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Michèle Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. xii + 248 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S. (hc). ISBN 978-0-271-08356-8; \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-08357-5.

Review by Bettina Lerner, City College of New York and The Graduate Center, CUNY.

In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin describes how modernity changed the ways art was produced and experienced over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The advent of photography, film, and other technologies of reproduction, laid waste to the aura, that “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”[1] While artworks were most often tethered to specific places and traditions that imposed and maintained an auratic distance from their viewers, the infinite replication of images and mass spectatorship that accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism has permanently altered the specific spatial and temporal qualities to which the visual arts had laid claim. After all, what these technologies cannot capture, and what is ultimately devalued by the process of reproduction, is the artwork’s particular spatio-temporality: “In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject.”[2]

The idea that works of art are imbued with an uncanny kind of historicity, one that links the past to the present as well as the future, is central to the thought of Jules Michelet, from whom Benjamin borrowed the idea that “each epoch dreams the one to follow.”[3] The importance of viewing art and writing about it informs various aspects of Michelet’s historical project, as Michèle Hannoosh aptly and elegantly shows in *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*. For this Romantic historian, Hannoosh argues, a work of art “was not just the occasion for a historical experience, to be then recounted in language, but a historical object existing *in* time that comes to act upon the writer” (p. 38). By reading Michelet through the lens of his experiences and analyses of art, Hannoosh imparts important insights into his historical method and, more provocatively, lays the groundwork for a broader contribution to the history of aesthetic modes of perception during the Romantic period in France.

Hannoosh constructs her argument around Michelet’s encounters with specific works of art displayed in Paris in institutions like the famed Musée des monuments français and the Louvre, as well as on his travels to cathedrals and museums throughout Northern Europe. She relies on his private correspondence and *Journal*, his lectures at the Collège de France, as well as the

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published volumes of *Histoire de France* and shorter works to give a full picture of the subtle revisions and changing interpretations that often resulted from Michelet's tendency over the course of his life to recall and return to specific sculptures and paintings that had made an impact on him upon an initial viewing. These artworks, Hannoosh contends, hold the key to understanding Michelet's overall approach to and analysis of the historical periods in which they were produced: they embody and at times offer discernable critiques of the contradictions and shortcomings of each of the eras that make up the progressivist national narrative structuring his *Histoire de France*.

The book opens with an engaging and concise introduction followed by a theoretical chapter that provides an overview of the privileged place that art held in Michelet's historical project. Before concluding with an exploration of the emotional and identificatory impulses that linked Michelet to the artists whose works he considered, Hannoosh dedicates one chapter each to four distinct periods: the gothic Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Wars of Religion, and the Revolution and Empire. She shows that Michelet was drawn to a range of artists, from the anonymous sculptors of the Strasbourg Cathedral to iconic figures such as Jan Van Eyck, Albrecht Dürer, Peter Paul Rubens, Jean Goujon, Germain Pilon, and Théodore Géricault. Uncovering the role these artists played in helping Michelet conceptualize specific moments in the past, Hannoosh carefully traces how his approach to these periods and the actors within it shifted as his own views sharpened and changed over time. We see, for example, how Michelet's *Journal* registers his ambivalence toward the allegorism in Van Eyck's celebrated Ghent altarpiece (1423-1432) and how this hesitation is slowly transformed over the course of his travels such that the altarpiece ultimately illustrates his influential summary of the Burgundian Renaissance as "the discovery of the world, the discovery of man" (pp. 79-80). Yet Michelet did not just treat works of art as reflections of the particular contexts in which they were produced. At times, his interpretations take on the look and feel of symptomatic readings, showing how a particular work might assert an era's dominant ideals while simultaneously providing the tools for a latent critique. We see this most clearly in Hannoosh's chapter on the Wars of Religion, a period that Michelet condemns along with its key figure, Diane de Poitiers, who both repulses and fascinates him. As Hannoosh shows, Michelet's reading of Jean Goujon's *Diana with a Stag*, also known as *Diana of Anet*, focuses on a detail in the sculptural group in order to argue that the mangy cur hidden behind the gorgeous goddess tacitly points to the violence and hypocrisy of Henri II's reign, which temporarily set the French nation several steps back on its path toward unity.

Hannoosh builds her argument around intricate close readings like these, which unpack Michelet's writing on art in order to show how his use of free indirect discourse, ventriloquizing, and sudden shifts in emotional registers create a strong identificatory impulse for the reader, who feels drawn into the dialogue he entertains with the artist and the artwork. These close readings help to underscore just how unusually powerful Michelet's writing about art could be in the context of a century that gave rise to the professionalization of journalism, criticism, and especially art criticism. Some of the strongest moments in Hannoosh's analysis emerge when she places Michelet into dialogue with other critics of the first half of the century, such as Gustave Planche. Here her book opens up larger questions about the relationships between art, history, and how the two were written about in the nineteenth century, including the reading publics that these kinds of writing sought to engage and the ways in which these discourses continued to inform one another just as heightened institutionalization, professionalization and hyper-specialization were beginning to sever disciplinary bonds.

Hannoosh also goes a long way toward uncovering Michelet's lingering, if at times under-recognized, influence on art writing and cultural criticism as a whole. She draws a line from Michelet's ability to see scholasticism and the gothic as part of a unified cultural moment, to Erwin Panofsky's concept of "mental habit," and thus, indirectly, to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. Elsewhere, she adds layers to Michael Fried's insights about Michelet's influence on Édouard Manet by triangulating their relationship through the historian's reading of Géricault. In this way, Hannoosh shifts our understanding of Michelet's place in the cultural field of the nineteenth century and inflects the art historical genealogies that were formed from those networks. This matters in ways that go beyond the reevaluation of Michelet's place across disciplines, which Hannoosh achieves in her persuasive analysis. It also speaks to broader and more abstract concerns about the historicization of modes of perception.

Benjamin's point that "the way in which human perception is organized--the medium in which it occurs--is conditioned not only by nature but by history," has been of course explored by critics in various disciplines, but its implications are still rife with the potential for further study.[4] Hannoosh's careful research makes it clear that Michelet's approach to the past was significantly influenced by his repeated encounters with the visual arts. A complimentary set of questions raised by this investigation might spur us to look more deeply into how Michelet's perception is itself grounded in Romantic ways of seeing art and, more specifically, in the anxieties about viewership brought by the slow and partial democratization of museums and the advent of photography and the cinema. Hannoosh's *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France* paves significant part of the way toward this kind of inquiry. It is satisfying not just for what it contributes to our knowledge of Michelet and the nineteenth-century cultural field as a whole but also for the important set of theoretical questions it engenders.

## NOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings eds., *Selected Writings*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 104-105.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings*, p. 103.

[3] Jules Michelet, "Avenir! Avenir!" quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Selected Writings*, p. 33.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings*, p. 104.

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