

## Later Realism's Fifteen Minutes

*Samuel Raybone*

**Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time by Marnin Young, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015, 272 pp., 60 colour and 75 b. & w. illus., £50.00**

Recent years have witnessed a wide-ranging and revisionist return to late nineteenth-century French art and visual culture. Renewed critical interest in those Salon painters, Academicians, and 'second-rate' modernists, heretofore maligned or sidelined by the modernist narrative of impressionism as the synecdoche for an age, has enriched the art-historical account of the period with much-needed complexity and nuance. Marnin Young's accomplished study of the continued salience of certain realist practices and theories for artists working within and around impressionism, elucidated with methodological clarity and an impressive grasp of the extensive corpus of contemporaneous art criticism, contributes admirably and usefully to this body of scholarship.

*Realism in the Age of Impressionism* consists of five chronologically arranged case studies of individual paintings created or exhibited in Paris between 1878 and 1882. These case studies do not combine to identify an explicit or coherent later realist 'movement', but rather demonstrate the existence and relevance of a broad network of related representational problems and questions, centred upon the core concern of temporality and its vicissitudes (214). Young aims to reconsider late nineteenth-century realism, impressionism and naturalism alongside one another in dialectical terms, emphasizing that their points of contact are moments evidencing a wider cultural tension animated by the contemporaneous and politicized reorganization of time. Ostensibly formalist questions of style and method therefore become, for Young, suffused with cultural and political significance: the confrontation of distinct representational paradigms – mid-century realism on the one hand and the modernism of impressionism on the other – becomes entangled with the politics of time, and the problem of how, or indeed whether, to represent its passage. In this respect, Young successfully

balances the competing methodological influences of Michael Fried and T. J. Clark; however, the brief reference to Whitney Davis' theory of visuality in the introduction only serves to underscore the essentially exclusive attention paid to high art in the hermeneutic thrust of the text. Young's central argument is that in both form and content the loose grouping of painters he terms 'later Realist' were united by a desire to maintain a way of painting and of looking slowly that was becoming, by the 1870s and 1880s, increasingly incompatible with, and inconceivable within, the speed and immediacy of modernity (12).

Young begins in 1878 with the exhibition of Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Les Foins* at the Paris Salon. The mixed critical reception of the painting was a direct response, Young argues, to Bastien-Lepage's challenging 'antitheatrical' treatment of the motif of a peasant caught in total absorptive closure, both signifying an

unequivocally realist durational temporality opposed to the instantaneous vision of photography, and referencing overtly the ideologically overdetermined status of the peasantry in the supercharged politics of 1878 (31). Young identifies *Les Foins* as a painting primarily concerning the problems encountered by Bastien-Lepage in his attempts to reconcile the traditional image of peasant work and rest, provided by the paintings of Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet, with the actually occurring erosion of traditional peasant working practices in favour of the disciplined work-time of liberal capitalism.

A portion of Gustave Caillebotte's contribution to the fourth impressionist exhibition in 1879 – a *Decorative Triptych* consisting of *Fishing*, *Bathers* and *Périssoires* – constitutes the focus of the next chapter. Young sees the 'failure' of these works, critically and conceptually, as the result of Caillebotte's unsuccessful move away from his earlier 'absorptive' and realist paintings which emphasized duration, and towards a more identifiably impressionist treatment of the fugitive moment (57).

**I Alfred-Philippe Roll, *The Strike of the Miners [La Grève des mineurs]*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 345 × 434 cm. Valenciennes: Musée des Beaux-Arts (now destroyed). Photo: Yale University Press.**



In Young's view, Caillebotte's challenge was to effect a synthesis of impressionism's formal innovations, attractive to the artist as a means of responding to criticism of his earlier works as excessively photographic, and a bourgeois iconography inseparable from his class status as a *rentier* and his enduring ownership of the property he represents, in this case the family's Yerres estate. Ultimately the harmonious reconciliation of such diametrically opposed form and content, each proposing radically incompatible temporalities, evaded Caillebotte in 1879: '[...]ater Realism could not be adapted to the iconographies of modernity', writes Young (89).

The third chapter, about Alfred Philippe Roll's *The Strike of the Miners* of 1880 (another painting whose mixed critical fortune seems to have attracted Young) is the most explicitly political in focus, no doubt as a result of the painting's politically saturated subject matter (plate 1). It is here that Young most forcefully and successfully articulates the connection he proposes between representational practices and the politics of time, drawing from both sustained visual analysis and an impressively broad historical archive. It is among the striking miners of Anzin that later realism finds its perfect subject matter: a contemporaneously existing cohort whose double exclusion from both the normative centre of bourgeois French social power and from the succour of traditional ways of work and life was caused by the specifically modern remaking of work-time. Moreover, it is in Alfred Roll that realism finds its perfect exponent: a careful and meticulous researcher who nevertheless resisted the documentary allure of photography in favour of producing a complex temporality that connected the arrested time of the strike, its dialectical cognate labour-time, and the time of the painter himself. In constituting his painting as, like the strike it represents, an intervention into the very structure of work-time, Roll was able to represent time's stasis coherently by dispersing across the canvas a narrative frozen in liminality, without falling prey to the fractures and disjunctions that plagued both Bastien-Lepage and Caillebotte (119).

