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Alice Blackhurst, *Luxury, Sensation and the Moving Image*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2021. ix + 186 pp. Illustrations and bibliography. \$115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781839540226.

Review by Maureen Turim, University of Florida.

Alice Blackhurst asserts that minimalist film, art, and literature, or works that repeatedly rework material, luxuriate in temporal expansion and maximize sensory appeal, which she calls “sensation.” Her corpus is comprised of four artists, all women, with a chapter devoted to each: Chantal Akerman, Annie Ernaux, Louise Bourgeois, and Sophie Calle. This mixture of film with writing, sculpture, and hybrid image/text installation in her selected artists is not necessarily forecast in the title of the volume, but that emphasis on the “moving image” seems to be a product of fitting the work into the Legenda “Moving Image” series. Her four artists are a formidable group to consider together, and I applaud attention to a sampling of these fascinating works: Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*; Ernaux’s *Passion simple* and *Se Perdre*; Bourgeois’s soft sculptures, as well as some of her bronzes and plaster works, and her *Insomnia Drawings*; and Calle’s *Suite vénitienne*, *Douleur exquise* and *Prenez soin de vous*. Blackhurst’s project embraces theoretical positivity that rests on citation of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy, philosophers who bring creative positive energy to reimagining thought.

Here is Blackhurst in her introduction: “A concern to exit an economy of parasitic, intransitive consumption, and to affirm instead a philosophy of vital production and the incessant productivity of desire broadly characterizes the thinking of Gilles Deleuze. Throughout the book I draw recursively upon Deleuze’s work to aid in extricating any elected corpus of artists from economies of negativity, and to instead insert them in creative networks of luxurious potentiality and fecund exchange” (p. 5). As to Nancy, Blackhurst says: “Drawing on Deleuze’s efforts to articulate a novel ‘logic of sensation,’ the thought of Nancy broadly seeks to explore the infinitely mobile nature of the sensible and sensuous—or what is generally referred to in his work under the broad term ‘sense’—from within the circumscribed parameters of our finite, shared, and emphatically material corporeal existence” (pp. 5-6).

There is much to be said for emphasizing the creative gesture as a way of overcoming the darker emotions of life or the periods of historical strife that one seeks to survive. Choosing this corpus of artists, these four creative voices whose works often address depression, fear, or anxiety, and concern the past as affecting the present, while sharing a tendency towards rumination, Blackhurst posits that her approach seeks to counter more standard critical reception of the works. These profoundly significant artists certainly testify to the ability to create as a glorious

way to overcome the struggles they openly acknowledge. The question I pose in this review is how well this “eliminate the negative” approach to their works copes with their complexity.[1]

An early touchstone in this project is one of Charles Baudelaire’s most well-known poems, “L’Invitation au voyage” (1857) as an evocation of a sensual journey to “luxe, calme, et volupté.”[2] Yes, the poem highlights one of Blackhurst’s key terms, “luxury,” and invokes sensation—voluptuousness—though its sense of luxury includes the fantasy of ornate furnishings, quite in contrast to the minimalist gestures of Akerman and Calle in particular. The poem is complicated, with the lines “De tes traîtres yeux,/Brillant à travers leurs larmes” forming an unsettling preface to its unfolding fantasy of order and peace. Further, one only need look to another famous Baudelaire poem, “Au lecteur,” to find *ennui* (boredom, lassitude) complicating the notion that Blackhurst extracts from “L’Invitation” celebrating luxuriating in the calm sensuousness of temporal expansion: other emotions may occur.[3] That Blackhurst does not account for the first poem’s internal complexity nor consider the contrary concerns within the poet’s oeuvre on issues of temporality and sensation becomes symptomatic of how the author approaches creative works: selectively highlighting aspects while reducing their internal play with polysemy and contradiction to have them illustrate her thesis. With that caveat, let me examine her readings.

I’ll start with the ways in which Blackhurst’s thesis works well for aspects of Ernaux’s books. Annie Ernaux herself speaks to luxury directly, as Blackhurst notes at the beginning of her chapter on the now Nobel-prized author with a direct citation of Ernaux’s own thoughts about writing as “a passion, a luxury” that the author appreciates (p. 55). “When I was a child, luxury for me was fur coats, long dresses and villas next to the sea. Later, I believed luxury was leading the life of an intellectual. It seems to me now that it is also being able to live a passion for a man or for a woman.” (*Passion simple*, as quoted by Blackhurst, p. 55). That the narrator’s passion for the Russian diplomat becomes marked by accepting the relationship on his prerogatives (quintessential male control) is noted by Blackhurst; that moments of the lover’s absence are marked by excessive purchases of luxuries, to give way to a penance by compulsive daily charity, though abandonment is the lover’s final act—all of this is filtered through theoretical references (Bordieu, Barthes, Bataille, Blanchot).

