

Anthony White, *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism*, New York: Routledge, 2020, 206 pp., 8 colour, 51 b/w illus., \$160.00 US (hardcover) ISBN 9780367196271, \$44.05 US (eBook) ISBN 9780429203541

Nicholas Chare

Volume 46, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078072ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078072ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

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

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Chare, N. (2021). Compte rendu de [Anthony White, *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism*, New York: Routledge, 2020, 206 pp., 8 colour, 51 b/w illus., \$160.00 US (hardcover) ISBN 9780367196271, \$44.05 US (eBook) ISBN 9780429203541]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(1), 109–111. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078072ar>

The merging of style and subject is exemplified by the unique suitability of winter scenes for studying the effects of light and the complex atmospheres of urban views.

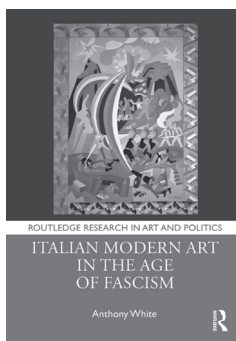
Gerta Moray explores how initial forays into Impressionism by Cullen, Morrice, Suzor-Coté and others laid the groundwork for modernism in Canada by introducing “fundamental modernist imperatives—artists should experiment with pictorial form, create a subjective individual vision, and focus on the experience of modernity” (115). She documents how a following generation of artists (the Group of Seven, members of the Beaver Hall group, Emily Carr and others) would take up “divergent symbolic and epistemological possibilities” including the paradox of modernist anti-modernism (115).

In contrast to these social histories, Sandra Paikowsky contributes a superbly written formal analysis of several Canadian artists’ images of “canals and rivers, bays and beaches,” revealing their reliance on Impressionist processes that, in opposition to popular perceptions of the movement, “demanded considered compositions, articulated pictorial space, objectified viewing points, and poised brush marks of selected colour” (73). She pairs her intimate knowledge of James Wilson Morrice’s oeuvre with careful considerations of Clarence Gagnon’s and Helen McNicoll’s approaches to similar watery themes. By way of conclusion, she deftly summarizes the ways in which Canadians adapted the visual language of French Impressionism while maintaining its central tenet: “the ideal of modernity where the actuality of the present is the impulse for new ways of seeing and responding” (81).

Finally, in the epilogue “New World Impressionism” art historian Tracey Lock of the Art Gallery of South Australia makes a convincing case for Canadian and Australian iterations as being different sides of a World Impressionist coin. Her suggestion of settler colonist

artists raises important points about hybrid spaces of contact, noting, “Accents of this ‘third cultural reality’ can be found in New World Impressionist landscapes,” (132) and calling attention to the ways emerging nations aspired to expanding their frontiers at the expense of Indigenous populations. However, her approach still seems tinged with Eurocentric views of peripheries and margins. Instead of engaging directly with post-colonial theory, she cites interpretations of Bernard Smith and Bronislaw Malinowski as read by Andrew Sayers in “A Half-Century On: The Legacy of European Vision and the South Pacific.”²

My only concern with this publication is Lock’s use of the term “New World.” I wonder if there is a more constructive way to frame the rhizomic spread of Impres-



sionism around the globe than the colonial binary of “New World” versus “Old World.” Furthermore, I am not certain all would agree with her analysis of Emily Carr’s work as demonstrating an “awareness of past ownership” of the land, or of her painting *Gitwangak* (1912) as embracing “recasting of settler relationships with the First Nations peoples of British Columbia” (138). Nevertheless, Lock’s comparative approach is useful, as is her quoting Piotr Piotrowski in advocating for “a transnational horizontal theory of ‘art history that is polyphonic, multi-dimensional and free

of geographic hierarchies” (131). Subtly, in a footnote, Lock alludes to the difficult settler histories that have shaped Impressionism around the world, and she locates this type of study in a larger reappraisal of how “erased cultural histories defined each country’s shift to modernism” (139). ¶

Alena Buis is an Instructor and Chair of the Department of Art History & Religious Studies at snəwəyət̓ lələm-Langara College, Vancouver. —abuis@langara.ca

1. Sylvia Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen, 1866–1934* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982); René Boissay, *Clarence Gagnon* (La Prairie: M. Broquet Publishing, 1988); Nicole Cloutier, *James Wilson Morrice, 1865–1924* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1985); Laurier Lacroix, *Suzor-Coté: Light and Matter* (Montreal: Éditions de l’Homme, 2002).

2. In Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall, and Andrew Yip, eds., *The Legacies of Bernard Smith: Essays on Australian Art, History and Cultural Politics* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2016).

