

## Garnett on Herbert (2015)

Herbert, James D. *Brushstroke and Emergence: Courbet, Impressionism, Picasso*. Chicago UP, 2015, pp. 149, ISBN 978-0-226-27201-6 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-226-27215-3 (e-book)

Mary Anne Garnett, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

*Brushstroke and Emergence* is not for the casual reader but rather, in Herbert's own words, for an "open-minded and creative" one willing to grapple with an innovative, complex, and often controversial examination of the process of artistic creativity (x). In this difficult and sometimes frustrating text, Herbert applies the concept of emergence—defined as "the way in which the interactions of simple behaviors at one level of a complex system can prompt unpredictable events at a higher level of the system that are qualitatively different from anything that exists at the lower level," to the subject of the brushstroke in specific art works by Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, and Pablo Picasso (2). His aim is to examine "the dynamics whereby modern painters form brushstrokes and brushstrokes form modern painters" (2) in reaction to the nineteenth-century belief that "the strong subjectivity of the artist creates the brushstroke, while the brushstroke divulges the essence of the artist" (1).

Herbert's multidisciplinary approach is a blend of cognitive science, art history, and philosophy. The latter is informed by the works of phenomenologists Hubert L. Dreyfus and John Haugeland whom he cites frequently, to the extent of referring to "Haugelandesque components" in an analysis of Courbet's *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* (36). Those accustomed to more traditional art history may be somewhat taken aback by the unexpected variety of analogies and cultural references Herbert uses in an attempt to illustrate difficult concepts for lay readers. In the space of a few pages, he can range from discussions of low-bandwidth versus high-bandwidth interfaces and the workings of ant colonies to quotes from the basketball player Larry Bird or from General Zaroff in the short story "The Dangerous Game."

It is not only the content of *Brushstroke and Emergence* that challenges readers' expectations but also the manner in which the author presents it. Herbert does announce the "somewhat idiosyncratic format" of his text (ix). He has intentionally avoided creating major subdivisions or chapters, instead preferring to separate sections by a single asterisk in order to avoid reinforcing "the sense of autonomy of individual artists and paintings that this book would like to question" (ix). He hopes to enhance his arguments "in subtle ways by having the writing emulate some of the characteristics of the events and artifacts it analyzes" (x). This is most explicit in his analysis of Picasso's cubist painting *La Jolie* in which the various parts of the woman's body are presented as clusters of attributes. Herbert creates neologisms like "quadrupartism" (an attribute of the representation not of the hand itself but of "handiness," and not to be confused with the political term quadripartism), "carpalism," and "thoracity" in order "to capture a sense in words of such idiosyncratic innovation in Picasso's visual lexicography" (112-13). Herbert's own style is an idiosyncratic blend of erudition and playfulness. This can sometimes verge on *préciosité* when an ant becomes a "unified formicine entity" (36), horses "extraneous equine entities" (21), and the roebuck "Courbet's cervine target" (29) with "emergent cervine consciousness" (72). Rather than facilitating comprehension, this playful use of language can, on occasion, distract the reader.

Among the strengths of Herbert's erudite essay are what might be called his close readings of the brushstrokes in canvasses that include some of the iconic works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* and Seurat's *Sunday on the Grande Jatte* (Herbert works with English titles). Some choices are less obvious, such as Cézanne's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* or Monet's *Rue Montorgueil, Celebration of 30 June* and *Boulevard des Capucines*. In all cases, his insightful analyses are enhanced by excellent color reproductions of the paintings and the details he discusses.

Unfortunately, the narrative flow is continually interrupted by reference to a multiplicity of endnotes: there are eighteen pages of endnotes for 129 pages of text and illustrations. Some of these endnotes are lengthy, running to a half a page or more, as in note 86 that attempts to explain and illustrate the Koch curve, a concept from fractal geometry (139-40). Herbert also uses the footnotes to expand his arguments for and against views expressed by other art historians, with whom he seems to relish sparring, in particular T. J. Clark. Nor does he spare himself, taking the opportunity to correct what Herbert now considers his own previous mistakes in earlier essays about Manet (138, note 77) and Picasso (x).

Finally, a practical consideration: Although the clothbound book is printed on glossy paper with beautiful color illustrations, some readers may prefer the e-book, which is both searchable (the paper version has only a barebones index) and scalable for easier reading, particularly of the dense endnotes.

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