

**Critique  
d'art**

## Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art  
contemporain

**41 | Printemps/Été 2013**  
**CRITIQUE D'ART 41**

---

## Preamble

**Laurence Bertrand Dorléac**

Translator: Charlotte Gould



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/8337>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.8337

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

### Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

### Printed version

Date of publication: 24 June 2013

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

### Electronic reference

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, « Preamble », *Critique d'art* [Online], 41 | Printemps/Été 2013, Online since 24 June 2014, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/8337> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.8337

---

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

---

# Preamble

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac

Translation : Charlotte Gould

---

## REFERENCES

Texte original en français paru dans : Bertrand Dorléac, Laurence. *Contre-déclin : Monet et Spengler dans les jardins de l'histoire*, Paris : Gallimard, 2012, p. 7-13 © Editions Gallimard, Paris, 2012

## EDITOR'S NOTE

L'association troublante des noms de Claude Monet et du philosophe allemand Oswald Spengler, auteur du *Déclin de l'Occident*, paru en 1918 et 1922, invite d'emblée le lecteur à un questionnement sur l'écriture de l'histoire. Poursuivant une réflexion qui de *L'Art de la défaite 1940-1944* (Paris : Seuil, 1993) à *L'Ordre sauvage : violence, dépense et sacré dans l'art des années 1950-1960* (Paris : Gallimard, 2004) et *Après la guerre* (Paris : Gallimard, 2010) porte en grande partie sur la construction des récits historiques et sur ce que l'art nous apprend sur leurs non-dits, Laurence Bertrand Dorléac montre dans *Contre-déclin* comment les schèmes conceptuels véhiculés par un ouvrage qui fit le lit du Nazisme en Allemagne, mais qui furent déclinés dans toute l'Europe, rendirent illisible pendant plusieurs décennies l'œuvre de Claude Monet, à laquelle étaient désormais préférées les odes au retour à l'ordre<sup>1</sup>.

Nourri de l'imaginaire délétère d'une histoire biologique qui triomphera en 1940, le *best-seller* d'Oswald Spengler, commencé en 1914 au moment où le peintre met en chantier la série des *Nymphéas* qu'il allait offrir à la France, s'abîme dans le rêve d'une communauté organique où l'art, en tant qu'activité « individualiste », n'a plus place. Claude Monet, lui, entame un processus de travail toujours recommencé, sans début ni fin, où s'abolit un ordre ancien.

Le préambule de *Contre-déclin* éclaire le dialogue ainsi noué entre un porte-parole des révolutions conservatrices et un artiste dont la peinture, longtemps disqualifiée, ne sera comprise qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, lorsque la voix du premier aura cessé d'être audible. Ecrite à un moment où le discours décliniste des retours à l'ordre connaît un regain, cette étude sur les conditions d'existence des œuvres et du regard que nous portons sur elles constitue un apport majeur pour tous ceux qui s'intéressent aux idéologies de l'entre-deux-guerres et aux précaires et tenaces contre-feux qui leur furent opposés, mais aussi et plus largement pour tous ceux qui s'intéressent aux jardins délaissés de l'histoire.

/

When faced with the disturbing pairing of Claude Monet and German philosopher Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West* (published in 1918 and 1922), the reader of the following text is immediately prompted to question how history is written. Following up on *Art of the Defeat. France 1940-1944* (translated by Jane Mary Todd, Getty Research Institute, 2008), *L'Ordre sauvage : violence, dépense et sacré dans l'art des années 1950-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004) and *Après la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010) which dealt with the way historical records are constructed and with what art can tell us about what these records leave unsaid, in *Contre-déclin* (Counter-decline), Laurence Bertrand Dorléac explains how the conceptual patterns conveyed in a book which planted the seeds of Nazism in Germany, but which were adapted throughout Europe, rendered Claude Monet's work unintelligible for several decades, while odes to a return to order were favoured.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the deleterious fantasies about a biological history which triumphed in 1940, Oswald Spengler's best-seller, which he set out writing in 1914 - the same year Monet started work on the *Water Lilies*, his gift to France - wallows in the dream of an organic community from which art, as an "individualistic" activity, is excluded. Meanwhile, Claude Monet launched an ever-renewed work process without beginning or end, and in which the ancient order was abolished. The preamble to *Contre-déclin* sheds light on the dialogue which arose between a mouthpiece of the conservative revolutions and an artist whose painting, long disqualifed, was understood only after the Second World War, when the former's voice ceased being audible. Written in a time when declinist discourses about a return to order have regained prominence, this study of the conditions in which works of art exist, and of how we consider them, provides a major contribution for anyone who is interested in the ideologies of the interwar years and in the precarious or tenacious retaliations they were opposed, but also more largely for anyone interested in the neglected gardens of history.

