

Baudelaire and Philosophy

An International Conference supported by the British Society of Aesthetics and organised by the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought, Goldsmiths, University of London, 5-6 June 2019

Abstracts

Plenary speakers

Isabelle Alfandary

Destinies of the Purloined Letter : Lacan and Derrida Readers of Poe and Baudelaire

Poe's 'Purloined Letter' is a text caught from the start in the nets of intertextuality. As the narrator announces from the first page, even before the arrival of the Prefect: 'For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rôget'. As Derrida has pointed out, the story is a weaving of interwoven texts ('*The Purloined Letter* is the text, the text in the text'), which is the reason for my own attempt to read Lacan's 'Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'' together with the response it drew from Derrida. These texts, connected in that they respond to one another, follow from Poe's text, itself read, at least by Lacan, in Charles Baudelaire's translation.

Jennifer Bajorek

Refugee Baudelaire

One of the hallmarks of Baudelaire's Paris is the heightened visibility of the abject within it: the beggar, the pauper, the ragpicker, the sex worker, the drunk, all those produced at the limits of a social order organized by capitalist and colonial modernity. Our own era is characterized by the invisibility of this same class, which, in rich countries today, consists not only of the homeless or the indigent but also of migrants in a geopolitical sense: Syrian refugees, Eritrean asylum-seekers, Malians and other West Africans classed as economic migrants who, today, live in the streets, squats, and "humanitarian welcome centers" on the margins of Paris. One interpretation of this invisibility would hold that the novelty has worn off. I will venture a more speculative interpretation, which attempts to take into account the poetic and philosophical resources of Baudelaire's own texts for rethinking Paris as a privileged site of hospitality or hostility with regard to the other, and for rethinking the status of citizenship and belonging, proximity and distance, in the present. Guiding lines of inquiry include the "ethical" Baudelaire, analogies with Blanqui, notions of refugee subjectivity, black fugitivity, colonial revolt, and postcolonial revenge.

Patrick ffrench

Individuation and Juxtaposition in Baudelaire

Despite the prominence of the figure of Baudelaire as an individual, readers of his work have discerned a striking predominance of contingent associations and juxtapositions and an increasing tendency away from any 'permanent design' and fixed image of the self. This plays itself out in the dynamics of the tropes of metaphor and metonymy in his verse and prose poems, and between the broader metaphoric and metonymic axes of discourse. This paper will explore, with reference to the essays on poetics by Roman Jakobson, and readings of Baudelaire by Leo Bersani, Barbara Johnson and Eugene Holland, the dynamics of juxtaposition and its relation to poetic form. I will ask what work the notion of juxtaposition does in these accounts and what the implications are with regard to the postulation, or not, of the subjectivity of the poet.

Elissa Marder

Baudelaire's Little Prophetic History of Photography

As Walter Benjamin famously suggested, if Baudelaire's poetry has never become outdated, it is in part because its relation to its historical moment was inscribed as an address to future readers. Given the significant place that Baudelaire has occupied for generations of thinkers (ranging from Benjamin to Derrida and Foucault), one might be tempted to extend Benjamin's insight by observing that Baudelaire's oeuvre has a seemingly unique (and almost uncanny) capacity to update itself in response to the historical experience of his readers. In this paper, I propose to show how Baudelaire's writings on photography—and his photographic writings—contain a latent thinking about prophecy and historical temporality. In the section of the Salon of 1859 devoted to photography, 'Le Public moderne et la photographie', Baudelaire draws upon, but implicitly subverts, the reactionary theology of Joseph de Maistre to establish a complex relation between photography, prophecy and history.

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Richard Rand

Not Only, but Also: Further Steps in the Reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal*

Taking 'The Author as Producer' as a starting-point, I explore the ways in which 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' fulfils Benjamin's account of the tendentious essay – mobilising Baudelaire's work as a weapon in the class warfare of the 1930's. Two subjects have to be developed here: Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire as a person, and his account of the poet's relationship to the crowd. These are familiar topics, and the only contribution I have to offer at this time is a review of the features in Baudelaire that Benjamin handles reductively, or not at all in this essay: a discussion of 'curiosity', and of the 'new' as the promise afforded by curiosity (i.e. the 'faculty of curiosity', to borrow Baudelaire's term). This takes us back to the opening sections of 'The Painter of Modern Life', a text that Benjamin carefully circumvents in his discussions of the crowd. I close by proposing that Benjamin's essay really speaks to readers in 2019 by obliging them to reconsider the topics that his essay pointedly (and compellingly) demotes (in its service to the working-class cause of the 1930s).

