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Paula Radisich, *Pastiche, Fashion, and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects. Looking Smart*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014. xii + 193 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-1-61149-424-2.

Review by Frédéric Ogée, Université Paris Diderot.

Paula Radisich's new book, *Pastiche, Fashion, and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects. Looking Smart* (University of Delaware Press, 2014) is primarily concerned with the reception of Chardin's genre paintings, a difficult issue which the book attempts to contextualize through an exploration of the possible meanings of the three main terms in the title. While Radisich presents and discusses the works themselves as "highly contrived representations inflected by the values of *galanterie* and fashion" (p. 158), she is in fact mostly concerned with the changing semiotic systems within which those works were commissioned, designed, talked about, referred to (including the issue of the titles) and used. In particular, and quite successfully, she suggests interesting links with the aesthetics and vocabulary of fashion prints, whose fast development played an important part in the development of a more public "visual culture" in early Enlightenment France.

One of the most fascinating (and frustrating) features of Chardin's pictures is their resistance to discourse, what many critics have termed their "silence." While this has often led commentators (not least Diderot himself) to circle around the works and talk about something else, a long line of scholars, from the eighteenth century to today, have tried to meet the challenge and analyse the artist's "mute compositions" (Diderot again), and to account for what Gérard Genette has called the *work* of art in Chardin's *oeuvre*.<sup>[1]</sup> Famously, this has led Michael Baxandall to look into the evolution of optics in the early decades of the eighteenth century, while René D'Amorim has brought in the toolbox of psychoanalysis to try and make sense of the skate, the bubble or the plum.<sup>[2]</sup> However farfetched or irritating, there is always something to be gained from those various insights, which in the end reinforce our conviction of the artist's remarkable genius. Apparently in line with that tradition, Paula Radisich's *Looking Smart*, unfortunately, proves a disappointment, for a combination of reasons which the present review will try to explain.

First, even though Radisich occasionally attempts to echo her own discussion from chapter to chapter, there is something patchy about the book's structure and project, and *Looking Smart* often feels like the collage of conference papers, graduate seminar discussions (chapter four sometimes reads like the pastiche of a college course on gender and sex in eighteenth-century art) and library findings, a patchiness somehow reflected in the rather busy title/subtitle. As a result the book lacks momentum and the progress of its argument, framed by similar remarks in the Introduction and Conclusion, does not appear clearly. The book's priority interests and central issues do not come out very clearly, and it is quite difficult, in the end, to decide what it is Paula Radisich would like us to understand and observe with her.

Her main line of argument is that Chardin and his patrons, in a conscious and mutually agreed move, fashioned the creation and reception of his genre pictures and subjects within the new *mentalité* of the *goût moderne*, with a striking focus on the artefacts and body language of present "modern" life, and a

more tangible, self-conscious, pleasure-oriented aesthetics based on what Radisich calls “a sociable, intimate, participatory mode of response” (p. 1). And the book contends that “those producing works of visual art and literature in the ‘modern taste’ insinuated ordinary life into their representations in highly mediated, complex, and ingenious ways” (p. 159). While none of this sounds very new (and the book, incidentally, pays no attention to literature), Paula Radisich is right that the early decades of Louis XV’s reign, although officially and historically considered as “ancien régime,” already allowed and encouraged the emergence of some of the most constitutive features of our modernity—speculative capitalism and finance, consumerism, retail commerce, fashion—in a way that undermined, and gnawed at, the values and references of “ancient” culture, in particular in the world of art making, buying and using.

Radisich proposes efficient formulations of this evolution: “privilege was constantly more and more in play with fashion, beauty, wealth, and merit, and increasingly complicated by sensitivity to gender,” and chapter three—the most successful of the book—brings out fruitful questionings on the new material culture and the relation of fine art “to the new metropolitan environment of early 18<sup>th</sup>-century goods”: “From the perspective of the Moderns, the question of craft’s relationship to beauty was an intriguing one. Clearly the fashionable accessories devised by the *marchande de modes* [vendor of fashionable accessories] and the objects crafted by the *menuisier* [fabricator of wooden furniture] were beautiful, and they routinely cost more than a framed painting. It was evident that owning such objects or clothing had become a mark of high-status taste and high rank in society. Given these factors, the question naturally arose, To what extent do the makers of those luxury goods hold the key to Modern beauty and what is their relation to the ‘new taste’ in painting?” (p. 98).

Yet, unfortunately, the book never really invites us to step back and take in the larger view, thus depriving its numerous but often random micro-readings and comparisons of works and texts of the contextual framework, with its shifts and contradictions, within which they could make sense. Why is it “obvious” that “the figures in these fashion prints incarnated good taste and modern beauty” (pp. 66-67)? By which “18<sup>th</sup>-century standards” can we agree to see the servant in *La ratisseuse de navets* displaying “a mental and physical slackness [that] verges on the uncivil” (p. 47)? Or, by the same token, why, in the delightful and moving *Jeune écolier qui dessine*, should we decide that the boy’s pose is not graceful and that “the presentation of the figure’s back to the beholder is impolite, an old-regime expression of insolence” (p. 108)? Why would *Négligé*, described here as “an extremely rich period term in the 1730s”, give rise to irony and insinuation? It is certainly hard to detect any of that in Chardin’s 1741 painting which, incidentally, is rather known as *La Toilette du matin* than as *Le Négligé*. For the same reasons, the proposed comparisons between some of Chardin’s works and an array of late seventeenth-century prints by Nicolas Arnoult, Pierre Aveline, Jean-Dieu de Saint-Jean or Antoine Trouvain is all but convincing, and a close look at them evinces more differences than similarities (this is particularly true of the parallel reading, in chapter one, of Chardin’s *Jeune écolier* and Rembrandt’s 1628 *Artist in his Studio*). As for the analogy suggested between Jeanne-Marie Guyon and Blake and their so-called “amalgam of word and image” (p. 132), it is simply absurd.

