
H-France Review Vol. 22 (April 2022), No. 44

Raisa Adah Rexer. *The Fallen Veil. A Literary and Cultural History of the Photographic Nude in Nineteenth-Century France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2021. xii + 328pp. Eighty-seven halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 9780812252866.

Review by Suzanne Guerlac, University of California, Berkeley.

The Fallen Veil. A Literary and Cultural History of the Photographic Nude is well written and well researched. It offers a generous (perhaps too generous!) display of more than eighty nude photographs and, in so doing, conclusively opens a field of study that has received little attention. It makes a strong argument as it moves adroitly between the territories of visual studies, literary study, social history, esthetics and feminist or gender theory (its intermedial treatment of photography and literature is particularly welcome). In a first part, which deals with the Second Empire, nude photography raises questions of art, obscenity, realism, and the poetics of modernity; in a second part, which concerns the Third Republic, it emerges as a social problem in the context of an ever-expanding market for photographic pornography.

The Fallen Veil opens with an analysis of the paradoxical legal status of nude photographic images in the Second Empire, one of “simultaneous authorization and proscription” through which Rexer explores fundamental ambivalences and ambiguities that will continue to haunt these images (p. 4). Napoleon III, an enthusiast of photography, authorized nude images, but only under certain conditions: photographic nudes that were *ostensibly* produced for artists to use privately for figure studies in place of live models (and so were implicitly lodged within the pedagogical structure of the Fine Arts Academy) were legal. They were officially registered as *académies* (or *études d’après nature*, a designation preferred by those less eager to submit to the authority of the Academy) and copies were deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale as part of the *dépot legal* or copyright protocol. Images that did not meet the legal standard—nude photographs that were suggestively, or frankly, pornographic and circulated commercially—were proscribed for reason of obscenity according to an 1852 censorship law, and recorded in police registries. Rexer’s study depends upon these two visual archives. The advantage of the legal framing device is that it inscribes questions of nude photography and obscenity within social history, even as it introduces the philosophical and esthetic framework of an opposition between the ideal (the artistic) and the real (the obscene) that will orient Rexer’s study of literary works by Baudelaire, the Goncourt Brothers, Zola and Maizerot (author of feminist photo novels).

The poet of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is a likely suspect for Rexer’s “literary history” of the nude photograph, not only because he himself was charged with indecency when some of his poems were deemed “visually obscene” (p. 72), but also because he authored an essay fiercely critical of

photography (“Le public français et la photographie”) in connection with the 1859 Salon. Rexer focuses on Baudelaire’s notion of esthetic modernity which, in her view, requires a lucid negotiation across the horizons of the real and the ideal. Rexer argues that, having initially sought a “delicate balance” (p. 85) between the two (she emphasizes the synesthetic dimension of Baudelaire’s symbolist poetics of supernaturalism) Baudelaire takes an increasingly anti-realist position, one Rexer aligns with the poet’s attack on photography. For Baudelaire, Rexer argues, the real becomes a horizon of “the violence of obscene photography” (p. 87) such that “no solution remained in a photographic world but to wrest art away almost entirely from the domain of the real” (p. 79). Perhaps, but the world Baudelaire explicitly decries in his 1859 essay does not concern photography *per se* (much less nude photography) so much as the world of industry, materialism and positivism (a world of progress he judges to be the enemy of poetry) of which photography is a symptom. We recall that 1859 was the first year photography was exhibited in the Palace of Fine Arts instead of the Palace of Industry, where daguerreotypes had traditionally been displayed. This prompted a reasonable concern that, given the idiocy of the French public (*la sottise de la multitude*), photography might become the standard of art—think naturalism in painting and (on the horizon) in literature.[1] Given the materialistic culture of the Second Empire (captured in the perhaps apocryphal formula *Enrichissez-vous*), one might conjecture that the profound *ennui* this culture engendered in the poet is much more devastating to life and art than the obscene photographs that circulate within it. Baudelaire’s response to both, in any case, is “Je préfère les monstres de mon imagination à la trivialité positive.”[2] The corollary to this feeling, namely that the privilege of art is its ability to express the horrible in a way that renders it beautiful, grounds the esthetic project of *extraire la beauté du mal*. The powers of pure art, as this provocative appeal suggests, exceed Rexer’s working framework of the real vs. the ideal. Yet, in a sense, it reinforces the larger point I take Rexer to be making, namely that, in a photograph, the horrible will always remain horrible.