Catherine Fraixe

Traduit du français par Charlotte Gould

1 **Preamble**

2 History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.<sup>1</sup>

3 James Joyce, *Ulysses*

4 The human race has forever thought about decline, this from the very moment time, and the course of history, started to unfold: even before the fall of Rome, and especially at certain periods when people started overestimating the ancient figure of Progress. The belief in a historical fate with a precise meaning is a biblical one, yet only in the 18th century in Europe, and at renewed cost, was a redemptive evolution imagined—the one

does not go without the other. Decline was envisaged proportionally to the love of progress which, as early as 1780,<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville had proclaimed to be limitless in France; meanwhile Condorcet was about to establish the sustainable pair of decadence and progress in *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* in 1794. Among the supporters of the revolution also, this awareness of the end grew in the same proportion as the belief in the virtue of evolution, especially in those who were well-travelled enough to have seen real ruins, and not just in paintings. In 1791, the Count of Volney, an active figure of the Enlightenment, published *Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*, which he wrote in Benjamin Franklin's office. He used the remains of Palmyra as a backdrop to philosophize about the destruction of many a kingdom promised eternity by recalling the law of nature which makes everything grow and perish. This allowed him to put a brutal halt to revolutionary frenzy by asking the question bluntly: "Who knows, said I, but such may one day be the abandonment of our countries? Who knows if, on the banks of the Seine, the Thames, or the Zuyderzee [...] who knows if some traveller, like myself, shall not one day sit on their silent ruins, and weep in solitude over the ashes of their inhabitants and the memory of their greatness?"<sup>3</sup>

- 5 In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Paul Valéry seemed to follow suit in the wake of the Great War of 1914-1918, which had destroyed everything, even the credibility of "the civilization of morals":
- 6 We later civilizations . . . we too know that we are mortal.
- 7 We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished, of empires sunk without a trace, gone down with all their men and all their machines into the unexplorable depths of the centuries, with their gods and their laws, their academies and their sciences pure and applied, their grammars and their dictionaries, their Classics, their Romantics, and their Symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics. [...]
- 8 *Elam, Ninevah, Babylon* were but beautiful vague names, and the total ruin of those worlds had as little significance for us as their very existence. But *France, England, Russia...* these too would be beautiful names. [...] And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers.<sup>4</sup>
- 9 Using Valéry's reaction, people tried to confine the sense of decline to the right, but a cursory study contradicts these political boundaries. The nostalgia for a paradise lost is indeed part of a shared anxiety and, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the avant-gardes have also vehemently called for initiatory scenarios, so thirsty were they for stories about the origins and for the sweet elsewhere that can be opposed to the old, deteriorated Christian Western World.
- 10 Rimbaud flees to distant climes so that, unlike the one he leaves behind, he does not have to dream of "Symptoms of ruin. Vast buildings. Several, one on top of the other, apartments, rooms, some temples, galleries, lanterns, stairways, fountains, viewpoints, statues. [...] How to warn peoples and nations? let us whisper warnings into the ears of the most intelligent. / High up, a column cracks and its two ends are displaced"<sup>5</sup>. Nothing has crumbled yet, but in his nightmare, Baudelaire cannot find a way out. He goes down, and then up again a maze-tower which he never could escape, inhabiting for ever a building which is about to collapse, a building gnawed at by a secret disease, working out for his own amusement "if such a prodigious mass of stones, marbles, statues, walls,

which are about to collide with one another, will be greatly sullied by that multitude of brains, human flesh and shattered bones”<sup>6</sup>.

