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Bridget Alsdorf, *Gawkers: Art and Audience in Late Nineteenth-Century France*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022. 296 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. $63.00 U.S./£52.00 (hb). ISBN 9780691166384.

Review by Samuel Raybone, Aberystwyth University.

Bridget Alsdorf's latest book introduces us to the *badauds*: those curious, gawking onlookers who crowd the scene of a road accident and gather stupefied before shop windows. *Gawkers: Art and Audience in Late Nineteenth-Century France* convincingly argues that the *badaud* was not only a ubiquitous feature of modern Parisian life and art, but also a resonant metaphor for modern subjectivity and art's modern viewers. Marginalized and ignored by scholars, the *badaud* concentrated a range of desires and anxieties that were, in fact, absolutely central to modern urban life in Paris: about the dangers of the crowd, the sway of mass media, and the commodification of art. As Alsdorf skillfully demonstrates, fin-de-siècle artists developed a nuanced range of responses to the *badaud* as motif and metaphor. For example, Pierre Bonnard adopted a *badaud*'s-eye view of "visual…collisions" (p. 130) and "optical interference of urban life" (p. 122), while Félix Vallotton questioned the ethics of passively looking on as others live and die. Honoré Daumier explored the social theatrics of being captivated or bored by art in private and public, whereas Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec reveled in the "captivated immobility" (p. 186) enforced by commercialized pleasure. Taken together, these case studies reveal a new facet of modern visual culture and make an important advance in our understanding of the subject.

The *badaud* is the "flâneur's other side" (p. 11). Where the flâneur is "a free and active agent" who immerses himself in modern life but never loses his self-possession, the *badaud* is "emotional, highly impressionable, and distractable, a cipher of a person both generated and fascinated by crowds" (p. 9). Despite the two concepts being intertwined in nineteenth-century literature, the flâneur has dominated scholarship at the expense of the *badaud*. Alsdorf approvingly cites Martine Lauster's argument that this inequality of attention grew out of Walter Benjamin's "influential misreading" (p. 243 n. 31) of Charles Baudelaire's foundational essay "The Painter of Modern Life."[1] Benjamin erases the aspects of *badauderie* that Baudelaire encoded via references to Edgar Allan Poe's concept of the "man of the crowd," which the later critic inaccurately reads as a flâneur rather than a *badaud*. That this mythical flâneur became an "icon of modernity"[2] and the epitome of modern subjectivity (as rational, bounded, self-possessed, empowered, and masculine) is seen to reveal the biases of modernist cultural criticism rather than reflecting historical reality. Thus, Alsdorf consciously chooses to "set aside" (p. 243

n. 21) Benjamin's overburdened and problematic flâneur, and instead study representations of the crowd of which he was part.

The book is structured by thematic chapters divided into monographic case-study sections, which provide a taxonomy of artistic responses to gawking. This approach neatly aligns with the book's methodological stance of "privileging artists as theorists" (p. 21) and allows the diversity and nuances of the selected artists' perspectives to emerge clearly. Among these artists Félix Vallotton, the Nabis painter and printmaker, is by far the most prominent. The sophistication and range of Vallotton's engagement with the theme of gawking make this a natural and effective choice. However, the comparative brevity with which other artists are at times treated somewhat undermines the book's thematic approach and interpretation of the *badaud* as a broad cultural touchstone.

In chapter one, Alsdorf examines representations of accidents, and the crowds they attracted, by Vallotton, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Charles Angrand. Alsdorf connects Vallotton with Gérôme via their shared interest in *fait divers*, a format of newspaper reportage particular to modern mass media wherein surprising, tragic, humorous, absurd, and surreal vignettes featuring ordinary people were pithily summarized to arouse and satiate readers' curiosity and "desire to see" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted p. 33).[3] Both artists responded to the *fait divers'* "spectacularization of everyday life" (p. 31) by emphasizing the spectators' acts of looking rather than the event itself. However, only Vallotton insistently pictured the suicides, tramplings, executions, brawls, and accidents that were the stock-in-trade of *fait divers*. In this way, Alsdorf sees him implicating his viewers in the gawking depicted: by probing the tension, inherent to *badauderie*, between "specular detachment … [and] visceral identification" (p. 32), Vallotton asks, of us and himself, "What happens when what we see looks back? Is a reluctance to act itself an act of brutality?" (p. 51).

