*H-France Review* Vol. 21 (September 2021), No. 161

Jillian Lerner, *Experimental Self-Portraits in Early French Photography*. London & New York: Routledge, 2021. xiii + 178 pp. Fifty-five black-and-white illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $155.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-501-34495-4; $57.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-100-310550-3.

Review by Brynne McBryde, Fondazione 1563.

Jillian Lerner's *Experimental Self-Portraits in Early French Photography* is a meticulously researched and highly nuanced study of four photographic portraits that provides an important corrective to the sweeping teleological narratives that tend to dominate histories of early photography. Lerner intentionally focuses on images that have been historically marginalized (due to their authors, materials, or subjects) to reveal the processes of negotiation that early practitioners of photography engaged in both socially and within the medium of photography. She uses her in-depth knowledge of French visual culture to tie detailed visual analysis to each object's cultural and historical context and thereby draws out connections, implications, and readings that are often overlooked.

Lerner's choice of photographic self-portraiture as a subject allows her to simultaneously explore shifting understandings of artistic medium, celebrity, deception, and embodied identity. Each of the images that centers one of her four chapters occupies a liminal position: a photograph that is both the first self-portrait and the first fictional photograph, a photographic caricature, a portrait of an ostracized social elite, and a self-portrait that is also a dual portrait. The images are thus sites of negotiation around the nature of photography, self-promotion, celebrity, and the body. She navigates this unstable ground by carefully recreating the debates and visual expectations circulating in France during the middle of the nineteenth century and demonstrating how each of her subjects alternately plays into or challenges them. Perhaps the book's greatest strength is in its rejection of straightforward narratives and insistence on nuanced interpretations.

The first chapter is a reexamination of the photograph that Lerner identifies as the first photographic self-portrait, Hippolyte Bayard's *Le Noyé* of 1840. The photograph is a demonstration of Bayard's heliographic technique on paper. It features the artist reclining half-naked with a white sheet over his lap. His eyes are closed and he is posed near a fisherman's hat, a vase, and a small plaster cast of a statue. Lerner builds a two-pronged argument to explain the image: that it is a recreation of display practices at the Paris morgue and that it is a direct response to Louis Daguerre's self-promotion and the success he achieved through it. Bayard was an early contender for recognition as the inventor of photography. Daguerre was nearly immediately embraced by the public, the press, and the French government, who gave him a lifelong stipend in exchange for his invention, while Bayard was relegated to the sidelines as, at

best, a secondary figure. Lerner focuses on one of three versions of the image that bears a written inscription addressing the viewer (an inscription that would not have been possible using Daguerre's metal plates). Through careful reading of the text and recreation of the system of display used by the Paris morgue to seek public assistance in identifying anonymous corpses, Lerner demonstrates that Bayard presents himself as an unidentified victim of drowning, presented to the public for their consideration and entertainment. She links Bayard's assumed identity (or non-identity) to his disappointment with the way that the French government and press ignored his photographic invention in favor of the singular narrative presented by Daguerre. She argues that by assuming a sensationalistic identity, Bayard mimicked Daguerre's promotional strategies. *Le Noyé* thus functioned as an advertisement for Bayard's skill and process, a satirical sendup of Bayard's own failure at the game of self-promotion, a reprimand for those who overlooked him, and a condemnation of Daguerre's manipulation of the processes of notoriety to gain (perhaps unwarranted) celebrity.

Chapter two turns to a photographer who proved to be more adept at navigating the waters of nineteenth-century fame and celebrity than perhaps any other, Nadar (Félix Tournachon). Within Nadar's celebrated body of work, Lerner selects a little-known self-portrait produced at the beginning of his photographic career. The self-portrait is a montage combining an unremarkable photographic representation of Nadar's head and torso with hand-drawn and fantastically elongated limbs that prance across the picture plane. Lerner explains the image as a bridge between Nadar's early career as a caricaturist and his venture into photographic portraiture. Lerner reads the self-portrait as a signature of sorts, one that incorporates not only these two professional practices, but also Nadar's skill as a publicist and his public persona. She details the way that Nadar built his own public image through caricatures of himself that featured spidery limbs and his wild shock of red hair--physical features that the photomontage clearly emphasizes. The image applies Nadar's characteristically celebratory treatment of his subjects to his own likeness. It thus fits into the developing network of mutual affirmation that would-be celebrities used to flatter and promote one another in the public eye. Lerner argues that, in the age of celebrity, Nadar's physical characteristics became as much a signature as his characteristic formal style and his written signature. The montaged image allowed Nadar to demonstrate the possibilities of portraiture and photography rather than their limitations, thus expanding the reach of both of his chosen media. As Nadar's practice became increasingly concerned with capturing the essence of his sitters without manipulation, however, the mixed media of the montaged portrait came to contradict another of his signatures--the unretouched photograph. This may be the reason that Nadar did not reproduce the image and stopped using it promotionally.

