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Hélène Valance, *Nocturne. Night in American Art, 1890–1917*

Winner of the Terra Foundation for American Art – Yale University Press
American Art in Translation Book Prize.

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REFERENCES

Hélène Valance, *Nocturne. Night in American Art, 1890-1917*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018, 256 pages, 116 color and 35 black and white illustrations, \$45. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. ISBN: 9780300223996

- ¹ *Nocturne - Night in American Art, 1890–1917* was originally published in French as *Nuits américaines: l'art du nocturne aux États-Unis, 1890-1917*.¹ In this lavishly illustrated book, Hélène Valance proposes to explore the radical change that occurred in American art in the early 1890s, from Hudson River School painters' grandiose depiction of the American wilderness to artists who "devot[ed] themselves almost systematically to an art that favored atmospheric effects, with a preeminent place given to nighttime" (3). This art will then be referred to as "nocturne," "nocturnal landscape" or "nocturnal genre" in the course of her demonstration. Valance clearly states her theoretical objective in the introduction: "My approach seeks to demonstrate that this corpus constitutes a coherent artistic movement and, beyond it, a particularly significant cultural phenomenon profoundly anchored in a pivotal moment of American history" (12).
- ² Following the holistic principles of visual culture studies, she thus aptly intertwines historical, cultural, social, political, and even scientific perspectives, to shed light on this radical departure from the set of representational practices that defined the American landscape in the early nineteenth century. Her approach is definitely in line with W.J.T. Mitchell's, who defines landscape "not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed" (Mitchell 1).

Indeed, as Valance puts it: “Night fascinated American artists and their public because, through its representations, there circulated a set of cultural meanings that resonated profoundly with the everyday lives of Americans and with a modernity to which they sometimes struggled to adapt. Darkness proved to be a particularly fitting source of cultural representations through which to address a number of these new phenomena, whether scientific, technological, political, or social” (10). Her book’s structure revolves around three main thematic axes (studied throughout ten chapters), each one focusing on a specific aspect of the nocturnal genre in relation to the broader issue of the status of images in American culture at that time. The three parts also delve into the three major historical developments that concurrently occurred in the United States: the official closing of the frontier of the Wild West in 1890, the advent of modern art at the Armory Show of 1913, and the radical change in the United States’ international politics that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century.

- 3 The first part, “Antivisions” focuses more closely on the aesthetics of the nocturne. Just as Thomas Cole (1801-1848) established the visual tropes of the American landscape in the early 19th century, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) paved the way for the nocturnal genre. Indeed, Americans rediscovered Whistler’s artwork in the early 1890s: “From 1866 to the mid-1880s, Whistler produced a series of night landscapes characterized by almost monochromatic abstraction [...]” (3). Despite the “radical aesthetic stance” (7) and “intransigent formalism of his paintings” (7), it was met with favorable public and critical appraisal and seemed to match the cultural environment of the turn of the twentieth century. To prove her point, the author examines how scientific breakthroughs (X-rays, the microscope, the telescope, etc.) and technological evolutions (mechanical reproduction) “revolutionized the field of the visible” (34) while producing a paradoxical response : as the world became more and more accessible from a visual perspective, it also strengthened the idea that some things may remain unseen and beyond the reach of science, shrouded in darkness somehow. Similarly, the mass production of images and their increased accessibility also spurred painters and photographers to reconsider the status of images, which were in the process of becoming mere commodities. As a result, they produced more high-brow and challenging forms of art (such as nocturnal landscapes, the halftone, or pictorialist photography): “Artists, confronted with that emblematic medium for mechanically reproducing images, strategically used the nocturne’s codes to situate themselves (artistically, sociologically, and economically) within the ever-expanding economy of images” (51). Valance convincingly uses the example of Frederic Remington (1861-1909), one of the most popular commercial illustrators of the time, to demonstrate this point. Indeed, Remington increasingly shifted to night scenes at the end of his career. Finally, psychology began to be officially recognized as a scientific endeavor,² and consequently, the apprehension of subjectivity took on a Byzantine complexity that perfectly matched the “space of mental projection” (79) depicted by nocturne artists, who sometimes exhibited stereotypical dispositions, like a “feminine sensibility” (80) and/or nervousness that could sometimes verge on madness (see for example the case of Ralph Albert Blakelock, 1847-1919). Valance states that the nocturne ultimately epitomized a complex, shifting and—to some extent—reactionary definition of the American civilization that “revealed [nocturne artists’] anxiety in a context where religion on one hand and scientific positivism on the other seemed to have become incapable of ensuring the idea of a world governed by a stable system” (79).

