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Marit Grøtta. *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19th-Century Media.* New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. 192. ISBN: 9781628924404.

If there ever was an evocative adjective to describe the current effort in humanities to foster interdisciplinarity, it would be "kaleidoscopic." The colourful glistening patterns created through the device's subtle game of mirrors may be said to embody scholars' creative endeavours to bring meaning from bits and pieces of theory collected in different disciplines in the hope to create new thought patterns. It is exactly this Marit Grøtta seeks to achieve in her innovative monograph *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19th-Century Media*. With the ambitious purpose of bridging the gap between previous (sometimes canonical) literary and visual analyses of Baudelaire's prose poems and essays, Grøtta offers a thorough examination of the poet's art as the aesthetics of Paris's *flâneur par excellence.* Grøtta—arguably a *flâneuse* herself—leads her reader on a delightful stroll through the pioneering nineteenth-century media city—"it is thus a book that deals with literature, perception, and the configuration of the senses in the first phase of modernity" (1).

Sensitive or perceptual frames are at the centre of Grøtta's embrace of mediation theory in describing Baudelaire's position as a precursor of modern urban life and contemporary empirical metaphors. From such a perspective, the notions addressed in Grøtta's work produce a double echo in contemporary society. Baudelaire, embodying the *flâneur*, "is an urban stroller, a street-artist, an accidental gaze, an amateur detective" (3); he is the repository of "a new perceptual regime" (7). This regime, Grøtta argues, is embodied in Baudelaire's personal aesthetics stemming from what she calls "his precinematic sensibility"; that which Baudelaire, in a playful image, represents as "a kaleidoscope endowed with a conscience" (87). The figure of the *flâneur* is initiatory in itself not only because he represents the experience of blooming urban life and its "overload of sensory perception"(5), but also because his way of expressing this perceptual experience gave birth to now commonplace images. The two hundred years of information overload that we have come to define by means of consumerist images such as infobesity, information glut and more recently infoxication, was first defined through the poetic subject's visual prism for which expressive imagery was to be found in new nineteenth-century media. In this way, for the poet-*flâneur* (or the

flâneur-poet) "the mind [became] a camera obscura," "Paris [was] like a kaleidoscope," (143), and life became a moving picture.

With the *flâneur* as a central motif, Grøtta's approach shows affinities to Walter Benjamin's seminal reading of Baudelaire. The urban malaise Baudelaire seeks to address in his prose poems is what Benjamin associates with the experience of shock "inflicted by [...] rapidly changing urban surroundings" (Grøtta 5) and the loss of the auratic power of the work of art. The gaze of the *flâneur*, then, is alternatively allegorical and melancholic; as he becomes in turns "the amateur detective (the distant and rational observer) and the gaper (the perplexed observer)" (5). Benjamin's position seems paradoxical at times: embracing more readily techno-utopianism or techno-pessimism depending on the motif Baudelaire is developing. To this dilemma, Grøtta answers with an assertion that "studies of the *flâneur* should take as a premise that vision does not objectively represent reality and that visibility is always something created" (6). Instead of originating from a bewildered "naked eye" (i.e. the direct experience of urban malaise), Baudelaire's gaze is "framed, fashioned, and *mediated* through the visual media of the period" (6). Baudelaire's malaise was induced by a new environment and by his rejection of some of the new media associated with it. However, his aesthetics testifies to his deep understanding of the perception demanded by this new environment as a *game* with forms associated with new media. In other words, although Baudelaire, an ardent supporter of art for art's sake, may not endorse the new media representing a new cultural field, he is conscious that these new media "shape [...] the way we *see* reality" (7).

A time museum of sorts, this book can be conceived as a stroll through galleries devoted to the new media available in Baudelaire's society. The role of newspapers, photographs, precinematic devices, toys, and corporeality in Baudelaire's works is substantiated by remarkable analyses of his *Petits Poèmes en Prose.* Grøtta skilfully masters the delicate art of lively description. Her depictions of *physiologies* (or *tableaux)* and *fait divers*, photographic practices such as the *carte de visite*, kaleidoscopes and phenakistiscopes, and even nineteenth-century toys, supported by quotes from Baudelaire's works and correspondence, describe the delightful polyphonic patterns of life in nineteenth-century Paris. This kaleidoscopic structure allows both for cherry-picking as well as for linear reading. It may thus fuel media-specific arguments or discussions on more general aesthetic considerations.

