

Caricature, Salon criticism, laughter and modernity

Review of:

Julia Langbein, *Laugh Lines: Caricaturing Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*, London: Bloomsbury 2022, pp. 245, 43 col. plates and 46 b. @ w. ills, ISBN 9781350186859, £ 85.

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Figure 1 Bertall, 'Promenade de Salon de 1865', *Le Journal Amusant*, 27 May 1865.

In his preface to the *Bibliography of Salon Criticism from the July Monarchy to the Second Republic*, Neil McWilliam brought attention to what he termed a 'vernacular form' of art writing, proliferating in the French popular press of the time. As McWilliam argued, this new language, 'laconic ..., disconcertingly flippant, or eccentrically focused', disrupts the weighty verdicts passed on by high-brow journals, and it offers today 'deeper insights into the culture within which it was sustained'.¹ This category of art criticism surely includes an entirely new kind of Salon reviews which was bread on the pages of the illustrated satirical press in the 1840s, and which survived at least until the early twentieth century, to be adopted also by British,

¹ Neil McWilliam, Preface, in *Bibliography of Salon Criticism from the July Monarchy to the Second Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, x.

German and American magazines to review their own art exhibitions. Made of rows of hastily drawn 'pocket cartoons' that poke fun on the art works on display (fig. 1), the *Salon caricatural* was one of the manifestations of the emerging 'cultural industry', providing light entertainment for the readers then. For the readers now, however, the very act of privileging image as a vehicle of critique, followed by the reduction of text to caption, as well as the application of the comic mode to both, upsets every possible protocol of art criticism. By scrutinising the paintings by revered Salon artists with the same dedication as that given to modern rebels, those 'disconcertingly flippant' reviews hand in today an extra pair of spectacles to zoom in on the affections and aversions of the Parisian art world of the nineteenth century, and to question the certainties imposed by modernist art history.

Julia Langbein's *Laugh Lines: Caricaturing Painting in Nineteenth-Century France* poses some of those questions in her multifaceted inquiry into the genre of the *Salon caricatural*, for which she adopts the phrase *Salons pour rire*.² Supported by ample studies of the abundant primary sources, from Baudelaire and Champfleury to Grand-Carteret and Duret, as well as archival material in the Bibliothèque Nationale, the book straddles several areas. Apart from caricature studies, it dives deeply into reproductive technologies, the practices of physiognomy, photography, Salon history, as well as into cultures of art viewing and the perception of laughter in nineteenth-century France. Langbein traces the genre from its rise on the pages of *Le Charivari* towards the end of the July Monarchy when censorship laws curtailed political caricature, until the end of the state-sponsored Salon of the Third Republic in 1881, when censorship rules were abolished and when the Salon was transformed into a 'flea market for polished pastiches'.³ It discusses the formats of the *Salon caricatural*, published either as stand-alone portable *livrets*, to be taken to exhibitions, and, increasingly so, as special issues, or dedicated pages of illustrated journals. Philipon's satirical press empire played a decisive role in initiating the genre in *Le Charivari* in 1840, as well as in hosting it in *Journal pour rire*, renamed *Le Journal amusant* in 1856. The trend was soon picked up by other magazines, such as the upmarket *l'Illustration* and *L'Eclipse*. With some notable exceptions, as in the case of Nadar, the caricaturists who specialised in those reviews, Bertall, Cham and Gill, had been trained as artists. Daumier, who initiated the genre, preferred however to focus his attention on the Salon public rather than on the paintings themselves.

Most importantly, Langbein distances herself provocatively from the common approach of French caricature studies which, as she argues, tend to focus on the most vicarious political prints of the July Monarchy, absolutizing their violence as the *modus operandi* of the medium. If French political caricature is characterised by resistance against power, Salon caricature was never primarily oppositional. Likewise, Langbein steers away from the tendentious and patchy selection of Salon caricatures in modernist art history, which has routinely centred

² Literature to the topic is scarce, see Thierry Chabanne, *Le Salons caricaturaux*, Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux (Les dossiers du Musée d'Orsay 41), 1990; Yin-Hsuan Yang, 'Les premières Salons caricaturaux au XIX^e siècle', in *L'art de la caricature*, ed. Ségolène le Men, Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2011, 73-86.

