

Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 320 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (c1). ISBN 9780226593869.

Review by Peter Soppelsa, University of Oklahoma

This beautifully illustrated book showcases art history's disciplinary investment in artful printing and methodologically foregrounds the artifacts studied, letting readers analyze Clayson's sources with her: drawings, paintings, photographs, and prints. The study deftly balances its art historical pedigree with interdisciplinary dialogue. I read the book enthusiastically as a scholar working at the intersections of urban history, the history of technology, visual studies, and nineteenth-century French studies—intersections that also anchor Clayson's bright new volume. My review highlights the book's conversations with these fields.

Clayson gathers longstanding threads in urban history and the history of technology that trace cultural reactions to changing urban environments and technologies. Most broadly, *Illuminated Paris* speaks to research on the adoption, appropriation, domestication, and reception of new technologies, especially electricity, during this age of innovation and proliferating technological alternatives sometimes called the Second Industrial Revolution: 1870s-1940s, peaking in the 1880s-1920s.[1] Most specifically, Clayson contributes to studies of nineteenth-century artificial light alongside Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Chris Otter, and David Nye, and to studies of electricity and modernity, joining Christoph Asendorf, Anson Rabinbach, and Andreas Killen.[2] The book also connects with sensory urban studies from Joachim Schlör to Nicholas Kenny, which examine the changing meanings of modernity, nighttime, artificial light, and urban experience.[3]

*Illuminated Paris* begins from the nickname "City of Light," which metaphorically evokes the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, but literally recalls Paris's nineteenth-century leadership in artificial lighting. Clayson convincingly contends that scholars emphasize the former meaning at the latter's expense. In fact, Paris streetlighting predates the Enlightenment, born in 1667 of security and surveillance under Lieutenant General of Police Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie.[4] Clayson shifts focus from *lumière* (light) to *éclairage* (lighting), examining lighting techniques used in galleries, shops, homes, and expositions, as well as public streets, squares, and buildings. Her Paris is a *beacon*, beckoning expatriate artists, lighting engineers, exposition guests, and journalists from the U.S. and Europe with its literal and figurative glow. As "capital" of streetlights, nightlife, and modern art, Paris was a lighthouse of modernity, which indicated the dangers and safe passages of modernization. Like a lighthouse, Paris was most effective at night. Clayson characterizes the fin-de-siècle and Belle Époque years as flooded with choices about a "dazzling rivalry" (p. 85) of "motley" (p. 177) new lighting techniques, mostly electric, which drew strikingly divergent reactions in France and fed transnational debates about modernity, technology, cities, and the night.

Narratives of French modernism often, perhaps ad nauseum, repeat that a defining feature of impressionism and post-impressionism was depicting—particularly painting—the effects of light on human eyes and minds. From Manet's mirrors to Monet's shimmering waters, from *plein air* to pointillism, French modernism has been tied to painting light. Art histories also show how nineteenth-century artists used techniques from photography, optics, and artificial lighting in

producing artworks. Clayson corrects for these traditional biases in favor of daylight and painting in examining Paris modernism, but does not investigate how artists used artificial lights. For example, she mentions Felix Nadar's embrace of artificial light in artistic salons (p. 67) but neglects his earlier experiments with artificially lit underground photography of Paris's catacombs and sewers. Instead she studies how artists and writers represented lighting, tracing what she calls "illumination discourse" (p. 3) and "a new culturewide alertness to light" (p. 118). Depictions of darkness dotting chapters 2 through 6 offer an important proof of concept: even when artists represented dim light or scenes without lamps, they consistently addressed the bright-dark dialectic. Centered on new artificial lighting techniques, Parisian illumination discourse was structured by the complex play of light and dark, day and night, natural and artificial, and gas and electricity.

Clayson resists the hegemony of public streetlighting among artificial lights, and thereby avoids the politics of streetlighting as a public utility, its police origins, and citizen-state conflicts. A long French tradition of politicizing infrastructure made public works—the state's territorial projections—targets for sabotage and vandalism during rebellions or revolutions. Destroying or extinguishing streetlights and threatening to hang powerful people from lamp posts were common in Parisian revolutionary discourse and strategy between 1789 and 1871.[5] Putting aside this state politics of infrastructure, Clayson uncovers a cultural politics of lighting that is broader, newer, more complex, and less familiar.

