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Norman Bryson. Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. 281 pp. £27.50.

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While literary criticism is now one of the most lively and innovative academic disciplines, art history remains by contrast very staid and traditional. As a group, art historians remain bound to relatively conservative ways of thinking and writing about art. Bryson's book must be understood against this background. It is perhaps the first serious presentation in English of an approach to visual art modeled on the French-style poststructuralism found now in much literary criticism. Bryson's book falls into two parts: a brief theoretical introduction and an application of that account to eighteenth-century French art. Because the interest of that historical study depends, ultimately, on the security of his novel and complex theory of paintings, I begin by considering that theory.

What is meant by calling paintings "signs"? A verbal or pictorial sign signifies something, and so we can focus alternately on the sign itself and on what it stands for. We see the typeface here used in printing the word "art" and can then think of the meaning of that word; analogously, we can focus first on the figural aspect of a picture and then on what it depicts. Images can be placed on a linear scale according to their ratio of figure to meaning. Thus, hieroglyphs are 1:1 illustrations of words, every feature of the sign contributing to its meaning. In realistic pictures the signified:sign ratio is many:1, for only some features of the picture are essential to picking out what is depicted. Finally, in abstract art that ratio is in effect infinity:1, since now the sign signifies nothing but is merely the pigment whose figural qualities we see.

Thus, realism in painting cannot be defined, as traditional art historians assume and as Gombrich argues, by the closeness of the painting to being an objective copy of what it depicts. Rather, a Masaccio fresco is more realistic than a window in Canterbury Cathedral because the Italian master supplies us with excessive or irrelevant information. The Bible requires that Christ be depicted without specifying His position in the picture space. Thus realism is established "by an instituted difference between figure and discourse . . . an excess of the image over discourse" (p. 12). Because realistic pictures look natural, we attach meanings to the image which really belong to the text signified by that image. Realism involves deception because we see the picture's meanings as *in* the picture itself.

This theory requires some way of independently specifying what the sign is and what it signifies. Bryson gives different accounts in the course of his account of how to do that. What is signified can be a text existing prior to and independently of the image, as when Masaccio tells a Bible story. Also, texts may be a product of our viewing of a picture, as when we see a couple to be married in *L'accordée de village* and produce a text for Greuze's painting. The text may include a label placed beneath the painting. To take an example Bryson borrows from John Berger, putting the words "This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself" (p. 6) beside his last painting changes how we see that picture. The text might even encompass the words viewers produce in response to a picture. Le Brun matches text to picture, leaving nothing more to be said; by contrast, "Watteau's strategy is to release enough discourse for the viewer to begin to verbalize the image" (p. 74), so we respond to his pictures with biographical writing about the artist.

What counts as the qualities of the sign itself, the figural aspect of the picture, is similarly variable. Still life works are figural if the flowers or fruit in them have no meaning beyond just being flowers and fruit; they lack the meaning of an image of a man who stands for some biblical personage. A Vermeer is more figural because it makes us aware that the images are the product of brushwork. Finally, a Pollock showing only "the painterly trace" (p. 27) is entirely figural, since the paint signifies nothing.

As given, this theory fails, apparently, to make some important distinctions. A Vermeer does in one sense signify something, namely what it depicts. We can attend both to the sign and to what the sign stands for. But this has nothing to do with whether the picture refers to a text. In viewing a Rubens biblical scene, we focus on the pigment more easily than when before a similar Poussin; Rubens, we conventionally say, is a more painterly artist. Similarly, still life images can be more or less figural. Manet focuses more attention on pigment than Fantin-Latour, though both artists' works stand for and so signify their still life objects. Bryson does make a distinction between denotation and connotation, between what we simply see in a picture and what those visual elements mean. A painting depicts a human skull, and that skull may mean "mortality." But once he allows that distinction, saying what the picture signifies cannot, I think, be done unambiguously. We cannot place art from a Canterbury Cathedral window and the Pollock on one scale measured by the signified/signifier ratio. Rather, we need first to distinguish art that depicts from abstract art; and then to contrast art depicting just what, in one sense, we see in the picture—the simple still life—with the allegorical work whose visual elements carry additional meanings.