³ Langbein, *Laugh Lines*, 177.

on just a few images that target Courbet or Manet, while ignoring 'a sea of caricatures after painters of all types and genres' participating in the Salon. The aim of the book thus is to 'evacuate the attack' and to interrogate the genre of Salon caricature in its entirety, approaching it as a *duel pour rire*, a pretended aggression, deprived of violence, 'no longer a crusade but a petty attack'. Accordingly, displacing the term 'critique' with 'opposition', she examines its modes, its experiments with formatting the page, its themes and technologies, and its placement within 'nineteenth-century image culture more widely'. The two major themes reappearing throughout the book are, on the one hand, the ways and techniques of representing art by caricature, or, as Langbein says, 'repicturing' art on the pages of satirical journals, and, on the other hand, the significance of laughter in art viewing and its misperception by the historiography of modern art. 'My aim', she writes, 'is to move away from reading caricature as "commentary", reducible to phrase or opinion, and instead to focus on caricature's pictorial relations. Salon caricature could have literary, political, and ethical dimensions, but it is first and foremost a repicturing intended to make laugh – a comic image.'⁴

Repicturing

The specificity of the book is its attention to the medium. Langbein looks closely into the ways in which the core task of caricature of summing up a body [or a scene] in just a few lines. Borrowing from Ivins and Bann, it focuses on the ways in which caricature, when applied to painting, involves the translation of the medium of paint into drawing and print, of reproducing the surface covered with brush-strokes and patches into a system of 'interlocking and parallel lines'.⁵ Accordingly, the book emphasises Salon caricature as a collaborative product. Apart from the artist to do the drawing, it also required an author to write a caption, as well as a reproductive engraver, or another middleman employing various technologies to transfer the finished product into typesets, and, when issued in colour, an unnamed hand-colourist. The reader, Langbein suggests repeatedly, could also be counted into this equation, as it was their engagement with the new unconventional ways of looking at art suggested by *Salons pour rire*, as well as their laughter, which were necessary to complete the process.

The book's unquestionable strength are visual analyses. Langbein takes the readers on captivating journeys, which move with confidence between the original works by Delacroix, Ribot and many lesser-known artists, and the 'hyperactive lines' of the rapidly drawn caricatures by Cham and Bertall, sometimes including also polite reproductive engravings of the same paintings for comparison. Langbein argues most eloquently that the task of the Salon caricaturist was not only to comment on the contents of the work, but also on the 'paint itself', in other words, to animate the paint by caricaturing it. The book pays thus special attention to the shifts in reproductive methods, from lithography and wood engraving, to *gillotage* and diverse photomechanical technologies, and it analyses in detail the ways in

⁴ Langbein, *Laugh Lines*, 6.

⁵ William Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1968; Stephen Bann, *Parallel Lines: Printmakers, Painters and Photographers in Nineteenth-Century France*, New York and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

which the caricaturist's 'animation of paint' leads to the discovery of the visual powers of geometry and flatness in the process, incidentally both of them soon identified as the formal properties of modern art. The chapter 'Salon Caricature and the Physiognomy of Paint', which puts forward a thesis that caricaturing painting constitutes a special variation of physiognomy, whereby the medium of paint serves as an equivalent of face, is also informed by this argument.

Despite her emphasis on Salon caricature as being, first and foremost, a battle between the mediums, Langbein applies the act of repicturing to the figurative content of paintings as well. Her illuminating analysis of Raymond Pelez's 'Aquatic Fantasy' ('Salon de 1842', *Le Charivari*), which takes on Joseph-Désiré Court's *Algerian Bather* serves as a prelude to the book's last chapter on the inspiration drawn by Manet from caricaturists. As she writes, by uglifying the body of Court's oriental odalisque taking a bath, by replacing the incense burner with a cigarette, as well as by adding a 'sponge or callous grater' and the plug to the range of props, the latter to indicate the imminent removal of water, Pelez transformed 'the viewer's comfortable aesthetic enjoyment of the nude into an erotic encounter rife with anxiety. The viewer meets the nude not in the halls of oriental fantasy but in Paris, not in the sanitized zone of aesthetic appreciation but in the economic zone of sexual transaction.'⁶ The caricaturist's rejection of the 'eternal' for the sake of the 'contingent', constitutes precisely what would soon be expected, as diagnosed by Baudelaire, from the painter of modern life.⁷ Although Langbein refrains at this point from commenting on the affinities between Salon caricature and Baudelaire's poetics of modernity, yet to be formulated, she would later acknowledge that it is the caricaturist which serves for Baudelaire as 'the model of the modern artist'.⁸

