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Cantalupo, Barbara, *Poe and the Visual Arts*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. 197 pages, 37,86 €, ISBN: 978-0-271-06309-6

- 1 On the first page of her book *Poe and the Visual Arts*, Barbara Cantalupo underlines Poe's "graphicality," a word coined by the 19th century author himself. This "graphicality" is attested to by Poe's continued presence in popular visual culture: in film (for example *Twixt* by Coppola, 2011), in television (the series *The Following*, 2013-15) and as an action figure, bobble-head or finger puppet. Cantalupo decides to enter into this rich field through the lens of 19th-century painting.
- 2 Indeed, the first half of the book is devoted to Poe and painting. Cantalupo begins her analysis with the paintings that Poe could have seen during his lifetime, those shown at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts while he lived in Philadelphia (1838-1844), and those hung at the National Academy of Design while Poe lived in Manhattan (1844 and 1845). In addition to giving a comprehensive listing of the paintings shown in these two venues, her first chapter analyzes some "stand-out" pieces, such as paintings by Nicolas Poussin, Salvator Rosa and Asher Durand and connects them to Poe's visual aesthetics. In the process, a lively picture is painted of the art world and the beginning of museum culture during Poe's time in Philadelphia and New York, and how Poe might have been connected to them. The text provides a wealth of empirical, geographical detail, such as the observation that the Chinese museum opened in 1838 by the collector Nathan Dunn in Philadelphia was located "only a few short blocks from Poe's home on North Eighth Street" (90).

- 3 The geographical frame remains important in the second chapter as Cantalupo moves on to look at the artists and paintings Poe explicitly mentions in the tales and sketches written or revised while he lived in Philadelphia and New York. In addition to providing in annex a comprehensive list of Poe's references to artists, paintings, drawings and sculptures, Cantalupo looks in more detail at some of the tales and sketches in which painting is expressly referenced (such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Philosophy of Furniture" and "The Landscape Garden") and offers an interpretation of why Poe chose those specific allusions. The reproduction of individual paintings alongside the relevant references to painters in Poe's texts is particularly evocative and valuable.
- 4 The second half of the book is devoted to an exploration of the "painterly" aspects of Poe's work. Chapter 3 is devoted to descriptions of "homely interiors" in "The Devil in the Belfry," "William Wilson," "The Philosophy of Furniture," and the landscape sketches. The idea is to explore the "ordinary and undervalued objects" (87) in these texts, in order to bring out an aesthetic of the common in Poe. This tack enables the author to give a novel interpretation of "William Wilson," in particular, in which one is more accustomed to find the gothic emphasized.
- 5 The author then moves on to explore "visual tricks" (chapter 4) in select tales, such as the myopia of the protagonist in "The Spectacles," or the error in scale in "The Sphinx." The bulk of this chapter is however devoted to an analysis of anamorphosis in "Ligeia," which provides the author with a useful and productive key to analyze the aesthetics of the bridal chamber showcased in this story.
- 6 Finally, the book ends with an exploration of how Poe constructed himself as an art critic (chapter 5), and the key role played by in this process by Charles Briggs, sometime owner and editor of the *Broadway Journal*. Briggs wrote the art criticism articles for the *Journal* probably up until July 1845. He was a particularly harsh critic, in particular when he considered that the cause of educating the American taste was at issue. Poe subsequently fashioned his own voice as an art critic in the *Journal* both in continuity and in contradistinction to Briggs: "Like Briggs, Poe knew that the public was vulnerable to fashion's whims and lacked an appreciation for aesthetic principles, but unlike Briggs, Poe simply disdained that tendency and was not concerned with educating the public" (155).
- 7 On the whole, *Poe and the Visual Arts* paints a very detailed picture of the art-world in Poe's time, providing the reader with a rich background against which many of the tales are revisited. It is quite possible to imagine how many other tales might also benefit from such an approach. Its very pertinence nonetheless raises some questions.
- 8 The author's choice to begin her analysis with a focus on exhibits that occurred in Philadelphia and New York during Poe's time in these cities is the result of philological and historical rigor, but it is not without risks for the strength of the analysis. If there is concrete proof that Poe actually went to these exhibits, the author does not clearly bring it out. Rather, she speaks repeatedly (particularly in her introduction to the chapter on these exhibits) of "opportunities": "the opportunity to see" (19), "many opportunities to discuss ... art" (20), "plenty of opportunities to discuss the arts" (20). Thus the author seems to rely on a kind of informed conjecture on Poe's exposure to painting and his involvement in the art world. The following quotation is a good example of how her argumentation in this part of the book functions:

Of course, we do not have any direct quotes to confirm what Poe thought of the paintings by Thomas Cole—or Asher Durand or Frederic Church (specifically the latter's ethereal *Twilight Among the Mountains*, which hung in the National Academy of Design's 1845 show). However, Poe's own landscape writing strongly suggests that he would have been drawn to these works, especially to Cole's romantic imagery, dramatic color, and fine craftsmanship. Like Briggs, Poe would have faulted Cole for the didactic nature of his *Course of Empire* series, but he could not have faulted Cole's overall technique, which produced profound effects. Poe had already shown that he could quite harshly criticize even highly regarded painters such as Henry Inman—one of the founders of the National Academy of Design—for poor technique. However, Poe saw Cole's work a number of times both in Philadelphia and in New York, and he must have viewed it in a positive light since he applauds Cole's predecessor Claude Lorrain. (48)

- 9 We begin with an acknowledgement that “there are no direct quotes to confirm what Poe thought.” Then a series of informed conjectures are listed: “he would have been”, he “would have faulted,” “he could not have faulted.” These informed conjectures seem to reinforce each other to such an extent that we end with a certainty: “Poe saw Cole's work a number of times.”
- 10 This shift might be simply anecdotal if the author's elaboration of Poe's aesthetics in this early part of the book, which is carried forward throughout, were not so firmly grounded in this initial analysis of paintings he might have seen. Part of the author's argument is indeed that Poe's aesthetics are grounded in the paintings that he had the “opportunity” to see, and the aesthetics of the beautiful that she derives from these “opportunities” informs all her subsequent analyses of Poe.
- 11 The author's definition of “the visual arts” also gives rise to question. As may have been gleaned from the above remarks, the phrase “the visual arts” functions as virtually synonymous with painting. The endeavor to reconstruct Poe's visual universe is a valuable one, but might have gained from a broader conception of the visual arts. For example, an analysis of the visual environment of the magazines in which Poe published his tales might have yielded productive insights. Engraving in particular is mentioned in passing a few times—particularly with regard to paintings Poe could have known such as *Facing the Enemy* by Francis William Edmonds which also exists as an engraving—but not systematically envisaged, although it was an important aspect of magazine publication in Poe's time, and one he clearly regarded as important.
- 12 Finally, a question arises regarding the argument of the book as a whole, which the author sums up aptly in the book's “Coda”: “This book pictures Poe as many may not have known him before. As the evidence presented here reveals, Poe's youthful dedication to beauty did not fade; in fact, his mature work shows a move away from the grotesque and the sublime and toward an appreciation of homeliness and beauty” (159). The privilege of an aesthetics of the beautiful (derived from the paintings analyzed) over an aesthetics of the sublime comes up again and again in the book. These two notions are, however, somewhat undertheorized, which is all the more regrettable since they can take on (and have taken on, especially in the post-structuralist discussion since the 1980s) an array of very different meanings. For example, the sublime can either be thought of as a superlative version of beauty (as in Bouvard's wording: “le Beau est le Beau, et le Sublime le très Beau”) or as radically heterogeneous to the beautiful and in this case (for example, in Kant's famous elaboration) the one completely excludes the other. It is not possible to tell on which side of this demarcation the author's conceptions of the beautiful and the

sublime fall, and this uncertainty somewhat weakens the otherwise quite productive contention that the late Poe turns away from the sublime toward the beautiful.

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