Chapter two examines how artists responded to the changed "relationship of artist, art, and audience in a period" (p. 72) of image saturation, media proliferation, and fierce competition for attention. As Alsdorf shows, artists' anxieties about their newfound dependence on the attention and approval of the gawking masses gave rise to a pervasive concern with "theatricality and spectatorship" (p. 77) that went beyond, but continually referenced, the theater. Honoré Daumier, Louis-Léopold Boilly, Edgar Degas, Vallotton, and Eugène Carrière utilized theater audiences as metaphors for art audiences, allowing them to project their hopes and fears regarding the reception of their own work. Degas, for example, captured the inattentive audiences at the café-concerts as an act of "defiance" (p. 93) against a culture of distracted, apathetic looking in art galleries. The chapter's central example, Daumier, was, however, more accepting of "Art's dependence on a broad, unpredictable audience" (p. 93). Daumier was "fascinated by how audiences look, listen, and behave" (p. 78) and they form a significant component of his output. His paintings of theater audiences explore their potential for captivation and boredom, while his prints document the various forms of labor on stage and behind the scenes, drawing parallels with the artist's equivalent reliance on holding an audience's attention for his professional success. These latent anxieties come to the fore in Daumier's depictions of art spectatorship: in prints and paintings of people viewing prints and paintings, he catalogues various reactions, from the authentic captivation of a mixed crowd attracted by a print seller's street display to the comic ineptitude of the Salon jury. Crucially, Daumier adapted his portrayal of audiences according to

the audience each medium implied: his paintings "allowed Daumier to imagine a *desired* audience, attentive and absorbed, while lithographs for the mass press allowed him to express frustration with actual audiences while entertaining them, too" (p. 85).

In chapter three, Alsdorf juxtaposes representations of Parisian streets by Pierre Bonnard and the Lumière brothers. In the 1890s, Bonnard wandered with a sketchpad through the streets of Paris, immersing himself in what he called "the theater of the everyday" (p. 120). In the paintings and color lithographs that followed, Alsdorf argues that Bonnard developed a "pictorial phenomenology of urban life" (p. 120) characterized by "a new kind of vision that took its cues from the constant optical interference of urban life." The new vision encompassed the mobile perspective "of navigating crowded streets" and "the peripheral glimpses and chance encounters of life in a city" (p. 122). Alsdorf traces Bonnard's iteration of this way of seeing across media and shows how Bonnard "[blurred] the boundary between the *badaud* and the flâneur" (p. 22) by articulating his libidinal investments and "contingency of vision" (p. 22) as a counterpoint to the detachment and control associated with the flâneur. What Bonnard pictured from the inside, the Lumière brothers captured from the outside: crowds of gawking bystanders, looking directly into the camera lens. Alsdorf argues that these were far from a nuisance or a necessary evil (as they were for other filmmakers), but instead a deliberately cultivated and carefully managed component of the films, intended to reflect the cinema audience's "mesmerized stares" (p. 146) back at them and so make the production and consumption of the film itself the spectacle.

Chapter four examines the new forms of commercialized spectatorship that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Artists both depicted and participated in "a capitalist culture of competition for attention" (p. 174); whether making paintings, prints, posters, or leaflets, fin-de-siècle artists were forced to confront the "blurring of art and commerce" and their own "[dependence] on public exposure in the street and the press" (p. 174). The centerpiece of the chapter is Vallotton's *Le Bon Marché* (1898), an "extraordinary triptych" (p. 203) that captures the colorful aesthetics of seduction and complex crowd dynamics of this "cathedral of commerce" (Émile Zola quoted p. 205), while simultaneously serving as a "knowing advertisement for Vallotton's [own] work" (p. 210) through coded references to his *intimiste* interiors. [4] The department store was not hospitable terrain for the flâneur: the visual and emotional enticements were too strong a threat to his "free movement, individuality, and…masculine control" (p. 215). Significantly, by this time he could also no longer take refuge in the streets. Alsdorf cites Romain Coolus, for whom artificial lighting and chromolithographed posters transformed the city's walls into a "halting screen" that "grips us as we go by," "persecuting us, hurling spectacle at us" (Coolus quoted p. 172). The saturation of everyday life with vibrant, eye-catching images enforced a form of gawking spectatorship as collective, passive, and mesmerized. For Coolus, "if … one pressed their eyes like sponges, they would seep images" (Coolus qtd p. 173).[5] The fin-de-siècle street thus became the domain of the *badauds*, more than the flâneurs, representing a watershed moment in art's colonization by capitalism and the transformation of artists and audiences according to new economic and technical necessities.

