
H-France Review Vol. 19 (April 2019), No. 59

Jennifer Wild. *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xv + 360 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 (cl). ISBN 9780520279889; \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 9780520279896.

Review by Juliet Bellow, American University.

This ambitious book aims to map the largely “uncharted relationship” (p. 1) between the Parisian avant-garde and the cinema at a formative moment in both domains. Art and film historians alike have long acknowledged that “early cinema not only shaped the culture and experience of urban modernity, but also played a significant role in the development of modern and avant-garde art” (p. 1). However, few scholars have ventured far enough outside existing disciplinary boundaries to work in the spaces between early cinema and vanguard art—undefined terrain that proved attractive to artists who sought to reinvent existing genres and media. Wild traces reactions to a rapidly-changing cinematic landscape on the part of two generations of artists, more or less divided by World War I. The first, a group loosely designated as Cubist, included Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Blaise Cendrars as well as Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp at the moment when the latter two abandoned painting in favor of readymade practices. These figures came of age during the transition from a “cinema of attractions”—typified by short films presented alongside other entertainments in mixed-use venues—to narrative features shown in dedicated movie theaters. The second generation comprised the nucleus of the Paris Dada movement: André Breton, Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, and Tristan Tzara. This group, responding to the film industry’s push during the late 1910s to legitimate itself by affiliating with institutional theaters, advocated a return to the anarchic hybridity of the “cinema of attractions.”

Wild articulates the stakes of this project for the domain of film studies when she asks “what changes in a history of the cinema when art works and artists are granted fuller agency in its telling?” (p. 3). The artworks in question, she argues, constitute “an important extra-filmic archive capable of providing valuable insight about the experience of early cinema in its various forms” (p. 7). She relates these works to other “extra-filmic” dimensions of cinema as a cultural phenomenon, including “the formal and symbolic aspects of the spaces that accommodated their viewing, the projecting techniques that permitted their display, and the ephemeral artifacts related to films and cinema that were deposited within the cultural surroundings” (p. 4). Wild’s account thus participates in a broader historical-materialist turn in film studies, building upon scholarship by Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, and others who have excavated the technologies, venues, and viewers of cinema in Europe and the United States in the initial decades after its invention.

Given the author’s claim to eschew a medium-specific approach, it seems fair to note that she does not address as clearly what may change in a history of art when cinema is granted fuller agency in its telling. Wild engages with an impressive tranche of the art-historical literature, though her primary interlocutors all frequently appear in the pages of *October*.^[1] (The same cannot be said of scholarship in the history of dance, which is directly relevant to all of Wild’s chosen case studies, and is therefore a disappointing omission.) Each of her chapters opens up new avenues of interpretation for canonical artists and works,

an achievement largely due to the oblique perspective she brings to the material. However, in mining artworks for what they can tell us about early cinema, Wild often glosses over the complexities of their material, stylistic, and conceptual properties. Indeed, her approach to artworks stands in striking contrast with her archivally-based, deeply historical account of film practices. I found myself wishing for a correspondingly granular, contextual treatment of artworks. Admittedly, though, in advocating that the author provide such close readings, I am revealing my own disciplinary biases and expectations.

The possibilities and the limitations of Wild's approach manifest in the concept of "horizontality," a term she uses both to describe a type of cinematic projection and to characterize her trans-disciplinary methodology. As she notes, classic film theory was premised upon an exhibition method called "reflective projection," whereby the projector is positioned behind the audience, in "near-perfect alignment with the axis of human vision" (p. 10). This arrangement, which Wild terms "cinematic verticality," encourages the audience's absorption into the on-screen spectacle (and thus viewers' identification with the main protagonists). For this reason, it was central to the psychoanalytic and semiotic accounts that dominated the field of film studies during the 1970s and 80s. However, Wild convincingly documents that the most common projection technique of this early period was *projection par transparence*, in which the projector was placed behind a transparent screen. This arrangement made the entire apparatus visible to viewers, such that "the projected image no longer works as a direct analogue of human sight" (p. 12) but instead unfolds from a mechanism existing in shared space with the audience.

To explicate the differences between these two models of projection, Wild adapts Leo Steinberg's concept of the "flatbed picture plane." Steinberg, who derived the term from a type of horizontal printing press, used it to describe a paradigm change in the art of the 1960s, from a vertical orientation correlated with "the conception of the picture as representing a world" to a horizontal orientation, in which the pictorial surface operates less like a window than the surface of a table—or any other "receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed."^[2] For Steinberg, "horizontality" was not literal (although Robert Rauschenberg's 1955 painting *Bed* perfectly illustrates the paradigm) but metaphorical: emblematic of a shift from a transcendental, contemplative conception of painting, as "the analogue of a visual experience of nature," to a materialist conception of painting, as a matrix of culture. It is horizontality in this broad sense that Wild aligns with transparent projection. The spectator's "visual confrontation with the image's mechanical source," she argues, reinforces the mediated, culturally reflexive character of film (p. 12). Wild's decision to place Steinberg's theory at the heart of her narrative underscores her commitment to the principle of interdisciplinarity. But Wild stretches "horizontality" to such a degree—both chronologically and conceptually—that its original explanatory force dissipates, and in practice proves more confusing than illuminating.