Parisians often criticized new technology as anti-aesthetic. Beyond the famed Eiffel Tower controversy, studies by myself and others have documented aesthetic debates over the Metro, streetcars, and outdoor electric wires. Such controversy might seem unsurprising for technologies that provide transportation, sanitation, energy, or water. But Clayson shows that even artificial lighting—with often overt aesthetic aims—was criticized because its equipment or effects were "too ugly," or too utilitarian to even engage with aesthetics. Some worried that new lighting would threaten Paris's leadership in urban beautification (*embellissement*) and monumental architecture. Jules Claretie's traditionalist view that "nothing is more anti-art than electric light" (p. 79) resembles his criticisms of modern communication, energy, and transportation technologies (pp. 135-136). Albert Robida similarly criticized multiple technologies (pp. 57-62, pp. 93-95). Reading Clayson's book alongside other recent Paris studies reveals a cluster of conflicts over aesthetics and new technologies.[6] These conflicts confirm that, in Theresa Levitt's words, "France at the time was one of the most vibrant and high-stakes battlegrounds of the forces of modernity," and new technologies were central to these battles.[7]

Because artificial lighting could open dark spaces and manipulate nightfall, it helped shape basic affective parameters of urban experience: time, space, ambience, beauty, and comfort. Sometimes illumination discourse addressed the health and safety of new lighting. Clayson stresses medical warnings that electric light was overstimulating for eyes and minds, but also glances at social concerns that lighting could impact criminal or sexual behavior. After noting the tragic 1887 Opera Comique fire (p. 8), she largely ignores the risks of gaslight (fire, explosion, and asphyxiation), as examined by Jean-Baptiste Fressoz in the context of longer debates about safety in modern urban spaces, especially theaters.[8] This is significant because images of performance spaces—cabarets, cafés, and theaters—crisscross Clayson's book: from caricaturist Cham (p. 83), Edgar Degas (pp. 107-114), Mary Cassatt (pp. 116-117), Edvard

Munch (p. 161), Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (pp. 180-181), and Edouard Manet (p. 183). The book left me excited to learn more about how the dangers of electricity differed from those of gas.

Although Clayson's conclusion admits that Paris's electrification is not quite an organizing theme, both the author and her sources emphasize electricity more than gas. The ebook yields 311 hits for "electric" but 136 for "gas" and 56 for "gaslight." The study targets the 1870s through the 1920s, amid Paris's "gingerly" (p. 149, p. 178) shift from gas to electric lighting. Paris's gas streetlights burned from 1829 to 1962 (pp. 4-7). Although Haussmann called electrification a "radical revolution," Paris after 1889 was slow or late to adopt electricity (p. 7). Haussmann's claim was therefore doubly ironic—he credited the wrong technology (electricity instead of gas) and neglected that the real lighting revolution was his own (in the 1850s-60s, not thereafter). Yet the idiom persisted, for example in the works of Robida and science writer Louis Figuier: electricity was revolutionary (p. 95). Paris's cautious and contentious electrification contrasts sharply with gaslight's boom between 1830 and 1870, which cemented the literal sense of "City of Light." The singular midcentury zeal for gaslight preceded a profoundly conflicted turn-of-the-century encounter with electricity as technical alternatives blossomed. In Paris, electricity posed more difficult questions than gas did.

Clayson's longest and my favorite chapter strikingly interprets caricatures of electric lighting in terms of gender and sexuality. Faced with "male" plugs and "female" sockets, we may yet overlook the gendering of infrastructure standards. Similarly, we routinely ignore the racial meanings of "master" and "slave" devices in technical systems.[9] Clayson detects similar heteronormative sexual assumptions in illumination caricatures. Electricity as a "fluid" was like a bodily fluid and electro-magnetism as "attraction" carried interpersonal and romantic overtones (p. 91). Paris artists and writers both celebrated and criticized electric lamps because their brightness was arousing and stimulating. Cartoonist Draner linked electric light with men's "sexual mischief" including publicly propositioning and groping women (p. 57, p. 80, p. 92), and his editor Robida imagined an Edisonian electro-gadget that men would use to surveil and control women's sexuality (pp. 57-62). Moreover, the French personification and feminization of electricity as a fairy, goddess, or muse compounded the practical consequences of artificial lighting for displaying, eroticizing, and objectifying women's bodies. Citing Graeme Gooday's gender analysis of British electrification, Clayson shows that French sources echo his claim that women found indoor electric lights "unflattering" (p. 96) or "unbecoming" (p. 122), increasing the gaze's glare on women's bodies.[10]

Clayson plays on the "labile" bilingual simile of female genitalia as feline, which explains the 1881 Draner cartoon of a heterosexual couple heading home from an evening outing that ends with the man saying, "light up my cat" (pp. 92-93). She compellingly links the literal play of light and shadow in these illustrations with their coy punning, innuendo, titillating hints, and sly, knowing humor—the "visibility/invisibility dialectic, a central preoccupation of the era" (p. 3). Above all, lighting was gendered and sexualized in both heteronormative and naughtily transgressive ways, which embodied modernity's hedonism, vulgarity, and vice. Chapter three underscores her broader argument that lighting was instrumental in making the new nightlife both safe enough to become popular and dangerous enough to remain exciting. Parisian discourse emphasized crime (pp. 50-52, pp. 62-63) and sex (pp. 88-95) as defining and interrelated aspects of nightlife. Parisians used the bawdy humor of popular illustrations to

process the changes in urban environments and experiences produced by expanding electrification, lighting, and nightlife.