Adrian Rifkin

Baudelaire Between "I" and 'I': On Anaphoric Thinking

This piece will set out from two points of reference: the more recent is Laurent Nunez's commentary on Baudelaire's poem 'La servante au grand coeur' in his *L'énigme de premières phrases*, and the second is Scholium 4 of Chapter 1 of Giorgio Agamben's *Stanzas*. Somewhere between these will also be Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. If the name Benjamin were to occur it will be only *sous rature*, as a word connoting a certain industry of intellectual production, while I will also resist, as far as possible, any attempt to 'queer' Baudelaire, as I consider this to be a doomed project – and, as such, a core element of my own affair with him and my failure to accept his version of modernity, or his invention of it. I will rather think of Baudelaire as having generated a series of anaphoric effects in the enjoyment as well as the critique of western culture, which float around the spaces of public literary and philosophical discourse and haunt my (our) darkest thoughts, a rhythmic and sonorous structure, syntactic if you like, of a process of thinking as such, a perfect melancholy.

Panel speakers

Virgil W. Brower

Phenomenology of Flowers: Saturated Certitude in Passing

This paper investigates Jean-Luc Marion's engagement with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in §28 of *Certitudes négatives*. The former focuses on poem 93, '*À une passante*', to address the event of a woman's passage as 'an encounter that took place only by not being able to take place'. He suggests that the 'banal' passing written by Baudelaire embodies an encounter beyond being, recognition, causation, certainty, and foreseeability. The passage passes off a post-metaphysics, since metaphysics 'always speaks in the name of cause'. The passing woman becomes 'an unexpected arrival [*arrivée*]', rather than a mere scheduled appearance [*arrivée*']'. This discloses a breach in linear or mathematical time, set in motion by Kantian intuition or inner sense. The event has its own time beyond one's own sense of time: 'not my time... but its time'. Perspective and the principle of identity are breached in poetic encounter. Baudelaire inscribes a passage through which the poet sees himself from the woman's point of view and does not see her from his own. The paper closes by further developing motifs left untouched in Marion's analysis: the gender and muliebrity of passage, the poet's drinking in [*je buvais*'] of the experience, and the poetic articulation of the phenomenon of hetero-affective co-enfleshment, that one can discern in Marion's previous (and most poetic) text, *The Erotic Phenomenon*.

Kathryn Brown

Staging Philosophy: Baudelaire, Wittgenstein, and the Limits of Sense

In Baudelaire's unfinished essay 'Philosophical Art', published posthumously in 1868, the poet contemplates the relationship between philosophy, literature, and the visual arts. He identifies a tension between the drive to be 'philosophically clear' and the expressive capacities of art. This paper explores Baudelaire's discussion of competing tendencies between philosophy and art and shows how he resolved them in his own poetry. By tracing Baudelaire's conception of the role of 'providential limits' in visual art and literature, I show how the poet stages a deferral of sense in his works. I argue that representations in the texts are engineered in such a

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way that they become of instrumental value in the positing of other philosophical goals. I identify Baudelaire's poetry as an anticipation of ideas discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1922. By employing the resources of language to stage the failure of representation, Baudelaire, like Wittgenstein, used language as an instrument to point towards truths that cannot be expressed. Avoiding any association between poetry and a discursive or analytical thought, Baudelaire exploits the limits of his art and 'stages' a philosophical problem, namely how to enunciate ideas that lie beyond thought. I trace a connection between Baudelaire's poetry and Wittgenstein's saying/showing distinction in the *Tractatus* and show how Baudelaire developed a uniquely philosophical art.

Laura Chiesa

Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda: Cinematic Constellations after Charles Baudelaire

In this paper I will touch on—if only on the surface—the singular role that Charles Baudelaire's oeuvre plays for two key filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague*, Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda. Literary and philosophical excerpts are interspersed among Godard's feature films and videographic essay films, and I will tackle a few cinematic moments when Baudelaire's poems, writing, and reflections on modernity emerge in Godard's films. I will limit my presentation to two of Godard's films related to science-fiction and cosmic and/or technological expansions: in *Alphaville* (1964), a dystopian sci-fi feature film, splinters of Baudelaire's poem ('Invitation to the Reader') are addressed to a computer, whereas in *La puissance de la parole* (1988), a short video produced by France Telecom, Godard investigates telecommunications and expanded cosmic distances through a clear reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story (translated into French by Baudelaire). On the other hand, Varda's films are indelibly marked by the motif of *flânerie* and the *flâneuse*, so it is no wonder that in her interviews she refers explicitly to Baudelaire. Varda's short *Les Dites Cariatides* (1984), filming feminine sculptures embedded into the facades of Parisian buildings, is also an homage to and echo of Baudelaire's poetry, and her experimental documentary *The Gleaners and I* (2000) expands the gleaners' gesture from Baudelaire's time to address today's questions of waste and ecology. My presentation will therefore explore the expanded constellation of Baudelairean poetics embedded in the cinematic textures that Varda and Godard invite us to inhabit. Walter Benjamin's study of Baudelaire and the tension between the now and the past inform my reading. This presentation represents a short part of a larger project on which I am working, which, starting from the notion of the 'expanded', studies relationships among language, literature, and experimental filmmaking.