More seriously, the contribution of Paula Radisich’s book to the critical debate on the reception of Chardin’s art—and beyond it on the remarkable evolution of artistic practice and discourse in the early Enlightenment—is weakened by the fact that, while Radisich uses interesting (though often mistranscribed and occasionally misread) excerpts from many contemporary newspapers, letters, or private memoirs, her book fails to engage with some of the most important contributions to the subject. Diderot barely makes an appearance, and Radisich’s announcement, in the Introduction, that she will return to his approach of Chardin and “beaux esprits” culture is never taken up in the subsequent chapters. At the other end of the critical spectrum, while deploring that “though the literature on Chardin’s artwork is immense, surprisingly little has been written about it as a product of the artist’s historical moment” (an unfair exaggeration), she never mentions Norman Bryson’s path-breaking 1981 *Word and Image: French painting of the Ancien Régime*, which is essentially concerned with all the issues discussed in *Looking Smart*, and offers, with remarkable originality and a very efficient critical

methodology, a most stimulating exploration of the works and texts Radisich here revisits. Norman Bryson's famous study of the tension between the figural and the discursive in Chardin's works allows him to go beyond the traditional opposition between his genre pictures (with human figures) and his still lifes, thus encompassing the artist's whole enterprise. Radisich's odd dismissal of the latter as not belonging to the "new taste" or the "goût moderne" ("the indulgences of an artist in semi retirement," p. 21), upon which most of her arguments of the genre subjects are based, would have been wisely qualified by a more thorough acknowledgement of the rich critical literature on the still lifes, from Diderot (whose accounts of them in the Salons is remarkably complex) to René Démoris and Bryson.

Last but not least, the book is marred by an incredibly high number of inaccuracies and mistakes which are simply unacceptable in a scholarly book published by a major University Press (which charges \$75.00 for it). It is a well-known fact that spelling and grammar were not very stable in the early eighteenth century, and research is often slowed down by the inconsistencies of language in primary sources. The difficulty is even greater when one is dealing with a foreign language. But in the present case, Radisich and her editor have let through and added dozens of mistakes (the present reviewer has listed and checked more than fifty) which are not (and couldn't have been) in the original: "fête gallants" (p. 16), "profusion de forms" (p. 25), "ceux qui examinant leurs tableaux" (p. 30), "obeisant serviteur" (p. 30), "les faires graver" (p. 30), "adroitement" (p. 58), "un grands fonds" (p. 59), "L'Adjustment" (p. 85), "les plus beaux Nations" (p. 85), "autant que cela pourra convenir" (p. 89), "Dictionnaire portative" (pp. 101 and 119), "Les gravures Français du XVIIIe Siècle" (p. 115), "l'exercice de ces arts" (p. 116), "Discours prononce à la séance publique" (p. 119), "les emblems" (p. 129), "les objets tells qu'ils sont securement" (p. 141), "il ne rest que Dieu" (p. 141), "il sauté aux yeux" (p. 142), "des attributes de l'enfance" (p. 153), etc. Dozens of accents are missing, which are in the original.

Sometimes the casual reading leads to downright approximations and occasional mistakes: the translation of 'côtoyer' by 'walk' in one of the first quotes discussed (p. 2) misses the fact that the French verb has to do with the coastline, and introduces interesting metaphorical nuances of approach and borderlines which almost invalidate the interpretation of the sentence proposed here; "festive celebration" is a clearly inappropriate rendering of the delicate and fragile "fête galante"; "I note and I conclude" (p. 77) is clearly different from "j'estime et je pense"; and it is not certain that today's readers will understand what "un hôtel particulier" in the urban spaces of Paris might have been when described as "a fashionable urban hotel." Chardin's magical *Soap Bubbles* painting is referred to, three times, as *L'amusement frivole d'un jeune homme faisant des bouteilles [sic] de savon* (pp. 36, 38, 40), *La ratisseuse de navets* becomes *La ratisseuse des navets*, again on three occasions (pp. 62 and 159), and Pierre Aveline's *Enfant de qualité promenée par sa gouvernante* becomes *Enfan de qualité promenés par sa gouvernante* (pp. 80-1). And it is simply impossible that the vendor of windmills in Bouchardon's *Cris de Paris* could be titled "Achetez des Moulins," which is simply meaningless.

Even the English is at times contaminated: "Adult players bet on the outcome of the twirling teetotum, rather like they gamble on a roulette wheel" (p. 85); "Rather different than" (p. 108); "he hopes the public it will admire the work as much as he does" (p. 154). Adding insult to injury and making the reading of the book even more unpleasant, the very poor quality of the illustrations, tolerable when those are mere visual reminders and the cost of the book must be kept low, is here seriously detrimental to the core arguments and discussions of the book, which is so much concerned with the issue of effect and attention to detail.

It is uncomfortable to have to end a review on such a disastrous list. Paula Radisich's research for this book was certainly meticulous, and the book she wished to produce out of it from her findings was undoubtedly worth writing. There may have been a circumstance that precipitated its publication. Still the constant flow of inaccuracies and inconsistencies, which eventually sheds a disturbing light on the whole enterprise, as well as the weaknesses in the book's structure and its insufficient contextualization

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of some of the key concepts and engagement with some important predecessors in the field, make for a very frustrating read. The book, as such, certainly doesn't look smart.

#### NOTES

[1] Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, in *Salons*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 111; Gérard Genette, *L'œuvre de l'art: Immanence et Transcendance* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

[2] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); René Démoris, *Chardin, la chair et l'objet* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1991).

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