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Retrospective Writing, or How One Becomes an Art Critic

Clélia Zernik

RÉFÉRENCE

Douglas Crimp. *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 2012
Simon Reynolds. *Rétromania : comment la culture pop recycle son passé pour s'inventer un futur*,
Marseille : Le Mot et le reste, 2012
Anne Tronche. *L'Art des années 1960 : chroniques d'une scène parisienne*, Paris : Hazan, 2012

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Charles Penwarden

- 1 The common characteristic of these books by Anne Tronche, Simon Reynolds and Douglas Crimp – in which a French, English and an American critic, all develop a similar “style of writing” – is the close intertwining of first and third-person discourses. Each writer integrates the subjectivity of a personal viewpoint into the analysis of musical, visual or cinematographic works. The style reflects an awareness of what exactly a critic is, namely, someone who is both inside and outside art, at once internal and external, who speaks about creative work while at the same time being constituted by it.
- 2 In spite of the diversity of their geographic origins and their ambitions as writers (Simon Reynolds is trying to construct a thoroughgoing thesis about modern pop culture’s attachment to the past, whereas Anne Tronche and Douglas Crimp have written studies, respectively, of artists and a filmmaker), this “retrospective” style of writing articulates a subjective gaze that is close to confession, and a use of memory and description of lived

atmospheres and events that place the works in a historical and social context which is also affective and partial. The writing is, we might say, “phenomenological.”

- 3 This “retrospective” style is distinct from a “historical” style, which plunges into and totally immerses itself in the past. These books by Anne Tronche, Simon Reynolds and Douglas Crimp look back to the 1960s, when the authors’ own vocation as writers was formed, and measure the distance separating that decade from the present. Hence the juxtaposition of time frames and back-and-forth movements reading the past with the eyes of the present. Indeed, that is the whole point of Simon Reynolds’ text. He analyzes the many tendencies to nostalgia in today’s popular culture and studies the layerings of periods in today’s music. “Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade” (p. x-xi). There is a real market for musical nostalgia: groups reforming, musical archives, the “museumification” of pop, the recreation of historic concerts, the fashion for heritage objects, the culture of copying (remakes, karaoke, etc.). More than that, according to Simon Reynolds, current music is none other than a way of travelling through time via sampling and more or less explicit references. New technologies and tools, especially the iPod and YouTube, have heightened this resurgence of the past in the present: memories are within reach of all and infiltrate the fabric of our lives. The past comes back in the form of a ghost that is at once fascinating and paralysing – Simon Reynolds sees current creativity as “blocked.” “Could it be that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is... its past?” (p. ix). Mixing “now,” “then” and “tomorrow,” which are the headings of *Retromania*’s three main sections, Simon Reynolds nevertheless concludes, “I still believe the future is out there” (p. 428).
- 4 Anne Tronche also intertwines different times, but refers solely to her own memories. Her “chronicles” report on the distance travelled by artists over the last four decades and, in parallel, her own trajectory as a critic: “[...] Thirty-seven years have passed since the loss of those papers evoked here. Since then, Morellet’s work has confirmed the magnificent singularities that it expressed, but often discreetly, at the time” (p. 406). Her approach is retrospective and her judgement, at the same time, retroactive. The author recaptures the person she once was while remaining the one she is now, in a stimulating confusion of youth and maturity.
- 5 A similarly internal and external viewpoint characterises Douglas Crimp’s text: “I had set out to write about 1960s New York City queer culture, the culture in which I happily immersed myself when I came to the city after college toward the end of that decade” (p. ix). Above all, it is significant that he is constantly reinscribing the film he is studying within the specific conditions of projection in which he saw it. In this way, he inexorably links the object he is analysing to the subject he once was.
- 6 Consequently, the retrospective style allows for a certain confusion of past and present, and even the future. It also counters categorisation of discourse by erasing the very Cartesian distinction between subject and object.
- 7 While the author acts as witness to the past by mixing different time frames, a degree of subjectivity is required for the transcription and as a result the “retrospective” style sometimes reads like confession. In his study of the nostalgia informing pop culture, Simon Reynolds uses a style that is itself nostalgic. He does not hesitate to share his

memories of concerts he went to, to tell us about his manias as a collector, his experiences with hippies at Oxford, or recall his son's childhood. Nostalgia is at once the object and the style – the subject – of the book. “All this reverent introspection from a culture once so uncontrollably innovative used to puzzle me. Then I realised: *it's just like me*. I've often decried nostalgia but I'm also highly susceptible to that emotion. I can remember being five and looking back wistfully to how great things were when I was four” (p. 239). Subject and object come together in a genuinely phenomenological experience in which affective perception colours the book's characteristics: “It took me a while to fall under the spell of *Music Has a Right to Children*, but when it happened, the record took over my life for a good while. The crumbly smudges of texture, the miasmatic melody lines, the tangled threads of wistful and eerie seemed to have an extraordinary capacity to trigger ultra-vivid reveries that felt like childhood memories. [...] playgrounds with fresh rain stippling the wings and slides; canal-side recreation areas, with rows of saplings neatly plotted, wreathed in morning mist [...]” (p. 331). The retrospective style ties what it describes to the viewpoint of the person perceiving it. This is not the abstract, universal and Cartesian “I” of authorised critical discourse, but the first person of an idiosyncratic, contextualised and sensitive subject. This is the justification of confession, just as Maurice Merleau-Ponty used to evoke personal memories in order to cast light on a theoretical but never anonymous discourse.

