

Online Reviews

El Kettani, Soundouss. *Une dynamique du visuel: L'ondoyante vérité des Rougon-Macquart de Zola*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013. Pp. 187. ISBN: 978-2-336-29173-4

Laurey Martin-Berg, University of Wisconsin-Madison

This study purports to reveal the threatening sense of dissipation experienced by observers in Zola's fictive universe and the unbreachable distance between subject and object in this so-called Naturalist representation of the world by approaching the twenty novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* series via "the visual," defined as everything presented in the novelistic text as though seen by an observing character. The book is well-documented, and its premise provides an interesting counterpoint to other studies of visual phenomena in Zola's works and of the artistic, philosophical, and psychological implications of the Naturalist endeavor in literature.

After an initial chapter encompassing a survey of previous studies of vision and visibility in Zola's novels and a discussion of the theories laid out in his *Roman expérimental*, El Kettani turns her attention to *La Confession de Claude*, which she treats as the prototype experimental novel, particularly with regard to Claude's situation as an "observer-experimenter." The two middle chapters of the book examine the thematic figures of architecture and painting, while the final two focus on the rhetorical techniques of metaphor and repetition.

While many of El Kettani's analyses are intriguing for the fresh perspective they bring, their impact is diminished by generally weak editing. The subtitle on the cover of the book, for example, reads "l'ondoyante vérité des Rougon-Macquart," yet the inside title page says "*l'ondoyante réalité des Rougon-Macquart*." The same subtitle indicates that the study is limited to the *Rougon-Macquart* series, yet the second chapter deals exclusively with a work outside the series, and other non-*Rougon-Macquart* texts are examined in some detail elsewhere in the book. In a quote from *La Bête humaine* the word "désespoir" is replaced by its antonym, "espoir." Finally, in spite of her lengthy bibliography, El Kettani neglects to list her doctoral thesis (*Zola ou la fatalité du débordement*, 2002) or any of her published articles related to the book's topic, including "La dynamique descriptive chez Zola et les Goncourt," published in this very journal (2007) and discussed in note 69 on page 74, or "Splendeurs et misères de l'architecture," also published in this journal (2010) and reproduced nearly verbatim as the book's third (and most compelling) chapter.

In addition to these editorial inconsistencies and oversights, there are a number of instances where the author seems to be stretching to make a point or to make the evidence fit her theory, the effect of which is to weaken the overall argument. For example, when Zola wrote in the *Ébauche* for *La Bête humaine* that he wanted to write a novel "sans description, sans art visible, sans effort," it is quite probable that he was simply expressing a desire to avoid the artifice (*art visible*) for which his previous novel (*Le Rêve*) had been criticized, and not, as El Kettani suggests, laying out a plan to write "un roman de l'invisible" (155). In her discussion of machine metaphors in the context of *L'Œuvre*, she glosses over the longstanding use of the word *machine* in French to refer to any great work of genius, or, pejoratively, to a large scale pompous painting. And her conclusion that Zola's metaphors are tautological (and therefore detrimental to perceiving/understanding) because in different novels he uses an image in different directions (plant as woman/woman as plant) is unconvincing if for no other reason than that the novels in question are thousands of pages apart.

In spite of such elements, which detract from her argument, El Kettani's study has merit. She provides an alternative reading to the *Rougon-Macquart* novels that, at the very least, points to the importance of nuance in any global analysis of the series. Her work should be of particular interest to specialists interested in "the visual" in Zola's works and in the inherent subjectivity of Naturalism.

Nineteenth-Century French Studies 42, Nos. 3 & 4 Spring-Summer 2014
http://ncfs.unl.edu/reviews_online.php

© 2014 University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Questions & Comments, write to: <ncfsreviews@gmail.com>