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Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism. Painting and the Politics of Time*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2015. ix + 259 pp. 135 figures, notes and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-300-208320.

Review by Alex Potts, University of Michigan.

Marnin Young's *Realism in the Age of Impressionism* represents a major intervention in understandings of late nineteenth-century art, making newly apparent the significance of the late realist or naturalist work that for a time in the later 1870s and earlier 1880s presented an alternative to the painting of modern life developed by the Impressionists. Impressionism was beginning to enjoy a reputation as the characteristic art of modernity among artists and critics of avant-garde persuasion, a reputation that later art historical studies have tended to sanctify. In what amounts to a radical shift of focus, Young points to the major re-engagement in the years around 1880 with the ambitions, political as well as aesthetic, of the realism of earlier artists such as Courbet and Jean-François Millet. He argues persuasively that this late realism or naturalism was particularly notable in its approach to negotiating the conflicting temporalities of late nineteenth-century European society.

Naturalism as a tendency in late nineteenth-century art has been the subject of a significant body of new research by scholars such as Gabriel Weisberg and Richard Thompson.[1] This work has directed attention to the pervasive presence of naturalist painting alongside the more evidently modern and better known avant-garde art, but does little to offer a critical examination of its formation comparable to studies that have that been done on naturalism in late nineteenth-century literature.[2] This is partly because critics writing at the time were not prompted to theorize about a modern form of naturalism in art as they were in the case of literature. The term naturalism was bandied about, but without any clear theoretical or critical purchase. In his review of the 1880 Salon, for example, Zola embraced a variety of Impressionist and non-Impressionist painting under the general umbrella of naturalism, but never developed this designation systematically, focusing instead on the painting of light as the defining project of modern painting.[3] In contrast to previous writing on naturalism or late realism in nineteenth-century art, Young's study stands out by focusing on work that has real formal complexity and political resonance and by advancing an ambitious critical thesis having to do with the distinctive "politics of time" this art articulates. Rethinking temporality has been a preoccupation of some of the more intellectually engaged recent studies in art history as well as other humanities disciplines. Young's book joins this work in seeking to do justice to the heterogeneity and complexity of modern understandings and experiences of time.

Young argues that the more significant naturalist art produced in the years around 1880 was negotiating a structural conflict that came to a head at the time between the durational or lived time that dominated most aspects of everyday life in the pre-industrial world and the accelerated mechanically measured time of industrial modernity. The latter, as he conceives it, has on the one hand to do with the accurate time keeping operating in new systems of communication and transport as well as in the workplaces of modern industry and commerce. On the other hand, this modern temporality

also has to do with speeding up the tempo of life and the circulation of people and goods, as well as a new instantaneity in the reception and processing of material data, encroaching on and dispersing the durational qualities of traditional lived time, a tendency which has long been seen as characteristic of the experience of modernity in the later nineteenth century.

Young's work is particularly illuminating because he seeks to understand how politically charged issues of temporality began to reshape the internal structuring of pictorial depiction. He conceives mid-century realism as grounded in an extended, durational grasp of things, as distinct from the mobile and instantaneous apprehension characteristic of later Impressionist work. In classic realism, according to Young, one sees the persistence of a traditional conception of temporality within a context where an alternative, modern temporality was beginning to take hold. By the 1880s, the moment of naturalism or late realism, the situation had changed. The attempted re-engagement with the durational or absorptive scenarios and modes of depiction of realism was complicated by the increasing displacement of such a sense of lived time by the different temporality of industrial and finance capitalism. Such a modern temporality, Young argues, was internalized in the very structure of the freely rendered forms of depiction pioneered by the Impressionists and in the modes of instantaneous, mobile, and fragmented apprehension they realized. Late realist or naturalist work then was in effect attempting a precarious and ultimately unsustainable synthesis of these conflicting temporalities and modes of picturing.

