

---

H-France Review Vol. 19 (April 2019), No. 54

Nathalie Kremer, *Traverser la peinture. Diderot--Baudelaire*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018. xii + 240 pp. Bibliography and index. \$140.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-04-36793-7; \$126.00 U.S. (eb) 978-90-04-36797-5

Review by Timothy Raser, University of Georgia.

The criticism of figurative works of plastic art—painting, drawing, sculpture—poses a number of problems specific to that writing: on the one hand, the work represents something; on the other, that work is represented in its criticism. Now, if the first representation is iconic or analogical, the second is verbal, and there is thus a change of medium; a transposition has occurred. Different from literary criticism, art criticism entails the use of two codes whose juxtaposition has consequences. Since it cannot quote its object (that is, repeat the same signs as such, representing them exactly), it must describe it, using some approximation or adjustment of the verbal system to the plastic one for every reference. This descriptive requirement can be considered a liability.

This is the direction taken by Nathalie Kremer in her examination of Diderot and Baudelaire's art criticism. Both writers, Kremer claims, eschew description in favor of another practice which she calls, paraphrasing Roland Barthes, "traverser la peinture." While other writers—Stendhal and Gautier, for example—practice description or ekphrasis, Diderot and Baudelaire do something else, something that goes beyond the limits of description and, implicitly, crosses the plane of the canvas. Such writing, which I translate as "crossing," hopes to puncture the picture plane and move into the space of the scene represented while also weaving a web of different signifying threads whose point of origin is the work of art:

Nous désirons mettre en valeur une attitude critique devant l'art que nous définissons comme une traversée. Le mot conjugue différents sens, à commencer par celui que tout tableau est d'abord perçu et apprécié, littéralement, comme une surface traversée de couleurs et de lignes par le travail de la main d'un artiste—des lignes sur la toile ou parfois même dans la toile. (p. 8)

Kremer's reluctance to grant description the status of writing enables her to develop the strong thesis that there is an alternative to description that merits its own name:

C'est la thèse que nous nous proposons d'examiner dans le présent livre: celle de la sonorité propre du langage de Diderot et de Baudelaire devant la peinture, comme une expérience de sa traversée, comme si sous leur plume les images pouvaient éclater en mots. (p. 16)

The description Kremer puts aside needs analysis, if only to allow one to define "crossing." Saussure's division of the sign into signifier and signified enabled him to sidestep the question of reference inherent in description. Mallarmé qualified description as "universel reportage" and a "fonction numéraire facile et représentatif".<sup>[1]</sup> For Nietzsche, descriptions can only be "lies": no verbal sign, general in nature, can achieve the particularity of what it claims to describe, and there can thus be no truth to the application of

language to non-language. “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration.” [2] Nietzsche’s critique, of course, is one of language itself, whose terms are necessarily general and cannot replicate the particularity of the world to which they refer. Turning Nietzsche’s claim around, Roland Barthes asserts that “truth” is a mere effect of language, specifically of its denotative function: “chaque fois que je crois à la vérité, j’ai besoin de la dénotation”. [3] If denotation—exact reference—is part of an ideology of the truth where its value varies in lockstep with that of the truth asserted, it follows that a connotative language would proceed differently and have different aims.

Kremer therefore argues that the specificity of Diderot and Baudelaire’s art criticism—what differentiates theirs from that of Stendhal or Gautier—lies not in description but in some other aspect. Given that art criticism consists in judgments and descriptions, it must be the former—with their explanatory foundation—that supply that particularity. Kant tells us that aesthetic judgments, to be such, must be disinterested, must claim universal assent, and may not refer to a concept in support of this claim. These constraints would leave only brief, rude assertions—“beautiful,” “not beautiful”—were it not for a fourth condition: they respond to the “form of finality” [4] of the object judged, without however being able to identify that aim: purposiveness without purpose. Whether a judgment meets the first three criteria or not determines whether a judgment can be aesthetic; it is in the elaboration of how it reconciles purposiveness with absence of purpose that aesthetic theory comes to be.

The metaphor of “crossing” that Kremer uses is one such theory, and comes from Barthes’s “Sur la lecture,” where it describes a mode of reading generative of texts:

Paradoxe du lecteur: il est communément admis que lire, c’est décoder: des lettres, des mots, des sens, des structures, et cela est incontestable; mais en accumulant les décodages, puisque la lecture est de droit infinie, en ôtant le cran d’arrêt du sens, en mettant la lecture en roue libre (qui est sa vocation structurelle), le lecteur est pris dans un renversement dialectique: finalement, il ne décode pas, il sur-code; il ne déchiffre pas, il produit, il entasse des langages, il se laisse infiniment et inlassablement traverser par eux: il est cette traversée. [5]

As a metaphor for reading painting, drawing, or sculpture, “crossing” brings out the suggestivity of both Diderot and Baudelaire’s criticism, implying that it is “scriptible”: generative of further textuality. This “crossing” touches the reader as much as it does the text, for if the viewer enters the picture’s space, the picture overwhelms its viewer in a “dépossession de soi” (p. 3). To account for this simultaneous disappearance of limits is the job of art criticism: “dire l’émotion que cause la beauté d’un spectacle visible, voilà la mission que se donnent Diderot et Baudelaire.” (p. 5)

The texts Kremer considers are comprised of the judgments, theories, and descriptions in *Salons* and other essays, and thus differ from the ekphrasis so tainted by the logic of denotation. Her readings tend towards those passages where appreciation, explication, and description converge, and leave behind any unsupported judgments, unexemplified theories, or gratuitous hypotyposes. For it is in this convergence, Kremer argues, that Diderot and Baudelaire’s criticism crosses over into textuality.