Jenny Doussan

From *Tigersprung* to the Appropriation of Unreality: Between Benjamin and Agamben on Baudelaire

'Fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new. —Yet can motifs of redemption be found specifically in fashion?' (SW 4, 179) This reflection is among the most oft-cited of Walter Benjamin's aphoristic statements on fashion. However, less frequent is commentary on the Nietzschean origins of this thesis, and even less still its foundation in the thought of Charles Baudelaire. In a fragment from the same period, Benjamin writes, 'The idea of eternal recurrence conjures the speculative idea (or phantasmagoria) of happiness from the misery of the times. Nietzsche's heroism has its counterpoint in the heroism of Baudelaire, who conjures the phantasmagoria of modernity from the misery of philistinism' (SW 4, 184). This Nietzsche-inflected reading of Baudelaire is arguably the most crucial moment in Benjamin's thought on fashion. Baudelaire's 'conjuring' here suggests a redemptive inversion; yet, fashion is elsewhere described by Benjamin as the quintessence of false consciousness (*Reflections*, 158). This paper excavates the nexus between Baudelaire and Nietzsche in Benjamin's thought, and recounts essential moments in Baudelaire's work that support a notion of redemption in fashion. It further offers an example of such a redemptive inversion in the Baudelairean archetype of the dandy, curiously underdeveloped by Benjamin, who is ascribed by Giorgio Agamben with the capability of abolishing the commodity character and establishing a new relation to things: 'the appropriation of unreality' (*Stanzas*, 50).

Daniela Liguori

The 'Heroic Brooder': Benjamin Reader of Baudelaire

In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Walter Benjamin underlines how the inclination to melancholy is a denial of the life and an affirmation of life *beyond* and despite what it denies and makes it devoid of meaning. Melancholy is therefore an unsatisfied gaze upon the world for which the dissatisfaction becomes an incessant boost. Since ancient times, the gaze of the melancholic person has been in fact a gaze intended on 'drilling' the 'bottom of a soil' where it seems that there is nothing to see, but for which the not seeing process becomes sight, visionary skill. Melancholy becomes then a way of thinking the *emptiness* of the world as a game (even a

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'diabolical' one as it is the case in Baudelaire's poetry), turning the *sense of emptiness* into that exercise of allegoresis which finds its highest expression in artistic activity. Moving from the analysis of the 'symptomatic complex' of melancholy theorized by Benjamin, the paper intends to analyse Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire as a modern 'melancholic genius' which 'represents in an extremely effective way the disposition of the brooder'. The latter being seen as the one who, while experiencing the *emptiness* of the world, makes it visible through an obsessive proliferation of topics which intertwine ideas and images, thoughts and sensibility. Such speculative, sensitive and imaginary 'brooding' would be expressed in Baudelaire's poetics through the exercise of allegoresis as means of giving expression to the world, not in its fullness and perfection, but in its falling apart and in pieces.

Dana MacFarlane

Truth, Ideal, and the Photographic subject

In an unpublished text written in 1922, Walter Benjamin described Baudelaire's perception through an extended metaphor. Time is a photographer 'who photographs the essence of things'. According to Benjamin, the images made by time-the-photographer are only negatives. Baudelaire can with great effort read these *negatives* of essence, poring over shadows of historical truth. There are resonances of idealism and aestheticism in Benjamin's fragment and indeed in Baudelaire's poetry and criticism. Benjamin's characterisation of Baudelaire as a 'reader' of arrested images could also be interpreted as a source for later concepts such as 'profane illumination' and the 'dialectical image'. But what is the force of comparing Baudelaire's poetics with the reading of a photographic negative? In what way does this technological metaphor disrupt inherited philosophical categories (being/becoming; nature/culture; history/eternity) that inflect Baudelaire's agonized, even pathological, relation to history, time and the subject? Does the structure of photographic technology (i.e., the 'imprint', the reversal produced by the development of negative into positive, its notional transparency) create a mode of perception linked to a distinctively modern ontology? In this paper, I will consider these questions in the context of Baudelaire's ambivalence towards photography and his reflections on being photographed. It is clear that Baudelaire saw the photographic subject as a surface lacking interiority and a coherent relationship to history. However, does Benjamin's early text provide a means to grasp the truth of the technological against the Ideal in Baudelaire's poetic vision?