- 4 At that point, in the second part of the book, “Heart of Darkness”, Valance moves on to a more political interpretation of the genre. Nocturne artists all belonged to the white, urban, and mostly male middle- and upper-class America and the images they created reveled in a nostalgic, melancholy and “muted version of the triumphalist discourse of American imperialism” (87). This new discourse on Americanness was accompanied by a change in foreign policy impelled by William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, who abandoned the isolationist stance that had prevailed so far and set forth to bear the torch of American values and Western civilization overseas. Anyhow, Valance admits that one would be hard-pressed to find allusions to race relations in paintings mostly exhibiting a “semantic void” (30). Here again, Valance resorts to a cross-disciplinary investigative model, white studies, “developed by historians and literary critics such as Toni Morrison and David Roediger, [and which] complements the various disciplines of minority studies by offering an analysis of the dominant (often white and male) point of view” (218). She thus analyzes nocturnes, “the landscape of white civilization” (92) in the light of images either betraying a racial bias and/or discourse (advertisements, photographs, postcards) or inspired by cosmopolitanism, like Japanism. She points out that nocturnal landscapes, which used extensively the metaphor of light and darkness, could be accused of using pervasively the imperialist dichotomy that correlated Western civilization and light, and conversely, “nonwhites and darkness” (97). However, Valance also stresses that contradictions and ambiguities were a core element of the genre, which cannot be crudely reduced to a series of cultural clichés. In one of the many thorough visual analyses interspersed throughout the text, she has chosen this time Winslow Homer’s *Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba* (1901) to prove her point: “The simple setting of *Searchlight* does not allude directly to the racist violence of colonization. But if Homer’s painting is considered within the mass of images that formed the everyday visual environment at the dawn of the twentieth century, the metaphor of night takes on a more evident signification” (100). The nostalgic subtext of Homer’s image is also used as a symbolic transition towards the “nocturnal imagery of the West” or “frontier nocturne” through which artists grieved the loss of the Western frontier, “metaphorically swallowed up by the dark” (112). These images lamented the “vanishing Indian” (112), the destruction of the wilderness but also the disappearance of “a certain kind of white man” (121). The trope of the Indians was particularly rife with ambiguities since once “an apolitical image of them (128)” that evacuated the crimes committed against them was constructed, they became part and parcel of “the American mythological genealogy” (126) by affirming the New World’s “cultural independence from the Old Continent” (127). The Indian was thus frequently depicted as a ghostly figure in nocturnal landscapes (see for example Edward S. Curtis’s eerie photograph, *The Vanishing Race*, c. 1904), which visually expressed the ambiguous feelings of nineteenth century Americans toward them but also hinted at their symbolic extermination.
- 5 Similarly, Americans had to grapple with the issue of a new “ethnic Other” (133), African Americans, whose situation generally became worse in the late nineteenth century. From a visual perspective, African Americans mostly appeared in racist caricatures, and their presence was marginal in the nocturnal genre. Valance notes that “African Americans were not a remote and largely imagined presence, and, unlike the Indians, they did not seem to belong to a bygone or vanishing era” (133). There was only one African American painter among the nocturne artists, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), and his mostly religious paintings testify to “the multiple displacements

through which the nocturne both incorporated and rejected the African American presence” (134).

