

**Howard Smagula, editor, *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1991, 170 pp., 13 black-and-white illus., \$21.80 U.S.**

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Volume 17, numéro 2, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073083ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073083ar>

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#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

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#### Citer ce compte rendu

Ramsay, E. L. (1990). Compte rendu de [Howard Smagula, editor, *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1991, 170 pp., 13 black-and-white illus., \$21.80 U.S.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 17(2), 190–192. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073083ar>

representational art. In the article, Schapiro takes the position that the characteristics of the pictorial field—the prepared surface, the boundaries, the positions (right/left), the directions, the shape of the field, its proportions, size, and scale, and then the image-making substances of ink painted, etc., lines and spots—all have expressive and constructive functions. He ends the article by comparing the practice in Degas of figures being “cut by the frame” to Mondrian’s non-mimetic paintings. As in the representational Degas, we are able to find meaning in the Mondrian: “In this construction one can see not only the artist’s ideal of order and scrupulous precision, but also a model of one aspect of contemporary thought, the conception of the world as law-bound in the relation of simple, elementary components, yet open, unbounded and contingent as a whole” (Schapiro, p. 223).

It is Schapiro’s contention that we arrive at that meaning through a combination of cultural conditioning by seeing earlier art images and by the habits of our everyday organic perceptual processes. Chave ends her book in a way that acknowledges the methods of interpretation cited by Schapiro:

Although viewers will not generally be cognizant of the specific associations involved, the painting “memories” or traces in Rothko’s art may resonate in the viewers’ unconscious along with those aspects of the classic pictures that are not associated with pre-existing pictorial codes; the use of the torn edge and rift for example, and of defocused, suspended forms that appear to have materialized, as if by magic, out of nothingness. (p. 189)

Schapiro and now Chave have, it seems to me, provided an excellent base not only for a fresh look at the Abstract Expressionists, but to the issue of the role of non-mimetic elements in painting whether representational or not. She has re-opened Schapiro’s invitation to further investigations of meaning in non-representational art.

#### NOTES

- 1 William Rubin, “Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism,” *Art in America* (November 1979), and Rosalind Krauss, “Contra Carmean: The Abstract Pollock,” *Art in America* (Summer 1982).
- 2 “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of the Visual Arts: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs,” *Semiotica*, 1 (1969).

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HOWARD SMAGULA, editor *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1991, 170 pp., 13 black-and-white illus., \$21.80 U.S.

Recent developments in postmodernism have opened valuable opportunities for an enlivened, community-centred dialogue on the discourse of art. In December 1990, at the ICA (London) Conference entitled “Values,” a debate emerged on subjectivity and the question of *value* in modern political and cultural practice. This debate emerged in the wake of the postmodern

erasure of “aesthetic value” as a criterion in the interpretation of art following the democratization of the cultural text. While the participants in this debate come from various quarters within the postmodern framework and support the evaluative achievements of levelling the cultural canon, they are now considering a move beyond the relativist discourse of early postmodernism into a new (and not so new) debate on the role of the “subject” (human agency) and “values” (meaning and interpretation) within the democratized critical paradigm. The conference intended to “assess whether there is now a gradual shift away from these manifestations of postmodernity, towards a reassertion of value, and to look at the implications of this shift across a spectrum of cultural, aesthetic and political fields.” While this opens space for many discourses on the nature of subjectivity and value in art, including returns to old positivist notions of “truth,” it also provides an opportunity for those who wish for a discursive dialogue beyond the “text” as “discourse” in the more reified sense.

The debates at the ICA in London are joined by international currents moving towards more “agency”-focused discourses that break with mechanistic theories of knowledge. The “subject,” no longer reified in philosophical discourse, is considered an active human agent shaping and making the world, as well as situated in a set of pre-formed contexts. Active “interests” come forward as part of this process. In Canada the shift is noted by debates on the need for new models of art writing amongst the artist communities, and discussions on the role of social responsibility in the public galleries. Issues of “voice” and responsibility are also part of this new current. Indeed, the interpretation of values has been an ever-present sub-stream within the dialogue on cultural studies over the past 15 years.

