

Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 248 pp. 107 figures. \$55.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN-13: 978-0-226-59386-9

Response by Hollis Clayson, Northwestern University

I could not be more pleased that *Illuminated Paris* was chosen for scrutiny by four first-rate scholars, and the discovery that my 2019 book is the first art history volume discussed in an issue of *H-France Forum*, a series inaugurated in 2006, makes me immensely proud. The four enlightening reviews – the result of an initiative painstakingly spearheaded by Masha Belenky – have opened my eyes to aspects of the book’s procedures and outlook I had not previously pondered, and have educated me about what worked well and not so well. At the same time, the reviews encouraged me to face aspects of the text that require clarification, defense, or even disavowal. All four reviewers and Masha Belenky have my heartfelt gratitude.

Daniel Sherman, a historian whom I have energetically but amicably debated over the years, pinpoints a substantial problem with the book’s subtitle, a terminological drawback I fretted over when production was still underway. The point he makes is not trivial. In 2018 French scholar-friends drew my attention to the problematic standing of the *ex post facto* term “Belle Époque.” Its knotty status had been convincingly disclosed by Dominique Kalifa in his forceful 2017 book mentioned by Sherman, *La véritable histoire de la “Belle Époque.”* My cherished publisher would not however consider putting the dates covered by my book (1860-1890) in the subtitle instead.

Sherman has his qualms about “illumination discourse,” a key coinage of mine. I take his point that it could have been more tightly and clearly defined. But Sherman takes it so literally that he cannot fathom how Munch, a non-French speaker, would have been expected to have access to any of its ingredients. He thus misunderstands “discourse” to be a circumscribed body of written texts rather than a multi-valent cluster of beliefs and preoccupations. The claim that like T. J. Clark’s earlier scholarly purview, I am always and only in prestigious collections of French art does not hold water in light of my eschewal of the Orsay collection, not to mention my detailed discussion of the work of non-French artists including Sargent, Cassatt, Curran, and Hassam, not to mention Munch. But Sherman does aver later that the book “can fairly claim a scope that goes beyond the usual Impressionist subjects.” The caricatures I place under detailed scrutiny would also qualify its compass as non-canonical in the opinion of many specialists. Sherman concludes that the book’s procedures identify me as (merely) an art historian. “The book’s goals as Clayson sets them out thus remain firmly within the bounds of mainstream art history.” Sherman however appears to deploy “mainstream” as an insult. I am not sure what he means by it, and whether it captures my perspective.

Peter Soppelsa, historian of technology, by contrast, acknowledges my art historical *bona fides* in other terms: the book “deftly balances its art historical pedigree with interdisciplinary dialogue with other fields.” I am pleased by Soppelsa’s underscoring of my engagement with the history of technology, exactly the component of a vexed union or battle (between art and artificial illumination) that I worked to foreground in the book. His grasp of this entanglement is nicely reflected in his definition of my object of study: “Paris was a lighthouse of modernity.” Insofar

as Soppelsa knows the history of nineteenth-century Paris infrastructure better than anyone else, I smiled when I read this: "... Clayson uncovers a cultural politics of lighting that is broader, newer, more complex, and less familiar." Soppelsa provides an elegant summary of the manifold ingredients of *Illuminated Paris*, and makes it sound perhaps more pointed and engaging than it is: "Above all, lighting was gendered and sexualized in both heteronormative and naughtily transgressive ways, which embodied modernity's hedonism, vulgarity, and vice." He is certainly right to note that for a book that ends taking its distance from electricity, I should have done more with gaslight, despite my valedictory admission that a book whose working title was *Electric Paris* encountered the dominion and endurance of gaslight forcing me to realize that a more accurate if outlandish title would have been *Gaseous Paris*. Soppelsa also wishes I had discussed artists' use of artificial lighting (e.g. Nadar's sewer photos). This is a fair point, but I did try, perhaps not convincingly, to explain my neglect of photography. I rationalized my avoidance of works in that crucial medium historiographically: "Photography is the light-dependent art par excellence, but I do not discuss it here because it is not a neglected area of study. My remit – Belle Époque figurations in the painted and graphic arts of the artificially illuminated night, whether indoors or out – has not attracted similar attention." [1] It is intriguing, given Soppelsa's research interests, that he liked the caricature chapter (chapter three) the best. It is likewise contradictory and fascinating that, according to Marnin Young, my discussion of caricatures on its own indexes a plunge into visual culture studies, as if a particular genre or medium could rupture art historical inquiry.

