Between Belief and Atheism: French Readings of Abstraction

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“He who believes what others believe is modern”.

Bruno Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, Paris : Synthélabo, 1996 (Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond)

- 1 A singular collection of publications accompanies the exhibition *Aux origines de l'abstraction 1800-1914*, organized at the Musée d'Orsay by Pascal Rousseau with the help of Arnaud Pierre, Julie Ramos, and Georges Roque. Two of them fit perfectly with the worksite opened up by the exhibition catalogue, itself a constellation of different readings of the scientific and synaesthetic origins of abstraction. One is the first French translation of the third part of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (1810), *Matériaux pour l'histoire de la théorie des couleurs*, in the excellent translation by Maurice Elie, preceded by a subtle and illuminating preface by Eliane Escoubas. The second is the catalogue of the works of Frantisek Kupka—central figure in the d'Orsay show—belonging

to the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art, outstandingly inventoried by Brigitte Leal for the “extra muros” Pompidou Centre exhibition. If these two publications stem from the establishment of sources and constitute research instruments, two others propose theoretical interpretations of early abstract works. G. Roque answers the question: *What is Abstraction?* and Philippe Sers augments his *Kandinsky. Philosophie de l'art abstrait : peinture, poésie, scénographie*, probably as a tribute to Anatole Kopp, “to all those who have believed, still do believe, and will believe in modernity not as a style, but as a cause”.

- 2 “Belief”, as we know, often goes hand in hand with regret for an allegedly glorious past, with, as a corollary, a harsh criticism of the present, deemed to be more “ephemeral” than past presents: this is the case of P. Sers. Our present, for him, is prey to the laws of internationalization, and devoid of utopia, and, when all is said and done, impure: “The great broom of history has unfortunately not yet started its cleaning job in our day and age” (p. 40). But isn’t the problem the fact that each time history has wanted to take up its broom, it was to do away with itself? Is it possible, today, to invoke something like a “spring clean”, as Kandinsky and his Expressionist friends did on the eve of 1914? Not even a “philosophy of abstract art” can free itself from historicity, its own as much as that of its object. P. Sers defends his belief proudly—and with a fanaticism that is even more disputable than that of the moderns, because it is late in coming (so has nothing happened since?). His understanding of the abstract, oriental, Christian, even Platonic image (it all comes to the same thing in his book) has as its conceptual matrix the Christian icon; this is probably why the image has a saving mission for the author. P. Sers’s belief is set forth at times in the mode of pure assertiveness (the onlooker must blend in a Kandinsky picture, and forget himself in order to “see the light”, p. 33), and at others through the simple identification of the author with his object (Kandinsky’s thinking paraphrased, the painter’s submission borrowed without inverted commas, p. 43). P. Sers presents his method like a hermeneutic exercise, but he seems to overlook the fact that this latter has proceeded, from Friedrich Schleiermacher at least, from the loss of the immediacy of sense and from the tension of the interpretations—because it is merely the fruit of our “ephemeral” and controversial day and age. He also defends just as much the infallibility of his “iconic hermeneutics” and condemns semiotics which, by mimetic contagion, is a science that is as prosaic as its primary object: language—far too poor when compared with the image (p. 15).
- 3 G. Roque adopts a stance that is the diametric opposite: for him, semiotics, a science beyond contingencies, is endowed with an interpretative neutrality which is every bit a match for the hard sciences. Having all the qualities of hermeneutic and formalist methods, and none of their shortcomings, semiotics is both the middle way and the fast lane combined for gaining access to the meaning of abstraction (p. 411 ff.). The author’s concern with rigour is apt, but it cannot be shared when it takes on the overtones of a certain return to order. “Art historians”, as G. Roque condescendingly labels those who studied abstraction before him, have nevertheless helped to specify, be it by means of formalism or hermeneutics, some of the sources of abstraction which are still valid. To sum up, one gets the feeling that spiritualism would make abstraction ashamed—and be its shame: how, otherwise, are we to comprehend G. Roque’s effort, in his contribution to the d’Orsay catalogue, to prove the chronological and, all of a sudden, ontological, antecedence of scientific statements about spiritualist theses? (p. 58). Human feats and acts have no need of “pure” motifs, but are in most cases the outcome of competing

motifs. Does not theosophy owe its success, in the 19th century, to the answers it gave to the “interpretative malaise” stirred up by images of science? (p. 58-59). Or alternatively, has it not quite simply sought to fill in the same semantic and ontological void that was also filled by belief in science?

- 4 The contributions by P. Rousseau, A. Pierre, J. Ramos and Marcella Lista to the d’Orsay catalogue do not champion any kind of methodological exclusivism, while at the same time adopting a micro-historic method focused on the scientific and scientific sources of abstraction. The last section of this catalogue is less focused, however, on these sources, and more on synaesthesia: J. Ramos, and, even more so, M. Lista simultaneously and subtly pull the different threads (aesthetic, formal, ideological and scientific) which have contributed to the formation of romantic imitation and early abstractions.
P. Rousseau and A. Pierre, both rigorous and precise, once more open up the great site of reflection and research: the role of the body, true terrain of “aesthetic reception”, as much for the artists as for the scientific aesthetic of the 19th century.
- 5 Taken overall, this catalogue prompts two observations. The first has to do with a certain interdisciplinarity: if French art history is in the process of discovering the immense scientific laboratory of the 19th century, other disciplines such as the history of medicine, political history and the history of science have been exploring this field for a long time. Likewise, it would have been nice to have a less specific exploration of the links between science and spiritualism, which were so close during the period in question. The authors’ thesis, whereby science is *one* of the sources of abstraction, and not the only one, would be on a firmer footing as a result: for it is true that, rather than belief or atheism, albeit enlightened, it is a form of agnosticism that art history needs.