
There is no denying that Scott Carpenter’s book, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France: Frauds, Hoaxes and Counterfeits*, boasts an alluring title. A glance at the chapter headings and a cursory flicking through of the pages promises the potential reader an interdisciplinary exploration of nineteenth-century French culture through the lenses of literature, caricature, history and politics. Nevertheless, Carpenter is quite hasty in his introduction to warn the reader that the book to follow might not be as full of intrigue as the title suggests. Based on the premise that the way in which falseness manifests itself within literary and cultural practices can tell us something about the preoccupations of a given time and place, the aim of the book is to examine how falseness is constructed in nineteenth-century France to ‘challenge the urgency of authenticity’ (p.18). The author admits that his examples of fraudulence are disparate, that his definitions of fraudulence, mystification and other related vocabulary are vague and that he is not attempting to “find a grand, unifying theory” (p.18). After all these disclaimers, the reader is left feeling slightly confused but hoping all the same to understand more fully by the end of the book the preoccupations of the entity that was nineteenth-century France.

What follows is a series of discrete essays all of which have nineteenth-century France as a setting, fraudulence as a loose theme and all of which are interesting, well-written and compellingly argued. Chapter Two, ‘Violent Hoaxes: Mérimée and the Booby-trapped Text’ argues that Mérimée’s works play on the credulity of the reader to highlight that the boundary between the world of reality and that of the supernatural is not incontrovertible. The following chapter, entitled ‘Political Prostheses and Imperial Imposters’, also regarding Mérimée, deals with a hoax history satirizing the fraudulence of Louis Napoleon’s Third Empire — a hoax never unveiled because its author was too close to the centre of power to be suspected of dissent. ‘The Ghosts of Kings’ deals with the Restoration attempt to manipulate collective memory through the revival of the ghosts of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Chapter 5 ‘Balzac’s Skillful Disguise’ reveals the way in which Balzac demonstrates in the *Comédie humaine* that differentiation between authentic and unoriginal in the realm of art is not always easy. ‘Vidocq and the Image of the Counterfeit’, the sixth chapter, tells the story of a nineteenth-century crook-turned-policeman and his dubious memoirs whose multilayered fraudulence scandalously eludes the fiction/fact divide. Carpenter argues in Chapter Seven, ‘False Genders: Sand’s Gabriel’ that intolerance of the law towards gender ambiguity forces the protagonist of *Gabriel* to constantly feel like an imposter, regardless of which gender s/he inhabits. The final two chapters both discuss Baudelaire: how counterfeit, surprise and irony work together to create an aesthetic of fraudulence; and the poet’s cleverly disguised mockery of his own countrymen in his travel memoir *Pauvre Belgique*.

Carpenter acknowledges that a French nineteenth-century obsession with fraudulence exists despite Romanticism’s desire to inject cultural endeavour with authenticity and to move away from Classicism’s penchant for imitation. He presents this as a sort of paradox, without exploring Romanticism’s relationship with its extra-literary historical context—Romanticism might have been striving towards a newfound emotional sincerity, but it was also deeply involved in questioning post-Enlightenment ideals of positivism and universal knowledge. What Carpenter is trying to get at is that a perceived Romantic preoccupation with the false is masking a more
profound obsession with the porous boundary that separates that which is true and knowable from that which is not.

On a more methodological note, a scarcity of referencing surprising in an academic work leaves the non-expert reader unsure as to the extent to which certain parts of the book are original research. Readability is hindered by an unnecessary and ungainly duplication of all quotes in both French and English in the main body of the text. Moreover, there is an irritating tendency for the author to insert an incongruous French word into an otherwise completely English sentence and immediately translate it in brackets, making for bumpy reading and a niggling twinge of pretension.

Ultimately, Aesthetics of Fraudulence manages to be a simultaneously enjoyable and somewhat disappointing and frustrating book. The individual chapters stand alone as satisfying slices of cultural investigation but as a reader, I felt that I had to work to locate a unifying argument and that when I did manage pull one together from hints and snippets, it didn’t quite live up to the promise of the title. I would argue that a more honest (less fraudulent?) title, and one which might have provided impetus for a more discernible, over-arching thread of argument, would have been something along the lines of The Romantic Preoccupation with Ambiguity in Nineteenth-Century France.

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