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Bridget Alsdorf: *Gawkers*

Unlike the detached sophistication and individuality of the *flâneur*, *badauds* or *gawkers*, the impulsive and often fickle members of a crowd are prone to distraction and often impressionable, taking part in the urban theatrical spectacle for reasons of curiosity through to cruelty. The term "badaud" is said to originate from the work of François Rabelais in a disparaging account describing Parisians as "so stupid, so gawking, and so inherently inept", but by the nineteenth century this term had expanded to encompass those in the streets searching out forms of amusement, entertainment or reasons to gossip (3).

Gawkers are present throughout the social spectrum and, according to Bridget Alsdorf, nowhere else are they better expressed in the visual arts than in the early work of Félix Vallotton: it is here that gawking urban spectators are most sharply captured and it is his fascination with the crowd that is the context in which the other artists in this book are considered. The four chapters of *Gawkers* are arranged by theme: "Accident" examines the mishaps of street life, "Audience" takes the theatre and theatricality as a distinctive element of the urban world, "Street Theater" observes the mostly outdoor theatrical aspect of the city, whilst "Attraction" centres on the bond between public, advertising and goods, together with their effect on artists.

Despite a lack of written records on Vallotton's political stance, it is known that his intellectual milieu was, on the whole, "far left" and in 1902 he directed his criticism towards "the police, the judiciary, banks, commerce, education, religion, and even parents" in a series of lithographs for the anarchist/socialist journal *L'Assiette au beurre* (2/47). In these prints troubles can simply arise from a chance encounter; by being a mere bystander the gawker becomes implicated and to a degree responsible for the scene unfolding before him. For public executions, France remained "the only nation in Western Europe still performing them at the fin-de-siècle". (53)

Gawkers, Parisians in particular, did not escape the scorn of the intelligentsia; Gustave Flaubert, Léon Daudet and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc were exceptionally acerbic. Crowds drove Stéphane Mallarmé to experiment in his work, prompting him to attend a symphony for no other reason than "badauderie", causing him to shift his focus from stage performances to "sniff out the occasion" in the bustling crowd (14). With the expansion of urban life and development of mass culture artists had to compete with and overcome the increased distractions of their public; this, at a time when experimentation with emerging forms of photography and film were impacting on more traditional methods.

Honoré Daumier makes an appearance too, markedly documenting theatre life from many spheres in the 1850s and 1860s. Hundreds of his caricatures made it to the press, exposing the "mundane interpersonal conflicts, petty squabbles, and financial pressures" of the Parisian scene, both backstage and in the auditorium (81). With the blending of fine and popular arts, his work moved into the hinterland between mere entertainment and art considered suitable for connoisseurship.

In Edgar Degas' works the split between stage and an often indifferent and inattentive audience is emphasised. Most of his performance images "do not include even a glimpse of people watching the show" and when they do they tend to be men with stage side benefits (93). In Vallotton's theatre scenes of the 1890s the draw of the audience resulted in his abandoning the stage as a focal point altogether, documenting the dispiriting behaviour, ranging from "jingoistic fervor" to "apathetic withdrawal". (107)

The spontaneity and surprises of the street as theatre are explored in Pierre Bonnard's early and more

neglected paintings, prints and sketches. Although Bonnard enthusiastically took to photography about this time, he shied away from street scenes - his shots were mainly of his circle in more pastoral settings and interiors. In order to show how Bonnard's wandering eye allowed him "to show how he represents badauderie as both fleeting and sustained", Alsdorf contrasts his work with "the fixed gaze of early French cinematography", enabling exponents such as the Lumière brothers to play on the curiosity of urban gawkers, recording either staged activity or the genuine surprise of undirected crowds, struck by the experience of being filmed (121).

The relationship between gawkers, art and the explicitly commercial world of advertising (from posters to the department store) is explored through the works of Bonnard, Vallotton and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The quandary remained: how to gain and maintain the attention of the public without debasing one's work. The distinction between art and shopping was becoming increasingly blurred. Rival outlets, Le Bon Marché and Les Grands Magasins du Louvre installed in-house galleries of fine art: "breasts were as ubiquitous in advertisements as in ancient sculpture, and the storefront vitrines [...] were akin to display cases in museums". (180)

Aside from uniting two main genres of his early work, crowd and interior, Vallotton's secular triptych, *Le Bon Marché* is given a close reading by Alsdorf and presents us with a paradigm of nineteenth century consumption: the department store, complete with its many devices for driving acquisitive desires, the world where "everything and everyone is for sale". (210) These values were not confined to Vallotton's work. Whilst painting the triptych he was contemplating a split with his seamstress partner, whom he eventually left for an affluent widow of an art dealing family.

The artists and intellectuals featured in *Gawkers* often have in common a persistent, amorphous and fraught relationship with the wider public. The issue becomes still more complex when many of them periodically become part of the crowd themselves. On one hand, their feelings veer from outrage at state corruption and its consequences for the masses, and on the other, a snobbery and contempt at their ignorance. At the same time, if they are to establish themselves and secure a place in history, they have to acknowledge that the crowd is an important factor, as both subject and client.

As one might expect in a book concerned with the late nineteenth century, the "bourgeois" pervades: there is "bourgeois morality", a "bourgeois interior", a "bourgeois accessory", a "bourgeois trophy", "bourgeois amateurs" and a "bourgeois elite" (215/216/218/221/226). It goes on. However, it is not clearly defined. Does it straightforwardly refer to the perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes of the middle class, or is it a general derisory term for the enemy? Perhaps all of these.

A great deal of ground is covered in *Gawkers*; in-depth descriptions of artworks, politics, anarchism, the many conflicts between the artist and society, from Oscar Wilde's trial to the rupture of the Dreyfus affair. This, combined with the prominence given to Vallotton, an artist who until relatively recently was marginally underrated helps make for a lively addition to the vast literature on nineteenth century French art history.

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