In the book's first chapter, the author boldly attributes Picasso's "reflexive study of mediation and beholding" (p. 27) in his paintings of 1907-13 to the "confrontational... aesthetics of exhibition and address" (p. 32) characteristic of transparent projection. This argument departs from previous attempts to link Cubist painting with cinematic montage on the basis of formal resemblance or conceptual trickery.^[3] Wild shifts focus from period films to the circumstances of projection, highlighting venues such as cinéma-café and circuses that Picasso was known to frequent, where the visibility of the apparatus foregrounded "the image's and the spectator's mutual conspicuousness and reflexive relativity" (p. 25).^[4] By merging the audience with the screen, Wild claims, transparent projection prompted Picasso to deconstruct the "classical systems of representation" (p. 29) that opaque film projection and illusionistic painting held in common. This insight sheds new light on the café scenes of Picasso's Analytic Cubist period, such as *Bouteille de Pernod et verre* (*Bottle of Pernod and Glass*, 1912). It seems plausible that the setting evoked is a cinema-café; indeed, as Wild points out, the stenciled letters "CI" at center may reference a poster advertising a *cinématographe*. She relates the depicted scenario to the experience of transparent projection, which created a disorienting interplay between the tangible and the virtual. We may be looking at a real table directly in front of us; a projected image of a table on a screen; a real table

seen through the screen; or all three at once. Wild's interpretation of this painting convinces because she directly relates its formal and iconographic properties to period features of the cinéma-café. However, much of the chapter rests on the shaky proposal that transparent projection informed Picasso's approach to representation throughout the Cubist period. Her comparison of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) to the Lumière Brothers' 1896 film *Repas du bébé*—on the basis of the fact that both employ the motif of a table that bridges actual and representational space—falls flat. If Wild had limited her scope to Picasso's café paintings of 1910-12, and acknowledged the range of live entertainments presented alongside cinema in the venues she discusses, the argument would have been more successful. [5]

Chapters two and three relate Picabia and Duchamp's "diagrammatic" artworks to early film stardom in the transitional era of 1908-17, as the cinema of attractions gradually was replaced by narrative films. [6] Once again, Wild turns attention to an extra-filmic context: the publicity apparatus that used film stars not only to advertise films, but also to sell products such as perfume, soap, and undergarments. Like transparent projection, this marketing strategy "breached the closed circuit between spectator and film...making the activity of spectatorship a more multiple, intermedial and fragmented—and also conceptual—activity" (p. 63). Wild analogizes this "process of signification and reception across media" (p. 64) to Picabia and Duchamp's ironic deployment of quasi-scientific diagrams in works that allude to two early film stars, Stacia Napierkowska and Fania Marinoff. Picabia, in *Mechanical Expression Seen Through Our Own Mechanical Expression* (1913), labeled his simplified drawing of a radiometer "Napierkowska." It has long been recognized that the reference is to the famous music-hall dancer, whom Picabia met on the ocean liner *La Lorraine* in 1913. But Wild notes that Napierkowska also participated in dozens of films around this time, and was a ubiquitous presence in posters and magazine adverts—so much so that one critic described her as "a near competitor of herself" (p. 86). In *Mechanical Expression*, Wild cogently argues, Picabia grapples with Napierkowska's simultaneous appearance in live entertainment, films, and publicity materials, commenting upon the way that the star system "transformed the 'real-world' dancer into a mediated entity whose circuitous semiotic process pivoted on the generative, diagrammatic formation of modern desire" (p. 84). This analysis could have been deepened with more attention to the way commodity desire intersects with the sexual thematics of the image, whose feminized machine-body conjures congress both penetrative and masturbatory.

Wild provides an equally compelling reading of Duchamp's 1916 drawing *Fania (Profile)*, an abstract portrait that intertwines a descending line of nonsensical typed words with a smudged, grotesque drawn profile. Wild makes a case that this work satirized promotional postcards such as one released by Pathé in 1915 to advertise a film starring Marinoff who, like Napierkowska, appeared on both stage and screen. Her invocation of such postcards hints at a hitherto unrecognized allusion in Duchamp's more famous readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). The possibility that Duchamp cheekily positioned the Mona Lisa as a film star, and compared Leonardo's painting (and its cheap reproductions) with publicity materials, adds new layers to our understanding of this work. Likewise, Wild's discussion of film stardom opens up productive avenues for rethinking Duchamp's alter ego Rose Sélavy, a topic that the author could have more fully explored. Wild finds less fertile ground for these concepts in Duchamp's famously hermetic work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, otherwise known as *The Large Glass* (1915-23). It is true that Duchamp, in various ways, alludes to photographic processes, and that he once characterized the figure of the "bride" in its upper half as undergoing a process of "cinematic blossoming" (p. 105). But it is unclear how it changes our understanding of the work, or of early film stardom, to imagine that the "bachelors" in its lower half "gaze at the bride like spectators before a movie screen whose images distantly blossom forth in a motion constructed from the serial components of the film strip" (p. 129).