Nigel Saint

Baudelaire in Didi-Huberman's archive of modernity

Georges Didi-Huberman's archive of modernity has led him to reference Baudelaire's poetry and prose in several projects. I will discuss three aspects of these readings: the interpretation given by Didi-Huberman to the phrase from 'The Painter of Modern Life' concerning the revelation of the beauty of the modern; the idea that Baudelaire's critique of idealised statuary proposed instead a courageous 'sculptor of modern life' who would take inspiration from everywhere, 'even from the filth'; and the theory of the imagination gleaned from the 'New Notes on Edgar Poe' and 'Some Foreign Caricaturists'. In the first case, *Ninfa moderna* (2002) will be the focus for the aesthetic considerations developed in Didi-Huberman's account of this 'prophet of modernity' who also faces backwards towards previous incarnations of the nymph or passer-by (including in Bernini and Botticelli). Secondly, I will discuss how Didi-Huberman's analysis of modern sculpture in *La Ressemblance par contact* (2008) reads Baudelaire's focus on skin, fabric and imprints as alternative and productive forms of beauty. Lastly, the supremacy of the imagination in *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet* (2011) is indebted to Baudelaire, enabling the creation of visual atlases that offer limitless and even chaotic series of cultural analogies and correspondences. These three occasions are related to Didi-Huberman's thinking about Benjamin and the dialectical image, but they also mark an increasing attention in his work to an 'anthropology of the imagination'. Didi-Huberman presents Baudelaire as both close to contemporary readers and reaching far back into the archive of the visual.

Robert St Clair

À Victor Hugo, *cygné* Baudelaire: Baudelairian Haunto-Poetics and the Politics of a Dedication

The question this talk seeks to tarry with is the following: what is the name 'Victor Hugo' doing in the dedication at the outset of 'Le Cygne'? How might we read this gift of a poem, *à Victor Hugo*— a donation which, furthermore, evocatively calls to mind the haunting grammar of gaps and loss in the poem itself, of losses and absences which seem to drift in and out of lyric thought, to both precede and exceed the limits of self-assured intentionality, of a *je [qui] pense à*. But by that same token—that is, by drawing our attention to an apparently extra-textual element, to an *hors-texte* that is nevertheless a proposition about how to read the poem itself, this dedication also figures—or perhaps produces—a point of indetermination that calls for attention: it marks a wavering threshold where things are neither entirely in nor out; neither purely text nor context, but both—or all—at once. The question of what "Victor Hugo" is doing in this dedication, in other words, does not have to do with a referent outside of the text so much as it names a process of signification at work in the poem which could be recapitulated as: *je pense aussi à Victor Hugo*. Drawing on a philosophy of spectrality from Derrida to Avery Gordon and Daniel Sangsue, I want to suggest that the dedication at the outset of the poem both echoes—or anticipates—the infamously weird closing line of the poem *and* thereby seems to include or implicate Victor Hugo in the poem as a kind of spectral figure, a haunting presence linked to every other figure in 'Le Cygne', if not as a name for the relation of poetry to history in the aftermath of disaster (the June days in 1848, Haussmannisation, etc.). 'À Victor Hugo' marks, ultimately, a point of ghostly-out-of-jointness—an intertwining of names, spaces, and times which are at once absent and present, here and there, then and now, in the poetry of modernity, a Baudelairian haunto-poetics which is inextricably interwoven with what we might consider the poetic politics of 'Le Cygne'.

Rafael Winkler

Fantasy, Trauma and the Impossible in Baudelaire

Freudian psychoanalysis thinks of fantasy either as a substitute satisfaction for a wish whose satisfaction in reality has to be deferred under the pressure of the reality principle, or as a screen to unpleasurable memories relating to the narcissistic or ego-libido. The fantasy in some of the poems of *Les Fleurs du mal* is at odds with this notion. This is the narrator's fantasy of being unable to die because death is a fiction or false exit, and that upon dying he will be implacably thrown back into being. What distinguishes this kind of fantasy is that there is no conceivable circumstance in which it could happen. To live through one's death and survive it is impossible (in a sense that, e.g., the wolfman's fantasy to obtain sexual gratification from his father, which involves castration, is not). It is a fantasy that neutralizes the distinction between life and death and that, in consequence, upends the order and rationality of the world (which depends on the belief that 'life' and 'death' are opposites that cannot mix or interpenetrate). In this paper, I examine the nature of this fantasy of the impossible. If time permits, I will do so in conjunction with the similar fantasy in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* and in Derrida's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* in the *Sovereign and the Beast, Volume II*. My two central claims are that (a) poetry is a revolt against the order and rationality of the world, and (b) fantasies of the impossible are original sources of trauma.