Grøtta sees in Baudelaire's appropriation of newspaper formats the very birth of his series of prose poems, also known as *Le Spleen de Paris,* published in *La Presse* in 1862. These poems, she argues, embody Baudelaire's media aesthetics, as they seek to make sense of modern life. In each poem, a narrator—"the poetic subject" (41)—tells colourful anecdotes garnered during his urban excursions. In order to expose the poetic subject's seemingly unaltered gaze, Baudelaire actually frames his understanding of urban life by means of two literary figures of speech. First, allegory, which can be construed as a re-appropriation of *physiologies* in newspapers—those portraits aimed at representing the type of persons one could encounter at the marketplace. Second, the anecdote, whose journalistic counterpart is the *fait divers*. Interestingly, Grøtta compares this dichotomy with Baudelaire's view on poetry and art through her analysis of the poem "Perte d'auréole." In this text, Grøtta argues, Baudelaire presents his solution to the budding struggle of poetry with new media in the literary field, not as an introverted closure but as a clever usurpation of new media's codes (i.e., commonplace, poster and quasi-poetic languages) in order for the (new or modern) poet to "go [...] incognito" (41).

When roaming through the streets incognito, the *flâneur* may allow his gaze and imagination to run wild. Ultimately, what Baudelaire gives us to see in his works is the gaze of the *flâneur* interpreted through the prism of his imagination. Because he knows that his gaze is mediated, Baudelaire borrows from photography the notion of "pure mediality" (55)—a "mediated vision that offers more to see" (55). In her chapter on photography, Grøtta analyses two of Baudelaire's prose poems, "*Les fenêtres*" and "*Mademoiselle Bistouri*". In both cases, the concept of frames—windows in the first case, and the frames in which Mademoiselle Bistouri displays her precious doctor pictures in the second—is a central element of Baudelaire's aesthetics. Grøtta explains that "Baudelaire's idealization of [a] framed, semitransparent, and illuminated view [...] paraphrases the visual conventions of photography" (56). Here again, these conventions are translated into a literary mode through allegory as a figure of speech. Baudelaire, a privileged viewer, understands reality as a negative that needs to be interpreted: when wandering through the streets, *he only* can identify allegorical characters in the figures he observes in window frames; when describing Miss Bistouri's obsession with doctor pictures, *he only* can identify the fetishist nature of the new art of photography. In

Grøtta's words, "[by] adopting the visual apparatus of photography, the poet-*flâneur* sees more than he does with only the naked eye, and allowing his imagination to fill in the picture, he provides the image with a caption" (59). Using repetitive photographic motifs, Baudelaire "adopts the gaze of the camera" in order to frame the scenes he witnesses in his urban environment. To this, he appends "the act of providing images with captions" (70) as an analogue to imagination.

Grøtta takes the motif of vision one step further in her following chapter on precinematic devices. The latter do not simply frame but *alter* human vision (74). With precinematic and optical devices, Baudelaire's contemporaries understood that "the human eye could no longer be trusted to provide an objective visual perspective, but was [...] vulnerable to manipulation and recoding" (77). Although he considers devices such as the kaleidoscope or the phenakistiscope as toys (scientific toys, as he calls them), Baudelaire seems fascinated with their power to manipulate and recode reality. He compares this process to the power of art in his essay "Morale du joujou." "According to Baudelaire, toys represent the child's ideas of beauty and it seems that their appeal comes from the way they forcefully and intensely affect the child's imagination" (81), Grøtta argues. From such a perspective, precinematic devices nurture children's sensitivity to manipulated representations of reality—i.e. the function and motifs of art and poetry. Grøtta more specifically considers that this tendency is verified through the aesthetic trends of decomposition/recomposition of images—what she calls *montage*—and movement. According to Grøtta, the best examples of these tendencies in Baudelaire's work are manifest in his recourse to the image of the kaleidoscope when describing crowds and in his tribute to Constantin Guys's sketches, which focus "on the particular vision required to capture movement" (86).

