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Sarah Bassnett, *Picturing Toronto. Photography and the Making of a Modern City*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016, 208 pp. 84 illus., $ 54 cloth ISBN 9780773546714

Jill Delaney

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Mapplethorpe's 1968 photograph of Louise Bourgeois, discussed in Guy Reynolds's essay, in which she confronts us with a knowing grin. Clasped securely under one arm is her sculpture *Fillette*, a constellation of multiple signifiers—phallus/female/meat—emblematic of the complexity of desire in these essays. ¶

Dr. Christine Conley is an art historian and independent curator with expertise in issues of feminism and gender, the ethics of difference, cultural translation, political violence, and armed conflict.
—cconley@geotext.ca

Sarah Bassnett
Picturing Toronto. Photography and the Making of a Modern City
Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016
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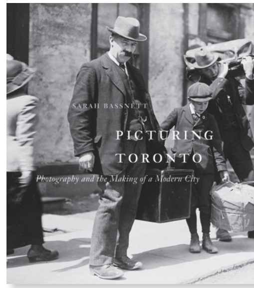
Jill Delaney

"Photography transformed modern life." The first sentence in Sarah Bassnett's book, *Picturing Toronto. Photography and the Making of a Modern City*, reads like a prosecutor's opening statement to a jury. Wasting no time, the author lays down the entire premise of her case in four words, and follows it up with a series of case studies and a final pitch to the jury. This is a case that photographic historians have been pleading for decades: photography has not acted simply as a passive recorder illustrating the development of modernity, it has been an active protagonist in that process.[1] Bassnett presents a series of convincing illustrations of that agency, while adding to the history of the role photography played in the development of the city of Toronto in the early twentieth century. Overall, the book is a welcome addition to both the history of photography in Canada and to the more broadly based critical thinking about the roles played by different photographic genres throughout its history.[2] The author states that the book is an attempt to bridge the gap between the conventional divisions in historical scholarship: photographic historians' use of history as context for the further understanding of the image, and historians' use of photographs as illustrations of the historical event.

Theoretically, much of the analysis of the city and the photograph is based on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, while drawing on now classic sources such as Allan Sekula, John Tagg, and Victor



Burgin for their ideological parsing of photography, but also on more recent work on "the affective turn"—the study of the effects of photography on the viewer. The main thesis of the book is that, under the "liberal project" of Toronto, photography was employed by its various creators and users to constitute modern urban subjects, and more specifically, self-regulating modern subjects. Photography is understood as a particularly powerful discursive tool in this regard, largely through its capacity to construct "truth" for a variety of liberal objectives in the building of the capitalist city.

The chapters in the book act as a series of case studies, grouped into two larger sections. The first section is concerned with the use of photography in the shaping of the built environment, addressing first the use of survey photographs for the construction of the Bloor Viaduct, and secondly the use of photographs by proponents of the City Beautiful Movement, although more in Chicago than Toronto. The second section focuses on the constitution of the urban liberal subject, analyzing the use of photography of The Ward (a central "slum") by urban reformers and newspapers, while also considering how different photographic genres have contributed to the formation of the modern liberal subject and the modern city.

In the introduction, Bassnett lays out her overriding thesis and various intersecting terms of analysis, defines modernity and photography's place within it, and summarizes photography's relation to liberalism, urban reform, and governmentality, as well as the various approaches to photographic history both in general and in Canada. She characterizes modernity by the familiar parameters set out by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georg Simmel, with the modern city posited as a space of constant transition, alienation, and fear. Bassnett argues that liberalism, a key feature of modernity, "paradoxically operates through the production of freedom and the corresponding constitution of self-regulating subjects" (4). Photography is positioned as one of the several rational modern technologies (along with surveys, statistics, and cartography) used to produce a rational, governable city. However, Bassnett also recognizes that it plays a major part in stoking the middle class's own anxieties, especially when it is used to sensationalize "the other" in the media.

