets up the topics to come by singling out two questions that critics have asked about Baudelaire's comments on photography, but without really delving deeply into the contexts of these comments: first, how could Baudelaire have been so wrong in his opinions on photography and, second, why did Baudelaire choose Guys as the exemplar of modernity (when photography would eventually replace work such as Guys's in the press)? Instead of jumping into this fray, Raser instead asks why Baudelaire wrote art criticism in the first place and what did he want to accomplish with it. Raser locates the heart of the matter in the development of Baudelaire's ideas in the year 1859 when he sees Meryon's engravings, writes "Salon of 1859," sends three poems to Hugo, meets Guys, and perhaps begins writing *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*.

The central chapters each tackle one aspect of art and Baudelaire's appraisal of it. Chapter two treats the American artist, Catlin, in whom Baudelaire sees certain traits that will later become part of his understanding of modernity. It is photography that helps Baudelaire hone his ideas about what he likes in Catlin's painting: their brilliant color and large canvases, both of which were not possible in the photography of his time. Catlin also paints an "elsewhere," an exotic place, and goes out alone, like Guys, as a hunter and observer of savageness, bringing back his "prey" and distributing it in his images.

The third chapter explores "Salon of 1859" and Baudelaire's investigation of just what imagination is not: copying and the idea of repetition. Imagination is forward looking, not a copy of the past or a verification of something. It is invention not recognition: painting tells a story, to which the viewer must add something, as in filling in the third dimension of an object in a painting that has only two dimensions (here the idea of the supplement is suggested). Art imposes order, whereas photos repeat things as they are. Photographs need physical presence—in fact, they depend on presence; paintings can create non-existent objects and spaces. Art adds value and alters what it represents to produce unexpected meanings; photography imposes a view. However, Raser also shows that Baudelaire's ideas and his writing itself have a vexed and not a simple, negative relation to copying.

The fourth chapter is also on "Salon of 1859," in which Baudelaire doesn't talk about the artworks that were actually in the exhibit of 1859, and Raser plays on this idea of absent artworks to explore the idea of absence itself that Baudelaire enacts in his writing. Only a quotation can do justice here: "Thus the critic who (almost) didn't visit the show [Baudelaire] wrote a passage about an artist whose works weren't shown there [Meryon], and used that artist's works to bolster his claim that the works present at the Salon were uninteresting; further, he directs this passage away from the etchings it describes towards a twenty-year old poem by a poet exiled from France since 1851 [Hugo]" (square brackets my additions, 36). At this time, Baudelaire was absent as well from Paris (in Honfleur). Raser goes on to analyze Hugo's theme of the disappearing city and its importance in Baudelaire's notion of absence.

The fifth chapter deals with the idea of "modernity" as Baudelaire uses it in the Salons, a word that appears in all of them, and this chapter includes *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. In the Salons, Baudelaire seems to struggle to define the modern and links it to death or to strangeness. Then Baudelaire discovers Guys, who will take center stage in the quest for modernity. Here Raser traces the truly odd saga of the publication (or non-publication) of the *Peintre* and suggests that the difficulty he encountered when seeking publication echoed the difficulty of seeking the modern.

Baudelaire's solution to the problem of modernity comprises the subject of the sixth chapter. If beauty and modernity are entangled in Baudelaire's thought (they are alternatives and are combined), through Guys's works Baudelaire concludes that the modern does not establish a new concept of beauty but

rather replaces beauty with the modern. The modern can provide an aesthetic reaction of pleasure, but it differs from beauty in its transitory nature: it is new and fleeting, it disappears.

The most theoretical chapter is perhaps the seventh, which deals with imagination, photos, and mirror images. Raser shows that, for Baudelaire, poetry is threatened by photography: one may destroy the other. This violent duality calls to mind the imaginary of Lacan, particularly because Baudelaire considers photography as serving narcissism (one enjoys photos of oneself). Raser goes on to claim that photographs for Baudelaire are imaginary creations that do not make the transition to the symbolic, to meaningful signification. This chapter moves the farthest from Baudelaire as it considers photography and Baudelaire's reaction to it more theoretically and in Lacanian terms.

The eighth chapter focuses on Baudelaire's move towards a poetics of reference as he seeks answers to the question of the existence of beauty in modernity. Raser provides a reading of Baudelaire's "Les Aveugles," showing that the poem puts into question our ability to know just what something represents (references), our ability to know, period. Photography triggers a reflection on reference that then pushes Baudelaire to come to the idea of the new and to use references to the modern city (as in "Le Cygne") in his own poetry.

The ninth and final chapter looks at the legacy of Baudelaire's ideas on photography, art, and modernity. One area in which Baudelaire's investigation of modernity arises can be found in his discussion of fashion, one of the themes that Raser sees as influencing Mallarmé and Barthes and their attitudes towards capturing the moment. There are also two appendices: the first, in French and English, contains a passage from Baudelaire's "Le Public moderne et la photographie" (part of "Salon de 1859"), an excerpt from Baudelaire's letter to his mother discussed in the epilogue and the poem, "Les Aveugles." The second appendix is a short summary of "Critical Moments in the History of Photography."

As always with Raser's writing, this is an intelligently and cogently argued book. His deep knowledge of Baudelaire's art criticism firmly grounds his arguments about aesthetic theory. Raser's literary interpretations, such as that of Hugo's poem, are interesting and thought-provoking. My only minor criticism, and there are only one or two places in the book where I encountered this, is that his love of logic sometimes takes over and the argument itself becomes the main point. This slender and elegant book has set me to thinking about Baudelaire's "aesthetics" of the modern as I read his works—it has given me a new perspective on his poetry.

Dorothy Kelly  
Boston University  
[djkelly@bu.edu](mailto:djkelly@bu.edu)

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