The texts she analyzes are thus theoretical, descriptive, and evaluative texts where judgments lead to theories that verge on paraphrases of pictures: Diderot’s reaction to Le Prince’s “Le Musicien champêtre” (p. 49) or to an unnamed canvas by Hubert Robert (p. 51). Here theory is seamlessly exemplified by description while instantiating implicit judgments, and what Kremer describes as “traversée” is a discourse ordinarily split into its abstract (theoretical) and concrete (descriptive) components. Finding texts where one blends into the other, and establishing the rhetoric of that “crossing,” is a considerable achievement. Likewise, discussing Baudelaire, Kremer gives particular attention to his *Salon de 1846*, in which critical reflection on art works is doubled by the critic’s reflection of the art works, and both

reflections are caught in the mirror of Baudelaire's prose (p. 172). The devices and attitudes proper to art criticism come to light in these analyses.

Thus, she analyzes Diderot's response to Vernet's landscapes, rendered in the "Promenade de Vernet" of the *Salon de 1767*, for this imaginary excursion into the painter's world simultaneously explains and exemplifies the role of fiction in the critic's theory. Greuzes's "Jeune Fille pleurant son oiseau mort" attracts Diderot, whose love of narrative dictates his interpretation of the painting as the representation of innocence lost. On the one hand, Diderot responds to painting by situating scenes depicted within a narrative of his invention; on the other, he treats these narratives as he did that of *Jacques le fataliste*, that is with the subversive tools of preterition and digression. Kremer calls this subversion "discours éclaté" (p. 46), which amounts to a kind of deconstruction *avant la lettre*: "Diderot ne décompose l'image que pour en reconstruire l'idée" (p. 51).

If Diderot uses novelistic devices to "cross" painting, Baudelaire uses more familiar tropes in poetry; and if the former treats painters as novelists, the latter treats them as poets. Baudelaire's Delacroix in 1846 thus eschews realism in favor of "imagination," and his Hugo practices cold calculation in favor of a more "passionate" approach. Kremer's formulations here echo her earlier opposition to ekphrasis and propose a more emotional "crossing" of paintings, as well as Baudelaire's own celebration of the "queen of faculties" in 1859. Baudelaire's endorsement of the bizarre in his *Exposition universelle (1855)* allows Kremer to establish a link to Diderot, who used the term to describe his own writing on drawing. She argues that Baudelaire's late double theory of beauty—that it is composed of eternal and variable elements—is one that is to be found in all of his art writing from 1845 onward. These contentions are supported by assimilating imagination to emotion, spontaneity, and sensitivity to one's surroundings.

Kremer's project—the determination of a place where different senses of different texts converge—is an admirable one, especially given Baudelaire's claim that the right to contradiction had been left out of the declaration of the rights of man [6], and given that Diderot felt no qualms at radical revision of earlier theories (witness his thoughts on acting). In Kremer's case, this method brings her to seek a unified theory of Beauty in Baudelaire's works from 1846, 1855, 1859, and 1861, reconciling the different orientations of his theses. Further, she seeks common ground between Diderot and Baudelaire, a place where the former's "pensées bizarres" meet the latter's "le beau est toujours bizarre".[7] She posits a general theory underlying Barthes's theory of reading, one that underlies both his analyses of images and those of texts, even if his search for the "plaisir du texte" and "textes scriptibles" was more specifically verbal than his preceding structural analysis. This reader prefers to consider Baudelaire's critical essays separately and to conceive them in a sequence that displays as great an evolution as that running from "Spleen et idéal" to "Tableaux parisiens" to *Petits Poèmes en prose*.

More significantly, Kremer focusses more on what the writers tell than on what they show; on passages where they explain the how and the why of their choices, rather than the "what" they are responding to. Surely discussions of art turn as much about what is sensed as about what is thought. Baudelaire's accounts of Boudin and Meryon—qualified as "comme un poème en prose" by Claude Pichois [8]—certainly need reading, as do many other passages which, needless to say, are not the denotations Kremer calls "la critique descriptive." Indeed, an argument can be made that descriptive art criticism, because it entails transposition, is inherently tropological and thus "over-codes" the work, which, of course, was not a text to start with.

Whatever one thinks of these reservations, Kremer has proposed a new reading of the art criticism of Diderot and Baudelaire, one that seeks to emulate late-period Barthes and his theory of reading, and this attempt, even if it assimilates text and image, opens significant new perspectives, in which the abstract discourse of theory opens itself to the possibilities of writing. Kremer finds that Diderot and Baudelaire have crossed the picture plane into textuality, and that this crossing is what makes their art criticism "scriptible." Her reluctance to consider description as capable of such crossing means, however, that her

---

own writing does not engage some of both writers' most suggestive texts.

## NOTES

[1] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 368.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Roland Speirs, trans. Roland Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 146.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eric Marty, 3 Vols. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993-95), vol. 3, p. 146.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 80.

[5] Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 383.

[6] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 Vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), vol. 2, p. 306.

[7] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 578.

[8] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 1407.

Timothy Raser  
University of Georgia  
[traser@uga.edu](mailto:traser@uga.edu)

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.