Chapter four moves away from the politics of work-time towards Jean-François Raffaëlli's excavation of the Parisian *banlieue* as a space distant from the temporal discipline of work under capitalism. Where Roll had shown the activity of strikers as explicitly distanced from 'idleness' (116), in his *Absinthe Drinkers* of 1881, Raffaëlli instead revels in alienation, stasis and class ambiguity (plate 2). Young identifies in this

painting another point of contact between the later realist aesthetics of duration and a topical exploration of the politics of time. Young subtly excavates the 'matrix of transitory meanings' – around the stultifying effects of absinthe, the marginal space of the *banlieue* and the provocative rejection of normative work-time (and the class structure it engendered and secured) by such *déclassé* figures – to provide a compelling account of Raffaëlli's powerfully realist challenge to impressionism (163).

The final chapter concerns the exhibition at the Paris Salon of 1882 of a work completed in 1880–81 by the Belgian James Ensor entitled *Russian Music*, which Young sees as an 'intervention within an increasingly dominant pan-European visual culture of the bourgeois interior' (169). Young highlights the ostensible disjunction between the (stereo) typical scene of bourgeois domesticity that connoted a durational temporality – contextualized within a matrix of historical values that ranged from boredom and alienation to calmness and rest – with a keen aesthetic interest in light (that critics attributed to the influence of impressionism, but Young attributes to realism) that stood for transience, mutability and political radicalism. For Young this double temporality was made to cohere around the rather clichéd motif of the woman at the piano, which Ensor reinvigorates with a focus on the unfolding experience of the listener, as opposed to the focus on the performance itself. As with all the other painters Young explores in detail, it is the political and cultural tensions provoked by the subject matter, in this case the bourgeois interior, that stimulate renewed attention to formal strategies categorized as realist, and a confrontation with the complex aesthetics of time.

Young's judgement that *Russian Music* is 'a painting of the bourgeoisie, but it is not a bourgeois painting' (175) makes clear but implicit reference to Emile Zola's damning critique of Caillebotte's *Floorscrapers* as being 'bourgeois in the force of its exactitude'.<sup>1</sup> Zola's judgement is referenced earlier in the book (78), erecting a paradigm of value judgement that quite explicitly favours the Belgian. However, it also signifies a missed encounter with the full complexity of Caillebotte and his attitude to work. Young's argument that work-time persistently functioned to structure the points of connection between visual representation and socio-political experiences necessitates an understanding of class that identifies its genesis in the procedural and performative world of work. Through



2 Jean-François Raffaëlli, *The Absinthe Drinkers [Les Déclassés]*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 110.2 × 110.2 cm. San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Photo: Yale University Press.

a combination of his radical politics and recourse to mid-century realism, Ensor was able to transcend his bourgeois background in a way that, clearly for Young as well as Zola, Caillebotte was not. However, to characterize Caillebotte as a painter condemned to a liminal existence ‘between Realism and Impressionism’ by his failure to escape his propertied bourgeois status problematically obscures Caillebotte’s own discomfort with his class identity.<sup>2</sup> By accounting for Caillebotte’s stylistic shift in the 1880s exclusively in

terms of his engagement with the motif of temporality, Young closes off the possibility that Caillebotte’s complex and shifting attitudes to his own work – not just as a painter but also as a yachtsman, philatelist, collector, gardener and naval architect – and class identity may have played a role. This dialectic, explored elsewhere in the book with regard to Roll’s reflexive meditation on the work-time of the painter, would certainly have enriched the case study of Caillebotte and, indeed, the book in general. However, through its impressive command of the corpus of late nineteenth-century art criticism and its convincing articulation of the importance of temporality as an analytical and

historical category, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism* is nevertheless an important contribution to nineteenth-century French art history.

**Notes**

- 1 See *Le Sémaphore de Marseille* [Emile Zola], 'Lettres de Paris: Autre correspondance', *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*, [dated 29 April 1876] 30 April–1 May 1876, reprinted in Ruth Berson, *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886. Documentation, Volume 1. Reviews*, San Francisco, CA, 1996, 108–9.
- 2 Marnin Young, 'Between realism and impressionism: On Gustave Caillebotte', Yale @RT books, 21 July 2015, <http://artbooks.yupnet.org/2015/07/21/between-realism-and-impressionism-on-gustave-caillebotte-by-marnin-young/>. Kirk Varnedoe, Norma Broude and Tamar Garb, far from seeing Caillebotte as constrained by bourgeois normativity, have all instead emphasized his distance from it: J. Kirk T. Varnedoe, 'Caillebotte's Pont de l'Europe: A new slant', and Norma Broude, 'Outing impressionism: Homosexuality and homosocial bonding in the work of Caillebotte and Bazille', in Broude, ed., *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*, New Brunswick, NJ and London, 2002, 15–17 and 117–74; Tamar Garb, 'Gustave Caillebotte's male figures: Masculinity, muscularity and modernity', in *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France*, London, 1998, 42.