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Andrei Pop, *A Forest of Symbols: Art, Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century*. New York: Zone Books, 2019. 320 pp. 101 black and white illustrations; 15 color illustrations. \$32.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-935408-36-9.

Review by Allison Morehead, Queen's University.

I have come to delight in what ensues from some Francophone attempts to pronounce my surname. The silent “e” of the first syllable, the “h,” the vowel combination “ea,” and the final “d” of the second syllable can provoke sounds utterly unlike the Anglophone pronunciation. If I am lucky, a new acquaintance will gamely try, they might ask for help, and we might chuckle until someone breaks the spell by offering the translation “plus de tête.” Now the pronunciation more closely accords with the name I think of as mine. My acquaintance is proud, I appreciate the effort, we share a laugh as we move from nonsense to the banal, and it might be the beginning of a friendship. The social rituals of working towards a “good” pronunciation aided by the “correct” translation of a concept that is also a proper name, not to mention the pleasure of hearing myself named otherwise from a name that caused some distress in adolescence, offer a glimpse of the intricacies, challenges, and thrills of communicating with other human beings.

Andrei Pop, in his new book, *A Forest of Symbols: Art, Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century*, takes the challenges and rewards of communicating very seriously, seriously enough to take a number of risks, the majority of which pay off in this provocative study. Pop’s ambitious argument, in brief, is that symbolism, broadly defined as meaning-making activity, responds to a crisis in both art and science arising from an intensifying self-consciousness about representing subjectivity. Artists, poets, philosophers, and scientists of the long nineteenth century proposed various solutions to the problem, some of which have been called symbolist, as in the symbolist art and poetry of the 1880s and 1890s, while others, according to Pop, also deserve the moniker. Taking meaning and meaning-making seriously, gathering resources to it, and facing squarely the complex problem of communicating inner thoughts are both Pop’s subject matter and his method. Moreover, he frames the project in terms of a moral imperative to address the contemporary crisis in the humanities. “Without working out the logical bases of our shared aesthetic, scientific, moral, and political projects,” he writes in the first chapter, “I do not see how we will overcome the tribalism overtaking twenty-first century life” (p. 31).

With this broader understanding of symbolism, the art historical problem of symbolist art comes into sharp focus, since art history can itself be understood as a “symbolist undertaking in its search for the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of pictorial meaning.” It therefore has to contend, as Pop argues, with “the difficulty of any self-reflexive practice: that of getting a clear view of itself” (p. 20). With

this assertion, Pop justifies his interdisciplinary approach. Something other than, or in addition to art history is needed to get at symbolist art, which becomes best understood within a larger category of critical human activity. It also licenses his apparent lack of interest in the existing scholarship on symbolist art, which leads to a number of contentious statements throughout: that symbolist art might represent a flight from reality, or be fundamentally anti-positivist, or antithetical to neo-impressionism, or that there is a commonly agreed-upon iconography of symbolism. These statements are usefully set aside or critiqued in the book, but they have also been successfully dismantled in a secondary literature sparsely cited.[1] Such is one risk of the project. The payoff is a probing analysis of how humans have persisted in trying to make meaning through pictures over and against an empirically derived awareness of how difficult it is to make one's subjectivity visible and intelligible to another individual subjectivity. In centering the problem of symbolism as both important and highly motivating, Pop successfully displaces impressionism, with its attempts to find equivalents in paint and ink for individual sensations, from its critical position in the history of modernist picture-making.

Readers interested in literary and visual symbolisms will find much to think through, and with, in the book's five chapters. The first considers how skepticism, deriving from empiricism and psychologism, intensified attempts to understand how meaning functions through words and images. Pop looks in particular to the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé and Gabriel-Albert Aurier for their approaches to representing private experience through the logically derived use of symbols. In Aurier, Pop finds a rejection of empirical sensationalism in favor of a Platonism enamoured by the hard sciences, which animates a symbolist picture theory envisioned as a corrective to positivism. Chapter two includes a most compelling analysis of the luxury edition of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" translated by Mallarmé and illustrated by Édouard Manet. For Pop, the central problem of the project, communicating private thoughts, is played out through Mallarmé's especially literal translation and Manet's lithographs. In Pop's analysis, translator, illustrator, and reader are all prompted to assume the "I" of the poem, to envision themselves in the empty chair of Manet's final image. In that envisioning they might just succeed in experiencing the narrator's, and perhaps Poe's, specific state of mind.

Chapter three focuses on color perception as a particularly revealing case of private experience that humans often try to share with each other, tracing the emerging critiques of psychologism under the influence of scientific and technological achievements such as the invention of photography. As subjectivity comes increasingly into the domain of the real, and photography seems to promise the objectification of the subjective, the extent to which a subjective impression rendered by an artist matches up with the viewer's subjective impression of what the artist has rendered becomes so problematized that impressionist artists, according to Pop, eventually flee to "an imagery of disjointed sensation" (p. 135). Pop shows painter-etchers such as Félix Bracquemond and Mary Cassatt especially engaged with the problem, and concludes by lamenting impressionism's eventual sidelining of vanguard printmaking.

Chapter four posits symbolism as more of a break with, than a continuation of impressionism, necessitating a "ground up" picture theory (pp. 138-139) for representing subjectivity offered in a series of first-person picturing practices such as Ernst Mach's drawing of the world from his left eyehole and Gottlob Frege's logical attempt to understand the function and functioning of private thoughts. In Frege's theory, visualized using a "concept-script" (*Begriffsschrift*) of his own invention, pictures are specific kinds of signs with sense-making value, but not necessarily truth-value, which is dependent on the context in which they are asserted. The analogy in symbolist

art is elements of a picture such as defined outlines and flat planes of color that “conceptually clarified” the world that symbolist artists attempted to represent (p. 178). The chapter concludes with a full-throated plea for pictures—for art—and for what art can *do*: “As physical objects, supplemented by us with an intricate network of conventions and assumptions, they take as variables our subjective contribution—the feelings and thoughts we bring to perceiving them—and give us output thoughts, and sprouting about these, a veritable forest of resonating side-thoughts, feelings, and conjectures” (p. 182).