Howard Smagula’s new volume, *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism*, a collection of fourteen reprinted articles by major art writers, poses a serious challenge for the cultural theorist by serving as a reminder that the discussion of “values” in the interpretive context may go in *many* directions. Smagula has produced a seamless trajectory in postmodernism towards a highly selective form of “dialectical pluralism” (p. 14).

Smagula’s preface to *Re-Visions* states that the volume starts from a postmodern framework with the assertion that the challenge to modernism by Robert Venturi and Michael Graves in architecture, the re-emergence of figurative painting, and the return to traditional materials and processes in sculpture have constituted an aesthetic countermovement. Music, literature, dance, and theatre have joined in the process, and the new “electronic age” has provided the synthesis of high and low art (p. v). The revisionist project of postmodernism in society and culture is seen to be paralleled by academic disciplines with a cross-fertilization between departments and a new emphasis on theorized discourse that can no longer be called into any one traditional field. The work of French post-structuralists is presented as formative to this interdisciplinary synthesis (p. vi). The editor, then, has included a selection of what he feels are the most stimulating syntheses in art writing from sociology, politics,

feminism, post-structuralism, ethics, and economic perspectives.

A preliminary examination of Smagula's table of contents reveals that his criteria for defining art criticism is interpretive rather than institutionally determined. Contributors to the volume include art historical writers such as Arnold Hauser on sociology and art, art critical writing on art and dematerialization by Lucy Lippard, theory and practice writing on feminism and art by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, and a post-structuralist contribution by French theorist Jean Baudrillard. Many of the writings embrace dual disciplines including Joanna Frueh and John Berger's contributions to art history and art criticism, while other contributors comment on the relationship between the disciplines, such as Donald Kuspit's selection on psychoanalysis and art, Kate Linker's analysis of art and cybernetics, Peter Halley's work on nature and culture, Carter Ratcliff's contribution on art as commodity, and David Carrier's concluding essay on theoretical discourse.

All "histories" chart courses through a selected terrain of knowledge, and *Re-Visions* is no exception to this process. While emphasizing *new* perspectives in art criticism, Smagula has begun his course from the European debates of the 1930s. Smagula suggests that this period was formative, not only for emergent sociocultural perspectives on art but also for the migration of ideas from Europe to England and North America (pp. 2-3). The 1950s and 1960s are then located as key decades for the popularization of these ideas through the work of Arnold Hauser and John Berger, allowing for a fertile dialogue on art and society in the 1970s and 1980s. For those sharing this perspective, the collection of essays in the first half of the book provides fruitful reading.

The essays in the first half of the book trace a chronological trajectory from the early philosophy of art by Arnold Hauser (1958) to the beginnings of "The New Art Criticism" by Lucy Lippard in the early 1980s. It bears commenting that these writers are based in different institutional contexts. Hauser's excerpt from the *Philosophy of Art History* is a contribution to the sociology of art that challenges the interpretation of art as a hermetic system without recourse to circumstances beyond the object. Hauser takes exception to *structural* or *genetic* systems of explanation, and focuses on the complex relationships that constitute the meanings and values of the artwork. With reference to the dialectical materialist method, Hauser makes crucial distinctions between the factors which surround the creation of the artwork and those which locate the artwork as a site of meaning. Artistic intentionality is always important in his investigation, although it is only one of many factors that may, or may not, contribute to the value and meaning of the artwork. The placement of human agency at the centre of cultural investigation is worth considering in the light of so many formalist and mechanistic elisions of the artist as an "actually present person" in the making of art. Hauser's contribution, then, breaks with genetic accounts of art by positing that the artist's attempt to depict the world is a mediated activity where the relationship between subjective and objective experience is necessarily fractured by the struggle of human consciousness to make sense of that

world. There is, for Hauser, no direct access to "truth" in depiction. All values in human experience are formed through complex human interaction and "truth" value is always a product of human decision.