When Blackhurst moves on to consider *Se perdre* as a diaristic ode to the loss of self, as the raw daily notation of the same affair that she had earlier chronicled in *Passion simple*, exalting the intensity of moments that are given expanse and repetitions, Blackhurst’s approach meets an object that yields to her touch. But is the loss of self as one cedes to an overwhelming desire so uniformly enthralling in this work? What of the dreams? What is the author trying to tell herself and what does she find out? Blackhurst’s readings, as fruitful as they are, theoretically foreclose important questions that might be usefully explored, especially since (as she notes) Ernaux risks observations that might provoke feminist critique.

Her chapter on Bourgeois pays deep homage to Nancy’s writings, especially linking his *La Naissance des seins* to Bourgeois’s figuration of breasts in her sculptures, both the soft ones and the bronzes and plasters in which the body parts also figure in contrast to the hardness of the material. Bourgeois’s *Insomnia Drawings* are presented by the artist as figures inspired by her chronic inability to fall or stay asleep; for Blackhurst the theoretical challenge is to reimagine this as “boundless night,” a fecund extra period of creativity that is freer and less controlled by aesthetic purpose and order. Yet Bourgeois is an artist who makes no pretense at leaving aside

her psyche, her past traumas, or her deep fears. She invites us to see spatial forms and drawings as embodiments of imaginary torments as well as creative desires. Telling is Blackhurst's interpretation of *Fillette*, in which she never considers that the title may refer not directly to the hanging sculpture of the penis, its vulnerability, but to the young girl imagining it with fear and uncertainty as that which hangs over her.

Akerman's *Je tu il elle* is a film built on three sections, the first of which is the most complex. Deleuze has written on Akerman's "languorous unproductivity" which becomes the lens through which Blackhurst explores this section of the film. I see it as a conceptual examination of writing anxiety staged as a solitary, days' long struggle whose resonance with Bourgeois's insomnia drawing might be usefully explored. Akerman acts as her fictional protagonist, writing a letter, never finished, to her lover who has left her, while eating sugar obsessively from a paper bag, rearranging her furniture, then clearing the furniture, while commenting on her activities. It is a beautiful, daring, and painful performance, one that compares to the aesthetics of performance art: even the pages of the letter are displayed on the floor as part of this play with form.[4] Blackhurst treats the disordered eating of straight sugar as "unrestrained, excessive, indulgent" (p. 36), before celebrating the subsequent spilling of the sugar as an "economy of squandering" given a political dimension by sugar as a rationed item in World War II. What Blackhurst refuses to consider is the abjection of this sequence, the display of loss through a ritual of depletion. The middle sequence of the film Blackhurst views as nomadism.

The term "nomadic" has been usefully ascribed to overviews of Akerman as auteur as she sets her films various places, but its use here ignores the goal of this journey. She makes much of the protagonist's statement at one point that she wishes to kiss the driver, then treats the sexual act subsequently demanded of the protagonist by the male truck driver as payment for the ride he has given her as a free expenditure of desire. The heterosexual act that ensues might rather be seen as coerced activity, impassively endured, as the blow job that takes place off frame at bottom presents a parallel to the paid sex Jeanne Dielman supplies her clients: sex acts from which the female is in a certain sense "absent." Then the final section of the film is presented by Blackhurst as a "further extension as boundless, sensual desire" (p. 40). I read it more as another rather alienated encounter, precisely bounded by the lack of communication that ensues and the departure of the protagonist at the end, within a strong homage to the filmmaking of Robert Bresson. Admittedly, these scenes are enigmatic, and interpretation of such conceptual filmmaking allows one to piece the elements together differently, but the evacuation of any negative effects of subjectivity from one's reading of the protagonist of this wonderful film flattens both its grace and richness for me.