Admittedly, a complaint that a novel theory fails to make familiar distinctions is unhelpful. The goal of the new approach could be precisely to elide those distinctions. But Bryson seeks both to undermine and to rely on familiar distinctions. His interesting discussion of the figural qualities of Vermeer, for example, requires distinguishing seeing the pigment and what the pigment depicts. Treating pictures as signs seems here a positive hindrance; perhaps the derivation of his approach from linguistics is responsible for some of its limitations. A printed word is an arbitrary signifier, as commentators on Saussure tirelessly remind us; words, unlike pictures, according to most theories, do not resemble what they stand for. I write "most theories" because, of course, Nelson Goodman has argued that pictures are arbitrary in just this sense; but he, unlike Bryson, who does not mention his work, has gone on to explain in detail the differences between visual and verbal signs. Bryson, by contrast, seemingly both asserts that pictures are arbitrary signs and speaks in the ordinary way about what we see in pictures. To note this problem is not, I think, just to point to a difficulty of theory. Consider one of Bryson's analyses, his discussion of David's didacticism. David avoids presenting a clear and unambiguous message by simultaneously using two opposing texts "which in effect cancel each other out . . . so that we attend instead to [the picture's] materiality, its figurality, its being-as-image." Here "figural" refers to the image; we see what David depicts, not the texts signified by his pictures. But since what is depicted is also, in Bryson's general theory, what these pictorial signs signify, we need a contrast between David's figurality and Pollock's, between images not tied to texts and paintings which are image-free. And that natural distinction seems hard to make within Bryson's theory.

The problems raised by this failure to work out a clear theory of visual signs appear, ironically, in the most brilliant and sustained part of the book, the discussion of Diderot's criticism. Diderot, Bryson suggests, thought of linguistic signs in two opposed ways: as ideally transparent, so that they would correspond exactly to the inner states that they express, and as opaque, reminding us of their qualities as words. The young Diderot treated signs as transparent, as establishing a perfect presence to us of what they signify. But he came to recognize the repressive political implications of such a model. We, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, are ruled by those who would have us thus be deceived by signs. Here we need not pursue this political point, which is elegantly borrowed, I think, from Derrida's now famous attack on writing in *Of Grammatology*. What is relevant is seeing how easily Bryson moves from pictorial images to Diderot's writing about such images. Diderot's ideal was to create a "form of sign that is

'all signified' " (p. 185); to create in words such a vivid mental image for himself and his readers that the actual physical painting would seem insignificant by comparison. Such a written account seems transparent if we fail to attend to the rhetoric of writing, to the ways Diderot creates that picture in words. In unmasking that prose, we become aware of how naturalistic narratives have ideological implications. The equivalent task in painting, learning to see that what pictures signify is not in fact a property of the images themselves, is a quite different task. If Diderot for Bryson is an Enlightenment unmasker of a belief in presence, so now Bryson mimics that role in his attack on visual realism. Spelling out his analysis of that problem brings out some of the differences between words and pictures.

Masaccio's naturalism persuades us to transfer to the picture itself, to the sign, qualities belonging to the text that picture signifies. An advertisement works in a similar if simpler way; we see designer jeans as sexy, as if the description given in the advertising copy, the text under the picture, were thus transferred to being a quality of what is depicted in the picture. Perspective is an especially powerful way of doing this, since we see the apparently lifelike image as if it were an image of some real scene, a faithful copy of that scene existing outside the picture.

This account might usefully be contrasted to Gombrich's. He both claims that perspective is objectively valid and allows that what we see in a picture when we project to interpret it is culturally determined. Imagining the attitude of Quattrocento spectators before an Annunciation is complex, and Gombrich's appeal to the Pygmalion fantasy, to the sculptor's wish that his statue of the woman might come alive, may be misleading. But to treat such early Renaissance art as if spectators then regarded pictures as literally true copies of scenes outside the picture may import into that period an attitude more appropriate to photography. Venetian paintings characteristically show sacred scenes in Venetian settings, and Veronese got into trouble with the Inquisition because he too casually placed Christ in such a scene; but surely the Venetians did not believe that the biblical scenes were actually copied by their painters. *Wivenhoe Park* is a copy of an original, and so we can compare and contrast Constable's painting with that landscape. But the realism of Christian religious art cannot be described in those terms only.

Some interesting problems with Bryson's account of realism appear in his discussion of Piero's *Flagellation*. Marilyn Lavin's well-known study of this famous painting argues that the three men filling the right foreground, which Bryson calls minor figures, are essential to the picture. If she is correct, the small figure of Christ is not, as he says, the "central textural

component" (p. 19); rather, the "text" is defined by the relation between Christ and those figures, for the point of the picture is to point out a link between those men and Christ. Bryson could, of course, reply that it is just because art historians believe in the objectivity of perspective that they read pictures in this way. To develop such a debate we would need to follow Lavin in speculating about Piero's intentions. Are those three men on the right "gigantic and extraneous" (p. 21), or could the picture be about them? Bryson in effect assumes that the relevant text is the Bible. But perhaps, as in much Renaissance art, the text was created as source for this painting; in that text, those three men might play an important part.