John Berger's well-known essay from *Ways of Seeing* is a very suitable accompaniment to Hauser's earlier piece, with its extension of Hauser's theory of knowledge. Berger extends this theory in two ways. In the first place, Berger suggests that even the act of looking involves conscious choice; that looking and realizing one is being looked at is one amongst the first of many self/other relationships that humans engage in. ("The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" [p. 27].) In the second instance, Berger extends Hauser's belief that there is a struggle between the desire to represent the world and the conscious process of making that representation. Here, as we shall see, Hauser and Berger depart widely from the later essays in the volume.

Lucy Lippard contributes the first essay to the volume that is written from within the institutional framework of art criticism. In "Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980," Lippard argues that the old dualist theories of subject/object, feeling/intellect, and recapitulated "quality" centred discourses must give way to an art and art writing which makes culture become truly alive for both artist and audience. She, in fact, calls for an artist-centred writing: "Why is it that culture today is only truly alive for those who make it, or make *something*? . . . Even as a critic, I find that my own greatest pleasure comes from empathetic or almost kinesthetic insights into how and why a work was made, its *provocative* elements" (p. 48). Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews' article, "Second-Generation Art Criticism and Methodology," also places those closest to the artist on the cutting edge of new developments in art criticism. The authors identify two generations of feminist art critics: those who set out to document the worlds of women and their experience, and those who see woman as an unfixed category, constantly in process of examination through her representation in a male system (p. 66). The first position is sometimes termed essentialist and the second post-modernist. The debate which has erupted between the different feminist streams is represented by the artwork of Judy Chicago (first generation) and Mary Kelly (second generation), and the 1983 exchange between Jane Weinstock and Nancy Spero. Gouma-Peterson and Mathews provide a judicious account of the various streams and tendencies between the various schools of thought and develop what they call the "intergenerational" perspective. Lisa Tickner, they suggest, provides the first bridge between the two perspectives with a viewpoint which does not see the two generations as mutually exclusive. Tickner not only offers a model of scholarship for second-generation art, but also re-establishes first generation art as a viable enterprise. This view is supported by Lucy Lippard, who also sees both feminist strategies as valid aspects of women's experience. As such, this article provides a strong voice in support of a postmodern feminism.

Thus the first half of the volume provides a solid groundwork in the history of critical writing from which to view postmodernism and any movements be-

yond postmodernism. The second half of the volume, however, charts quite a different course.

David Carrier's concluding essay, "Suspicious Art, Unsuspecting Texts," uses an article from *Art Forum* (Thomas Lawson's "Last Exit: Painting," October 1981), to launch a critique of post-structuralism on the premise that its "narrative" structure is illogical. Carrier, a contributing editor to *Arts Magazine* and co-editor of *Leonardo*, engages in a subjectivist reduction of the new art criticism by suggesting that the criticism bears more relation to itself than to the artwork it describes. The argument is tautological and barely conceals Carrier's primary task, which is to defend the writing of Hilton Kramer against the work of Thomas Lawson, Hal Foster, and Craig Owen. The latter style of writing is described as "dense, art-historical-type" writing (p. 163). The "open-ended" conclusion suggested by Carrier's essay actually points towards an anti-theorist future, which celebrates the role of art criticism as "the search for truthful art-critical descriptions" (p. 163). This, then, is the essay and volume's speculative conclusion.

