

2016

Books "Write Back"

Alina Cherry

Wayne State University, alina.cherry@wayne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Cherry, Alina (2016) "Books "Write Back"," *Criticism*: Vol. 58 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol58/iss1/10>

BOOKS “WRITE BACK” Alina Cherry

Pictures into Words: Images in Contemporary French Fiction
by Ari J. Blatt. Stages Series.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska
Press, 2012. Pp. 264. \$50.00 cloth.

Ari J. Blatt's *Pictures into Words* explores—as the title suggestively indicates—the complex and somewhat tense relationship between two media of artistic expression—literature and the visual culture—in the post–World War II era, when the sustained proliferation of images has permeated not only the space of our daily lives but also various fields of artistic expression. This “chronic profusion of pictures” (2), the author argues, has left a profound mark on contemporary French fiction. This ubiquitous influence is approached through the study of four novels that express a common fascination with images: *Triptyque* (Triptych, 1973) by Claude Simon, *Un cabinet d'amateur: Histoire d'un tableau* (A gallery portrait: The story of a painting, 1979) by Georges Perec, *Vie de Joseph Roulin* (Life of Joseph Roulin, 1988) by Pierre Michon, and *Cinéma* (1999) by Tanguy Viel. Blatt contends that what distinguishes these works from others that manifest an equally compulsive preoccupation with pictures (one of the implicit criteria according to which the selection of the corpus is made) is the fact that “these narratives consider the possibility of a kind of writing modeled on graphic or plastic forms” (10). These works are therefore categorized as “image-texts” or “iconotexts” (8), and justifiably so, considering that the realm of the visual has deep implications here, functioning at once as “a principal thematic and diegetic force”

(8) and “a prominent structuring metaphor” (9).

In a finely nuanced, yet comprehensive, introduction, the author suggests that the treatment of pictures in these literary works reveals a more or less strained alliance between text and image, as it oscillates between two divergent attitudes: an exuberant embracing of the images represented and a distrust of vision and visual representations. He posits that the interest these narratives take in pictures is not innocent; rather, it is fueled by a sense of resistance. This resistance is channeled in part through the particular dynamics of the confrontation between the visual and the textual, as none of the images on which these texts concentrate are shown; they are instead narrated. The fact that the pictures survive in the texts not as genuine visual reproductions but as descriptions challenges the primacy of the visual. The image exists only through (or, more importantly, thanks to) the power of words. Since the readers’ perception of the image is mediated through language, “writing the image” will inevitably control it, acting as a “screen onto which the powers of the text can be projected” (21). Hence, words function not only as a support for the image, but also as an essential filter, in a simultaneous attempt to “tame” (21) the image and “to make a case for fiction’s continued relevance” (22).

Each of the book’s four chapters (one for each of the aforementioned writers) exhibits a relatively similar structure in that it initially focuses on the main text under discussion and then situates this text in relation to the cultural context within which it was produced. In a methodological gesture similar to the poetic interdisciplinary cross-pollination exhibited by the authors he studies, Blatt expertly opens his textual analyses to varied methods of investigation. One of the book’s strengths lies, indeed, in Blatt’s ability to extend the analysis of the four primary works beyond their literary frontiers (transcending their literariness, so to speak), first by placing the books in a dialogue with the pictorial intertexts to which they refer either explicitly or implicitly and, second, by bringing into play interdisciplinary perspectives borrowed from art history and film studies (among others) that situate these analyses within a larger cultural context.

Chapter 1 (“Puzzling Pictures”) focuses on Claude Simon’s masterful exploration of the limits of representation through his attempts “to drive his writing as close to the edge of sight as possible” (26). In *Triptyque*, Simon’s passion for painting (well documented by Blatt) is experienced on several levels: structured around two visual metaphors—the triptych and the picture puzzle—the novel also incorporates, in each of its three

intertwined narrative threads, descriptions of events, actions, and characters that are generated by the author's encounter with the works of three painters: Jean Dubuffet, Paul Delvaux, and Francis Bacon. Furthermore, the disposition of the fragmented narrative threads is reminiscent of collage techniques.