The book is structured as a series of case studies, examining in depth five works produced in the years 1878-1881 that stand as keys instances of the politics of time negotiated in naturalist or late realist depictions of scenes from contemporary life. The two most politically charged paintings, Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Haymaking (Les Foins, 1877)* and Alfred Roll's *The Strike of the Miners (La Grève des Mineurs, 1880)*, large scale works exhibited at the French Salons of 1878 and 1880, have to do with the temporality of labor in a rural and an industrial context. Bastien-Lepage's *Haymaking* was a particularly important painting and set the precedent for a proliferation of naturalist scenes of rural labor in the art of the 1880s and the 1890s, scenes featuring traditional summer haymaking and wheat harvesting as well as the less picturesque harvesting of potatoes, beets and turnips in autumn and winter. While picking up on the departure effected by Millet's art from the Romantic period's prettified and anecdotal depictions of peasant life, this work differed from Millet's in its larger, more history-painting like scale—Courbet's *Stonebreakers (1849)* was an important precedent in this respect—its attention to factual detail and its generally brighter tonality and avoidance of strong chiaroscuro, as well as its looser, more informal composition (criticized by some as photographic). Issues of class were raised in a number of paintings depicting rural work as exhausting physical labor, a notable case being Bastien-Lepage's *Haymaking*. In this a man lying flat out on the ground and a woman slumped and gazing vacantly into space are shown, not taking a break so much as imprisoned in a temporarily suspended work time.

Labor here is clearly being presented as an issue. It is not quite traditional rural work, nor is it, as in the paintings of Miller, that of a peasantry passively submitting to an unrelenting toil that has been its destiny from time eternal. Still, it is not characteristically modern industrial labor either. The two principal figures may be wage laborers, and as such situated more or less at the bottom of the social scale, working for an employer who owns the field where other distant figures dotted here and there are back at work. But there is no trace of modern mechanized farming, and space is still given to the viewer to project onto the painting aspects of a traditional pastoral. Young's analysis nicely anchors this ambivalence in the social historical realities of rural life and labor in France at the time, a moment when modern work practices and time keeping were penetrating the countryside and when casual laborers of the kind featured in Bastien-Lepage's painting were often moving seasonally between rural and industrial or construction work. Just as the painting invites a sustained viewing of the finely rendered details and textures of the rural scene it depicts while also offering up passages of bravura brushwork and a flattening onto the picture plane that would cater to a desire for instantaneity of apprehension, so too there is a parallel double take in the nature of the scene depicted. Haymaking suggests an age-old cycle of seasonal rural work, here early summer, but there also intrudes on this a sense of modern

disciplining of labor and its relentless exploitation, to the point of utter exhaustion, of the laborer's efforts.

Young discusses the precariousness of this co-existence of different temporalities and formations of labor (synthesis would be the wrong word, though for some viewers of the time Bastien-Lepage's artistry achieved a kind of synthesis) in some detail. As a case in point, he notes the artist's attempt a year later to capture labor in action with the painting *October Season, Harvesting of potatoes* (1878, Salon of 1879). Even at the time, the work provoked skepticism and unease, focused particularly on the artificially frozen action of the woman steering a basket full of potatoes into an open sack. Here, he argues, the contemplative durational viewing invited by the work's realism was thrown out of kilter by the intrusion of a momentary action. Artificially stilled by the exactingly accurate detailing, the bodily gesture of the laboring figure is at odds with a properly realist sense of pictorial duration, of ongoing flow from an earlier to a later moment. The painting seems split by the contrary temporalities it was seeking to synthesize, introducing into a scene suggestive of traditional patterns of work the discordant modernity of a frozen action, of the kind to be captured by photographic technology. Young points out that Muybridge's early experiments in photographing sequences of bodies in motion were exactly contemporary with Bastien-Lepage's experiment in achieving analogous results with a realist painting, while being careful to note that the two exercises were carried out in isolation from one another.

Work time and the politics of the modern restructuring and commodification of labor come fully to the fore in a discussion of Alfred Roll's *The Strike of the Miners* exhibited at the Salon a year later. This work was partly conceived in response to a recent wave of industrial unrest in the coal-mining regions of France, but it was also a large Salon machine whose scale and highly charged subject matter served to draw attention to the painter and establish his reputation as a major new name in French art.[4] Industrial scenes such as this were a rarity in publicly exhibited paintings of contemporary life in nineteenth-century art. There was no established genre of industrial work scenes that in any way mirrored those of rural labor. Paintings such as Roll's *Strike of the Miners*, and a slightly later *The Strike* (1886) by the German-American painter Robert Koehler (this more conventional realist/naturalist work also pictures a strike in a coal mine), as well as Adolf von Menzel's famous *The Iron Rolling, Modern Cyclops* (1875), were isolated, once-off experiments even within the oeuvre of the artists who produced them. At the same time, such paintings were not necessarily seen as exceptionally controversial, and could enjoy considerable success—Roll's work was purchased by the state after it was exhibited to widespread interest and acclaim at the Salon of 1880.

