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Ari Blatt, *Pictures into Words: Images in Contemporary French Fiction*. Lincoln and London: Nebraska University Press, 2012. x + 249 pp. Images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8032-3805-3.

Review by William Cloonan, Florida State University.

Toward the end of Ari Blatt's illuminating *Pictures into Words: Images in Contemporary French Fiction*, the author, referring to Marcel Duchamps's creation of the readymade, suggests that this provocation heralded "the emergence of a postmodern logic of appropriationist 'postproduction' in which cultural artifacts are not merely recycled, but reinvented and reconsumed" (p.160). This is the impetus for Blatt's study. Essentially he examines how the introduction of images in selected texts radically alters the work of literature. Obviously this is not true of every book with a picture in it, but Blatt does detect a pattern in novels associated with the postmodern. *Pictures into Words* centers on four works of fiction in which images play a significant role, Claude Simon's *Triptyque*, George Perec's *Un cabinet d'amateur*, Pierre Michon's *Vie de Joseph Roulin*, Tanguy Viel's *Cinéma*.<sup>[1]</sup>

In each instance Blatt focuses not precisely on the appropriated images in these works, but on the ways their presence in the texts alters the verbal medium, so that these novels, while never ceasing to be literature, become for the reader "imagetexts" where the pictures are used neither in an inconsequential nor "purely ornamental way" (p. 10). Rather, they "partake in the storytelling" (p. 10). They are books "of and about pictures" (p. 8, emphasis in text), and as such they present peculiar challenges since they problematize the sense of the parameters of both prose fiction and the visual arts. Blatt offers an arresting summary of his aim: "How might the literary incorporation of images...impact the ways we think not only about pictures and perceptions, but also about the *texts, reading* and the role that *literature* occupies in society today?" (p. 21, emphasis in text). *Pictures in Words* is a cogently argued effort to respond to this question.

Initially this approach can seem quite cerebral and lead to readings that appear very clever without yielding much insight into the works under discussion, but Blatt avoids this potential danger by anchoring each discussion in some aspect of contemporary theories and fashions prevailing in today's art world. One of the finest aspects of this book is the way it shows how these novels which can often seem hermetic are in fact deeply engaged with cultural issues of considerable importance.

Blatt's method, then, is to combine close textual readings with an integration of the work under discussion into a broader social context. In his reading of *Triptyque*, he places Simon's intentions in diametrical opposition to the dictates of the most powerful art critic of the day, Clement Greenberg, the pope/grand inquisitor of Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg argued forcefully that contemporary painters should only concern themselves with what was unique to the medium of paint; that they should banish from their canvases historical motifs, story of any sort, traditional symbolism, et cetera. For Greenberg, painting should only do what painting can do, and should certainly avoid anything that implies the mingling of painting with other artistic genres. As Blatt shows, *Triptyque* constitutes a rejoinder to Greenberg's position. It represents a conscious effort to explore the degree to which the visual and the verbal can be brought together in a successful work of art. To that end, he explains how

Simon uses words to allude to a variety of images and references at once, how the superimposition of narrative strains replicates the visual artist's use of several coats of paint, and how Simon consciously employs color imagery to simulate the visual effect of painting.

Blatt links the creative activities of Simon with those of Robert Rauschenberg, the American graphic artist. Rauschenberg's "combines" join painterly and sculptural elements in a sort of three-dimensional collage of which *Monogram* (1959) is a good example. Such pieces function, according to Blatt, as "puzzles" the viewer is invited to ponder, if not always resolve (p. 52). Simon's novels can be viewed in a comparable fashion, yet perhaps in a more radical way than in the "combines," as puzzles which will always elude total resolution. In this respect, the two artists challenge Greenberg and reflect their mutual sense that human beings' experience of the world is "necessarily incomplete" (p. 53).

The period Blatt discusses in this monograph runs from the 1970s to the end of the century, an era which witnessed "the increasing ubiquity of the visual in contemporary culture" (p. 60). In this context, *Un cabinet d'amateur* becomes something of a cautionary tale, a recognition of the omnipresence of the image and an acknowledgement of how easily the picture can deceive. In a broader sense, the novel addresses the issue of the "fake," and what exactly separates its value from that of the original.

In *Un cabinet d'amateur*, the painter, Kürz, is a skilled forger, so adept at what he does that he deliberately makes slight changes in the *mise-en-abyme* in his canvas to test his viewers who inevitably fail to note the alteration. He is a master at *trompe l'oeil*, and enough of a philosopher to know that most people are quite happy in Plato's cave where the simulacrum of reality can readily pass for the original. Perec manipulates the notion of *trompe l'oeil* to alert his readers to the dangers of gullibility, either to images or ideologies. As Blatt observes, the ultimate aim of Perec's deployment of *trompe l'oeil* is to "*détromper l'oeil*" (p. 77)

Speaking directly to the concept of the "fake," Blatt sees *Un cabinet d'amateur* as addressing an issue that was the subject of hot debate at the time of the book's appearance: "Why...are...fakes...deemed worthless kitsch if they are virtually indistinguishable from the 'real' paintings upon which they are based" (p. 89)? It will surprise nobody that he does not exactly answer this question, but chooses instead to implicitly suggest that, in the postmodern era, the conundrum can never be resolved since artists quite consciously fudge the distinction between the original and the copy. Although the trained eye can find in Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) elements which set it apart from its model (the use of plywood, the work's size, the absence of flaps), these slight differences are perhaps less important than the issue of why the artist is so set upon replicating such a banal object. In this chapter, Blatt makes many illuminating references to Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1973), a film which considers the degrees of fakery required to make an "original" work of art.