Although it does suggest a connection with the idea of movement—"the body of the *flâneur* is a body in motion" (103), Grøtta's subsequent chapter on corporeality seems somewhat at odds with the general structure of her work. Though the body may easily be understood as a form of new media that started developing from the nineteenth century onwards, Grotta's decision to devote a whole chapter to this topic may seem debatable. Her analysis of the motifs of violence, crowds and the commonplace as a type of mass communication in "Le Mauvais vitrier," "Les Foules" and "L'Horloge," "Le Joueur Généreux" and "La Corde" is nonetheless remarkable. Similarly, Grøtta's fifth chapter on toys may at first sound as a repetition

of the material already covered in her chapter on precinematic devices. She does indeed reiterate a number of her remarks on "Morale du joujou." However, she takes her reflection one step further by addressing the fetishism of commodities in Baudelaire's retelling of his childhood memory of a woman he identified as the "toy fairy" (126). In this passage, Grøtta masterfully interprets Baudelaire's indirect reliance on yet another media specific to nineteenth-century society, i.e. *fantasmagories*.

Fantasmagories and a number of the other media Grøtta analyzed in her previous chapters resurface in her somewhat flawed conclusion. After providing her readers with a very effective recapitulation of the principles of Baudelaire's media aesthetic, which she describes as a "media-saturated imagination" (146), Grøtta includes sub-sections devoted to Marx's, Benjamin's, and Freud's appropriation of similar new media images. Admittedly, each section reads as a well-written overview of the issues of Marx's and Benjamin's use of phantasmagoria in their respective descriptions of commodities and Paris, and of Freud's understanding of the psyche as a photographic apparatus. Still, one may wonder why Grøtta chooses to address these theoreticians' personal appropriation of media imagery in modernity in this particular part of the book. As an effort to further investigate the influence of Baudelaire as a precursor of our contemporary expression of our urban-saturated mode of perception, these sections are certainly worthwhile. However, to do these topics full justice would certainly require more specialized studies.

All in all, Marit Grøtta's monograph is a delightful and perfectly documented work that certainly deserves to be read by comparative literature scholars. As an original effort to bridge the gap between too often separated though arguably related disciplines, this book definitely offers new avenues through which to explore the link between literary analysis and visual (or other) mediation. Readers may choose to adopt the position of the urban stroller in order to discover the media landscape of nineteenth-century Paris. Alternatively, they may elect to become (amateur) detectives in order to investigate how literary and visual disciplines intermingle in Baudelaire's mediated vision and often neglected prose poems. Whatever their decision may be, they will surely appreciate the opportunity of going back in time offered by Grotta's remarkable scholarly work.

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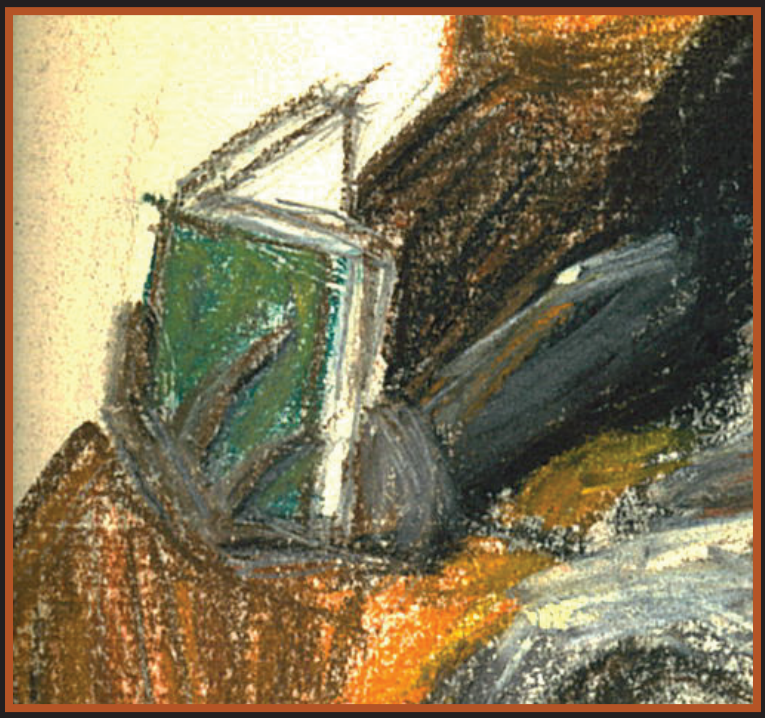

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