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book review of

*Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century* by  
Linda Nochlin

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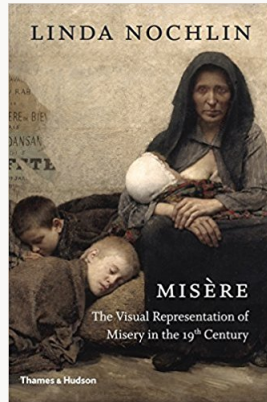
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Linda Nochlin,  
*Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century*.  
New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018.  
176 pp.; 51 color and 77 b&w illus.; notes; index.  
\$35 (hardcover)  
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This posthumously published volume is an honest, personal, and eminently thought provoking addendum to the scholarship of Linda Nochlin (1931–2017), one of the great figures of art history and surely of our subfield. Nochlin’s early survey of Realism (published by Penguin in 1971) and numerous essays on women artists, gendered representations, and Orientalism are seminal texts for social and feminist histories of art. With her final publication, she returned to a complex set of issues that had occupied her thoughts and punctuated her work throughout her career: the imperative to register the real circumstances of the marginalized and the consequences of aestheticizing such realities. *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century*, considers the “proto-documentary” impulse of nineteenth-century artists and illustrators from a position informed by certain twentieth-century theoretical convictions that the documentary is intrinsically troubled and by twenty-first century concerns about the moral and ethical dimensions of representation itself. Citing cultural theorist Stuart Hall, she reminds the reader that “representation” is a problematic term: “As we all know, there is no such thing as representation pure and simple, disengaged from ideology. In a sense, representation itself is an ideological formation” (9).<sup>[1]</sup> These philosophical questions of truth and representability/unrepresentability loom large, and though Nochlin does not offer definitive answers, she does repeatedly acknowledge the distinction between the aesthetic effects of the real and realistic documentation.

The subtitle, too, suggests a kind of comprehensive account that would be a mischaracterization of the book. Rather than a survey of the representation of misery in the nineteenth century, Nochlin offers a meditation on select case studies and paradigms. The five short chapters are really thematic essays originating from discrete lectures. They include an investigation of the strategies employed by nineteenth-century newspaper illustrators and twentieth- and twenty-first century monument designers to represent the Irish Famine (ca. 1846–51); some thoughts on gender and misery occasioned by two recent exhibitions, *Splendeurs et misères: images de la prostitution, 1850–1910* at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (2015), and

*Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2016); a presentation on Théodore Géricault and Francisco Goya delivered at the Prado in 2012; an examination of the figure of the beggar in the work of Gustave Courbet, first published in the catalogue of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt exhibition *Courbet: A Dream of Modern Art* (2011); and finally a consideration of disaffection and alienation as animated in the works of the lesser-known Fernand Pelez, which she connects to her previous work on the trope of the impoverished old man as a signifier of misery.[2] In every essay, Nochlin engages in comparisons that crisscross nationality, historical period, and material specificity, and which are often revelatory of her own purview and politics. Consequently, the project never fully coalesces into a thesis on her subject, though the book is a pleasure to read insofar as it is a product of the author's own historiography of misery.

The impetus for collecting these pieces? In 2008, Nochlin encountered the work of French sociologist Eugène Buret. In *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France*, a treatise on the effects of the economic progress of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism on the social conditions of the working class, she found a compelling elaboration of the condition indicated by the term *misère*. [3] An affliction at once distinct from pauperism and specific to the nineteenth century, "*Misère*," Buret wrote, "is poverty felt morally" (8). As Nochlin summarizes, *misère* is a form of distress with physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. The other salient point of Buret's account is that the onset of *misère* occurred during unprecedented progress in England and France, such that destitution was thrown into relief by the propinquity of "extreme opulence" and "legitimate well-being" (8–9). *Misère* is, for Buret and Nochlin, both a sign and a signifier of the industrial revolution. Indeed, some of the best moments in *Misère* occur when Nochlin limns this in the images, most successfully in her analysis of Géricault's London lithographs. The timing of Nochlin's discovery of Buret's text is also significant. She states that the economic situation in the year of financial crises in Europe and the United States "increased [her] interest in a parallel, if by no means exactly similar, set of circumstances in nineteenth-century Europe" (7). This coincidence effectively becomes a frame for the historical to contemporary approach she takes in the succeeding chapters.