- 11 Gauguin, Van Gogh, the Fauves, Dada, the Surrealists and many more still were also the turbulent enemies of the “West” which they despised and belonged to in equal measure, open as they were to other cultures they believed to be less eroded, less progressive, less technical, less arrogant, less boring and, ultimately, less destructive. The thirst for the new did not remain the preserve of the supporters of progress—its enemies also proved inventive and creatively powerful: no one is enjoying the chaos in the West, but no one is renouncing dancing on its mass grave either.
- 12 I was pondering all this while going through all the different discourses on decadence in art,<sup>7</sup> finishing with Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which he started working on in 1914 in Munich. In 1918, he predicted the tragic end of a civilization, necessarily replaced by another, according to the law of cycles: a thousand years more or less for each culture, and then death; just like plants. His dark scenario doomed the artist to disappear as quickly as possible, taking the back seat to the engineer, capable of managing a technician West's final splendour alongside the action man and a Cesar figure able to lead the crowds, just before imperialism starts to hold sway, as it did over all declining civilizations. The weakness of genius, its growing impotence, its physical exhaustion: Spengler was not inventing all of this, it had all largely been scientifically labelled since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the wake of the psychiatrists, Zola himself had, in France, famously pointed to the torments of the modern painter decimated by romanticism and a dubious family history: while the suicide of Claude Lantier, his antihero in *The Masterpiece*, alienated him from the friends he was alluding to—from Cézanne and Monet at least—, it secured him the understanding of a time obsessed by both decadence and progress.
- 13 Spengler was not alone either in seeing history as a morphology in which man has no more purpose than a butterfly or an orchid, and his success owed much to the taste for a cross between science and reverie. To Goethe and Nietzsche, his protecting intellectual guides whose writings he would bend to his own needs, he added Ernst Haeckel, a strange man who had introduced Europe to Darwin and was worshipped by many artists, not just for his scientific aura gained from his long exploratory journeys, but also thanks to his ravishing drawings of plants and radiolarians which were as dreamy as they were informative. Haeckel notably inspired the monumental shell-shaped door of the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris; like his dainty figures, this big showcase for the West opened up onto escapism and musing, especially with the Guillaume brothers' giant aquarium in which fake mermaids mingled with a wonderful fauna and flora in the process of being inventoried. One would thus sway between knowledge and dream, science and superstition, the hankering for materialism and the interest in archaic forms of life, of thought, of religion, and of art.
- 14 **Turning point**
- 15 The present study on decline would never have taken the course it eventually took had I not decided to take a break from all this by visiting once more the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens to see Monet's last works: I wanted to forget about Spengler the prophet of Doom whom, while he had been praised to the sky in Europe right until 1945, no one was reading anymore. In the Orangerie, I experienced a great moment of calm in the fascinating atmosphere—which has become even more so since visitors were ordered to “keep quiet”—of the two low-ceilinged oval rooms bathed in natural light where the

works are placed very low against slightly curved walls, exactly the way Monet meant it. Novelty arises from all parts, and especially from the position occupied by the person who penetrates the heart of the place, sucked up into this limitless painting of blooming waters which envelops them and touches all of their senses. The lily pond, the main source for this work in which art and life eventually merge, actually existed in an extraordinary garden in Giverny where Monet had retired to cultivate his garden and paint its variations. When? From the end of the century, but mostly during the Great War, an event compounded by the sadness of recently feeling his life being cut short when his son Jean died suddenly in 1914.

- 16 Aching all over, and with a deficient eyesight, this was precisely the year he resumed his old project, while, in Munich, Spengler was taking up his breviary of European pessimism. Both men have in common that they think about the movement of the world. The painter wished to grasp its beauty, the writer to announce the end of the world in the gardens of the West. Spengler believed that he had come too late to write the book he had dreamt of; Monet feared he had come too early for his contemporaries to be able to understand him. Spengler thought in terms of progress; in Monet's timeframe, every work of art was a new beginning. Spengler wished to apply his system to the whole universe but ended up championing his nation above all else; Monet built a microcosm on an infinite scale. Spengler thought that nature was imposing its laws on society; in his highly cultivated garden, the painter never switched from a natural order to a social one.
- 17 Monet had always favoured impermanence, and, in his cleverly composed artificial paradise, he eventually painted stagnant water in which indistinct forms are engulfed, thus erasing the limits between sky and earth. As he himself had proclaimed as early as the end of the 1890s, he dreamed of large decorations: "Picture a round room in which the whole wall is taken up by an expanse of water spotted with vegetation, the transparency of the partitions shifting from green to purple, the peaceful and silent dead water reflecting spreading flowerings; the tones are vague and delightfully nuanced, as delicate as a dream."<sup>8</sup> He decided to explore this motif of the water-lilies, renowned the world over for their symbolic significance and their medicinal properties, until his death, keeping them close and knowing too well that the last one might not be the best: he never ceased to assess them, panicking constantly and bemoaning the elusiveness of his subject.
- 18 From 1914, and while Spengler doubted the permeability of cultures and saw in Impressionism merely the dying flames of the West haunted by infinity, Monet set out to unwittingly destroy this thesis by offering his very last work a motley set of tools, made up of all sorts of references to his wide stock of memories, to the history of the landscape, of the botany, of the colours and light of the West, but also of the Far East, a land he adored for its simplicity, conciseness and for the depth of its lightness. He tried to transcribe the whimsical moves of the *floating world*, just like his forefathers had done before him, Hiroshige, or Hokusai, the other old man, but Japanese, obsessing over the vagaries of the weather and the ways in which he could render them: things and the feelings these things elicited in him. The project eventually wore him out as he became overwhelmed by the ambitious programme he had set out in 1909. At the time, he had written that he wished to carry his Water Lilies motif "along the length of the walls, enveloping the entire interior with its unity, it would produce the illusion of an endless whole, of a watery surface with no horizon and no shore; nerves exhausted by work would relax there, following the restful example of those still waters, and, to whoever

entered it, the room would provide a refuge of peaceful meditation in the middle of a flowering aquarium".<sup>9</sup>