The renewed call for an unproblematic relation between the world and the representation of the world is spearheaded by several other authors in the second half of the volume. Peter Halley's essay, provocatively titled "Nature and Culture," is neither an examination of the relation between the categories of nature and culture, nor an enquiry into the philosophy of knowledge. Rather, Halley recasts two major philosophical traditions of the past century (existentialism and phenomenology) and an art movement (abstract expressionism) into a search for the "primordial mother, earth" (p. 117). This reading of modern art and philosophy leads Halley to his central criticism that art of the 1970s and 1980s was a closed system of work, fascinated with sociological and political reality, without extra-human (e.g., nature) references, and rejecting the positivism ("truth") of the physical and social sciences. The claim that *some* post-structuralism poses a hermetic conception of society, locked only within a system of ideas and language, may interest some readers. However, Halley's assertion of a pre-modern notion of nature and distinctive subject-object relations will no doubt appear more problematical. As Halley suggests in his controversial essay, "The advent of post-industrialism has also seemed to make obsolete the very concept of nature, giving rise to a critique of the idea of nature in post-structuralism and bringing to an end the reign of nature in art" (p. 120).

Carter Ratcliff adds his voice to the seemingly unproblematic nature of representation with his defence of the artwork as commodity. Ratcliff sees *value* in art as the progeny of the art market and the product of centuries of an entrepreneurial spirit in art. Supporting his theory with quotations from Adam Smith, Ratcliff discusses the effects of the modern market economy on art. Dealers, according to Ratcliff, are major promoters of public good, following Adam Smith's prophecy that business promotes the public will even though it places profit first (p. 143). In this discussion of "The Marriage of Art and Money," Ratcliff suggests that market value is related to aesthetic value; that the "aesthetic" value of "Western Art since the Renaissance" is only one aspect of an artwork along with its

"entrepreneurial" and "commercial" aspects (p. 146). In a word, the market value of an artwork is seen as part of its "attractive" qualities *and its meaning*. This argument naturalizes market functions and suggests that an invitation to purchase an artwork is the same as the invitation to "understand, to accept, to buy the work and its meaning, figuratively and literally" (p. 147). Ratcliff conflates a theory of knowledge with an economic perspective on the marketplace: "It may seem odd to pair the sober Adam Smith with the visionary Blake, but if we can get over the habit of seeing the commercial and the esthetic as separate orders of value, it will become clear that Blake and Smith shared the modern entrepreneur's faith that, with providential certainty, free markets generate the best outcome for all" (p. 148).

Anthologies are not necessarily organized in a linear fashion. Smagula, however, has presented this volume as a course charted through the trajectory of postmodernism towards a critique of theorized approaches to art. "The Postmodern world," he states, "is rife with theory and counter-theory and much energy is expended in the establishment of one ideological stance against another" (p. 6).

This emphasis on theory has of course been rampant in the academic literary establishment for the last fifteen or twenty years and has become one of the 'glamour' fields of study within the University. Naturally, other disciplines within the humanities have adapted the methodologies and language of these complex literary and social theories to the problems of their own fields of study. (p. 13)

Smagula's volume concludes with the artistic equivalents of what he calls the "New Pragmatists" in literary criticism. These scholars, according to Smagula, "have challenged the entire canon of contemporary theories (poststructuralism, Marxism, semiotics, deconstruction, etc.) with what is essentially an antitheoretical position" (p. 13). Smagula thus presents an anti-theorist perspective at the end of this volume. In one sense, I am reminded of Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* with its claim that literary radicals have taken over the university curriculum. There certainly seems no evidence of this. Rather, Smagula, and the authors towards the end of the volume, seem to have erected a straw man in the form of an "alternative canon" in order to represent a very old theory of knowledge.

Howard Smagula's *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism* makes a fascinating study in the selective interpretation of the past for a very particular kind of future. The essays in the first half of the anthology provide fruitful reading for those wishing a refresher in the origins of critical theory in art. The second half of the book, however, departs from this position and provides a framework for pre-modern philosophical traditions. The return to positivist theories of objective truth suggests the existence of objective meaning independent of human understanding. This involves the belief that humans are separate from their environment. The call for a "truth" principle in art by these authors is particularly perplexing, at a time when so much interesting work is being done in the theory of knowledge.

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