I am even more dubious by the way Blackhurst reads the bath in *Jeanne Dielman*, a still from which is used on both the book's front and back cover, and presented by Blackhurst as "lulling, soothing and stilling" (p. 21). Compared to the sensuous potential of bath scenes, the one in this film is a ritual of cleansing that is decidedly austere, less of a bath than a utilitarian scouring of a body that plays against the sensuality of actress Delphine Seyrig's body, previously concealed under demure costuming. What ensues is hand-held showering that removes the traces of the paid sexual encounter that preceded the bath, then concludes as its protagonist obsessively cleans the tub before exiting it. The publisher of the Moving Image series at Legenda blurbs the book strangely by more insistence on the bath scene as extended pleasure, gushing that "we can almost feel the warmth of the water." [5] My pleasures with this scene and the film as a whole rest largely on its conceptual dissection of a restricted life, an existence that erupts in the final scenes,

in violence depicted minimally with authorial restraint, yet so crucial to making sense of the film's play with duration. In the midst of her commentary on the bath scene, Blackhurst cites Carol Mavors's interpretation of the scene which more accurately captures its ironies, but Blackhurst ignores the consequence this should have on her own interpretation. So many feminists have written convincingly about this film, but only a few are cited by Blackhurst, and never for their most explicit feminism.

That art and creativity in her four examples issue productively from the more cumbersome aspects of the psyche is not ignored by Blackhurst, as in the tack she takes when she notes in her chapter on Sophie Calle's works that one can luxuriate in melancholy. Here Blackhurst may sound as cruel as an insensitive therapist, but that is not her purpose. Her women artists and writers usefully, though at times painfully, explore the darkest corners of experience and the psyche to offer their readers or viewers insight into daily survival and the unconscious: Blackhurst pays less attention to how that process, that working-through, is manifested in the works' formal designs. She instead celebrates their aesthetic achievements in minimalist form or repetitive elements in variation as a triumphant gesture. The Calle chapter pays less attention to form than do the other chapters, as it primarily concentrates on the rules Calle establishes for her art as involving the input of others; Blackhurst's treatment of *Suite vénitienne* has little to say about the photos, concentrating on the prose. Yet all the blending of the personal with the social, or the artist as collaborator with the public, would be far less intriguing if Calle did not ingeniously combine images and texts, and if her sense of narrative displayed as short placards, rather than just read as text in continuity were less strong. Calle's later work begins to invite women to be her collaborators, rather than simply centering on the male figure who constitutes her illusive and involuntary object of the camera's gaze in *Suite*: the early work that depends on gender role-reversal for its subversive energy.

Though Calle establishes formal limits and distance to her stalking and voyeurism, restricting herself to street documentation, a welcome transformation occurs in when she turns in two cases to overcoming pain caused by men who are already absent, marked only by one not showing up as planned in Tokyo to meet her in *Douleur exquise* and a final email break-up message from the other in *Prenez soin de vous*. In each of the works, she opens the situation to the commentary of others: inviting them to offer accounts of their most painful experiences in the earlier work, and to offer their analysis of her former lover's break-up note drawing on their own experiences in the later work. Again, the aesthetics of display and the different installation spaces in which the works have been shown are not the focus of Blackhurst's account; her focus is instead on the communal interaction with the artist as temporally expansive gesture with repetition and variation.

There is a real opportunity to compare the mid-sections of *Je tu il elle*, *Passion simple*, *Suite vénitienne*, and *Fillele* as a coping with male power examined through its effects on the female self, but extended comparison does not happen even in the book's conclusion, which opts instead for reiteration of the points made across the volume as redefining luxury. I have suggested that Blackhurst's corralling of negative forces and psychical functioning as they transmogrify as aesthetic achievement induces a certain flatness to her thesis, as well as troublesome misinterpretations of key moments in the works analyzed by her. Yet the positivity of her readings remains a celebration with deep philosophical underpinnings: illustrative, worthy, but half the picture, half the story.

## NOTES

[1] My quote is from the Johnny Mercer song, “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” (1944).

[2] Charles Beaudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

[3] Beaudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

[4] For those interested in my take on Ackerman’s films, see Maureen Turim, “Personal Pronouncements in Two Akerman Films: *Je tu il elle* and *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*” *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Foster (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 9-26; “Next to Chantal Akerman: An Installation of Generations and the Shoah” and “Forgetting to Eat: A Commemoration,” *Camera Obscura*, 34/1 (May 2019).

[5] <http://www.mhra.org.uk/news/2021/06/27/luxuriate-on-film.html>

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