Like streetlights, lighthouses are in part technologies of safety and security, which both indicate safe paths forward and reveal rocks, reefs, and other risks. As lighthouse of modernity, Paris was also a miner's canary for the perils of progress. Chapter four's section on Mary Cassat's prints shows her depictions of lighting to be deeply ambivalent: luminophilic and luminophobic, equal parts "intimate union" and "hostile encounter" with artificial light (p. 126). Because artificial light can be amplified (in principle *ad infinitum*), many found it blinding, dazzling, glaring, spectacular, overwhelming, or too revealing. One signature facet of modernization is intensification: intensified energy use; faster transport, communication, economy, and daily life; and the sensory intensification of urban experience. Inspired by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Simmel, Clayson tracks the ways that lighting threatened to make urban experience too intense, helping construct modernity as an era of overload, nervousness, rush, and risk.

Like lighthouses, Paris also served long-distance travelers. Thus, another threat of artificial lighting in Paris was "Americanization," which French nationalist critics linked with vulgar, utilitarian, hyper-technologized lifestyles. Here again illumination discourse veered toward Claretie, Robida, and critics of Eiffel and Edison, who feared cultural decline as consumerism, hedonism, materialism, shallowness, and vice. These Parisian debates resonate with the contemporary German-language critique of lower Atlantic *Zivilisation* versus higher German *Kultur*. Parisians identified electric light as a vehicle of cosmopolitanism and globalization, and thus electrification debates served to negotiate relations with cultural others, especially Americans. Adopting the broadened perspective advocated in her recent co-edited volume, Clayson's Paris story takes a transnational turn in chapters 4-6, richly illustrated with readings of American artists Mary Cassatt, Maurice Prendergast, Childe Hassam, and Charles Courtney Curran, and Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.[11] Visitors from Belgium, Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands also dot the study, as Clayson demonstrates the transnational range of illumination discourse as a shared means of negotiating modernity's urban-technological nocturnes.

Clayson's candid conclusion clarifies her "disappointments" and "discoveries." Looking for the light led her into the night. I admire this prose style: a researcher's confessional, which contrasts her initial expectations with the project's eventual destinations.[12] It brilliantly conveys her own learning process while drawing in readers with intellectual honesty. Methodologically, it lets Clayson "stay with the trouble" produced by illumination discourse's variety, complexity, and tensions.[13] Similar to Graeme Gooday's "uncertainty" and Bernhard Rieger's "ambivalence," the reactions to and representations of lighting technologies that Clayson investigates reveal "bewilderment" (p. 57) and "indistinctness and multiplicity" (p. 178); they "foreswear descriptive closure" (p. 184). The modernities illuminated by this lighthouse were decidedly contested, multiple, and nocturnal.

## NOTES

[1] David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Graeme Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity: Technology, Uncertainty and Gender, 1880-1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

[2] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); David Nye, *American Illuminations: Urban Lighting, 1800-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018); Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[3] Joachim Schlör, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London 1840-1930* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998); Nicholas Kenny, *The Feel of the City: Experiences of Urban Transformation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

[4] Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 119-120.

[5] Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 252, 258; Jonathan Strauss, *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-century Paris* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 203; Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" XV, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 261-62.

[6] Peter Soppelsa, "Visualizing Viaducts in 1880s Paris," *History and Technology* 27, no. 3 (2011): 371-377; Soppelsa, "Reworking Appropriation: The Language of Paris Railways, 1870-1914" *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 104-123; Soppelsa, "The End of Horse Transportation in Belle-Époque Paris," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 1 (2017): 113-129; Carlos López Galviz, *Cities, Railways, Modernities: London, Paris, and the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2019); Caroline Grubbs, "Terminus 1900: The Métro and the Universal Expositions in Fin-de-siècle Paris" *Dix-Neuf* 24, no. 2-3 (2020).

[7] Theresa Levitt, "Science and Technology beyond the Barricades," *Technology and Culture* 54, no. 2 (2013): 377-381, quote 377.

[8] Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "The Gas Lighting Controversy: Technological Risk, Expertise, and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 (2007): 729-755.

[9] Ron Eglash, "Broken Metaphor: The Master-Slave Analogy in Technical Literature," *Technology and Culture* 48, no. 2 (2007): 360-369.

[10] Graeme Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity*.

[11] 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).

[12] Another effective confessional is the introduction to Neil M. Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[13] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Peter Soppelsa  
University of Oklahoma  
peter.soppelsa@ou.edu

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