Chapter One examines the photographs taken by Arthur Goss, Toronto's first official municipal photographer, as part of the survey of properties to be affected by the construction of the Bloor Viaduct, in order to demonstrate how photography can be a "rational instrument" in the objectification and commodification of both the built and natural environments. During his tenure, between 1911 and 1940, Goss produced around 26,000 photographs for various departments within the municipal government, including

Public Works, the Health department, and even the Claims department. He was also a significant contributor to the pictorial movement in Canada. The Arthur Goss archive (see The Arthur S. Goss fonds and The Department of Public Works Photographs Series at the City of Toronto Archives) has been mined multiple times by scholars in the last decades, more often than not for his photographs of "slum" conditions in Toronto. Bassnett, however, is interested in how these rather mundane photographs made the land available for exploitation in the capitalist city. The argument is sound, although Bassnett's argument about the "slippage between instrumental and aesthetic discourses" (48) in the photographs seems less developed. The author relies on Elizabeth Edward's analysis, in *The Camera as Historian*, of the amateur architectural survey photography in nineteenth-century England and the tension between the documentary and aesthetic intents of the photographers. It is an interesting discussion, verging as it does on the possibility of an anti-aesthetic, but it could have been more fully developed with further examples and illustrations.

Indeed, it might have been more interesting to see a further exploration of this aspect of all the photographs in the book. Chapter Two focuses on the rise and influence of the City Beautiful movement in Toronto (which in fact was never very strong), specifically through The Civic Guild's *Report on a Comprehensive Plan for Systematic Civic Improvements in Toronto* of 1909, and the photographs published in the report. However, the rather long discussion of the well-known Chicago City Beautiful plan seems a bit out of place in a book on Toronto photography and urban reform, and the space might have been better used for an in-depth discussion of the notions of visuality and modern perception that Bassnett introduces here. Her application of Jonathan Crary's thesis about a "new regime of perception" that supported the development of liberal subjectivity in the modern city, and more specifically in the planned city, is nevertheless an important one. Urban and architectural historians may not be as familiar with Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* as photographic historians. This is where Bassnett's project to bridge the gap between art history and other histories shows promise, as this project requires a broad analysis of the importance of visuality in modern urban development principles and the undervalued role of photography, which was situated in a much broader instrumental field than the merely illustrative.

Chapter Three, "Instruments of Reform," analyzes three different reports generated between 1911 and 1918 on slum conditions in Toronto, and shows how photography used its affective capacity to make the argument for reform. The author demonstrates how the photographs used in the Medical Health Officer's 1911 report justified invasive and ongoing inspection as a key feature of the emerging liberal order (much as the footage from security cameras justifies today's increasing security apparatus). Far from merely illustrating the effects of an unequal distribution of wealth and power, the photographs themselves became sites where specific social subjects were produced. Along with the photographs used by the Bureau of Municipal Research for its 1913 report, Bassnett argues, these images produced specific knowledge about the slums and their citizens that incited fear and anxiety among middle-class citizens, and a desire for regulation.

Chapter Four, "Framing Citizenship" opens the second section of the book by continuing to question the role of photography as an invasive technology, but is more concerned with how it participates in the creation of different types of citizens. Bassnett builds a complex analysis of how photography was used to create new forms of liberal subjectivities by both sensationalist and liberal newspapers, by charitable reformers, and by some of the occupants of The Ward themselves. The issue of agency, which lurked in the background in the previous chapter, comes to the fore here. Do the subjects (both implied and visible) of these photographs have any opportunity to respond to or resist this instrument of social order, or are they powerless to define themselves? And does this, or can this, only happen through the studio portraits that, in Bassnett's example, were commissioned by Jewish inhabitants of The Ward? This chapter is quite convincing on many levels, but there is a certain relentlessness to the argument put forth. It seems that no one in The Ward, or even within the reformist middle-class communities, could evade the establishment of the liberal social order and the liberal subjectivities of the modern city in this view. There must have been at least a few communists and anarchists hidden in the dark corners of the neighbourhood who may have offered a means, however small, to opt out of the system. The photographs analyzed in this chapter do reveal a more complex set of subjectivities in this neighbourhood than those produced and published by the Medical Health Officer and others. However, as Martha Rosler has argued, documentary photography was better suited to moralism than revolution, and there may have been inhabitants who evaded such photography either knowingly or because they fell outside the predetermined view of the lens.