Chapters four through six deal with shifts in cinema and the avant-garde during and after World War I. Wild details the industry's moves to elevate the cultural status of film in the wartime years, documenting the gentrification of cinema through several interrelated developments: the rise of posh picture palaces; an increase in the length of feature films; and a strategic alignment, in terms of casting and content, with highbrow theater. While this process was, as Wild notes, bound up in a nationalistic effort to claim French

hegemony in yet one more cultural arena, her concern is primarily the effect of these changes on film spectatorship. With the rise of reflective projection, of film-only venues, and of narrative works, “temporal, bodily flux and cultural variation gave way to the regulated synchronization between audience attendance and a feature film’s projection time” (p. 141). The Dada group, Wild argues, reacted against this instrumentalization, favoring instead imported American films and French serials like *Fantômas*, with their lowbrow sensibility, slapstick comedy, and direct address to the viewer. Wild refers to these films, and their associated promotional materials, as a “cinema of ballistics” that revived the “punctuating force” (p. 194) central to the cinema of attractions. Her proposition that the Dadaist principles of discontinuity, violence, and shock derived in part from cinema is potentially revelatory, but not sufficiently substantiated in her brief analyses of Dada artworks and events. She also misses an opportunity in these sections to relate the “cinema of ballistics” to the Dadaists’ stance on the war and the nation-states that waged it.

A case in point is the second public Dada event in Paris, the “manifestation” staged on February 5, 1920 at the Grand Palais, that serves as a jumping-off point for Wild’s final chapter. Famously, to publicize the event, Tristan Tzara fed *Le Journal du Peuple* a false announcement to the effect that “Charlie Chaplin, the illustrious Charlot, has just arrived in Paris... [and] has joined the Dada Movement” (p. 262). Wild argues that Tzara did so not only to drive crowds to the Grand Palais, but also because he modeled Dada strategy after the Hollywood star system, with the intention of making “distribution and reception more visible as the construction principles driving Dada art as event” (p. 227). While this is an intriguing premise, the evidence Wild presents to support it is thin. For example, she makes much of the fact that “Tzara and his cohort made a practice of observing their own mass-popular circulation and reception, having even hired a professional agency to track the mention of Dada in the press” (p. 258), when this was standard practice for artists from the 1880s onward, including figures such as Georges Seurat and Auguste Rodin. More attention to the specific program of this and other manifestations could have helped Wild make the case that the grab-bag structure of Dada events revived the mixed-genre “cinema of attractions.”[7] Further consideration of the audience that arrived at the Grand Palais, primed by media coverage of the initial Dada event held on January 23, 1920, also would have fleshed out this connection. Spectators surely attended not because they actually believed Chaplin would appear, but with the expectation of witnessing a Dada provocation—a phenomenon that neatly parallels the “(in)credulous spectator” of the “cinema of attractions.”[8]

Wild ends her account of this period of fruitful interaction at the moment when the vanguard became disenchanted with Chaplin—citing Dadaist Céline Arnould’s proclamation that his film *The Kid* (1921), screened at a 1925 Chaplin retrospective at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier “smells strongly of bad literature” (p. 271)—and began to use film as a venue for their own artistic experimentation. By drawing a dividing line between film as popular entertainment and film as provocative art, the avant-garde of the mid-1920s at once usurped and undermined the medium’s original subversive potential. Wild does us all a service by expanding our understanding of the period between 1900 and 1923 when both film and art could still be imagined as “avant-garde.”

NOTES

[1] One important art-historical source that Wild surprisingly did not consult is Lynda Nead’s *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, and Film around 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[2] Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972): 82.

[3] See Bernice Rose, *Picasso, Film, and Early Cubism* (New York: Pace Wildenstein, 2007), and Natasha Staller, *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso’s Cultures and the Creation of Cubism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[4] Documentary evidence of Picasso's cinema habits is provided in Laurence Madeline et al., *Les Archives de Picasso: "on est ce que l'on garde!"* (Paris: Réunion des Archives Nationaux, 2003).

[5] I discuss the co-presence of live and cinematic performance in relation to Picasso's ballet *Parade* in my book *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

[6] Wild's use of the term "diagram" derives from David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998); as with Steinberg's "horizontality," her use of the term differs significantly from Joselit's.

[7] See Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris* [1964] (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012) and Annabelle Meltzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[8] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 31-45.

Juliet Bellow
American University
bellow@american.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.

ISSN 1553-9172