Although Paris is no longer the capital of the nineteenth century, *Gawkers* shows that there are still important new discoveries to be made about the city's modern visual culture.[6] It aligns with a growing body of scholarship that re-evaluates the visual culture of modern Paris by exploring neglected forms of visual experiences, social types, and non-art images.[7] Like these

texts, *Gawkers* helps correct the overemphasis and artificial segregation of images classed as "art" which characterized many social history of art approaches. For several scholars, questions of race, gender, and nationality have been central to this re-evaluation; Paris has been shown to have been substantially more diverse, multicultural, and globally interconnected (and so Parisian modernity more fragmented and pluralistic) than previously realised.[8] *Gawkers* does not address the racialized co-ordinates of looking, and emphasizes the "remarkably *un*gendered characterization of badauds in literature, journalism, and visual art" (p. 154, emphasis original), in contrast to the resolutely gendered flâneur (p. 243 n. 25), as well as the "especially Parisian" (p. 13) nature of *badauderie*. Of course, it is not the stated aim of *Gawkers* to resituate or decenter Paris (and despite the mention of France in the title, the focus remains squarely on Paris); however, such questions do have relevance to the topic and may possibly have yielded further insights.

For example, in the section on Degas's identification with performers and representations of inattentive audiences, there was possibly scope to compare these forms of looking to the racializing stare Degas trains on the performer in *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, and so ask broader questions about what gawking looked like when race was the spectacle.[9] Alsdorf makes the point that a crucial aspect of the *badaud* is the undifferentiated nature of his or her gawking stare: they are liable to be taken in by anything and everything eye-catching or spectacular, and anyone can become a gawker. However, given modernity's obsession with identifying, classifying, and hierarchizing various forms of otherness, it would be potentially illuminating to consider how experiences and perceptions of gawking, and being gawked at, intersected with racial and other forms of embodied difference, such as gender, foreignness, and disability.

Gawkers also contributes to the body of recent scholarship examining the impact of new media, materials, and technologies on late nineteenth-century visual culture.[10] Alsdorf is attentive to intermediality, showing not only that late nineteenth-century artists worked across a range of media, but that the very process of cross-pollinating and translating meanings and motifs among them (adapting to the audiences and forms of spectatorship that each medium encouraged) was highly generative. Indeed, although the book's stated focus is on audience and spectatorship, often it is modernity's new media and technologies that emerge as a key driving force for the artistic projects and historical processes under discussion. For this reason, a more systematic and perhaps explicitly theorized approach might have clarified the choices to include some media and exclude others (why cinema but not photography, why fine art prints and posters but almost no other forms of printed ephemera?), as well as the connections drawn among them (and those not).

For example, the chromolithographed trade cards (known as chromos) that department stores including *Au Bon Marché* distributed in their millions, and that, like the other media addressed, depicted crowds and implicated their viewers in distinctive economies of attention and forms of looking, are absent. In contrast, Vallotton's flyer for print dealer Edmond Sagot and chromolithographed posters by Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard are included and analyzed. Given the book's stated focus on "artists," the exclusion of most commercial ephemera (for which the chromolithographic artist was just one member of a large team) is not unreasonable. Yet, the exclusion of color prints without a named, canonical artist cuts against the (valid) argumentative

emphasis on the blurring of art and commerce, and on the instability of the "artist" as an identity and profession. More holistic consideration of color printed ephemera would surely enrich our understanding of the particular subject of gawking, and late nineteenth-century visual cultural more generally.[11]