Young is the first to give Roll's painting serious consideration, making a point of drawing out the intriguing complexity of its treatment of temporality. The scene is one of paused action, preceding a possibly violent confrontation between the strikers crowding around the mine pit head and the approaching column of soldiers, and following the drama of the arrest of one of the miners by two gendarmes who had arrived on the scene on horseback. Young comments on the absorptive, anti-theatrical rendering of this potentially explosive scene (the one exception is a miner shown being restrained from hurling a lump of coal) and sees this as tallying formally with the durational temporality of classic realism, and also politically with the strike's stilling of the incessant and rigidly controlled activity of an industrial work place. In Roll's as in Bastien-Lepage's painting, active laboring is momentarily suspended, but the upshot is different, namely a radical negation of the submission to long hours of hard labor to which urban and rural workers had to subject themselves in order to earn a bare living. Further layered on this highly charged scenario are controversies over the image of the striker, either as slacking off from honest work or as actively engaged in protest against harsh, poorly remunerated working conditions. Implicit in the conception of the painting then is a complex of issues concerning the rule of industrial work time and protest against it through a temporary halting of its iron logic.

The confused, episodic arrangement of the closely packed figures, which makes it hard to discern at first sight exactly what is happening in the painting, introduces a further significant feature of Roll's treatment of pictorial temporality. There is no integrated unified action, no climactic moment, but rather an array of situations each unfolding in its own time, loosely framed within the temporality of a larger history whose upshot is uncertain. This dispersal of the dramatic unity of conventional narrative, this interruption of a unidirectional progression from past to future through the present, and this opening out to a multiplicity of co-existent temporalities, is a common feature of the loosely additive compositional structure of much later nineteenth-century narrative painting, but rarely deployed to such resonant and politically charged effect as in Roll's *Strike*.

Jean-François Raffaëlli's *The Absinthe Drinkers* (*Les Déclassés*, 1881) makes for an effective transition to the treatment of a bourgeois politics of time. The painting depicts a scene of semi-bohemian existence situated on the margins of society. The leisure, the absenting from the demands of work, enjoyed by the two men drinking in a down-and-out bar is a desperate, ill-fated one, a caricature perhaps of the leisure the bourgeoisie enjoyed as by right. The rather different leisured temporality of a wealthy middle class milieu then features in Young's analysis of a series of decorative panels by Gustave Caillebotte dating from 1878 and depicting scenes of fishing, swimming and boating located on a slow-flowing river, one which in fact ran through the Caillebotte family country estate. These are works that Young designates as intriguing, if partially failed, experiments (they certainly made little mark in their own time) in combining Impressionist instantaneity with realist duration. The formal split the paintings seek to negotiate, Young argues, echoes a split in the temporality of a wealthy bourgeois lifestyle of the kind Caillebotte enjoyed—between that of the new, fast-moving, volatile world of finance capital and the more slow-moving one of a traditional wealthy bourgeoisie who defined themselves by way of ownership of tangible possession and goods. While this split came to a head in France in the period of rapid modernization and economic growth the country underwent in the later nineteenth century, a push and pull between the instability of financial speculation and what might be seen as more materially grounded economic processes had been a feature of bourgeois commercial life since the early modern period. At what point this constituted a crisis, when finance capital became so dominant as effectively to subsume other forms of economic activity, is hard to define. It may be more productive to see the dislocations of these competing, co-existing temporalities as an ongoing feature of the unstable life-world created by modern capitalism.