Both art historian reviewers, Nancy Locke and Marnin Young, are well known to me. Across generations and three different universities, we share a dissertation advisor, named by Daniel Sherman. Both Locke and Young make the identical error regarding the coverage and structure of the book. Locke calls it a "series of case studies" and Young likewise says "the bulk of the book is given over to case studies of the artistic response to and intervention within the contemporary illumination discourse." As I stress, but perhaps not strongly enough, near the end of the book (177), "...the art works and situations that I scrutinized could only be unique events rather than cases. As a result, generalizing about these singular instances would have been forced." I inveighed in print some years ago against the promiscuous and incorrect use of the language of the "case study" in the humanities, but my critique, buried in a discussion of art and the Franco-Prussian war, has not had much traction. [2] In that discussion, I adhered to the classic definition of the "case," insisting that it must exemplify and resemble cognate absent examples in a shared field. The originator of the concept was of course Freud; think of the Wolf Man. Rather than cases, the artworks I discuss in *Illuminated Paris* are one of a kind, an identity that dictated the book's interpretive scenarios which in turn motivated my unusually confessional Conclusion. It acknowledges some of my disappointments and tries to justify certain omissions (notably the art of Lautrec and Seurat as well as allegorical representations of lighting), but it does not summarize in the conventional way because the book is not a survey or overview. Locke and Young have plenty to say of interest otherwise however concerning the book's method.

Locke flatters me when she calls me an art historian "who scrutinizes and critiques the social historical method," claiming that I interrogate what it means to ask the questions that I am asking. I find her characterization of my analysis of Sargent's art (chapter two) to be especially congenial; she finds that I treat the paintings as wagers or proposals. It is likewise gratifying to

read her summary of the book's compass: it "takes us from the technical history of artificial lighting in Paris to the moral topography of its representations."

Young inaugurates a series of questions about my method with a phrase that may help my survivors decide what to put on my tombstone: Clayson is "arguably the standard-bearer" of the social history of art. He segues quickly however to a rebarbative claim: the book "floats on the rising tide of visual culture studies and the global or "transregional" nineteenth century." As I implied above, I do not identify my work with or as visual culture studies. And the transnational dimension of parts of the book (especially chapters five and six) is characterized implicitly in Young's phrase as if it arose as a capitulation to academic fashion rather than an organic dimension of the Franco-American and Norwegian-French materials at hand. Young also uses the notion of "context" in ways that are not congenial to my thinking. First of all, "context," a lamentably mechanical term, is not a word in my vocabulary.[3] He proceeds to ask probing questions however about the status of "context" in my account or rather what I call a "philosophical and visual matrix." He claims that in my work "context remains a means to an interpretative end." This is presumably a problem, but he goes on to strike a positive note when saying that the book "maintains a dialectical interplay between a research-based project of historical recovery and a self-conscious attentiveness of the concerns presented by the object of inquiry in the present." Elsewhere he approvingly detects "the convergence of visual ideology and representation," but rightly queries where the book stands on the longstanding issue of "critical demystification." I hope other readers will ponder the contours and consequence of the shifting terms of Young's critique.

Young's most original contribution is his reevaluation of Munch's 1890 *Night in Saint-Cloud* (chapter six) through the lens of Pandemic 2020. I mention in passing two circumstances of the artist's life and outlook in 1889: the outbreak of influenza in Paris (encouraging him to settle away from the city center) and the unexpected death of his father. Young returns to these factors to stress their causative gravity. He writes convincingly: "our appreciation of the cloistering and melancholy of Munch's painting, its intimation of isolation and mortality, would take on a wholly different character if we knew that the dreaded *grippe* of 1889-1890 was, in fact, the first global coronavirus pandemic. [...] the painting...is surely, in some sense, about the conditions of living through a pandemic." It is a point very well taken, and Young's emphasis upon the "Russian flu" and the blame for it assigned to electric light at the time coincidentally puts his own interpretative use of "context" on display and to the test.

Responding to the reviews leads me to reflect on the place of *Illuminated Paris* in the arc of my scholarship. Others matters however loom large. I write this peering through the lens of the troubled New World wrought by COVID-19 and only weeks before Election Day 2020. But after four decades in the classroom and on the page, my art history antenna does not readily shut down, and so I am thinking nonstop about what is molding the practice of art history at this moment of crisis.

As art history has become more attentive to race and the global, especially now but with increasing velocity over the past decade or so, why do I study art made in Paris? I have already noted the transnational dimensions of *Illuminated Paris*, and I want to insist that the book is about more than Paris between 1860 and 1890. The book speaks implicitly but decisively to

growing present-day concerns worldwide about the quality and the function of the illuminated night, well analyzed within the dynamic and environmentally savvy field of Night Studies.[4] Consideration of the illuminated night is especially resonant in 2020 as night life as a category of urban sociability and hallmark of modernity has been curtailed to the brink of extinction.

