Book Review

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Pathology and visual culture: The scientific artworks of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot and the Salpêtrière School

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In art historical investigations of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot and his work at the Salpêtrière, the focus has largely been on the representation of hysteria. Seminal texts have pioneered investigations in this field, and many students in art history are as acquainted with the key debates of photography and hysteria as they are with studying the Old Masters. Natasha Ruiz-Gómez's book breaks new ground by turning much of her attention away from the representation of hysteria, to explore the 'pathological drawings, photographs, casts, and sculptures' (4) of neurological diseases that the clinicians and artists of the Salpêtrière created. *Pathology and Visual Culture* offers a case study of how these scientific artworks 'combined scientific knowledge and artistic expression' (4). Ruiz-Gómez presents a commendable study, situated within the fields of art history and visual culture, on how the scientific artworks trouble the binary between science and art, objectivity and aesthetic, and forwards an interpretation of the artworks that considers how the clinician and/or artist negotiated an interest in pursuing both 'medical objectivity and artistry' (5).

An outstanding feature of *Pathology and Visual Culture* is Ruiz-Gómez's command of art historical analysis while also framing the study within a visual culture enquiry where the focus is on expanding the critical analysis of images to include works produced by non-artists. Moreover, Ruiz-Gómez offers the reader an expansive horizon of the Salpêtrière by exploring the clinicians who came to study and work under Charcot. While she acknowledges that Charcot 'cultivated the artistic

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sensibilities of the many doctors who worked under him' (4), she seeks to explore the works by the clinicians who have, to date, received little or no scholarly attention. These clinicians were not artists and their intention in producing the works was to 'improve their own understanding and to inform other physicians of the symptoms and causes of specific pathologies' (8). While these clinicians 'visualized pathology' (8) within the limits of their artistic abilities, numerous works demonstrate how the clinicians were informed by 'contemporary artistic discourses and the history of art' (5). Thus, in producing the works to research a pathology, the clinicians did not strive solely for scientific objectivity, as the works show evidence of them incorporating artistic expression.

Apart from exploring how clinicians 'engaged with the era's artistic practices and discourses as well as with the history of art' (9), Ruiz-Gómez also explores the 'crossover between fine art and medicine' (9) by noting that a professional photographer, Albert Londe, directed the Salpêtrière's photo studio, and Dr Paul Richer – who started working at the hospital from 1878 – created works for both the hospital and the Paris Salon (9). In sum, by identifying how the hospital's clinicians and artists produced works that show an influence of the discourses and history of art, Ruiz-Gómez 'argues for the critical importance of art and its histories' (5) in interpreting their works. This marks the novel contribution of Ruiz-Gómez's book, as many of the visual examples she discusses have, to date, received no attention in art-historical scholarship (8). Yet, Ruiz-Gómez does not follow a traditional art historical approach by comparing the hospital's images with artworks from the history of art, but offers an innovative analysis by placing them in 'dialogue' (5) with published memoirs, technical manuals, and medical texts. This remarkable analysis allows the images to "speak" from multiple horizons: medicine and art, pathology and portraits, patients and clinicians.

In Chapter 1, 'Curating Pathology at the Musée Charcot', one of the goals is an investigation of the Musée Charcot and the unpublished albums of the museum. In 1875, Charcot proposed a museum that would contain artworks, wax casts and anatomical and pathological specimens, and would complement the 'living pathological museum' (22) of the Salpêtrière. The museum's albums, which 'replicate the museum's methodology in miniature' (22), contain drawings, photographs, graphs, and diagrams. Most of this material represents and visualises various pathologies, but there are many drawings where illnesses appear indiscernible. In these cases, the drawings are 'more successful at eliciting pathos than depicting pathology' (53). For example, in a drawing made by Richer, Ruiz-Gómez argues that the medium allowed him a means to 'normalize' the symptoms of a pathology 'by granting him artistic licence to craft a patient from a different class and with a different psychological profile' (47).

Chapter 2, 'The Art of Retouching at the Salpêtrière', examines a 'forgotten album of photographs made in preparation' (18) for the first volume of the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*. The album contains multiple retouched photographs. For Ruiz-Gómez, the retouched photographs allow us to consider the aesthetic and artistic choices that underpinned the manipulation of the original image, as well as how the retouched image may have resulted in failure:

> While some of the modifications serve to highlight a hysterical contracture or emphasize an expression, in most cases they do not serve any clear "scientific" purpose but rather appear to be principally aesthetic. In fact, as a result of dubious aesthetic and practical choices or clumsy implementation, the retouching often proves completely counterproductive, unintentionally obfuscating a photograph's subject or its details (18).

