

Brown on Boime (2008)

Boime, Albert. *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-siècle Painting*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2008. Pp. 304. ISBN: 978-0-8262-1780-6

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Albert Boime's investigation of French fin-de-siècle painting opens in dialogue with Sven Lövgrén's famous book, *The Genesis of Modernism: Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and French Symbolism in the 1880s* (1959; revised 1971). Like Lövgrén, Boime selects a series of works that he considers to be emblematic of key social, political, and aesthetic trends that characterized artistic production in France from the 1880s to the turn of the century. The works chosen for detailed analysis are Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889), Seurat's *La Parade de cirque* (1888), Cézanne's landscapes of the 1880s and 90s, and Gauguin's *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1897). For Boime, these works are unified by a recurrent leitmotif in the form of "the artist's projection of a social or personal utopia through a visual construct that attempts to reorganize perceptual experience" (x-xi). He locates these utopian aspirations in the context of each artist's biography and, more importantly for the trajectory of the book as a whole, in the socio-political and institutional circumstances of the works' production. It is this latter point that distinguishes this analysis from the approach adopted by Lövgrén and permits Boime to articulate a sense of "crisis" that permeated modernist artistic circles towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The form of this crisis in Van Gogh's *Starry Night* consists in a combination of anxieties about the artist's personal health and his reflection on metaphysical uncertainty in the face of the unknown. Boime provides a compelling reading of Van Gogh's painting by focusing not merely on the symbolism of the night sky, but on the astronomical foundations of the work. With the assistance of astronomy colleagues, Boime reconstructs the look of the sky over Saint-Rémy at the time of the work's production in order to track the changes and decisions that informed the final composition of the painting (discussion of Van Gogh's reworking of the shape of the moon is particularly engaging). Locating the work in art historical, scientific and popular treatments of celestial exploration, Boime argues that *Starry Night* sought to communicate a vision of harmony between nature and the cosmos, thereby offering its audience "fresh explanations of spiritual phenomena" (50).

Politics comes to the fore in Boime's interpretation of Seurat's *La Parade de cirque*. Drawing an analogy between the theme of the work and French political "sideshows" of the late 1880s, Boime argues that Seurat's painting spoke directly to the escapist pleasures of the working masses as well as to failed attempts by political leaders to alleviate poverty and hardship. Central to this socio-political reading of the work is the impact of Boulangism on avant-garde painting of the period. Although beginning as a reformist movement that protested against the bourgeois Republic, General Boulanger's political campaign ended with a secret appeal to the Right in a bid for power. Boime argues that this vacillation of a one-time hero prompted widespread pessimism amongst the Symbolist poets and anarchists who made up Seurat's circle. As a result, *Parade* is interpreted as an allegory of political disappointment that heralded the artist's own stronger alignment with parties that advocated more radical social reform.

Forming a link with the opening chapter on Van Gogh, Boime's reading of Cézanne's landscapes concerns itself with ways in which the artist conceived of his place in the wider world. The rigorous structure of Cézanne's compositions is interpreted by Boime as part of the artist's "craving for dominance and control over his elusive subjects and environment" and as a manifestation of his need to "command the spaces in which he paints" (103). This theme is discussed in the context of Cézanne's desire to maintain to the "purity" of Aix-en-Provence, his political conservatism and his psychological predilection for private spaces. In contrast to critical focus on phenomenological experience in Cézanne's works, Boime thus trains his attention on ways in which the exercise of a controlling gaze may be used to configure pictorial space in a manner that imposes structure on a disordered world.

The final chapter of the book investigates the role of the occult in Gauguin's *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* Developing the theme of disillusionment with French society of the late nineteenth-century, Boime interprets Gauguin's Edenic vision of Tahitian life against a background of magical thinking and escapist fantasy. It is argued that the writings of Éliphas Lévi (Alphonse-Louis Constant) on spiritualism and the occult were a powerful influence on Gauguin's millennial thinking as well as on various symbols included in the painting itself. Like Cézanne's landscapes, Gauguin's painting is viewed as symptomatic of the painter's desire to impose control and order on his surroundings, a retort to the social threats that threatened the power and privilege of the "white Western male's fictive norms of class, gender, and nationality" (212). Rather than viewing Gauguin's departure for Tahiti as a search for new artistic stimulation, Boime locates this period of productivity against Gauguin's personal and professional uncertainty in a rapidly-changing European bourgeois society. In this case, the

appropriation of occult symbolism fuels the artist's image of a "primitive" utopia that is both exclusionary and anti-democratic.

Taking a small group of paintings as representative of much wider social and aesthetic currents is a difficult task, and there are times when discussion of a larger selection of works would have strengthened Boime's analysis. Nevertheless, this elegantly-written book provides valuable insights into the paintings under discussion and reveals crucial fractures in the emergence of modernism at the end of the nineteenth century. Boime shows that while modernist art could offer a powerful social critique, it was also stimulated by fears of an assault on the privileged position of a socially dominant class. Showing how the emergence of modernism was informed by expressions of racial prejudice, sexism and anti-semitism, Boime's analysis is both an illuminating contribution to art history and a cautionary tale about the susceptibility of utopian thinking to ideological appropriation.

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