The final chapter explores the “consequences of symbolism” (p. 189), less the solutions of particular works of art—although the chapter ends with a discussion of the work of Georges Seurat and Odilon Redon—and more the philosophical consequences of asking whether language ultimately can or cannot grasp the symbols of symbolist practices and therefore exceed ekphrasis. In extending Frege’s work, Pop argues, Ludwig Wittgenstein almost inadvertently thickened picture theory by ascribing more logical content to pictures than previously imagined possible. Bertrand Russell revived an impressionist view of the world to yoke it to a modernist one, enlarging the realm of logic to incorporate empiricism and thereby granting “equal reality to all aspects, both experiential and logical, of the world” (p. 216). In Seurat’s *Grande Jatte* Pop sees a way to test and refine Russell’s logical incorporation of the realm of sensation into the logician’s purview. Rather than a scientificization of sensation rendered, Pop sees a symbolist circumscribing of form in contours defining and shaping the elements of the work, a kind of bounding of individual entities into concepts that also raises the question of the very nature of objects.

At one point in his study, Pop anticipates the reader’s criticism and addresses it by recourse to taste: “If it’s intelligible, you might object, it is public. But if it *works* aesthetically, I reply, subjective resources are in play that cannot be shared, and the resulting combination of private and public resources may merit the name ‘private language,’ despite the public thoughts it consists in. What emerges is not *a* private language in the singular...but private *languages*, or better yet *private language* as a mass term, the possibility of complex aesthetic experience articulated by each person” (p. 97; Pop’s italics). The objector might wonder what is assumed by the phrases “*works* aesthetically” and “complex aesthetic experience articulated by each person”. Does the former allow for something that affects only one person in a way that that one person characterizes as aesthetic? Sure, Pop might respond, go ahead and speak about the aesthetic effect of the hair pin in your bag with the one gray and one brown tendril caught within. But the latter phrase undercuts the seeming openness of the former. Does my aesthetic experience have to be complex? If I don’t try to articulate it, is it still an aesthetic experience? If I feel that my hairpin is aesthetically pleasing and I communicate that to you simply as “my hairpin is cool,” can we still say that it *works* aesthetically, even if you disagree? Pop’s fundamental position, however, is that “objectivity is possible,” even necessary for “the communication of knowledge and the coordination of practical action but also [for] what knowledge we have of our diverse subjective resources, how they bind and separate us” (p. 102). This returns us to a central empirical conundrum, which Pop acknowledges will never go away entirely: does it *work* aesthetically equally well for everyone, or only for some and not at all for others? Does it *work* aesthetically only when someone thinks or writes about it, or regardless of whether anyone pays attention? If a tree falls in the forest of symbols and no one hears, does it make a sound?

A Forest of Symbols is ultimately a plea against hermeneutic relativism, a bulwark against assuming polysemy, and a critique of reception studies. In his conclusion, Pop calls for the

ongoing logical analysis of “the greatest, most interesting art,” to understand how meaning undergoes “subtle and unsubtle variation,” but also how meaning “stays the same or is conserved with the passage of time” (p. 238). Prior to this, there is little hyperbole in the book, although it appears at various points, often to draw the reader’s attention to unsung critics and logicians of the past, including a number of women. Hovering at the edges of the text is a concern for how art history, bound up with Euro-American knowledge production, has perpetuated racism and sexism, and an apprehension about whether this particular study of meaning-making might serve to prolong or dismantle existing systems. These concerns surface in the highlighting of lesser known women critics and logicians, in the critique of William James’ theories of psychological pluralism as licensing racial theory, in the citation from *Huckleberry Finn*, situated as a counter-intuitive symbolist artwork, and indeed in the strong statement about twenty-first century “tribalism” cited above. Still, maintaining thickness and persistence of meaning—to whom, for whom, by whom?—as a sign of greatness remains an argument for quality, which Lucy Lippard memorably called “the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity in the modernist and postmodernist periods.”^[2] Pop’s main goal in his probing study is certainly not to shore up taste, but the reader might ask whether a logical theory of meaning-making can ever avoid being potentially homogenizing. You might think that I captured, adequately enough, my own delight in communications prompted by “incorrect” pronunciations of my surname, but what if, in trying to give you a complete picture of the meaning of the interaction, I asked my acquaintance to tell you about their experience or their understanding of the significance of the encounter. What if their experience was painful or embarrassing, the very opposite of delightful? What if, being of utterly no importance to them, they can’t recall it even happening, and ascribe no meaning to it whatsoever? The difficulties multiply. Pop would surely counter that the stakes for communication are too high, that meaning is too important, and that difficulty should be no alibi for failing to try.

NOTES

[1] See Filiz Burhan, “Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth-Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences, and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France,” PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1979; Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Rodolphe Rapetti, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005); Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); Allison Morehead, *Nature’s Experiments and the Search for Symbolist Form* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017). The literature on symbolist art remains fragmented, still to some extent bedevilled by the term postimpressionism, and all too often falling back on iconography to circumscribe a set of practices and strategies whose formal qualities, or more specifically their dialectics of form and content, usually constitute a more useful point of departure. The critique of an iconographical definition of symbolist art begins with Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) and gathers pace in Reinhold Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of the Surface,” *Art Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1985):146–153.

[2] Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 7.

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