- 8 The text put forward here is the production of a singular individual, with his voice and memory. No claim is therefore made to objectivity, exhaustiveness or neutrality. Introducing her series of monographs, Anne Tronche writes: “I didn't see everything during that period. I chose some circuits to the detriments of others, I have privileged events that sometimes have to do with the quality of human relations. [...] Having essentially, I might even say exclusively, worked from memory, I have not tried to artificially fill certain gaps, since the main thing I wanted to show is that the perception of the work is, for the person observing it, an experiment that, over time, reveals the relation between's one own and other people's thought. [...] I have in effect taken the option of making some unusual comparisons” (p. 8). What we are given are the encounters as they occurred, coincidences that led to transitions. While offering a panorama of art in France in the 1960s, the author also explores the reasons behind her critical choices, goes back over her formative period and, in an almost analytical movement, offers an implicit self-portrait: “However, thinking back to those years which for me were the years of my first discoveries, I can see how decisive some encounters were for the things I wrote about and for the way I thought about my relation to art criticism” (p. 7). In the same way, if Douglas Crimp's viewpoint is constantly surfacing in his analyses, he also admits that the films studied in his book made a lasting impact on the construction of his identity: “*The Chelsea Girls* changed my life. Very soon after I saw it, in 1967, I quit school, moved to New York City [...]” (p. 99). Subject and object mutually constitute each other. *Our Kind of Movie* is also a self-portrait by its author – the cause of a calling. For Douglas Crimp, Andy Warhol's films have the power of changing in the same moment both faces and the way we look at them (p. 145).
- 9 By erasing the distinction between subject and object, Anne Tronche intricately links her style of writing and the contents of her analyses. She is phenomenological in tone, but also by taste and in her ideas. She thus offers a phenomenological reading of Soto's *Pénétrables*,¹ and of the works of Marc Brusse, Tania Mouraud and Larry Bell. Likewise, what interests Douglas Crimp is the particular experience of Warholian time, or the

specific phenomenology of the face. His description is not objective. It immerses itself in the image in order to evoke its depth and not its simple surface. The theoretical analysis all hinges on the quality of the gaze and the nature of the writing.

- 10 This retrospective approach leads, above all, to a blurring of the literary categories as they concern the discourse on art. As much as they are art historical texts, the three works discussed here partake, as we have seen, of the confession or memoir genre, but also of the novelistic art of description. The literary quality of these essays is not a secondary matter: it is a vital part of the retrospective style, or even demonstration. The writing works to recapture specific atmospheres. Anne Tronche, in particular, offers detailed descriptions of the places and seasons of her first encounters with the artists, evokes their physical appearances, their physical presence, way of dressing and hairstyle. Moreover, the descriptive dimension seeks to convey a “Parisian artistic climate,” as Emile Zola, Honoré de Balzac and the Goncourt Brothers once did. Anne Tronche sketches out a network of elective affinities and maps the creative landscape of the day. “Friendships linked to the name of artistic interests in some cases elicit a singular geography, indifferent to the usual classifications. Friendships that play a hidden but essential role in the story, in all histories, of artists or any other individual” (p. 335). So, in spite of the book’s division into separate monographs and chronicles, the process of reading weaves an emotional portrait of a period and a milieu, in the cafés and galleries of Saint-Germain, on Quai des Grands-Augustins or in the Contrescarpe quarter, punctuated by names of artists, of dealers, of gallerists and of art critics.
- 11 Likewise, with Simon Reynolds, the quality of the writing is needed to effectively underpin the flights of nostalgia. Here, once again, the retrospective style blurs boundaries between literary genres. The art of description is merged with the literary sub-genres of confession, self-analysis and self-critique: “Given that I enjoy many aspects of retro, why do I still feel deep down that it is lame and shameful? [...] It’s the story of my pop life, really. I was born in 1963 which, for various, not completely narcissistic reasons, I regard as *The Year That Rock Began*” (p. xxiii/403). In the same way, Douglas Crimp mixes the description of a period with shameful confessions: “At the tender age of twenty-five I succumbed to ridiculousness. It happened on Forty-Second Street, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, sometime after midnight, at a porn cinema called the *Masque Theater*” (p. 39). Personal anecdote has a demonstrative function, in the same way as the reference to particular cinematographic techniques. With retrospective writing, style itself is an issue and is not distinct from the analyses it conveys.
- 12 Retrospective writing is a hybrid genre. It mixes past and present, objective information and incomplete memories, witness and emotion. It interweaves the subject and the object of discourse, historical neutrality and novelistic description, generalising analysis and specific anecdote. More generally, it interweaves autobiographical narrative and theory, each alternately serving the other. There are several ways of interpreting the rise of this style which puts the critic’s voice and memory centre-stage. One could say that it is symptomatic of a certain kind of contemporary narcissism, of the kind that Douglas Crimp seems to encourage, or a backward-looking nostalgia, as studied by Simon Reynolds. But it seems to me – if I can speak here with *my* voice – that this writing bears witness to the consciousness of a literary truth, of a truth of writing which, far from mapping the human sciences onto hard science, reintroduces the spectator, the listener or the viewer, into any discourse on art.

NOTES

1. Tronche, Anne. *L'Art des années 1960 : chroniques d'une scène parisienne*, Paris: Hazan, 2012, pp. 266-267: "In doing so, this device which so effectively converted visual sensation into corporeal, almost muscular sensation, reconnected by indirect paths with the stakes involved in collective performance. A performance that seeks to attenuate the dualist relation between subject and object, as if the viewer, during the time of their active participation, had become inseparable from the object. A new model of dialogue characterised the experience of the *Pénétrable*, which seemed in many respects to give concrete expression to those 'interlacings' of the body in the world theorised by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as in a relation to intimate, so close that one could not say 'where to put the limit of the body and the world, because the world is flesh.'"