- 6 Eventually, the nocturne rediscovered Whistler’s first inspiration: the urban views, as Valance explains in the third part “Landscape Reconfigured.” As a matter of fact, the disappearance of the frontier and the domestication of the last remnants of wilderness also meant the victory of industrialization, thus establishing the primacy of the urbanized landscape, in which nocturne artists found again a convenient “transitional space [...] populated by ambiguities and uncertainties” (148) through which they could express their ambivalent and conflicting feelings towards the American society, which was still torn between the Jeffersonian pastoral ideals and the unrelenting march of capitalism at the turn of the nineteenth century. Two opposite schools of artists prevailed. The first one was resolutely focused on an aesthetic approach and was composed of “tonalist painting and pictorialist photography privileged atmospheric effects and formal explorations in often-deserted views of the nocturnal city” (148). The second one was more socially and politically committed and was labelled “the Ashcan School” by art historians.
- 7 A major technological achievement, the large-scale electrification of American metropolises, contributed to a redefinition of urban spaces at night and a blurring of realities that artists were keen to explore, as Valance exemplifies: “The night enhanced by electric lighting opened up a world of leisure, a time of sociability detached from daytime activities, where hierarchical relations, economic issues, and cultural practices were entirely reconfigured” (152). The visual trope ‘darkness / brightness’ was also a very convenient way to picture the dual aspect of urbanization, from the splendor of Broadway to the squalor of derelict tenements housing the working-class and newly-arrived immigrants, the “other half” in Jacob Riis’s words (157) and documentary practice (161). Valance insists on the fact that, once again, visual art played an ambiguous role when it came to picturing alterity: “[...] though the urban picturesque attenuated certain contrasts, it also reproduced the most entrenched forms of discrimination in American society” (167).
- 8 Next, Valance turns to the question of the figure in the urban landscape, which caused “a profound visual disorientation” (170) among city dwellers and artists alike. The latter mostly resorted to the representation of the crowd and the shadow to convey this “shift to a problematic appearance” (169) incurred by the reconfiguration of cities. Valance uses the very convincing examples of John Sloan’s (1871-1951) crowd paintings, like *Six O’Clock, Winter* (1912) or *Election Night* (1907) or Childe Hassam’s (1859-1935) shadowy figures to illustrate her point.
- 9 In the final chapter, Valance convincingly argues that the nocturnal genre signaled a transition from the traditional pastoral definition of the American landscape to its contemporary urban redefinition, the “technological sublime” (195) that she presents as follows: “Through the nocturnal imagery of the city, a series of visual codes was set in place, inaugurating a reading of the sublime and of modernity that in large measure still dominates the perception and appreciation of the urban landscape” (187). This new urban aesthetic was particularly suited to the spectacular architecture of the American cityscape at night, to which beholders would soon be so accustomed, thanks to numerous photographs and prints, that they would be ready to accept urban and industrial images in full daylight, such as Charles Sheeler’s paintings. This visual process mirrored the advance of American capitalism of which “at the turn of the

twentieth century the American metropolis became emblematic” (Trachtenberg, quoted in Valance, 199).

- 10 In the conclusion, Valance explains that the nocturnal genre began to wane at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly with the introduction of modernism in American art at the 1913 Armory Show. She chooses Edward Hopper’s painting, *Night Window* (1928) as a sort of transitional object between two modes of nocturnal images. Indeed, the painting borrows some classical features of the genre (the anonymous and furtive figure for example), but also introduces newer and more abstract visual standards, like color blocks or the multiple sub-frames formed by the windows. According to Valance, Edward Hopper’s images also foreshadowed the future of the nocturne, whose thematic and visual ambivalence would become a standard feature of American movies in the 1940s and 1950s.
- 11 To conclude, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in or studying American visual culture. It provides a sweeping view of the field at the turn of the twentieth century, and numerous references and insights on the cultural and social developments of Americanness at that crucial period.

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NOTES

1. Hélène Valance, *Nuits américaines : l’art du nocturne aux États-Unis, 1890–1917*. Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015.

2. Valance explains that: “The University of Pennsylvania, for example, established its department of psychology in 1887; it was followed by many other universities in the 1890s. The American Psychological Association was founded in 1892” (75).

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Subjects: Recensions

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