
H-France Review Vol. 18 (March 2018), No. 53

Hannah Scott, *Broken Glass, Broken World: Glass in French Culture in the Aftermath of 1870*. Research Monographs in French Studies, 46. Cambridge: Legenda, 2016. xi + 151 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1909662872.

Review by Colin Foss, Austin College.

The Siege of Paris and the Commune, two events that comprise what Victor Hugo called the *année terrible*, are difficult to inscribe into the political history of France. So often evoked together as two parts of the same year, 1870-1871, they nonetheless resist collapsing into a single political moment. Book-length studies of this year often isolate one of the two sieges from the other. Hollis Clayson's *Paris in Despair*^[1] and John Merriman's *Massacre*^[2] represent perhaps the most innovative of these most recent studies that propose thick description of one of the two sieges. However, there is another scholarly tradition that proposes to read these events together. Peter Brooks's *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris* is such a book, exciting for its intermingling of literature and politics and creative in its arguments.^[3] In her recent *Broken Glass, Broken World: Glass in the Aftermath of 1870*, Hannah Scott also takes on the *année terrible* as a single event, claiming that 1870-1871 changed the culture of everyday life in ways that require a mix of disciplinary perspectives in order to understand it in any meaningful way.

Broken Glass, Broken World brings the methodology of material culture studies to bear on an event that often is explained in political terms. Glass, argues Scott, needs to be understood first and foremost as an object that was produced, bought, and integrated into the urban environment. Perhaps due to glass's ubiquity in the urban landscape, Parisians did not fully realize its fragile underpinning of Paris until Prussian bombing quite literally shattered glass's transparency as urban phenomenon. It was through glass's destruction that it became a privileged object manifesting the devastation of the *année terrible* for Parisians. Scott's ingenuity lies in making glass visible, but especially in proposing *broken* glass as another ruin of Paris that both fascinated and disturbed contemporaries. In this aspect, her book works as a companion piece to the many studies of the ruins of Paris in the aftermath of the Commune, like Brooks's *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris*, which appeared just a few months after Scott's.

Scott's thematic subject—glass—does more than simply offer a case study through which to view the cultural impact of 1870-1871. To make manifest the difficult epistemological stakes of 1870-1871, *Broken Glass, Broken World* proposes glass not only as a material with historical specificity, but also as a theoretical framework. Thus, Scott writes not just about windows, but also about mirrors and mirroring, commodity culture, identity, prisms, gems, crystals, alcoholism, light, darkness, appearances, photographic lenses: in short, any *thing* or any conceptual analysis that deals with reflectivity or framing fall within the purview of this book.

The polyvalence of glass is one of this book's greatest strengths but also a hurdle that it constructs for itself. The introduction, "Why Glass?" contains a thoughtful apologia of material culture in French literary studies of the nineteenth century. And indeed, much of this book takes seriously the material

reality of glass as it relates to its fictional manifestations. However, the focus on material culture becomes obscured in the book's radical embracing of the metaphorical meanings of glass and mirrors. Especially in such a short (150-page) study, the motivation behind the inclusion of the sharp and lively analyses presented in each chapter could have been made more evident by a concise, working definition of glass as a physical and metaphorical object. The book sets out to convince the reader that glass is the most appropriate object for understanding the aftermath of the *année terrible*, but to do so, it makes glass able to reflect anything. In this, the book is maybe *too* successful. *Il n'y a pas de hors-verre*.

After a chapter giving historical context, to which I will return at the end of this review, the book offers a series of literary analyses of Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Maupassant's short stories, and Huysmans's *À rebours*. Each of these internal chapters presents an internally consistent definition of glass and its theoretical and cultural stakes, leading to very satisfying and insightful interpretations. Scott's analysis is reliably creative and convincing, balancing close reading with bold interpretations of these canonical works.