Laughing

Baudelaire, an unmissable protagonist of any inquiry into the conundrum of Salon criticism, caricature, laughter, and modernity, reappears many times in Langbein's narrative. Suffice to say, his career as the Salon reviewer was accompanied from the very beginning by his crusade against the bourgeois and for modern art, as well by his fascination with caricature.⁹ When his first Salon booklet was published in 1845, its back cover announced *De la peinture moderne* and *De la caricature* among his forthcoming publications.¹⁰ Both, of course, when they finally appeared many years later had their titles revised: modern painting expanded to modern life, while the thoughts on caricature, a 'mysterious' art form, aligned with modern beauty, derived from ugliness, gave rise to Baudelaire's philosophy of laughter, treating the

⁶ Langbein, *Laugh Lines*, 27.

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' [1863], in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon, 2001, 1-41.

⁸ Langbein, *Laugh Lines*, 59

⁹ The most comprehensive study of Baudelaire's interest in caricature is Michelle Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature: From the Comic to an Art of Modernity*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

¹⁰ Baudelaire Dufays, *Salon de 1845*, Paris: Jules Labitte, 1845. 'The Salon of 1845', in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Reviews of Salons & Other Exhibitions Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, transl. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1965, 1-32.

comic/caricature as its visual pronouncement.¹¹ Yet, his self-declared 'obsession' with caricature surpassed the boundaries of the philosophical inquiry, striding across the division between theory and practice, and bridging the gap between high and low Salon criticism, identified by McWilliam. When publishing his lengthy *Salon of 1846*,¹² and working at the same time on his highly analytical study of caricature, Baudelaire was tempted to combine the two, and try his hand, albeit anonymously, at the new *Salon pour rire* genre. He promptly entered into collaboration with two other poets, and the same Pelez who had earlier turned the odalisque into a prostitute smoking in her bath, which resulted in yet another booklet, a smaller one, entitled *Le Salon caricatural: Critique en vers et contre tous*. It included Baudelaire's caustic commentary on the Salon running alongside Pelez's caricatures.¹³ Relatively neglected in Baudelaire scholarship, it is this publication which becomes the object of Langbein's scrutiny.



Figure 2 Raymond Pelez, 'Prologue', *Le Salon caricatural. Critique en vers et contre tous*, illustrée de soixante caricatures dessinées sur bois. Première année, illustré par Raymond Pelez, Paris: Charpentier, 1846.

Le Salon caricatural is examined in the chapter 'Duelling and doubling', which looks for affinities with Baudelaire's theory of laughter. When those two texts written at the same time are read together, Langbein claims, 'they illuminate how Salon caricature staged itself as a *duel pour rire* at that period'. The opening figure of *Prologue* (to be pronounced 'prologre!' as duly indicated by its note 1), drawn rather

¹¹ 'The painter of modern life' in 1863, and 'On the essence of laughter, and, in general, on the comic in the plastic arts', the latter divided into three separate essays published in different journals in 1855 and 1857, Claude Pichois, 'La Date de l'essai de Baudelaire sur le rire et les caricaturistes', in *Baudelaire, Etudes et témoignages*, Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1967, 80 - 94. See also Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961, 1696; Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature*, 1-2.

¹² Charles Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', in *Art in Paris 1845-1862*, 41-120.