The first chapter proposes that the causes and conditions of the famine in Ireland make it paradigmatic of *misère* in the nineteenth century. Buret described the country as "the privileged domain of misery," and for Nochlin, the visual culture that documents and memorializes this case is "not so much a question of the representation of misery *in* Ireland, but the representation of Ireland *as* misery" (27). She then draws a parallel between Gustave de Beaumont's study of Ireland published in 1839, in which the author masterfully balanced accurate description with an appeal for justice, and the conundrum that faced graphic artists reporting for the *Illustrated London News*: "on the one hand, the image must convey, as directly as possible, the terrible plight of the starving Irish. On the other hand, famine victims must not be made so repulsive or so alien in their form that the public sympathy they seek turns into disgust and alienation" (32). [4] While these images invariably referenced established modes, as in the case of James Mahony's sketch of a beggar woman whose arms encircle her starving children, which resonates with conventional representations of the Virgin of Mercy, Nochlin argues that the documentary project was an emphatically anti-aesthetic one. Informality and incoherence, she insists, were the "guarantee of indexical accuracy" (30). After enumerating a much broader set of questions about the circumstances

of the Irish Famine and how the actuality and the truth of something like a famine might be represented, she concludes the chapter with a survey of the monuments commemorating it in Ireland and around the world. This is a curious move, but it allows for some reflection on the efficacy of public memorials, which does feel like a relevant inquiry for our own time.

The second chapter is similarly ruminative. Focused on prostitution and its representations, Nochlin introduces the topic by way of Buret's pronouncement that women suffered more than men, and then traverses the "fantasy-fueled representations of the sexual female" proffered by modernists like Paul Cézanne and Gustave-Adolphe Mossa, the more intimate insights into daily life as portrayed by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas and an indictment of the *Splendeurs et Misères* exhibition for its titillation and general lack of nuance in setting forth the diversity of experiences and conditions of degraded women, prostitutes, and courtesans (63). The most compelling constructions of gendered misery rely on narrative, she argues, supported by close readings of two paintings by Jean Béraud and of several illustrations for Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

The sense of an implied narrative and the veracity of the realist image are taken up in the third chapter with a judicious analysis of Géricault's lithograph, *Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man!*. Conceived on a trip to England in 1821, the print combines finely rendered details and poignant observations without recourse to symbolism or moralization. The structure of the composition is such that the viewer can see the effects of the industrialization on the city, contrasting the realities of extreme poverty, working-class labor, and commerce because "Géricault leaves out nothing, generalizes not at all, provides the viewer with a feast of information and meaningful relationships, from which the discerning eye must pick up the latent meanings" (85). In Nochlin's conception of the trajectory of the representation of misery, these compassionate, inclusive, and incisive illustrations prefigure documentary photography. She then traces the documentary mode from an agent of reform to one of sensationalism. Artful depictions of misery risk degrading their subjects, condescending in a manner that recalls the picturesque portrayals of the eighteenth century or perhaps most troublingly, appearing so common as to anesthetize viewers to stark reality. While she appreciates Martha Rosler's position on the inadequacy of visual representations of the Bowery in the 1970s, she cannot dismiss the role of pictures in bearing witness to human suffering. She asks, "are we willing to give up on visual documentation of human beings without a murmur? Must we reject the questionable pleasures of photographic representation if we are to rid ourselves of its ideological trappings, or is that throwing the baby out with the bathwater?" (112). This movement between the primary historical topic and contemporary debates may have come across better in a lecture format. Still, despite broad academic references and art historical allusions, the author's concerns remain clear and foregrounded. Contrasting Rosler's photo-texts with Géricault's lithograph, she ponders: "which works best? Which intensifies the response to misery? Which, on the contrary, makes us consider the issue of the *representation* of misery itself?" (114). These are historically significant and timely questions about the relationship between images and audiences. Nochlin does not answer these questions for the reader, but insists that they should remain foremost in our minds.