The second chapter, "Shopping for Harmony: Glass, Sound, and the Exhibition Effect in Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*," considers the department store's paradoxical use of glass as an overture to feminine empowerment but also as a reminder of the powerlessness of female shoppers, attributing glass's failure to seduce as a result of the shattering effect of 1870-1871. Shop windows and their displays invite feminine participation in the world of fashion, but simultaneously deny women the possibility of self-fashioning through their framing of desire. Windows and mirrors in this novel, argues Scott with an assist from Jacques Lacan, are ultimately unable to control femininity due to their reliance on narcissism in constructing identity. Windows and mirrors only reflect parts of a whole, fragmenting the body and positing it as a site of absence. Interestingly, Scott interprets this failure of glass to elicit desire as a historical function of the novel's publication: set in the Second Empire but published in 1883, the novel incorporates the negative associations with broken glass after the siege and the Commune and transposes them onto the consumer culture of what could be called a simpler time: Zola's Second Empire setting. In particular, although this move is not as obvious as Scott suggests, she claims that Zola's evocation of the Commune in *Au Bonheur des Dames* displaces revolutionary struggle onto the commercial culture of class.

In the third chapter, "Breakdowns and Breaking Glass: Glass and Identity in Maupassant's Short Stories," Scott accounts for dozens of appearances of glass in the works of Maupassant. This chapter is organized broadly as a series of arguments around gender identity and patriarchy, in particular how glass—but specifically mirrors—casts doubt on the privileged position of masculinity in the fin-de-siècle. This chapter pairs well with the preceding chapter, as together they present a compelling argument: glass and mirrors, despite the nineteenth-century association with femininity, say as much about masculinity and masculine attempts at controlling women and gender identities as they do about femininity. Both chapters also rely heavily on psychoanalytic readings, which privilege the mirror as a site of identity-building and fragmentation. Scott's conclusion is that these authors show how glass and mirrors are deceptive, foiling attempts to produce desire or to establish identity.

While Scott's references to glass in Maupassant's short stories are seemingly exhaustive without being exhausting, it is not clear what motivated the focus on these specific stories. Many of Maupassant's stories were specifically set during the Franco-Prussian War, but Scott reads this corpus less for their content and more for the susceptibility of their references to glass to be read through psychoanalysis. As a result, stories like "Le Horla" or "Fini" are given much more scrutiny than others that specifically represent the war, such as "Le Lit 29." More well-known stories like "Mademoiselle Fifi" or "Boule de Suif," both about the war and containing references to glass, do not appear at all in this book. Despite their passing references to the *année terrible* and its broken glass, these chapters—as well as the fourth—seem uninterested in explaining the book's initial claim that something about glass in the French psyche changed because of the *année terrible*.

The fourth chapter, “The Ideal Naturalist? Glass, Popular Culture, and Naturalism in Huysmans’s *À rebours*” brings us back into the scope of Scott’s initial premise in very satisfying ways. Coming full circle on her argument in the introduction and in chapter one, Scott argues that Huysmans’s Decadent novel is not a rejection or a reversal of popular, mainstream culture. Instead, des Esseintes, the hermit-hero of *À rebours*, ultimately embraces mainstream aesthetics despite the novel’s seeming rejection of it.

À rebours wants to have it both ways: to be against the world but also within it. Thus, des Esseintes’s retreat from Paris into a lonely chateau in Fontenay is undercut by his obsession with objects. Even if these objects inspire lengthy meditations on the nature of art, the meaning of good and evil, the epistemology of the senses, etc., it is still from objects that these meditations flow. This is one of Scott’s most interesting methodological stances in the book, and one emblematic of its strongest moments of analysis, blending material culture and literary studies. Through her reading of des Esseintes’s engagement with glass as an object of daily and decorative aesthetics, Scott forges an argument about Huysmanian Decadence, in which Naturalism and its descriptive lyricism attempt to escape their mundane origins. Moving from the material to the immaterial, Scott builds literary arguments out of material studies in innovative ways.