This example raises a general problem with Bryson's account. Just as it is difficult for him to say unambiguously what counts as a sign, so it is similarly unclear what the text is to which that sign refers. If the text can be a biblical passage, a story we produce in response to the painting, or just what people customarily say about the painting, where should we stop? Why cannot a Pollock signify the kind of art critical account typically produced before such an abstract artwork?

Here some reflection on the motives of art historians like Bryson who seek a new theoretical approach may be relevant. The methodology for Renaissance art is established, and now modernism also is treated by academic art history. But the status of eighteenth-century art, the link between the old masters and modernists, is perhaps less clear. A satisfying account of that period might, then, lead also to change in the approach to Renaissance and modernist art. For what is interesting about Watteau, Chardin, Greuze, and even David is how their work shows a transition from the Renaissance tradition, in which the texts exist prior to the painting, to an art in which the story told can be inferred only by looking at the picture. Going further, to the impressionist landscape, which is only about what we see, with no text needed, or even to the abstraction only "about" its own pigment, seems, perhaps, natural.

The difficulty, then, with the very general way in which Bryson speaks of the text is that he cannot really describe eighteenth-century art in such commonsense terms. Maybe we should welcome that result; perhaps the account I have given of this period is misleading. But here, as in the analysis of pictures as signs, Bryson's difficulty is that he must find a way of telling his new story about art without falling back into the very vocabulary he rejects.

Bryson claims that his new approach has greater explanatory power than the traditional account. Familiar questions about historical relativism, and about the relevance of the artist's intentions in interpretation, can be rephrased. If "the only component of the painterly sign guaranteed to survive is figural"

(p. 109), then we may have difficulty determining the text. We fail to recognize, for example, that Chardin aims at "liberating figurality from the controlling grasp of the signified" (p. 121); we tend to see his works as merely depicting everyday objects and not as presenting emblematic texts. And Greuze is hard to appreciate because his art is so closely tied to controversial texts, to "an ideology of family life that we are still hotly debating" (p. 122). His dying grandfather brings out our confused responses to the aged; his nubile young ladies puzzle because they combine "two mutually exclusive attitudes towards the female body—unavailable child, available adult" (p. 138).

These examples differ in complex ways. In viewing Chardins we have to learn that what he depicts has symbolic meaning; we must recognize that there are texts of that sort behind his pictures. We know Greuze's texts; only, these texts had different meanings for his contemporaries than they do now. Just as modern readers need to be told that the seventeenth-century poet speaking of "the plastic arm of God" doesn't use "plastic" in our sense, so we need to be aware of changing views of old age and sexuality. But why is reference to a semiotic theory helpful here? One group of revisionist art historians, feminists, have trained us to see female nudes in new ways. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* expresses, we come to recognize, an ideology of patriarchy. Seeing it in this new way doesn't require reference to a text in Bryson's sense of that word.

A portion of *Word and Image* is written in language unfamiliar to English-speaking art historians. When Bryson tells us how in Le Brun's art "because the signifier has been so degraded, as the Word fades it leaves only ash behind" (p. 43), we can recognize a tone and style of argument borrowed from French literary criticism—noting that is not, clearly, an objection to this approach. Given the meager interest of our art historians in theory, and the stimulating influence of French work on literary criticism, perhaps the best thing that could happen to English-language art history is to be influenced by another tradition. And just as T. J. Clark's reading in Lacan and Michael Fried's in Merleau-Ponty have been valued sources for their pioneering work, so perhaps semiotics might provide a new basis for eighteenth-century studies. But what is unclear here is whether Bryson is saying something new or just stating familiar points in a new vocabulary. "Once the Word was finally deposed, with the double exile of David and of Napoleon . . . Delacroix became necessary" (p. 253); is that a novel claim or just a familiar point about David translated into an exotic language?

Bryson faces this question most openly in his closing chapter. Treating paintings as signs, he claims, is more revealing than stylistics, which fails in the analysis of artists whose work "does not easily fit into the saga of successive visual styles" (p. 239). Now Chardin and Greuze can be placed within their age; they cease to be unrococo figures. Chardin, like Fragonard and Boucher, is interested in figuration. But, where they make the signifier erotic, for Chardin that concern involves interest in work, with images showing work, and with an attempt to work all the canvas surface equally. He, like them, is "part of a whole trend . . . of liberating figurality from the controlling grasp of the signified" (p. 121). Boucher's rococo space presents the female nude not in a real-seeming setting but in a space "that is as close as possible to that inhabited by the viewer" (p. 92); so, as Gombrich has argued in his account of erotic images, it is necessary to emphasize figurality in order to keep the overt sexuality of the image at a distance. But granting this analysis, why should noting that Chardin, too, focuses attention on the painted surface be reason to believe he is similar to these erotic artists? That a similar "formal" result, focus on the surface, is achieved by such different means—by painterly erotic imagery, by absorbing images of labor—is, I would have thought, to acknowledge our intuition that these really are, as they seem to be, very different kinds of paintings.