Rexer reads two Baudelaire poems, *La Charogne* and *La Martyre*, in terms of “the violence of obscene photography” (p. 87). She supports her case by pairing each poem with a specific contemporary nude photograph to which the poem might be said to critically respond. The juxtaposition she proposes is striking, and this kind of intermedial analysis between literature and photography is valuable. But her reading of the poems strikes me as reductive. Not only do the poems perform precisely the power of art to make even the horrible beautiful, in *La Charogne* he performs a grotesque reworking of the vanitas motif in which love and death are brought together and turned into art (think Ronsard, Lamartine, and Hugo).[3] Baudelaire shocks us most profoundly in *La Charogne*, I would venture, not by evoking the abjection of an obscene nude photograph, but by transforming the putrid body (is it a woman? Is it an animal?) into a romantic landscape: “Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique/Comme l’eau courante et le vent.”[4] When Rexer reads Baudelaire’s exuberant appeal to fashion, *parure* and *maquillage* in *Eloge du maquillage* as an attempt to “protect” the female body “from obscenity” (p. 84) by clothing it, I am not convinced. However, when she rephrases the problem of photographic obscenity as a danger of nonsignification—photography is always on the verge of collapsing into sheer materiality—I find her argument more compelling.

The author passes from Baudelaire to the Goncourt Brothers, who, she argues, wrestle with Baudelaire’s modern esthetic, which she construes as an attempt to resolve contradictory impulses toward the real and the ideal. She focusses on their novel *Manette Salomon*, which thematizes questions of art, realism and photography in a story that concerns relations (both esthetic and erotic) between a painter, his model and his art. The story ends violently after the

painter discovers a nude photograph of Manette, taken when she modeled for another artist. Rexer argues that “the nude photograph becomes the structural center of the novel” which undoes both the novel’s hero and his quest for a new, modern, realism (p. 115).

The second part of *The Fallen Veil* concerns the first three decades of the Third Republic for which no official archives of photographic images exist, due to the repeal of the 1852 censorship law in 1881. Since it was no longer necessary to legally register photographs, “the ‘unauthorized nude’ grew to include all of the nude photographs produced in the 1880s and 1890s” (p. 151). New technologies of image reproduction, the absence of censorship laws and the increased ambiguity between art images and obscene ones, all contribute to the emergence of a massive trade in pornographic photographs. Photography passes from being an esthetic threat to a moral one, for which art serves as pretext (the formula of the *académie* remains tacitly in place, but, now more than ever, as mere pretense).

These are the issues Zola takes up in *Nana*, a novel not only accused of being pornographic, but because of Zola’s relentless naturalistic portraits of Nana in the nude, one contemporary critic characterized as “nothing but a series of nude photographs strung together with the author’s commentary” (p. 187). Rexer, however, reads “Nana’s photographic aesthetic” as evidence of the critical force of Zola’s novel (p. 205). Nana, identified, through the photographic subtext, with “sex for sale” is “transformed into an economic force” (p. 205); as such, she performs sexual commerce as social decline. What renders this not only a social, but also a specifically political critique, Rexer suggests, is that it underscores how little has changed with the passage from the Second Empire (the story line of the novel) to the Third Republic. In a final chapter on Maizeroy’s feminist photo novels, Rexer raises two very interesting questions that it would take another whole book to fully explore: the first concerns gender as it pertains to women readers, their desire(s) and their gaze(s); the other concerns relations between image and text when photographic images confront these (straight) women readers.

The subtitle of *The Fallen Veil*—“A Literary and Cultural History of the Photographic Nude”—suggests a study of the photographic nude per se (at least this is how I read it). What the book offers is not that, but rather a passionate investigation of the peculiar chemistry that existed between photography and pornography in modern France, and the quandaries this represents for women and their bodies. If the visual archive Rexer depends upon supports the coherence of her overall argument, it also constrains the scope of her study, limiting it to images of mostly slim, young, white, straight women that hover between beauty and obscenity, increasingly drowning in the growing industry of pornography. Rexer acknowledges the limitations her archive imposes and assumes them. This is because (I would guess) what interests her is not nude photography in modern France *tout court* (which would have required a treatment of different kinds of photographic nudes, different kinds of bodies and even, for contrast, different media), but “the exceptional burden of meaning borne by the female body in arguments about photography and art,” arguments that specifically turn on questions of obscenity (p. 65).