Likewise, greater emphasis on the technical parameters and processes of printmaking might, in places, have added greater contextual nuance. For example, the "spatial compression and confusion" of Bonnard's color lithographs is presented as an "inevitable result" of Bonnard's embrace of the limitations of the process (p. 129). In fact, they reveal Bonnard's lack of technical expertise (he outsourced the actual printing to Auguste Clot, whose input, which must have been considerable, is not closely considered). Bonnard's sketchy drawing, suppression of detail, blurred outlines, and reduction of colors are perhaps better understood as a method of *avoiding*, as so many fine artists did, the challenges of chromolithography, which were in fact eminently surmountable (the accurate registration of successive printings is the most relevant here). Pertinent comparisons could include the sophisticated plates that Clot had put on stone for the illustrated catalogue of the *collection Spitzer* (published in six volumes between 1890 and 1892) while an apprentice at Imprimerie Lemercier—in which the varying textures of tapestry and gold are precisely recorded—or with the vast quantity of giveaway chromos that printers like Lemercier produced in many more colors than Bonnard went in for.[12] These paths not taken contextualize Bonnard's choices and his intermedial practice, and offer scope for new connections to be drawn between such "art" prints and the commercial prints that artists (of various kinds) produced alongside them.

Gawkers thoroughly succeeds in its mission to make us pay attention to those rubbernecking onlookers who stand at the margins of the scene; their perspective reveals new elements of Parisian modernity. Enlivened by fluid writing, close nuanced analysis, and a rich corpus of visual material, *Gawkers* will be of great use to specialists, and a thoroughly enjoyable read for a wider audience.

NOTES

[1] Martina Lauster, "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur,'" *Modern Language Review* 102 (2007): pp. 139-156.

[2] Lauster, "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur,' p. 156.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sur les faits divers," (1954) in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 388.

[4] Émile Zola, *Au bonheur des dames*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, eds. Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 612.

[5] Romain Coolus, "Affiches lumineuses," in *Badauderies parisiennes. Les Rassemblements. Physiologies de la rue*, ed. Octave Uzanne (Paris: H. Floury, 1896), pp. 113-115.

[6] In the sense that Parisian modernity can no longer credibly claim to be the universal standard or singular prototype for modernity as a whole, and that scholarship is increasingly attentive to the pluralization and globalization of modernities and modernisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Hollis Clayson and André Dombrowski eds., *Is Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century?: Essays on Art and Modernity, 1850-1900* (London: Routledge, 2016), especially Tamar Garb, "Revisiting the 1860s: Race and Place in Cape Town and Paris," pp. 115-130. For a discussion of this movement in relation to Impressionism, see Samuel Raybone, "Review of *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism* edited by Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle and *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts* edited by Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20/3 (2021).

[7] See for example Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Ruth E. Iskin, *The Poster, Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014); Marilyn Brown, *The Gamin de Paris in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture: Delacroix, Hugo, and the French Social Imaginary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

[8] See for example Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Robin Mitchell, *Vénus noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020); Karen L. Carter and Susan Waller, *Foreign Artists and Communities in Modern Paris, 1870-1914: Strangers in Paradise* (London: Routledge, 2015); Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[9] Marilyn R. Brown, "'Miss La La's' Teeth: Reflections on Degas and 'Race,'" *Art Bulletin* 89 (2007): 738-765; James Smalls, "'Race' As Spectacle in Late-Nineteenth-Century French Art and Popular Culture," *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003): 351-382.

[10] See for example André Dombrowski, "Impressionism and the Standardization of Time: Claude Monet at Gare Saint-Lazare," *Art Bulletin* 102 (2020), pp. 91-120; Michelle Foa, "The Making of Degas: Duranty, Technology, and the Meaning of Materials in Later Nineteenth-Century Paris," *nonsite* 27 (2019); Carol Armstrong, "Seurat's Media, or a Matrix of Materialities," *Grey Room* 58 (2015): 6-25; Anne Higonnet, "Manet and the Multiple," *Grey Room* 48 (2012): 102–116; Laura Anne Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017).

[11] Alsdorf's interest in chromolithography does not extend beyond art-adjacent examples: posters and original and reproduction fine art prints. On chromolithography and color printing more broadly, see especially Michael Twyman, *A History of Chromolithography: Printed Colour for All* (London: British Library, 2013). Recent studies also include Laurence Schmidlin, ed., *Enraptured by Color: Printmaking in Late-Nineteenth Century France* (Vevey: Musée Jenisch Vevey; Zürich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 2017); Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, *Prints in Paris 1900: From Elite to the Street* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Brussels: Mercatorfonds;

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017); Laura Anne Kalba, "Chromolithography: Posters, Trade Cards, and the Politics of Ephemera Collecting in Fin-de-Siècle France," in *Color in the Age of Impressionism*, pp. 149-181.

[12] Twyman, *Chromolithography*, pp. 234-235, 358-359.

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