Anthony White
Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism

New York: Routledge, 2020

206 pp. 8 colour, 51 b/w illus.

\$160.00 us (hardcover)

ISBN 9780367196271

\$44.05 us (eBook) ISBN 9780429203541

Nicholas Chare

Anthony White’s *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism* examines works of modern art produced in Italy in the time of Benito Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship. Mussolini was Duce of Italian fascism from 1919 until 1945 and leader of all Italy from 1922 to 1943. White consciously rejects offering a comprehensive overview of Italian modern art for this period, suggesting that panoramas render any accompanying analysis superficial. Rather, he structures his study around in-depth readings of the careers of three artists: Fortunato Depero, Scipione (Gino Bonichi), and Mario Radice. These

artists were chosen for what they reveal about the varied and fluctuating relation between modern art and Italian fascism. The chapter on Depero covers works created during Mussolini's rise to power, that on Scipione explores art produced as the dictator consolidated his grip on government, while the final chapter on Radice begins with works made between 1935 and 1936 and extends to the postwar period.

A number of interrelated themes play throughout the book. Most notably, White offers a subtle meditation on the relationship between tradition and modernism. He argues that Italian modernism does not conform to the dominant narratives of European modern art in which modernism is oppositional to traditionalism. Through his case studies, White destabilizes the straightforward linear narrative of modernism as continual advance and supplantation. Rather, White identifies a more complex association in which indigenous Italian artforms are regularly referenced and revived. This characteristic of Italian modernism has previously been explained through recourse to "palingenesis," a key concept of fascist ideology stemming from the idea "that society be born anew by a return to origins" (25).

The role of palingenesis in fascist ideology was first critically elaborated in the 1980s and continues to have currency. Roger Griffin, for example, suggests in his 2015 article, "Fixing Solutions" (published in the *Journal of Modern European History*) that palingenesis is fascism's "definitional core" (17). For White, however, palingenesis is too limiting as an explanatory framework for the turn to traditional media and established iconography in Italian art of the interwar period. Through his case studies, he deftly demonstrates why the view that modern art in Italy simply reflects or affirms fascist ideology is an overly simplistic one. Depero, for instance,

produces works in which traditional and futurist element co-exist in an uneasy and unresolved tension. In Depero's cloth pictures (works inspired by a centuries-old inlaid patchwork technique but reminiscent of avant-garde collage practices), tradition is not sublated in the service of renewal but instead registers as a persistent questioning of visions of modern society as inherently progressive.

A second major theme of the book is the complex connections between form and politics in interwar Italian art. Purely formalist approaches are anathema to White because form in modern art of the period was openly political and politicized and pregnant with symbolism. In this context, purely formal analyses are naïve: attentiveness to the politics of form is essential. Criticizing formalism's universalizing pretensions has recently assumed considerable importance in debates about art history and decolonization. White's perspective is not, however, focused on formalism's violent leveling of differences but on its tendency towards ahistoricity. In the chapter on Radice, he foregrounds the importance of combining formal analysis with attentiveness to the socio-historical context in which a given work of art or architecture emerged. As part of a subtle and sophisticated reading of Radice's works of the 1930s he suggests that, in them, "geometric abstract form was accommodated to embodying principles and standards of human conduct that were defended in a range of Italian texts at this time" (128). White also notes how Radice's technique and choice of artistic medium were politically invested. Efforts to divorce matter and formal elements from thorny political questions, raising them above the partisan fray, are therefore ill-conceived and uninformative. Avant-garde debates and skirmishes played out through formal elements and theories are always inflected by local concerns. Through

investigating how regional concerns registered in works by artists such as Radice, White therefore foregrounds the need for a granular history of European modern art that attends to ways in which regional concerns intersect with broader aesthetic debates.

The conclusion to White's book signals something of the origins of his nuanced approach to formalism. A key, if mainly silent, interlocutor in *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism* is Benjamin Buchloh, an art historian with a profound and enduring interest in formalism and historicity. White acknowledges his indebtedness not to Buchloh's work on formalism, although that is clearly felt, but rather to the latter's musings on art history and temporality. In an addendum to an anthologized version of his well-known 1981 *October* essay "Figures of Authority," Buchloh revisits his assertion that the turn to figurative representation in interwar avant-garde art manifested an indulgence and even embrace of the fascist worldview. Buchloh does not disavow his initial reading yet, in the postscript, he counsels that artworks need not be read simply in relation to the past but also for how they resonate with the present historical moment.