Given Bryson's interest in French criticism, and his opening statement that the crisis of French painting around 1650 was "at once institutional, political, and semiotic" (p. 29), we might expect a study of the link between paintings and power. But though he has many interesting things to say about the social history of art, what general picture he is sketching of the relation between art and society is unclear. An art of figuration is an art independent of texts. Consequently, if the larger historical movement is toward an emphasis on figuration, then perhaps for Bryson, as for the formalist, as painting evolves it ceases to be bound to any didactic text, and so escapes being controlled by political institutions. That, at least, is one suggestion of his account of David.

Word and Image is a brilliant performance, one drawing suggestively on a number of interesting sources. It offers a vision of a fascinating period, one somewhat neglected by orthodox art historians. Since, furthermore, Bryson is one of the few art historians now interested in the theory of art, his book deserves serious attention. Perhaps he, along with Michael Fried and Ronald Paulson (who is not, strangely, mentioned by Bryson), will guide us to see eighteenth-century art in new ways. But Bryson has not yet demonstrated, I think, that treating painting as signs is the best approach to that period. In focusing on the problems with his account, I have attempted to

respond to this ambitious work in an appropriate way. Perhaps it is premature to demand clarification of the questions I have raised; maybe once Bryson develops his approach these problems will cease to seem important. But such a development will succeed, I believe, only when the basic questions about what is involved in describing paintings as signs have been resolved.

Claudine de France. Cinéma et anthropologie. Paris: Editions de La Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1982. 400 pp., ill. (n.p.)

Reviewed by Steven Feld
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This revised version of Claudine de France's *Doctorat d'Etat* thesis is essentially a methodological discussion, concerned with *l'anthropologie filmique*, namely, constraints and options in the praxis of filmic observation of material, ritual, and bodily action. The emphasis is not on prescriptions for how to make or define an ethnographic film (à la Heider, to whom she sets herself in opposition); rather, the concern is with types of human activity and the relations between modes of observation and filmic ordering. De France is particularly clear in the Introduction on the differences between filmic observation as mediation and verbal description as a representational process. Her aim is to specify the nature of the former from a processual angle.

The first part of the book consists of discussion of material techniques, ritual actions, and bodily motions. In each case de France focuses on the relation between the period of actual time elapsed in action and observation, and the time condensation and ellipsis process in filmic observations. A similar discussion holds for spatial procedures; here she analyzes physical relations in space between co-actors and other observers and discusses the spatial framing employed to depict each variety of structure described. The fine points of the discussion display a concern with ways in which participants' points of view are referenced to those of observers and ways spatial orderings suggest roles and hierarchies of protagonists. All of these discussions are well illustrated with line-drawn frames from de France's films and from other well-known French ethnographic films (well known, that is, within the French anthropological and film communities; too few of these films have much circulation outside France).

The second part of the book moves the discussion of spatial and temporal articulation onto a more specific level, concerning the demarcation of behavioral units like action chains and sequential orderings, and detailing ways in which these are handled in edited film transitions in relation to composition, repetition, and simultaneity or co-occurrence of events.

The third part of the book then takes all the previous topics into a discussion of methodological options and instrumental constraints, characterizing differences between their use in *film d'exposition* and *film d'exploration*. This part is somewhat anecdotal (short examples of different filming experiences, issues that arose, ways in which they were resolved technically and methodologically). The attempt to fit films into various categories is the least theoretical exercise in the book.

On the whole this book is full of common sense. Indeed, much of it is reasonable, straightforward, and uncluttered by flighty theoretics. A great deal of material in the early parts of the book constitutes a worthwhile addition to the tiny literature that raises questions about the adequacy of ethnographic cinema as an observational method. At the same time there are critical epistemological failings here that raise doubts about the theoretical utility of de France's overall approach.

If we take seriously the notion that ethnographic films (like other films and other ethnographic texts) are motivated events, fashioned out of rhetorical and figurative tools that spring both from the medium and from the larger pool of social tropes for condensing and multiplying meanings, then the kind of analysis de France offers is little more than smorgasbord that cannot be made into a coherent supper. Her preferred segmentations seem to freeze cinematic and observational choices in the same way they freeze the possibilities for understanding how filmic symbols are multivalent and why multiplicities of readings demand socially situated analyses. What is lacking is a sense that the whole filmic enterprise and the whole ethnographic one are social constructions of reality that at once comment upon the observed while commenting upon the observation. Although occasionally presenting good descriptions, de France's research does not pursue the implications of why the observer has more faces than the camera has lenses.