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Katherine Shingler, *The French Art Novel 1900-1930*. London: Legenda, 2016. xi + 153 pp. Illustrations, notes, and bibliography. £75.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-1-909662-23-0.

Review by Dominique Jullien, UC Santa Barbara.

Covering the French art novel from 1900 to 1930, Shingler argues that while Romantic art novel themes (the defining features, even the clichés of the nineteenth-century art novel: the pairing of artist and model, the conflict between love and work, the artist's creative struggles and failure) persist well into the twentieth century, the art novel in the early twentieth century also evolves in response to specific modern developments. Moving from Paul Bourget to André Breton, the book aims to illustrate how in the first third of the twentieth century art novels "consciously rework and even work against the models provided by their nineteenth-century precedent—or indeed, respond to entirely new concerns" (p. 1). After 1900, the main issues that characterize the art novel and art discourses more generally cluster around authenticity and aesthetic value. Anxieties about artistic authenticity result, on the one hand, from the advent of mechanical reproducibility of images, and also, as the practice of art collecting expanded, from the fear of forgeries. On the other hand, anxiety about authenticity is bound up with a crisis of aesthetic value itself, as the unified salon system with its stable academic criteria gives way to a more open art market, with a plurality of venues and values. The result is uncertainty about what does or does not constitute art, since non-artistic objects are now being transferred into the world of art: the book opens with photographs of Marcel Duchamp's infamous urinal and mustachioed Mona Lisa.

The book explores this anxiety about authenticity across three decades of art novels, and it does so from various angles. Its four chapters develop case studies that bring together pairs of writers: Paul Bourget and Marcel Proust are paired on the theme of connoisseurship and art collecting; Camille Mauclair and Michel Georges-Michel on the hagiographic portrait of the artist; Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars on the dialogue of art and modernity; Louis Aragon and André Breton on the complex relation between Surrealism and visual culture. This pairing of writers yields a fruitful and elegant method of inquiry, allowing Shingler to cover vast conceptual and cultural ground. It also makes for rich, nuanced, and rewarding reading.

Unsurprisingly, cinema (alongside painting) emerges as one of the most important models and rivals for literature, and these new media reshape the art novel in the early twentieth century. Another major change concerns the place of women, who are no longer confined to the passive role of models and muses as in nineteenth-century art novels, but increasingly assume a creative role in their own right, something which creates a new set of tensions and rivalries. Lastly, a

decisive influence on the twentieth-century art novel comes from the popularity of real artist biographies, which assimilate the hagiographic tropes of legendary artist lives (Shingler gives the example of Van Gogh, whose biographies tend to cloak the artist “in a veneer of fictionality” [p. 10]). In spite of their differences, the eight writers chosen all “articulate an art-critical position” (p. 11), allowing Shingler to think through the relationship between fiction and criticism, and beyond that, between text and image.

Shingler’s pairing of highly canonical writers (Proust, Apollinaire, Breton) with writers who were well known and popular in their days, but who have since entered obscurity (Mauclair, Georges-Michel, or even Bourget) is original and stimulating. For example, the first chapter shows that Bourget and Proust largely overlap in their views on art collection and appreciation. Against a dominant positivistic approach to authenticating works of art (relying among other things on the “science” of connoisseurship devised by the popular Giovanni Morelli [pp. 16-17]), both Bourget and Proust favor a subjective approach that values above all the art viewer’s personal aesthetic experience. This sociological reading of the two writers does, however, beg the question: what makes Proust greater than Bourget when they share the same artistic discourse? Why is Proust not forgotten when Bourget is?

Other big questions are not asked, questions that could perhaps help contextualize the writers studied within the greater circle of Western art novels. Why are the examples chosen only from French novels? Of course it is well known that the center of the art world at the time was Paris. However, given that the foundational art novels listed (Honoré de Balzac’s *Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*, Émile Zola’s *L’Œuvre*, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s *Manette Salomon*, and Proust’s *Recherche* itself, of course) are also read beyond their own national tradition, and given that French art novelists were themselves influenced by the rich *Künstlerroman* tradition beyond France (from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Edgar Allan Poe, Hawthorne, and Oscar Wilde, to name only the most obvious), it would be worth reflecting, at least as an introduction, on what makes French art novels distinctive.