Broken Glass, Broken World makes a long journey from the shelling of Paris in 1870-1871 to the aesthetics of literary Decadence. In the first chapter, Scott offers a fascinating history of glass in public and private Parisian spaces, detailing its shift from pricey symbol of wealth to empty vessel of bourgeois aspirations for status. Her proposal to include glass, “so integral to the modern, bourgeois cityscape” (p.17), in our understanding of Paris’s ruins in the wake of the *année terrible* is commanding and convincing. However, by the end of this book, we have long left the *année terrible* in the rearview mirror. The declared motivation behind this study, the big bang of the *année terrible* that broke France’s glass, only reappears as marker in the liminal zones of chapters, as references to Prussians and Versailles at the beginnings and ends of analyses.

Ultimately, this book is less interested in the events of the *année terrible* as it is in the ways that glass, as a ubiquitous material object, expresses and transcends its materiality in literature. Glass had tremendous significance in the psyche of nineteenth-century France, and Scott posits and explores this significance through her particular methodological innovations and her lively textual analysis, but I tend to agree with her remark in the introduction that “[i]n many ways, glass culture crossed from the Second Empire to the Third Republic without change” (p. 26). It is clear in the introductory chapter that Scott has a wealth of diary and newspaper accounts of the Siege of Paris and the Commune that could bolster a claim that something about glass changed during this period, but these historical documents are relegated to the margins of this book.

Our understanding of the *année terrible* as a cultural event will only benefit from the types of methodological shifts inherent in studies like those of Brooks, Clayson, Merriman, and Scott. While the political implications of these events, often focused on *revanchisme* and *le mur des fédérés* as shorthand for the larger political malaise of the *fin-de-siècle*, have shown that there is no easy way to unpack 1870-1871, studies like *Broken Glass, Broken World* suggest that these events cannot be understood in their totality, but instead must be read through the perspective of an object, a person, or a concept.

Scott has not arbitrarily chosen glass in order to present an object study of the events of 1870-1871. The ubiquity of glass in Parisian architecture and in the literature of the nineteenth century merits more exploration. As this book suggests, studies of Haussmannization in particular—with its own version of broken glass—could benefit from renewed interest from the perspective of material culture. Most importantly, broken glass stands as a marker of the trauma and resilience of modernity during the nineteenth century. The demolition of Paris, the bombardment of the Siege and Commune, and the anarchist bombings in glass-rich edifices at the turn of the twentieth century are all moments where the

breaking of glass and its subsequent repair offer allegories of Paris's eagerness but ultimate inability to address the underlying fragility of State authority over its citizens.

NOTES

[1] Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[2] John Merriman, *Massacre: Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

[3] Peter Brooks, *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

Colin Foss
Austin College
cfoss@austincollege.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Review Vol. 18 (March 2018), No. 45. Sylvia Huot, *Outsiders: The Humanity and Inhumanity of Giants in Medieval French Prose Romance*. Notre Dame, Ind. H-France Review Vol. 18 (March 2018), No. 59. Jessica L. Fripp, Amandine Gorse, Nathalie Manceau, and Nina Struckmeyer, eds., *Artistes, savants et amateurs: art et sociabilit  au XVIIIe si cle (1715-1815): actes du colloque international, organis  du 23 au 25 juin 2011   l'INHA, Paris*. Preface by Stienne Jollet. Hollinshead-Strick, Cary. Review of: Jessica Wardhaugh, *Popular Theatre and Political Utopia in France, 1870-1940: Active Citizens*. H-France Review, vol. 18, no. 230, 2018, <https://h-france.net/h-france-review-volume-18-2018/>. Hollinshead-Strick, Cary. Teaching Les. Review of: Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color* (Princeton, 2017). H-France Review, vol. 18, no. 4, Jan. 2018, <http://www.h-france.net/vol18reviews/vol18no14roussakoff.pdf>. Russakoff, Anna, and Kyunghee Pyun. Pucelle, Jean. Received in March 2018. Actor AI's i Font BA in Linguistics, External Collaborator, Center for Sociolinguistics and Communication Research, University of Barcelona. Address: Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes 585, 08007 Barcelona, Catalunya, Espanya. Vestnik Chuvashskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta, vol. 89, no 1, pp. 3-12. Baker C. (2011) *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, no 9. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. DiMaggio P. (1982) *Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on the Grades of U. S. High School Students*. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 47, no 2, pp. 189-201.