On the matter of origins, what molded my interest in French art in the first place, and what sustained it? It may be of interest especially to younger scholars to discover the extent to which quirky circumstances governed my journey as a researcher focused on Paris. While some scholars explain their attention to France via an admiration for French politics or culture, my plunge into art practices headquartered in the French capital was motivated 100% by historiographic developments.[5] To quote my friend and colleague, the historian Ken Alder, “It’s Not About France.”[6] When I entered graduate school in California in the 1970s (I ended up there more or less by accident after a year in Athens), I was determined to shake off the dust of my hyper-conventional formalist training as an art history major at Wellesley College. Keen to adopt a contestatory model of art history – I would likely have embraced just about any non-traditional format and focus – I immersed myself in the Pasadena Rose Parade under the charismatic leadership of the Africanist Arnold Rubin who inspired a group of us to engage what he called “ethnographic art history in our own back yard.” My immersion was all-encompassing. I was, for example, the first woman in the history of the Tournament of Roses invited to drive a float. My M.A. thesis was scrupulously historical and archive-based, but nonetheless found preposterous by several faculty members.[7] I was moving towards a concentration upon the art of sub-Saharan Africa but within a year, a new professor arrived in town (T. J. Clark) who worked in a dazzling new idiom, a Marxism-inflected version of the social history of art. I was the classic early adopter. He studied nineteenth-century French art. From that moment on, so did I.

So my scholarship followed the path leading to where the art history action was: Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century.[8] Once there, I pursued the most visually insightful and historically revealing material, without agonizing too much about whether this or that artwork fit in a category. I also endeavored to analyze both the *texte* and the *hors-texte* with the same degree of ferocity, without falling into the reflection trap. Regarding art works as aesthetic and material mediations is my principal article of faith, implicit in my rejection of “context.” But at the same time, I sought to understand the lofty status of France in the American imagination. Chapter five of *Illuminated Paris*, which studies American nocturnes, is a product of my preoccupation with the widespread and intimidating American belief in the cultural superiority of France. Edith Wharton and Jules Claretie were my primary guides, and Alice Kaplan, the American scholar who endeavored brilliantly to look beneath the rock of the U.S. love affair with France, was a more proximate inspiration. Her perceptions gave me permission to understand (this is my final point) that becoming engrossed in Paris was an uncomfortable form of self-critique rooted in an unwitting identification as a permanently thwarted cosmopolitan.[9] I am hoping that my study of the inescapability of the world’s most visited tourist attraction will historicize and lessen the gravitational pull of the modern anchor of the Lure of Paris, the Eiffel Tower.[10]

NOTES:

[1] p.187, note 37. That said, chapter one does focus upon photos by Charles Marville, albeit shot in daylight, and there are discussions of other photographic practices in, for example, p. 188, note 15 and p.194, note 40.

[2] Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 11-12 & 361.

[3] See the excellent critique of context in Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* (vol. 73, no. 2, June 1991), 174-208. See also Paul Mattick, Jr., "Context," *Critical Terms for Art History*, second edition, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 110-127. Mattick is not anti-context, but his nuanced discussion is eminently worthwhile. And T.J. Clark's foundational advice to the social art historian to write a history of mediations remains entirely valid. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 9-20, especially 13. It would be disingenuous in the extreme not to cite my own energetic attempt to acknowledge and complicate the "context mantra" in the American social history of art. See Hollis Clayson, "L'histoire de l'art français aux États-Unis: Le "contexte" comme credo de l'histoire de l'art français aux États-Unis, 1973-2003," *Cahiers d'Histoire: revue d'histoire critique* (no. 96-97, octobre-décembre 2005), 31-40. I regret not having published it in English as well.

[4] Some examples: the international organization ALAN (Artificial Light at Night) spearheads ambitious annual interdisciplinary conferences; and Luc Gwiazdzinski, geographer at the Université Alpes Grenoble, is a leading night studies scholar. Within art history, see chapter four of Gavin Parkinson, *Enchanted Ground: André Breton, Modernism and the Surrealist Appraisal of Fin-de-Siècle Painting* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

[5] See Edward Berenson's essay, for example, "France, A Political Romance," *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 137-150.

[6] Ken Alder, "It's Not About France," *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 189-202. Please note that Ken's essay charts a singular route to the study of France that is *entirely* unlike my own.

[7] "The Pasadena, California Tournament of Roses Parade, 1927-1941: The Middle Years," UCLA, 1975.

[8] André Dombrowski and I worked to decenter Paris or at least to more fully historicize its mythic centrality in our book, *Is Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century? Essays on Art and Modernity, 1850-1900* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[9] In Kaplan's words: "You can't work in a French department for long without wondering whether our attachment to French isn't pathological. Both the native speakers and the Americans suffer under a system where language skills are made a fetish." *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 178.

[10] For the first published portion of an ongoing project, see Hollis Clayson, "The Ornamented Eiffel Tower: Awareness and Denial," *nonsite* #27, February 11, 2019, <https://nonsite.org/the-ornamented-eiffel-tower/>

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