Bassnett ends her case studies with an analysis of Goss's use of certain aesthetic conventions from pictorialism in his civic photography, drawing from what Walter Benjamin came to define as a distinction between informational (i.e., documentary or instrumental) and storytelling (i.e., pictorialism) discourses, in order to make the case for liberal reform in The Ward. In reading the fifth chapter,

it becomes clear that the previous ones were mere steps leading up to this final pitch to the jury about the construction of liberal subjectivities in the early twentieth-century city. There is a nice critique of pictorialism here, positioning it within the larger context of photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as within the broader development of the modern city. Sekula defined photography as "modernity run riot," and in this final chapter and in the conclusion, Bassnett foregrounds the fundamental link between modernity and photography, no matter the latter's purpose.

In the end, the author makes a strong case not just about the role of photography in shaping a modern Toronto, but in shaping its modern citizens as well. And she has bigger ambitions which she begins to fulfill with this book: to convince the reader that photography, the modern city, and modern subjectivity are entwined in ways that need to be carefully examined not only across a variety of photographic genres by photographic historians, but also by historians who are trying to better understand modernity itself. ¶

Jill Delaney is a Senior Archivist, Photography, Library and Archives Canada.
—jill.delaney@canada.ca

1. Classic works on this subject include, Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London, 1982); Martha Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in *Three Works* (Halifax, 1981); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (London, 1988); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who Is Speaking Thus. Some Questions about Documentary Photography," in *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis, 1991); and James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago, 1997).

2. The edited volume by Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard provides a good cross-section of recent Canadian approaches: Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard, eds., *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 2011); see also, for example, Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford, 2003); Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expression of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montreal and Kingston, 2007); and Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death. Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal and Kingston, 2003).

Marcelle Ferron
Le Droit d'être rebelle: Correspondance de Marcelle Ferron avec Jacques, Madeleine, Paul et Thérèse Ferron, textes choisis et présentés par Babalou Hamelin
Montréal, Les Éditions du Boréal, 2016
621 pp. 7 b/w illus.
$34.95 paper ISBN 9782764624562

Ray Ellenwood

> Ma vie est un fouillis, un gargantuesque désordre où la seule continuité a été ma peinture.
> —Marcelle Ferron

Marcelle Ferron is a major figure in the history of modern Canadian abstract art, and before discussing this exchange of letters with her brothers and sisters, selected and edited by her daughter, it might be useful to take a very quick look at her remarkable career.

In 1947, discouraged by her studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Quebec City, Ferron moved to Montreal, met Paul-Émile Borduas, and began to frequent the group of painters, writers, dancer/choreographers, photographers, and designers who were dubbed *les automatistes* by journalists at the time. In 1948, she signed their well-known manifesto, *Refus global*, with its call for social and artistic liberation through generous spontaneity and its demonstration of how surrealist automatism could be expressed in non-figurative art. The publication was a moment of euphoria, the culmination of several years of groundbreaking creative activity, and was met by a strong negative reaction by church and state due to its anti-clerical tone. The energy continued for a few years of debate and demonstration, before the group began to disperse as some of them, such as Thérèse Renaud, Jean Paul and Françoise Riopelle, and Fernand Leduc, made their way to Paris and New York. Marcelle Ferron would follow, arriving in Paris in 1953, but before then, like other women signatories of *Refus global*, she had married and started a family.

While Riopelle's career took off very quickly in Paris (by the mid-1950s he was a rising star, internationally acclaimed, selling well), Ferron needed a few years to be recognized, as her painting became bolder and more assured, with its characteristic broad, sweeping strokes of a palette knife that sometimes seemed larger than the artist herself. But by 1957, she was presenting solo exhibitions in increasingly important galleries in Paris, and was showing with the likes of Riopelle, Borduas, and Sam Francis in group exhibitions on two continents. In 1961 her work was included at the Sixth Bienal de Sao Paulo, and in March of 1962 she was preparing for major exhibitions in Milan, Copenhagen, and Spoletto. Soon she was getting more and more shows and commissions in Montreal and had begun experimenting with new techniques for an old medium: stained glass. Those experiments would solidify the second period of her career, when she moved back to Montreal and began work on some magnificent architectural installations of stained glass for such public buildings as Montreal's Champ de Mars subway station and the court-house in Granby. The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal held a major retrospective of her work in the spring of 1970, and another in 2000, shortly before her death. By the end of her life she had become a much-loved, outspoken public figure, and her funeral drew enough people to fill the large Saint-Viateur church in Outremont.