Realisms — Between Revolution and Reaction?

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REFERENCES


Bernard Rancillac’s *Le Regard idéologique* is a tremendously important publication. While the artist, whose well-known paintings can be violently political, deliberately sardonic – or pure Mickey Mouse– comes across as shy and deliberately self-deprecating, he is the only artist associated with the Figuration narrative grouping to have attempted to investigate its origins and explore its context. Attempts to market the movement internationally have conspicuously failed. Bernard Blistène’s rather grim show *Premises* at the Guggenheim Soho in New York, in 1998, attempted to present a new urbanised, aggressive France –from reconstruction to rap culture via Jean Nouvel. He could make space for Arman or Ben and Spoerri, but deliberately avoided the two movements which dominated the 1970s and were about painting: Supports-Surfaces and Figuration narrative. These curatorial choices create critical ellipses beyond France. With the literature currently available, it is difficult to convey the richness of Supports-Surfaces to new generations outside France: the fascinating dialogues between Matisse and Duchamp, between French Structuralism, American formalism and Maoism. But Figuration narrative fascinates them: the imagery is legible, funny, disturbing, the urgency of political concerns apparent, the dialogue with forms of popular culture. The immersion in a specifically French situation, a post-1968 malaise, a blue melancholy, a French economic miracle beginning to implode in the context of Vietnam and world recession is clear, and
makes the comparison between European realism and American Hyperrealism extremely interesting.

2 Rancillac’s *Le Regard Idéologique* contextualises his own experiences in diary form, literally *au jour le jour* between 1975 and 1979, with a wealth of references to contemporary exhibitions in Paris, reviews in *Le Monde*, current criticism and its reception. Above all he engages with the political past. As neo-marxism in France was engaged in a struggle – almost to the death – with the virulent Communist Party heritage and the sham de-Stalinisation efforts of the 1970s, Rancillac reveals the climate of art in Paris when besides avant-gardism, political engagement mattered. For example he mentions *L’URSS et la France* (Grand Palais, December, 1974); the huge display of avant-garde Soviet painting at the Venice Biennale of 1977, followed by *60 ans de peinture soviétique* (Grand Palais, 1977), *Art abstrait soviétique non-conformiste* at the Salon d’Automne, 1978 and so on. Rancillac recounts not only how he supplemented this experience through his own reading: Lucien Goldmann, Avner Ziss, Jean Kanapa, Marc Ferro on October 1917, Freville on Plekhanov, but demonstrates a curiosity about his socialist realist heritage—in France as well as the Soviet Union. Socialist Realism is investigated as a historical entity by Rancillac in the Bibliothèque des Recherches Marxistes, and on his own trips: to Albania for example, and nearer home: to interview the veteran Communist painter Boris Taslitzky in his studio. Little did Rancillac know how he was repeating, a generation later, Taslitzky’s own Communist-Party sponsored trip to Albania in 1957. The most illuminating moment of *Le Regard Idéologique* comes when Rancillac reads Ezra N. Suleiman’s *Les Hauts fonctionnaires et la politique*. It needed an American, sociologist of the English public-school system (!) to analyse France’s elite-forming institutions, and state the obvious that the grand machinery of the State and international diplomacy during the *Trente glorieuses* had more important problems to resolve than questions of art and the left, realism, representation, the avant-garde, etc., and that cultural foreign policy—so much less astute, than America’s well-financed CIA Cold War strategies—was of cosmetic importance only, its failures insignificant.

3 It is this crucial intellectual and political background—let alone the huge American question whose impact in the arts to take the areas of Pop and Hyperrealism alone—was all-important, that is missing from Jean-Louis Pradel’s nonetheless most welcome new book *La Figuration narrative*, produced at the time of a group show at the Villa Tamaris, La Seyne-sur-Mer. With excellent illustrations, biographies, comparative chronologies and an up-to-date bibliography, it rehearses the increasingly familiar history of the Figuration narrative movement, the exhibitions from *Mythologies quotidiennes* (1964), *La Figuration narrative* (1965), *Le Monde en question* (1967), to *Topino-Lebrun et ses amis* (1977) at the Centre Pompidou, together with the pertinent comparisons, and quotations such as Rancillac’s: « Pour ceux que le fusil rebute, le pinceau peut-il être une arme ? » [« For those repelled by guns, can the paintbrush be a weapon? »] The answer, at the level of the Assemblée Nationale would of course be “Non!”. Rancillac’s *Sur le Front d’Aragon*, 1996 or Gérard Fromanger’s *L’Atelier de la Révolution-Lumières du serment du Jeu de Paume*, 1991, looked, for all their *romantisme révolutionnaire*, embarrassingly out of place, when exhibited there for the FIAC (2000)...

4 A curious bridge was the work Philippe Cognée whose monochrome, encaustic visions of surburban tower blocks on display both at the Assemblée and at the école nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, in *Ce sont les pommes qui ont changé* curated by Hector Obalk and Didier Semin. I adored this, “oh-so French”, exhibition, which seemed particularly self-
conscious and witty. While Gilles Aillaud, once a Duchamp-slayer of Figuration narrative along with Arroyo and Recalcati, was acknowledged here as spiritual father of the group, I must confess that, without the spirit of provocation and the all-important dérision of the 1960s, his landscapes of Kenya or Brittany left me unmoved; shown with the Supports-Surfaces veteran Vincent Bioulès and Hugues Pissarro –alias Pomié–, Aillaud confronted a younger generation: the Apple advert on Boisrond’s translucent Ville de Paris bus shelters presumably provided the title of the show. Hector Obalk provides an anthology of his texts from 1986 to 2,000 –cool, savant, funny–, good on “bad” art, sometimes over the top.

5 The Pommes exhibition also overlapped with Philip Guston at the Beaubourg. The artist’s relationship with Philip Roth, twenty years Guston’s junior, likewise at his most unbridled and lurid during his self-imposed rural exile in Woodstock, was a discovery for me in the catalogue, where Guston’s writings from 1950-78 are translated into French for the first time. Guston’s mid-period, almost overwhelming relationship with late Monet seems curiously overlooked here. Early political works in the show such as The Tormentors, 1947-8, when Guston had Communist affiliations, are not illustrated –although of course the resurgence of Klu Klux Klan images in the later figurative work, and the brutality indicated by hob-nailed boots and penis-like stumps is all too apparent. The Centre Pompidou presented a Guston charmingly intellectualised by Didier Ottinger but neutralised by the institution; the comparisons with Goya via Malraux and Camus’s Sisyphus “existentialised” à la française an artist who wanted to give art –as well as society– a kick in the balls.

6 Didier Semin asks in Ce sont les pommes qui ont changé « What is bad painting?». The questions « Why socialist realism? Why Bernard Buffet? Why Georges Mathieu? Or why, indeed Figuration narrative? » seem to be questions that hit a jugular nerve within French culture. Semin, who proposed a “Carte blanche à Hector Obalk” while still at the Pompidou in 1998, appreciates the anthropological as well as ideological dimensions of this question (and is not ashamed of his tendresse for certain nostalgia-filled, well painted images).