¹³ [Charles Baudelaire et al.], *Le Salon caricatural. Critique en vers et contre tous*, illustrée de soixante caricatures dessinées sur bois. Première année, illustré par Raymond Pelez, Paris: Charpentier, 1846. Available online

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t12n68939&view=1up&seq=5&skin=2021> (accessed 22 June 2022). For the discussion of authorship, see Marie-Claude Chadefaux, 'Le Salon caricatural de 1846 et les autres Salons caricaturaux', *La Gazette des beaux-arts*, 1968 (March), 161-76.

compellingly by Pelez (fig. 2), conforms to Baudelaire's emphasis on the 'oppositional' and contradictory nature of caricature, capable of upholding the viewer's sense of superiority and of undermining it at the same time. *Prologue*, with large messy hair, frightening teeth and lethal moustaches, is armed with 'quills, pens and a palette', and while dangling two bundles of artists from his index fingers, he declares his readiness to 'quell [his] hunger with the juice of their brains'. And yet, the *Cicérone effroyable* soon begins to back off from this idea, declaring that his 'weapons are peaceful weapons' and promises lots of laughter, painfully aware that he makes himself a 'spectacle for others'. 'The threat of violence', announced at the beginning, 'evaporates', not leaving any doubt that the announced torment of painters by the ogre was only a joke. The duel is indeed no more than just a *duel pour rire*.

While discussing the notoriously difficult concept of *dédoublement*, summed up as the duality of Self and Other, both inhabited by the caricaturist, Langbein does not refer to another major element of Baudelaire's theory of laughter, to his division between the significative comic and the absolute comic. The first, grasped by reason, is referential and imitational, the second – intuitive, dwelling on grotesque and bordering on uneasiness and fear, reduces grandeur to misery.¹⁴ It is rather tempting to try and apply them to the tropes of laughing offered by *Le Salon caricatural*, and the French Salon caricature genre as a whole. One might ponder whether *comic absolu*, associated by Baudelaire with *beau moderne*, frightening and gruesome, belongs at all to the mode of the laughter provoked by *Salons pour rire*. If so, is it conjured up, with the same panache, by Daumier's lithographic essays on the Salon bourgeois public and by Cham's 'weightless' comedies about Salon paintings? Those two artists are juxtaposed provocatively by Langbein in one of the book's chapters.

The issue of laughter, identified routinely with 'illegitimate spectatorship', returns in the final chapter, discussing the dialogue between caricaturists and Salon artists, while bringing in also the much-needed comparison between the mainstream Salon Criticism and *Salon caricatural*. It looks closely at the dominating trope in the reception of Manet's Salon paintings, which are presented by its contemporary critics, and by art historians, as the 'subject of public laughter', the laughter both exemplified and ignited by the Salon caricatures of the painting. Langbein emphasises instead for the close proximity between artists and caricaturists, trained in the same studios, often practising both professions, belonging to the same communities, and exchanging as much ideas and as jokes. As she argues, Bertall's *charbonnière des Batignoles* (fig. 1) was not a philistine attack on *Olympia*, but an insight, not a jeering but the knowing laughter, shared by the insider. Even more so, the very idea of the painting must have been inspired by

¹⁴ See Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature*, 38-44. See also Sonya Stephens, 'The prose poem and the dualities of comic art', in *Baudelaire's Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 108-59, accessible online <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198158776.001.001/acprof-9780198158776>.

Manet's awareness of the countless Salon caricatures, which, like 'Aquatic Fantasy' by Pelez, for decades have been converting female nudes into images of 'contemporary women with troubled, vulnerable bodies'. Tying up the major strands of the book, this chapter brings the argument home, presenting Salon caricature as a special form of counter-discourse, as a comic inquiry into practices of imaging, applied both to visual properties of art, as well as to its contents.

Widely researched, and lavishly illustrated, *Laugh Lines*, makes both a challenging and inspirational reading. Reasserting the significance of caricature for modern art, the book joins Baudelaire, Benjamin, Werner Hoffmann, Michelle Hannoosh, Patricia Mainardi, and Patricia Leighton, who in many different ways have been arguing that caricature 'formed the very foundation of imagery through which the modern world was seen and comprehended'.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Patricia Mainardi, *Another World: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Print Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, 243. Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs: collector and historian'[1937], translated by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings on the basis of the translation by Knut Tarnowski, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 1935-1938, ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 260-302; Werner Hofmann, 'Comic art and modern caricature in the western world', *Encyclopedia of World Art*, New York: McGraw-Hill, vol. 3, 1960, cols 759-768; Patricia Leighton, *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.