White takes up this acknowledgment that the significance of an artwork is historically changeable and not bound to the period or politics within which it was produced. He asserts something similar in his chapter on Radice, concluding a lengthy meditation on anachronism with the observation: "[a]t the very least, it is possible to speak about how the afterlife of artworks and their concomitant reinterpretations may be compelling enough not only to transform such works' meanings for the present but also to affect our understanding of their historical significance" (143). This position echoes Griselda Pollock's observation in her essay "Visions du sexe" (published in 2000) that the significance of some artworks

only emerges in the *après-coup* when vocabularies adequate to unpacking overlooked elements of their complexity become available. Like White, Pollock is at pains to emphasize that, while challenging notions of linear history, these deferred readings never lose sight of the historical specificity of a given artwork.

Pollock's focus in her essay is not the politics of fascism but that of sexual difference. As several essays in the 1995 edited collection *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* highlight, however, there are clear links between sexual difference and politics in Fascist Italy. White's failure to engage with this topic reveals something of the limitations of his indebtedness to Buchloh and the *October* art historians more generally. White's perceptive and sophisticated 2011 monograph, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (which also briefly examines Radice) is part of the *October* book series that is currently edited by Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, and Leah Dickerman. *Lucio Fontana* is more in dialogue with Bois's work than Buchloh's but the overarching influence of Frankfurt school debates about art's autonomy and its potentially transformative role in society is clear. These debates are important but, depending on how they are taken up, can be restrictive.

Some of the major weakness of *October*-inspired art history were powerfully brought home with the 2004 publication of *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. The book was roundly criticized for its inability to engage with insights afforded by feminist and postcolonial art history except at the most superficial level (see, for example, Amelia Jones's measured damnation in her review for *Art Bulletin*). White's own resistance to embracing insights from feminism, and from gender studies more broadly, may stem from his over-reliance on art historical methods and approaches that are associated with *October*. His chapter on Scipione, for

instance, offers a brilliant exposition of ways in which hermaphroditic male and female figures serve as bellwethers for Italian attitudes about sexuality and identity. The chapter, which combines hard-won archival insights with compelling visual analyses and passages of exquisite prose, showcases that White is a brilliant art historian. The cursory engagement with fascist attitudes towards masculinity and fears of emasculation and effeminacy, however, is disappointing. There is a sense of what might have been, if only White had turned to broader art historical methodological sources to aid him in his readings.

Scipione's visions of male vulnerability in a work such as *The Men Who Turn Around* (1930) and his portrayal of hermaphroditism in the ink drawing *Hermaphrodite* (1931) call to be positioned in relation to fascist ideas and ideals of the body. White laid some of the groundwork for such a positioning in his 2014 article on Scipione, "Surrealism in Italy?" (notably absent from the bibliography of *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism*). He fails, however, to build on these earlier insights. John Champagne's 2012 monograph *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* dedicates a chapter to modernist painting and the male body. He only namechecks Scipione but several of his observations about how representations of the male body act to affirm or resist fascist ideology seem apposite when contemplating the artist's work. White, however, ultimately reads *The Men Who Turn Around* in existential terms as a painting that speaks to desolation, religious but also psychological. The two naked men leaning together in the painting, are hollow men facing an irredeemably bleak fate. Yet why are two *men* freighted with this spiritual and ontological significance? And what other significances might they embody? After all, the two, with their stocky sensuality, do not conform to the

heroic nude beloved by fascism, the well-defined ideal. Such questions remain unanswered.

This cavil cannot detract from the obvious and immense importance of White's book. The monograph is undoubtedly a major contribution to histories of European modernism. White adeptly demonstrates that Italian modern art's relation to fascism was multi-faceted and inconsistent, endorsing and eschewing fascist ideology in equal measure. His inspiring readings confirm T.J. Clark's observation in his *Farewell to an Idea* (1999) that any art of real complexity (such as the art of Depero, Radice and Scipione, for example) will inevitably be used, recruited, and misread by those in power. Clark is referring to Mussolini's use of the Arch of Constantine as a backdrop for public events, but he might as easily have been referring to Italian modern art of the interwar years. White, however, also shows that such recruitment of art and architecture for political purposes is never totalizing. Additionally, White draws attention through his powerful visual analyses to the reality that the pictorial language of a given historical moment is not always in lockstep with its art critical vocabulary. In such circumstances, reading an artwork, describing it and thinking through it can only occur belatedly through sensitive readings such as White's. ¶

Nicholas Chare is Professeur titulaire in the Faculté des arts et des sciences, Département d'histoire de l'art et d'études cinématographiques at the Université de Montréal.
—nicholas.chare@umontreal.ca