The final chapters introduce representations of misery from the earliest and latest phases of French Realism. The presence of an Irish beggar woman within Courbet's complex

allegorical work, *The Painter's Studio* (1854–55), is a testament to the artist's social consciousness. As Nochlin states, she “constitutes not merely a dark note of negativity calling into question the painting's utopian promise but, rather, a negation of that promise as a whole” (115). The marginalization and lack of dignity embodied in this figure make her exemplary of what Nochlin argues is a consistent theme throughout Courbet's oeuvre and a frequent preoccupation of his personal correspondence. Where Courbet succeeded in expressing humanity through a recognizable type, most poignantly in *Charity of a Beggar at Ornans* (1868), the formal priorities and aesthetic self-consciousness of artists like Edouard Manet and Vincent van Gogh obscured the truth of human misery. This distinction is critical for Nochlin's definition of “modern,” and she concludes the chapter with a call for a reexamination of the connection between Courbet and his “modernist followers” (136). Fernand Pelez, the fifth chapter seems to suggest, was really the next generation's most capable articulator of the modern vision and implicit call for justice inaugurated by Courbet. Nochlin highlights the pathos and vulnerability of Pelez's homeless children, depressed entertainers and bereft old men achieved through a combination of accuracy and emotional distance. Rather than narrative, Pelez illustrated misery through the figures' physical appearance, clothing, and position within frequently shallow spaces.<sup>[5]</sup> This approach to *being of one's time*, Nochlin asserts, deserves more serious consideration within narrative(s) of modernism.

In her brief conclusion, Nochlin returns to the politics of representing *misère*. This is a fascinating topic, and the author has provided a glimpse into how nineteenth-century images might inflect our understanding of the documentary project today. While one may well lament the format of this book, whose small reproductions occasionally make it difficult to observe the details that Nochlin points out, its intimate character has the effect of drawing the reader ever closer to the writer. Nochlin has posed many important questions in this final effort, reminding us of the power of images and of our role, as viewers and art historians, in interpreting them.

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## Notes

[1] Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

[2] The Prado lecture was subsequently published. Linda Nochlin, “Géricault, Goya y la representación de la miseria tras la Revolución industrial,” in Francisco Calvo Serraller, et. al., *El arte de la era romántica* (Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado; Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, Círculo de Lectores, 2012), 199–218; Linda Nochlin, “Courbet and the representation of ‘Misère’: a dream of justice,” in *Courbet: A Dream of Modern Art*, exh. cat., eds. Klaus Herding and Max Hoellein (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 76–83; Linda Nochlin, “Van Gogh, Renouard, and the weaver's crisis in Lyon: the status of a social issue in the art of the later 19th century,” in *Art, the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson*, eds. Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 669–88.

[3] Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France; de la nature de la misère, de son existence, de ses effets, de ses causes, et de l'insuffisance des remèdes qu'on lui a opposés*

*jusqu'ici; avec l'indication des moyens propres à en affranchir les sociétés* (Paris: Chez Paulin, Libraire, 1840; Paris: EDHIS, 1979).

[4] Buret's attention to the situation in Ireland was concise, and he referred his reader to the work of Gustave de Beaumont, a study which Nochlin, in turn, uses to ground her visual analyses. Gustave de Beaumont, *L'Irlande sociale, politique et religieuse* (Paris, 1839), ed. and trans. W. C. Taylor, *Ireland-Social, Political and Religious* (London, 1839; Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

[5] Gabriel Weisberg has described the range of social types that populate Pelez's naturalist compositions as "visual metaphors" for a marginalized existence. Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Naturalist Themes in Changing Times," in *Illusions of Reality: Naturalist Painting, Photography, Theatre, and Cinema, 1875–1918*, exh. cat., ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2010), 59.