The third chapter focuses on the remarkable series of photographs produced by Virginia Verasis de Castiglione (the Countess de Castiglione) in collaboration with Pierre-Louis Pierson over a forty year period, beginning in 1856, that all feature the countess or parts of her body. Lerner contextualizes the series within the collecting, display, and portrait practices of other elite women in order to reclaim Castiglione's production from critics who see it as exhibitionist, narcissistic, and neurotic. Through careful analysis of photographic albums created by wealthy aristocratic women in the nineteenth century, Lerner demonstrates the degree to which status and social access were mediated through and controlled by women, particularly for other women. She takes this framework as a starting point for understanding the anomalous practices of Castiglione, who was largely cut off from these female networks both in Paris and her home court of Turin. Lerner argues that Castiglione intended these photographs for specific individuals or small groups, using

them to craft targeted messages about her own identity and place in society at particular points in time. Lerner reveals the unprecedented control that Castiglione maintained over her own likeness by directing photographic shoots, meticulously annotating prints that were going to be reworked, cropped, or hand-painted, and securing Pierson's cooperation in not distributing negatives or prints without her express permission. Lerner concentrates on the few images that Castiglione clearly did intend for public display in order to show how the countess used them specifically to undermine public perceptions of her and create a new narrative around her own identity. The chapter reveals Castiglione's attempt to negotiate the carefully constructed visual identities of elite diplomatic women after she had been cut off from the social world her peers dominated.

Lerner's final chapter grapples with the scientific self-portrait in the form of Dr. Duchenne de Boulogne's frontispiece for *Album de photographies pathologiques*. The photograph features the doctor demonstrating his prize invention--a battery that allowed him to activate specific muscles in the face of an unidentified man in order to provoke a desired expression of universal human emotion. Lerner explores general understandings of science, machinery, photography, and medical authority to parse the relationships of Duchenne and his experimental subject to each other, the viewer, and the mechanical apparatuses of battery and camera. She points out that, despite the scientific photograph's claim to impartiality and representation of objective truth, scientific portraits were promotional images invested in revealing the humanity and celebrity of their sitters, and thus deeply subjective themselves. This is one of many subtle contradictions that Lerner finds lurking within the genres of scientific illustration and promotional photographic portraiture. She reveals the hierarchical nature of theories, such as Duchenne's, that claimed to place all of humanity on equal footing by considering the body as a machine with defined limitations and capabilities. Such theories preserved the authoritative superiority of the investigator and scientist who created them by arguing for spiritual mastery of the mechanistic body in select individuals. Ultimately Lerner argues that Duchenne's choice of frontispiece was an attempt to differentiate two distinct modes of embodied attention: his own internally motivated and intellectual concentration, and the cobbler's mechanistic physiological response to external stimuli. For Lerner, however, the expression Duchenne evoked opens the possibility of a subversive reading, one that undercuts Duchenne's authority and creates direct dialogue between his anonymous model and the viewer.

Lerner's narrow focus allows her to thoroughly investigate the multivalency of her selected images, drawing connections to visual and written sources, and recreating the dense social networks through which imagery and identity circulated in nineteenth-century France. At the same time, her investigations of these discrete objects often reveal common threads connecting them, such as the complex and often suppressed history of collaboration in early photographic practice and the importance of *réclame* (promotional texts or images that presented themselves as objective accounts). Nevertheless, Lerner's restraint in limiting her analysis to the extremely nuanced works at hand left me wanting more in depth and explicit discussions of the connections between her objects of study, as well as to broader trends in nineteenth-century French culture. For instance, Lerner touches briefly on the differences between scholarly analysis of Nadar's self-portraits, which are typically praised as examples of his skillful self-promotion and ability to create a public persona, and Castiglione's, which are often dismissed as evidence of narcissism or mental illness. She points out the legacy of patriarchal assumptions that persists in the narratives surrounding the two sets of images, despite their formal similarities, but does not pursue it. The fact that the book has no formal concluding chapter perhaps underscores my desire for more.

The prevailing shortcoming of the book is the size and lack of color in the images. The nature of early photographic images makes them somewhat difficult to see clearly in the best of reproductions. This limitation is particularly unfortunate in the third chapter where Lerner describes the lush hand painting and intricate color stories in many of the images created by Castiglione and her contemporaries. While Lerner's language is characteristically evocative (and it should be noted that she makes every effort to direct readers to high quality color images whenever possible in the notes), it makes me long to see the dynamics she attests to alongside the text.

Throughout the book, Lerner's greatest strength remains her meticulous attention to visual detail and ability to link it to broader trends in visual culture that would have resonated with the nineteenth-century viewer. Her clear descriptions and nuanced analysis make the time she has spent with these images clear, and guide the viewer through an often-sprawling web of connections that must be revealed in order to be fully understood. She challenges overly simplistic narratives of the work and their makers and offers strong but nuanced alternatives in their place. The book would be of great interest to scholars of photography and popular culture as well as those with an interest in the history of celebrity and medicine.

Brynne McBryde
Fondazione 1563
bdarbym@gmail.com



ISSN 1553-9172