
H-France Review Vol. 12 (Januray 2012), No. 12

Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. 272 pp. + 127 illustrations. \$50.67 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10:0300162812.

Review by Tom Conley, Harvard University.

Handsomely designed and lavishly illustrated, *The Visual World of French Theory* shows how and where the plastic arts inform what, in his book of the same name in 2003, François Cusset had titled (prior to its recent translation in English) “French Theory.” Sarah Wilson argues that the labor of intellectuals and philosophers of the last five decades owe much of its strength to its relation at once with politics, aesthetics and visual media. The abstraction for which many historians and pragmatic philosophers of the last decade have castigated French theory is shown to be far less ethereal or ephemeral than the writers of the obituaries of Derrida and others have led us to believe. Their reflections were grounded in rich and continuous dialogue with French painters associated with Narrative Figuration, a movement that is now, thanks to Wilson’s enlightened sense of retrospection, can now be understood in its relation with its time. From Wilson’s comparative treatment, a new sense of historical perspective emerges.

In a meticulous catalogue and history of the active and sustained relations that theorists held with painters, Wilson brings a welcome material bias to the French intellectual revolution of the post-1960s. Household names in the Anglo-Saxon world, the philosopher-writers she takes up are juxtaposed with artists who tend not to be known outside of France. Along the way it behooves us to know why: critics who did not frequent galleries and expositions from the 1960s up to now discover how deeply theory has been invested in the visual field. The painters, themselves in active and often highly critical dialogue with American art, tended to execute large canvases in hard-edge styles that, while sharing much with the tenor of Pop and Conceptual idiolects, exploited philosophy in order to bring sharp and cutting political edges to their creations.

The study is organized around “Narrative Figuration, Paris 1960-72,” a retrospective held at the Grand Palais in the spring of 2008 that assembled a considerable body of work anticipating and indeed informing what crystallized in the riots of May-July 1968 and their aftermath. Narrative Figuration “was positioned on the very cusp of postmodernism: it exemplified the last moment in France of grand history painting and the tradition of revolutionary romanticism” (p. 15). Keeping Rauschenberg, Rosenquist and Warhol in mind, Wilson adds that the artists affiliated with the movement, neither skeptical nor ironic about their undertaking, were “militantly figurative, ...fiercely engaged with contemporary popular culture” (p. 16) and implicitly or explicitly critical of the hegemony of American art. The mosaic history, set within the frame of the years 1960-2008, is organized according to what Wilson calls a logic of encounter. Writers find in the labor of artists they befriend a forum for inspired and ever-ongoing exchange. Paintings become the sites of critical and exploratory essays that, far from using art to exemplify theory, become arenas where language and image intercede and inform each other.

An introductory interlude sets as a point of departure “The Datcha,” a history painting of sorts, that Eduardo Arroyo designed and partners Gilles Aillaud, Francis Biras, Lucio Fanti and Fabio Reiti executed in July 1969 for the “Police et culture” show for the Salon de la Jeune Peinture at the Musée de la Ville de Paris. Portraying Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Althusser and Barthes as mute zombies in the confines of a secondary residence (an eerily secluded apartment) whose picture-window looks onto an urban non-space, in its moment—scarcely a year after the riots that brought France to a standstill—the painting indicates how much these formative intellectuals had retreated from the reality of current social conditions.

The six chapters that follow show how artists and intellectuals of the same and later generations keep politics at the forefront of their collaborations. In the first chapter, Jean-Paul Sartre’s celebrated essay on Robert Lapoujade (among others of his signature, that include articles on Canaletto, Tintoretto and Giacometti) is seen as a foil of “existentialist humanism” that stands in keen contrast to Louis Althusser’s inspired relation with Leonardo Cremonini, a painter whose surreal depictions of torture and terror corresponded with the moment—the Algerian War, the murders of 17 October 1961, the Americanization of France—in which *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* were born. In chapter two, Pierre Bourdieu’s experience of military service in Morocco, which led to his sociological studies of alienation in the colonial world, is juxtaposed with Bernard Rancillac, one of the key artists in the volume, who mobilizes the Pop aesthetic in paintings based on photographs from the War in Vietnam and on images of African leaders whom western forces had put to death.

Chapter three sets Lucio Fanti’s kitsch-like paintings of dead or forlorn heroes of pre-gulag Russia in the context of the troubled relation that Althusser and other intellectuals had held with Communism in the years in which its corrupt practices were made public. In chapter four, Wilson sorts through the dialogue that Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault had led with Gérard Fromanger (another of the painters crucial to the volume), an artist who painted epic scenes from mosaic assemblages of photographs projected onto his canvases. In Fromanger these philosophers found evidence for an array of theories bearing on painting and philosophy: among others, the diagram, the rhizome, and even the new taxonomy of an archeology of knowledge in which distinction of discursive and visible formations was keynote.

Chapter five studies Jean-François Lyotard’s enduring relation with Jacques Monory, a paternal figure in the Narrative Figuration movement, who inspires the philosopher’s writings on melancholy, eroticism and the sublime. Monory’s paintings of the early 1970s become correlatives of Lyotard’s decisive *Économie libidinale*, while others, of slightly later vintage, share much with the unreal spaces that Lyotard constructs from his experience of America in autobiographical writings and in his famous *Immatériaux* show at the Centre Pompidou in 1985. Chapter six, a scintillating and consummate study of drawing, image and writing in the exchanges that Derrida had with Valerio Adami (and to a lesser degree, Gérard Titus-Carmel), shows how much the philosopher’s work is embedded in the drawn figuration of language.

In a jeweled conclusion, Wilson notes that Narrative Figuration came to its end in 1977. The traditions of history painting and of representation on which it was based had lost their currency. By then, North American audiences had to put up with the likes of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Francesco Clemente and other artists (whom Robert Hughes declined in his *Sohoiaid*) that the market had foisted upon them while, conversely, the French public was exposed to the New Philosophers that the journal *Critique* saw as evidence of *le comble du vide*. The banality of these painters and writers has now shown how much artists associated with Narrative Figuration “were nevertheless stamped with that revolutionary history” (p. 214) going hand-in-hand with what has since been called French theory. The author notes—genially,

in the view of this reader--that in 1974 the "tolling bell which sounded in Derrida's *Glas*...resonated through the era and beyond." As a result the heady Marxism that Althusser had brought forward in the early 1960s "appeared as a spectre, a past informing the present like a memory of death, a mourning" of times past when the illusion that the world could be changed for the better seemed still to hold promise (p. 215). These final words chime with those of the introduction, where Wilson speculates that, by returning to Narrative Figuration through the filter of theory, we see better what we have before us today: a "hyper-capitalist, globalised and terrorized society, facing economic recession and the potential collapse of the narratives of both liberal capitalism and democracy" (p. 28).

The Visual World of French Theory revives the political and aesthetic ferment on which generations of students of art, literature, philosophy and the *sciences humaines* had feasted. Meticulously researched and based on the author's extensive fieldwork in ateliers, galleries and expositions, the book includes a register of painters, careful transcription and translation of all French sources in an ample body of endnotes, and an exhaustive bibliography of primary and secondary material. Its welcome political agenda is allied with its clear and telling critical focus. Readers are first led to wonder if the artists she studies belong to the allegorical tradition of "thesis-painting" derivative of the Romantic era. Closer comparative examination reveals that the works, infused as they are with theory, exploit history as a source for performative deviation and caustic treatment of the world from which they emerge. Every adept or specialist of theory and of French painting of the last four decades will welcome this crisply written and ever-informative book that utterly changes our appreciation of its topic.

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ISSN 1553-9172