Blatt assesses the novel's iconographic style by examining various pictorial and cinematic metaphors, as well as narrative techniques that contribute, on the one hand, to create the illusion of simultaneity, and on the other hand, to enhance the text's "painterly effect" (36). Blatt also advances that the desire to assimilate pictures—manifest in *Triptyque*—is typical of a "tendency for the various artistic media to engage one another" (28) that begins in the mid-1950s and continues throughout the 1970s. As such, *Triptyque* can be seen as "a historically conditioned text that enacts the complex relationship between text and image, and between the verbal and the visual, during a period marked by a comprehensive turn toward heterogeneity and interdisciplinarity in the arts" (29).

Approaching *Triptyque* from the angle of artistic heterogeneity and historic conditioning, while opening at the same time the literary analysis to outlooks borrowed from art criticism (offered to a large extent by a reading that goes against Clement Greenberg's modernist rhetoric of artistic purity, being informed

instead by Rosalind Krauss's promotion of artistic heterogeneity), affords Blatt an opportunity to engage Simon's text in a novel way. His interpretation is innovative in that it tackles the well-studied connection between *Triptyque* and the works of Robert Rauschenberg from an art-historical and cultural-historical perspective, therefore highlighting the ties of the novel to a "world colonized by pictures" (45). While one can read this novel as a "historically conditioned text," and I welcome Blatt's interdisciplinary reading of *Triptyque*, I find it necessary to argue that the penchant for heterogeneity is more widespread in Simon, both thematically (it extends past the realm of the visual, by challenging notions such as temporal representation, and the fine borderline between historical and fictional narratives, among others) and temporally (it is intrinsic to most of Simon's novels, extending beyond the novels from the 1970s).

Chapter 2—"Faking It (Phony Pictures)"—opens with an analysis of the trompe l'œil poetics exhibited in Georges Perec's *Un cabinet d'amateur: Histoire d'un tableau*, a novel staging the "story" of a painting that reproduces *en abyme* the numerous paintings owned by art collector and brewery magnate Hermann Raffke, who commissions the painting in the first place. At the same time, the painting (also entitled *Un cabinet d'amateur*) contains a reproduction of itself, thus

multiplying the vertiginous effect of the *mise en abyme* technique. To complicate the story further, the paintings in Raffke's collection turn out to be fakes, not originals, which makes the painting commissioned by Raffke an original depicting fakes. Given the novel's extensive reliance on "pictures that are never quite what they seem" (60), Blatt uses it as a launching pad for a sustained reflection on the social and cultural implications of artworks and simulacra. By referring to Gilles Deleuze's rehabilitation of the simulacrum as a "means to empower the public" (72) through its constant challenging of the foundations of representation, Blatt highlights the social and didactic dimensions of Perec's advocacy of the fake.

Furthering this exploration of the fake through a study of several famous forgers (Eric Hebborn, Clifford Irving, Elmyr de Hory) and forgeries (Orson Welles's movie *F for Fake* [1973] that starts off by claiming its status as a documentary only to show, in the end, that this was a "false front" [83]), Blatt probes the fragile boundary between reality and illusion, fact and fiction, authenticity and forgery. He argues that, through its "privileging of the false" (88), Perec's novel contributes a literary perspective to a cultural debate originating in the late 1960s through which artists, critics, and philosophers (e.g., Arthur Danto, Andy Warhol) seek to understand the difference between objects and

their representations, and between an artwork and its replica (89). Hence, Perec's novel and Welles's movie can be seen as part of a larger cultural movement that reflects a deep preoccupation with art's ontology.

The complex relationship between seeing ("voir") and knowing ("savoir"), which is one of the underlying motifs of *Pictures into Words*, is reintroduced in a new light through an analysis of Pierre Michon's short novel *Vie de Joseph Roulin* in chapter 3 ("Tableau vivant"). As Blatt points out, narrating the story from the viewpoint of Joseph Roulin—the postal worker who becomes the star of a well-known series of portraits by Vincent Van Gogh, but who "doesn't know anything about art" (110)—and not from the expert perspective of the painter, enables Michon to pursue a twofold goal: to rekindle the readers' interest in Van Gogh by providing them with an innocent look at the paintings, which will hopefully inspire them to "regard the paintings afresh" (108); and "to launch an ethical critique of the institution of art" (111) that targets in particular the transformation of art objects into commodities. Indeed, for a man like Roulin, who lacks the necessary "cultural capital" (to use a Bourdieusian term that Blatt himself employs as he supports his arguments with theories borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* [1970]) to produce aesthetic judgments, it is

equally difficult to comprehend not only what constitutes the difference between an everyday object and a cultural artifact, but how value—both artistic and monetary—is attributed to the latter.