In the concluding passages on *Un cabinet d'amateur*, Blatt praises the work for "rescuing the fake from its exile on the margins of culture" (p. 95). In the following chapter, devoted to Pierre Michon's *Vie de Joseph Roulin*, he extends the discussion of the fake and the real, but here the emphasis is on the original, specifically, the incredible prices offered for works of visual art. He revisits the scene in the novel where the elderly Roulin opens his door to discover a man who wishes to pay him a rather large sum for the portrait of himself made so many years ago by that odd Dutchman. Blatt reads Michon's novel as an extended commentary on the role of the marketplace in the creation of art. Banks, wealthy investors and businesses of various sorts contribute to the "creation" of art and the artist by placing a price tag on the finished product. In addition to developing these ideas through a close reading of the novel, Blatt makes useful reference to visual arts such as Jeff Koons and Hans Haacke whose works frequently focus on the industrialization of the art world. While Blatt's point is well-taken, and he develops it very well, this chapter remains the least successful in *Pictures into Words*, only because the story is all too well-known.

The chapter focusing on Tanguy Viel's *Cinéma* is somewhat different from the others since the pictures here are moving. The novel represents an effort by a crazed narrator to replicate in words Joseph Mankiewicz's 1972 thriller, *Sleuth*. For the purposes of Blatt's discussion, this film (which features a dizzying number of plot reversals), amounts to an extended meditation on the image and the word, the "real" and the "fake." While the reader of *Cinéma* will rapidly see that that the narrator will never manage a successful transcription of the visible into the verbal, this same reader will also understand that this failure is precisely the point: image and text can be brought together, to a degree transforming each other, but they always will be different. This is a point Blatt has been reiterating throughout his study. If the postmodern text is capable of undergoing radical revisions due to its interaction with the visual, the literary quality of the work will only be enhanced by this contact. Rather than a picture somehow dominating a prose narrative or the opposite, their successful intermingling in a single text has the potential to enhance both media due in large measure to the vitality created by their juxtaposition. Certainly the "imagetexts" Blatt describes are not simply books with pictures in them.

At the beginning of *Pictures into Words*, Blatt places the works he is about to study under the aegis of *ekphrasis* (p. 10), the literary technique by which a work of visual art is replicated verbally in a literary work. Now, however, he suggests that *Cinéma* "offers a critique of *ekphrasis*, and its drive to simultaneously empower and contain the image it describes" (p. 144). This latter attitude toward *ekphrasis* seems the more accurate one, not simply in relation to *Cinéma*, but to all the works he analyses. *Ekphrasis* is too staid and traditional a notion to capture the dynamic relation and tension between word and image that Blatt ascribes to these texts. A more extensive discussion of a very contemporary version of *ekphrasis*, one that does not deny the actuality of the past, but emphasizes the role of recycling in the present, would have brought the reader closer to the text-image experience Blatt proposes.

While one of the strengths of *Words into Pictures* is identifying a certain type of postmodern fiction, the "imagetext," his most striking contribution to the discussion of the contemporary novel is to challenge the notion of originality in contemporary art. This is implicit in every chapter, but it becomes increasingly prominent in the *Cinéma* chapter and the conclusion. In these sections, he gives pride of place to artist such as James Rosenquist, Jenny Holzer and Pierre Huyghe, artists who undermine "...the modern tradition that defines the work of art as an unique, synthetic creation" (p. 158). Blatt seems to suggest that today's artist can best be described as a *bricoleur*, someone who creates to a large extent by recycling the past as well as the present. From this perspective, artistic "originality" results from the borrowing and skillful use of found objects, be they discovered in the street, the movies or museums.

*Pictures into Words* is an informed and challenging study, and also a learned one. The monograph has an impressive bibliography, and makes salient use of contemporary theory. Yet it is ironic that, while this work is so anchored in the contemporary, so theoretically informed, the *maître à penser* in terms of its intellectual boldness remains Marcel Duchamps.

#### NOTE

[1] Claude Simon, *Triptyque* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973); George Perec, *Un cabinet d'amateur* (Paris: Balland, 1979); Pierre Michon, *Vie de Joseph Roulin* (Paris: Verdier, 1988); and Tanguy Viel, *Cinéma* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1999).

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