Another question concerns the dates chosen for the corpus. No doubt the three decades from 1900 to 1930 are crucial ones for artistic development (Shingler does a great job teasing out the complex reactions of writers to film, for instance)—but why stop in 1930 precisely? The art novel does not disappear after that date. Georges Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi* or *Un cabinet d’amateur*, or Jean Echenoz’s *Au piano*, for example, are remarkable late cases that play with the art novel tradition, recasting in fascinating postmodern ways some of the same questions addressed in Shingler’s book. Again, looking beyond French literature, art stories by Somerset Maugham, Thomas Mann, and Jorge Luis Borges all come to mind. It would be interesting to explain, even briefly, what makes 1930 a meaningful endpoint in terms of cultural history.

The book follows three lines of inquiry, ensuring thematic unity between the various case studies. The crisis of masculinity, brutally foregrounded after World War I and so apparent in the texts by Apollinaire, Cendrars and Breton, is compellingly analyzed as a reaction to postwar social changes. And yet, while this crisis of masculinity reflects specific historical circumstances, it also rewrites a foundational tension at the heart of art novels, which has its roots in the basic Platonism of Romantic aesthetic theories: the rivalry of creation and procreation, art and life, male and female principles. Avant-garde aesthetics, contrary to what might be expected, would prove no more welcoming of female creativity (p. 62). Reflecting on the gendered dimension of the art novel, Shingler traces a rather depressing continuity from Gillette’s sad fate (the sacrificial

model in Balzac's *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*) all the way down to the problematic status of Breton's Nadja as a Surrealist "found object," as Shingler brilliantly puts it (p. 131). Perhaps Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's seminal study of stock artist anecdotes (*Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* [1]), mentioned briefly on pp. 58-59) could be called upon more systematically to provide a structural explanation for the stubborn endurance of topical patterns and motifs in art novels. For instance, the murderous Pygmalion variation in Blaise Cendrars's *Dan Yack* (the statue crushing the sculptor), which Shingler convincingly relates to the Golem legend (pp. 94-95), also replicates the dramatic wedding-day scene in Zola's *L'Œuvre*.

The portrait of the artist as a secular saint is also deeply rooted in traditional legends about the artist. Shingler's second chapter is devoted to a discussion of this portrayal, which finds its way into early twentieth-century texts by writers nearly forgotten today but prominent in their time: Camille Mauclair and Michel Georges-Michel. To the ancient tradition of artistic hermits and saints, Shingler shows, were added new and historically specific themes of national anxieties: Mauclair takes it in a new right-wing nationalistic and xenophobic direction (as shown in her excellent analysis of how the hagiographical tropes in the portrayal of Rochès, the artist-hero of *La Ville lumière*, are woven into fears about foreign influences on French art and French identity [pp. 51-52]), while Georges-Michel's celebration of cosmopolitan bohemia in his 1924 novel *Les Montparnos: roman nouveau de la bohème cosmopolite* is modeled after Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, but also paradoxically mixed with an anxious defense of the French artistic heritage and a corresponding hostility to the German avant-garde (p. 61).

The complex collaboration and rivalry between text and image—writer and painter—runs through the entire book and is the focus of the conclusion. Cultural anxiety and an attempt to reposition writing in reaction to the visual arts, in particular the new technology of the cinema, is a feature common to all the writers in this book, most acutely expressed, of course, in the postwar period. Shingler highlights the anxiety about poetry's loss of cultural status in Apollinaire's experimental visual poetry in *Calligrammes* (1918), as well as his 1916 novella "Le Poète assassiné" and his hybrid, genre-defying art criticism (pp. 75-76). Apollinaire's ekphrastic response to Picasso's paintings, part essay, part prose poem, expresses a characteristically contemporary predicament, yet it also fulfills Baudelaire's profound intuition that the best kind of art criticism could well be a poem ("le meilleur compte rendu d'un tableau pourra être un sonnet ou une élégie." [2]) Perhaps a dialogue with David Scott's seminal *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* [3] could have helped anchor the more modern form of this brotherly feud in the older inter-arts debate dramatized by the art novel genre. As it is, this is an extremely informative and enjoyable study, which takes the reader on a rich and detailed tour of the early twentieth-century French artist's world, "far beyond the form and concerns of the genre's nineteenth-century foundational texts" (p. 124). Clear, compelling, lucid, well researched, and beautifully written, Shingler's book is an important and welcome sequel to scholarship written on the romantic art novel.

NOTES

[1] Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 1981).

[2] Charles Baudelaire, "A quoi bon la critique?", *Salon de 1846*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), v.2, 418.

[3] David Scott, *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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