- 19 No matter how unique, this aquarium still brought to mind many others which had been in fashion since the middle of the nineteenth century, just as the famous and gigantic Crystal Palace in London was being requisitioned to serve as a naval warehouse in 1914. That same year, Monet was focusing on the distant descendant of the bowls invented the previous century to make up for the nature the humans had lost. His artificial water garden in Giverny was to serve as a laboratory for his strange order, far from the fire-ravaged world where men were experiencing the heady lure of death. In this regard, the present book is not merely an imaginary dialogue between Monet and Spengler and between two philosophies of time and of history which sometimes converged, only to then diverge radically: it is inspired by a reflection on the Great War, a war which, though it is never clearly mentioned in any of these artworks, nonetheless arguably prodded them on.
- 20 Monet must be put into historical perspective in order to show the force but also the repulsion of this "terrible, horrendous war",<sup>10</sup> at a time when men were crashing into muddy trenches, penetrating the soil, being absorbed by it, sticking to it so as not to die,<sup>11</sup> where "colour and light were forbidden on pain of death",<sup>12</sup> where shells were dropping on men, "these small things", where "people are no bigger than ants" Fernand Léger wrote to his friend Louis Poughon.<sup>13</sup> This is probably the reason why, when you enter the Orangerie rooms, a label makes clear the object of these pieces for our contemporaries: "Monument to peace". Through Georges Clemenceau, the artist donated them right after the French victory in 1918, and we will see that these last *Water Lilies* were most importantly donated while the very first war memorials were being devised before being erected all over Europe, lest we forget. In that respect, Monet gave France its only horizontal monument not to depict any soldier, widow or orphan, no military symbol, and it would be impossible to understand the disaffection the public felt towards his last works without describing first this long period which followed the November 1918 armistice, when it was above all a question of heroism and of reconstructing an organic national community on charred remains, of force and efficiency, of a tragedy covered up so that order can be restored.
- 21 Why is it then that Spengler's dark prophecies were widely understood and read from 1918 on, and then, from 1945, once the hail of bombs had cleared up over Europe, this was no longer the case? Why is it that today millions of visitors enjoy these works by Monet, while they appealed to almost no one when they were installed in the Orangerie, in the Tuileries Gardens, in 1972? These historical whims of public taste are what the present book aims at explaining, not so much in order to justify the reason why Monet's last *Water Lilies* should be seen as a monument to peace, than to recall the conditions which precluded actual peace for so long.

---

## NOTES

1. Sur la disqualification de l'Impressionnisme dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres, voir aussi : Iamurri, Laura. *Lionello Venturi e la modernità dell'impressionismo*, Rome : Quodlibet, 2011
1. On the way Impressionism was disqualified in France in the interwar years, see also: Iamurri, Laura. *Lionello Venturi e la modernità dell'impressionismo*, Rome: Quodlibet, 2011.
1. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London, ed. Gabler, The Bodley Head, 1986, p. 28
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Michel Levy frères libraires éditeurs, 1856, p. 292. (*The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1856)
3. *Volney's Ruins*, Boston, 1869, trans. Count Daru, p. 26, from Comte de Volney, *Les Ruines ou Méditations sur les révolutions des Empires*, Genève, 1791, p. 4
4. Paul Valéry, letter originally published in English as "Crisis of the Mind" in April 1919 in London's *Athenæum*, then in *Variété I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1924; re-issued 2005, p. 372
5. Charles Baudelaire, project for a prose poem to be included in *Paris Spleen*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Cl. Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2 vol., t. I, 1975, p. 372
6. *Ibid.*
7. I was working on a paper for a symposium which took place in Rome in 2003, the proceedings of which have been published, edited by Jean-Yves Frétygné, Jean-Yves et François Jankowiak, *La Décadence dans la culture et la pensée politiques, Espagne, France et Italie (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)*, collection de l'Ecole française de Rome, 2008
8. Maurice Guillemot, *La Revue illustrée*, March 15, 1898
9. Roger Marx, 'Les "Nymphéas" de M. Claude Monet', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1909, p. 529
1. <sup>0</sup> Letter from Claude Monet to either Gaston or Josse Bernheim-Jeune, February 10, 1915, LW 2145
1. <sup>1</sup> Letter from Fernand Léger to Louis Poughon, Verdun, November 7, 1916, in "Fernand Léger. Une Correspondance de guerre," *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, 1990, p. 70
1. <sup>2</sup> Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*. Translated by Alexandra Anderson, New York, Viking Press, London, Thames and Hudson, 1973, p. 120 (*Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 85-86)
1. <sup>3</sup> Letter from Fernand Léger to Louis Poughon, Verdun, November 7, 1916, in "Une Correspondance de Guerre", see above.