

de Tholozany on Boime (2008)

Boime, Albert. *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. Pp xxvi + 250. ISBN 978-0-8262-1780-6

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Conceived as a response to Sven Lövgrén's *Genesis of Modernism*, *Revelation of Modernism* remains true to Albert Boime's distinctive contextualizing approach. Looking at artistic production through a historical and sociological lens, Boime integrates into his argument many heterogeneous sets of documents from different disciplinary fields that bring to light fascinating and unexpected material, sharpening our understanding of some of the most famous paintings in Western Art. The book consists of four chapters, the first of which deals with Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and the painter's interest in astronomy. Boime abundantly documents Van Gogh's fascination for Camille Flammarion, a popularizer of astronomy in the 1880s. Rescuing Van Gogh from the "mad genius" persona attached to his life and work, he points at the scientific exactitude that his paintings exhibit. Van Gogh's skies also relate to the painter's interest in cartography and to his idealized fantasy of the exotic lands that colonial expansion had rendered accessible at the time. The amount and diversity of material that Boime mobilizes here sometimes makes his argument hard to follow, but the chapter is nonetheless a very rewarding read. The following section on Seurat concentrates on *La Parade de cirque*, that Boime convincingly interprets as a political allegory. The painting is famous for its uncanny dichotomy, depicting as it does a circus parade in an unexpected gloomy mood. Boime focuses on the caricature of the period, this genre making extensive use of the "parade" setting when representing the political class. He gives particular attention to the figure of Général Boulanger, a radical politician who was exceptionally apt at staging himself in grandiose military mises-en-scènes. In a brilliant conclusion, the chapter interweaves these materials together and provides a convincing interpretation of Seurat's painting, arguing that the various characters depicted onstage each incarnate a different version of Boulanger's personae and political failure. In the third chapter, Boime reflects upon Cézanne's paintings, insisting on the lack of narrated access to his landscapes, composed as they are of closed houses and abruptly ending roads. The chapter ultimately seeks to amend the vision of the painter as a precursor of abstract art, stressing that although his compact masses and lines did inspire the aesthetics to come, they also proceeded from a desire of seclusion and appropriation that ultimately betrayed a quite mundane bourgeois aspiration to possess land and real estate.

Dealing with Gauguin's *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*, Boime's last chapter exposes the iconographic kinship between Gauguin's masterwork and the illustrations of Eliphas Lévi's mystic and occultist works. Lévi, a close friend of Gauguin's uncommon grandmother Flora Tristan, had written a series of syncretic and kabalistic treatises around the middle of the century. Boime's choice of prints from his works proves illuminating to understand Gauguin's sometimes obscure symbolism, and allows us a more subtle entry to the artist's paintings. The last pages of the chapter energetically expose Gauguin's religious, social, and political contradictions, in a somehow disorderly fashion that is perhaps impossible to avoid, given the painter's conflicting attitudes.

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