Chapter 3, 'The *Ataxic Venus*: Between Portraits and Specimen', provides a sensitive and sophisticated discussion of the *Ataxic Venus* – a 'polychrome full-body wax cast' that 'shows a patient named Berthelot, who had locomotor ataxia caused by tertiary syphilis' (18). Charcot used Berthelot's wax cast, her photographs, her actual skeleton – 'which was extracted after her death and preserved for display' (18) – and microscopic sections of the skeleton, as props during his presentations. While Charcot exploited Berthelot, today, the *Ataxic Venus* now lies 'stowed in a wooden box, and tucked away in museum storage' (92). Exploited and now forgotten, Ruiz-Gómez undertakes to explore the *Ataxic Venus* as a portrait of a person and a portrait of pain. In terms of the latter, she explores how the contorted and contracted limbs of the Venus 'should be read through the codes of pain that have a long lineage in Christian and classical imagery' (107). In terms of the former, the endeavour is faced with a hurdle, as Berthelot did not 'leave behind any verbal or written trace' (102). To offer a 'sort of surrogate' (19) for Berthelot, Ruiz-Gómez uses Alphonse Daudet's autobiographical text, where he recounts his suffering from living with locomotor ataxia. Daudet's words thus provide Ruiz-Gómez with a means to 'approximate and articulate' (19) Berthelot's experience.

The focus of Chapter 4, 'Paul Richer, Sculpting Pathology', is the sculptures of pathology made by Richer in the 1890s. The sculptures depict patients of the hospital who represented types of illnesses. Yet, Richer's sculptures also conveyed pathos and depicted an identifiable individual. To this end, Ruiz-Gómez argues that Richer engaged with conventions of portraiture to capture the subjects' agency and their individuality. She substantiates her arguments by providing compelling readings of Richer's sculptures, showing that instead of seeking to represent objective records of pathology, his sculptures show an 'attempt to beautify or idealize the sitter' (135).

Pathology and Visual Culture ends with a coda where Ruiz-Gómez discusses Richer leaving the Salpêtrière to become a professor of anatomy for art students at the École des Beaux-Arts. During his time at the École, although Richer produced sculptures of athletic male bodies instead of sculptures of pathology, his career and works continued to 'embody and extend the deep interconnectedness of medical science and art' (147).

As a case study of the clinicians and artists, working with Charcot at the Salpêtrière, *Pathology and Visual Culture* succeeds in showcasing how the scientific artworks produced at the hospital show an influence of artistic and objective concerns. However, Ruiz-Gómez's findings must be read within the large body of scholarship that explores the long history of the intersections between art and medicine – for example, the works by Thomas Laqueur and Sander Gilman. One aspect that was underdeveloped in the book was the eventual decline and disappearance of the Musée Charcot. Ruiz-Gómez outlines that with the death of Charcot in 1893, the museum went into decline, and its material remnants are now scattered in various archives (xv). Potentially, the coda that spoke of Richer's new life at the École could have been the ideal opportunity to speak of the dying days of the Musée Charcot.

A praiseworthy feature of *Pathology and Visual Culture* is Ruiz-Gómez's awareness of the 'sensitive nature and ethical dangers' (14) of including and analysing the images of the hospital's patients. To restore the humanity of the patients, she has recovered their biographies to 'call attention to the ways in which the images might demonstrate their agency and to critically contextualize the use of their (re)presentations' (14). In other instances, where their biographies are not available, Ruiz-Gómez has ensured that her interpretation of the images treats the patients with dignity and respect. In sum, *Pathology and Visual Culture* compelling demonstrates how Ruiz-Gómez carefully calls the readers' attention to details in the image that gently trigger an awareness that an individual is portrayed. In this way, Ruiz-Gómez's arguments are not concerned with empathising with the patient, as we 'can never truly access another's "real" pain' and their pain remains 'untranslatable' (114), but by aiding the reader to see and recognise the patient as an individual, she offers a 'gesture of compassion' (Stevenson 2020:10) to the depicted subjects.

References

Stevenson, L. 2020. Looking away. *Cultural Anthropology* 35(1):6-13. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.02