This is fair enough. It is for the author to choose her subject. But there is one moment that struck me as a missed opportunity to reflect on the terms of her analysis, and even to complicate them. Speaking about the ambiguities involved in the distinction between respectable nude photographs and obscene ones, she brings up the case of a well-respected photographer named Félix Moulin (also a travel photographer) who supplemented his income by producing illicit images. She cites the following reproach from a critic who was disturbed by one of his illicit

photographs: “If, at a minimum the scant propriety of the subject were redeemed by beauty, by grace: but how, to the wrong of indecency, he adds so gratuitously those of ugliness and of vulgarity! Look at that Hottentot...M. Moulin has granted us the right to tell him in the name of taste, if not in the name of modesty: ‘Cover up this object that one *cannot bear to see*’”(p. 66, original emphasis). As the term “Hottentot” reveals (a pejorative term for African, and specifically Nuba women) this nude photograph presents the body of a woman of color. This fact seems to change everything. Here, anti-blackness trumps obscenity, whose complicity with conventions of beauty and grace this comment exposes. What this white European man *cannot bear to see* is the female black body. Another contemporary French photographer, Pierre Trémeaux, who traveled in Africa and photographed Nubian people, offers a quite different perspective. He remarks that the Nubian women he photographed were not bothered by their nakedness, and comments that they posed with simple modesty (as we see in the figure below).



Pierre Trémeaux, *La Femme Nuba*, 1853-4
The Metropolitan Museum (image in the public domain). “Young Nuba Woman, 1853-54,” <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/285640>, consulted 9 July 2021.

This suggests that even if photography carries a medium-specific imprint of the real, the real is not one. It also suggests that there are many nudités. The young Nubian woman (photographed

in Africa) sits unclothed before a white male photographer, but does not appear to be constituted by his gaze or to exist for it. On the contrary, she seems to short circuit what one might take to be an automatic association between nude photography and obscenity. Rexer seems to take the question of obscenity for granted. In relation to this broader question, we might want to consider Audre Lorde's careful parsing of the distinction between the erotic, which she considers a replenishing force, and "its opposite, the pornographic," which she defines as "a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling." [5]

Rexer cites T.J. Clark concerning the prostitute as "a cultural signifier of modernity" (p. 46). In his *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel adds another piece of the puzzle. [6] For him, the prostitute is a figure of money, and the economic regime of money is what characterizes modernity and affects its structures of desire. For Simmel, both photography and money subvert clear lines of social distinction (consider Balzac's *Sarrasine*). From this perspective, given that the money economy begins to install itself in France during the Second Empire (with Hugo in exile in the Channel Islands), the question of commercialization (of photography and of French culture generally) would move to the center of the question of nude photography as it pertains to women's bodies and to the pornography industry. Moreover, as Zola depicts so well in his last novel, *L'Argent*, the same modernity of money that yields the commercialization of photography (and the industry of pornography) underwrites France's colonial investment during the Third Republic. The contrast between Trémeaux's perspective on the Nuba women he photographed and the critical response to Moulin's "Hottentot" image suggests that it is colonial difference that exposes for us the limit of the paradigm of obscenity.

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, "Le public et la photographie," in "Salon de 1859," reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard 1975), p. 618.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, "La reine des facultés," in "Salon de 1859," reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard 1975), p. 618.

[3] In Pierre de Ronsard's "Comme on voit sur la branche au mois de May la rose" (1574), we read:

"Ainsi, en ta première et jeune nouveauté.
Quand la Terre et le Ciel honoraient ta beauté,
La Parque ta tuée, et cendre repose."

The theme of love and death returns in Alphonse de Lamartine's "Le Lac" (1820) and again in Victor Hugo's "Tristesse d'Olympio" (1840), where we read:

"... Et s'il est quelque part, dans l'ombre où rien ne veille,
Deux amants sous vos fleurs abritant leurs transports,
Ne leur irez-vous pas murmurer à l'oreille:
- Vous qui vivez, donnez une pensée aux morts!"

[4] Charles Baudelaire, "Une Charogne," *Fleurs du mal* (1857).

[5] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 20.

[6] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, ed. David Frisby, tr. Tom Bottomore (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011). For more on Simmel and the question of prostitution, see my *Proust, Photography and the Time of Life. Ravaisson, Bergson and Simmel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Suzanne Guerlac
University of California, Berkeley
guerlac@berkeley.edu

Copyright © 2022 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 redistribution/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