The inquiries raised by and through Roulin provide Blatt with fertile ground on which to build a parallel between Michon's critique of the mercantilist system and anti-commercialist artistic trends from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. By providing several keen interpretations of visual works by artists (Robert Smithson, Ana Mendieta, Barbara Kruger, and Jeff Koons, among others) who choose either to "work outside the traditional systems of display, ownership, and exchange" (120) or to create works that engage the viewers in "a self-reflexive process that encourages them to think critically about the ideologies that necessarily condition their viewing" (122), Blatt demonstrates how artists resist, in their individual ways, the growing commodification of art.

Telling an entire movie in words without having recourse to any visual aids presents its own particular challenges, as we find out in chapter 4 ("Remake"), which centers on Tanguy Viel's novel *Cinéma* that tells Joseph Mankiewicz's movie *Sleuth* (1972). Despite the loss of image and sound, the telling, as opposed to the showing, of a movie does present certain advantages: Viel's narrator can leisurely

stroll through the cinematic archive (he pauses, restarts, and replays the movie at will); he fills in some of the gaps left in the original scenario and manages to warn the readers of the "dangerously seductive powers of popular cinema" (149) through the display of his own obsession with the movie ("*Sleuth*-ophilia" [150], as Blatt puts it). Viel also harnesses specific narrative techniques so as to reenact the cinematic experience: among others, the use of the present tense in order to create the illusion of immediacy between the readers and the action; a deft manipulation of ekphrasis, which, despite its effectiveness, cannot help recreate the movie—a failure Viel admits as he concludes the novel: "[A] film can never be replaced by what one might have to say about it" (143).

This self-proclaimed "failure" results, nonetheless, in success, as Blatt shows through his adroit repositioning of the novel within the cultural context of contemporary appropriation art stemming from avant-garde notions that reject the modernist tenets of originality and artistic agency and bearing the influence of Marcel Duchamp's concept of the readymade. Blatt suggests that Viel's own gesture of erasing *Sleuth*'s theatrical origin through the omission of the name of its creator (playwright Anthony Shaffer, who is also the film's screenwriter) is consistent with practices that champion "the death of the author." Whereas Viel himself distanced his

literary work from the concept of the readymade (an important detail that Blatt simultaneously acknowledges and cleverly challenges), the author of *Pictures into Words* points to convincing similarities and connections between, on the one hand, the practices of reproducing, copying, reframing, and repackaging advocated by appropriation artists in the 1980s and 1990s (Richard Prince, Mike Bidlo, and Pierre Huyghe, to name a few) and, on the other hand, Viel's own recycling and "literary repackaging" (168) of Mankiewicz's film, a gesture that ultimately gives a new but different kind of life to the movie.

The book concludes in a rather unsettling fashion—namely, by providing a concise critical survey of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novel *La télévision* (1996) before summing up, in a reinvigorating way, some of the main points about the relation between text and image, as well as their role and functioning in contemporary sociocultural settings. Yet, the unexpected arrival of Toussaint's novel and its subsequent analysis, at this particular point, elicit questions about the organization of the book and the choice of the literary corpus. As an avid reader of Toussaint's novels, I am glad that *La télévision* made, at least, a cameo appearance. This being said, since Toussaint's "imagetext" largely investigates the impact of images on everyday life and on writing in

particular (the narrator is a university professor from Paris—and not a French art historian, as Blatt claims, the uncertainty of the narrator's nationality being an important aspect of Toussaint's novels—who spends a sabbatical year in Berlin hoping to write a study on Titian), one certainly wonders if this analysis wouldn't have been better placed, albeit in an expanded version, as an individual chapter rather than as a newly introduced topic at the very end of the book. This is especially true since all four chapters, despite their individual attachment to the overarching arguments of the book, function as self-contained, independent units. Each novel maintains its own discrete relation with the visual intertexts it engages, and relates to a different sociocultural context than its counterparts.

These reservations aside, the book makes a significant contribution to both literary and visual studies, particularly through its interdisciplinary scope. Beautifully written, extensively researched, Ari Blatt's insightful study constitutes a valuable academic tool while also offering a profoundly engaging and thought-provoking perspective on the intersection of literature and the visual arts.

Alina Cherry is associate professor of French at Wayne State University. She is the author of Claude Simon: Fashioning the Past by Writing the Present.