The problematic Young defines takes a richly productive turn in his finely conceptualized analysis of the naturalist bourgeois interior, *Russian Music* (*Chez Miss*, 1880-81), by the Belgian painter James Ensor, known mainly for his radically non-realist, proto-Expressionist mask paintings. In this work a woman, her back to the viewer, is shown absorbed playing the piano while a gentleman seated at right angles to the viewer's line of sight gazes outward, possibly distracted and even a touch bored, or possibly listening. These bourgeois scenarios by Ensor encapsulate more vividly possibly than any other painting of the period the contrary temporal imperatives Young sees as shaping the more critically self-aware late realist or naturalist work that interests him. In this case the temporality is not work time, but rather bourgeois leisure time, experienced as substantive and enduring on the one hand, and as subject to the fast-moving and instantaneous but also potentially alienating and disrupting temporality of capitalist modernity on the other. Young shows how in their responses to this painting at the time, critics were in turn puzzled, disturbed, and engaged by the combination of a substantively felt detailing and texturing which had affinities with Courbet's realism—the latter enjoyed a particular vogue in Belgium in the later nineteenth century—and a proto-modernist or Impressionistic enlivening of the painting's surface and immediate pictorial effect. This unstable and also uneasy conflation of differing temporalities and their differing formal and cultural imperatives did not prove lasting. Ensor's work in this vein, while capturing a significant aspect of a bourgeois life-world with scenes of absorptive but also potentially empty leisure, of taking time off from the mechanically regulated tempo of the modern world of work, but never free of its encroachments, abruptly came to an end in the mid-1880s.

If there is a strong case for seeing this late realism as a fragile construct, which in the end had to give way to forms of art more in tune with the temporal logics of capitalist modernity, Ensor's art would serve as a particularly dramatic instance. He was not alone in this respect, however, though the dramatic nature of the shift he made was exceptional. A number of artists who in the 1870s and 1880s experimented with the new naturalism and its enlivened social realism subsequently abandoned this mode for a more painterly Impressionist one as well as its naturalist, Zola-like ambitions to present a social panorama that included scenes of lower-class life. In the work of the German artist Max Liebermann and the Belgian Émile Claus, as well as the Frenchmen Raffaëlli and Léon Lhermitte, gritty social realism eventually gave way to Impressionist depictions of sunny bourgeois leisure or equally sunny pastoral beauty. Ensor's thought took a rather different route. He turned on the bourgeoisie as well as the common people and caricatured them, sometimes bitterly and viciously, as well as picturing disturbingly hallucinatory, anti-naturalist scenarios.

Young offers a compelling account of how and why the late realism or naturalism that emerged with such apparent force in the years around 1880 did not prevail against the lure of more modernist forms of painting. His discussion draws extensively on Michael Fried's theorizing of the absorptive, anti-theatrical logic of mid-nineteenth century realism. He also seems to buy into the historicizing teleology of Fried's formalism and Fried's case that, by the latter part of the century, realist depiction and the durational temporality essential to its success had become unsustainable.[5] Seen in these terms, Young's late realism marks a belated, precarious flourishing as well as the end of realism as viable practice. Nevertheless, new forms of realism, unstable and alienated as they might be, did emerge from time to time after Impressionism, and continued to do so even after the advent of modernist abstraction.[6]

The scope and ambition of realism as conceived in the mid-nineteenth century certainly fell apart in the later years of the century. However, the problematic Young identifies, the attempt to grapple with and give artistic form to the contending senses of time at work in modern society have continued apace, as have the often thwarted ambitions of a realist art to capture the substance as well as the elusive, impermanent, and fragmented tenor of life in a class-riven modern world. One also needs to bear in mind that realism, even in its classic form represented by artists such as Courbet, was not able to achieve, and more importantly did not seek to achieve, a stably synthesized picturing of the world, nor did it seek to realize in substantive form a steadily unfolding temporal duration. Most modern realist art we find compelling gains its vitality and realism from the attempt to negotiate a precarious and at times disconcerting co-existence of the conflicting imperatives, temporal as well as social, shaping the world in which it was fashioned. One of the great strengths of Young's study is its offering a new understanding of how such a politicized problematics of time operates within the formation of a realist or naturalist art.

## NOTES

[1] Richard Thompson, *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France, 1880-1900* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2012), Gabriel Weisberg, ed., *Illusions of Reality: Naturalist Painting, Photography and Cinema, 1875-1918* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 1910).

[2] Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: the Entropic Vision* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[3] Émile Zola, "Le Naturalisme au Salon" [1880], *Écrits sur l'Art* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1991), pp. 409-438.

[4] No longer extant, the painting is recorded in an old photograph and in a colored print dating from 1892.

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[5] Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1990) and *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1996).

[6] Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: the Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

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