
As John Shearman points out in his stimulating and provocative introduction, the history of the viewer’s response to renaissance works of art is not a new, or ‘New’ approach. This observation is a critical one, in both senses of the word, because the capital implies a certain distrust for the so-called New Art History, or at least a dissatisfaction with some of its claims to originality; so much so that the author is eager to remind his readers that what has now become the domain of Reception Theory had already been investigated by nineteenth-century scholars (p.6). Yet it is Shearman himself who finds Receptioneigenschauce ‘very interesting, very productive’, adding that ‘no other new critical technique has changed my thinking as much as this one has’ (p.8).

This is not as contradictory as it may sound: a mild reprimand on the grounds of superficial trendiness does not conceal the fact that the author has been deeply affected by the methodological debates that have shaken the discipline of art history over the last two decades, and his general programme is clear: Shearman’s principal aim is to reconcile praxis with theoretical considerations, historicism with hermeneutics. To use his own words: ‘this is not intended to be a polemical book, but on the contrary to be one that connects’ (p.4).

It is easy to sympathise with such a goal, but those who choose to meditate always run the risk of being criticised from all sides. In a recent review, in the position of an example, Ernst Gombrich questions whether this book has theoretical premises at all (New York Review of Books, 4th March 1993, p.19: ‘Shearman prefers to teach by examples rather than by theoretical considerations.

... The only brief excursion into theory the author permits himself is the proposal to use the grammatical term ‘transitive’ for the kind of relationship between the work of art and the spectator that interests him’. Yet it is crucial to be clear about what we mean by ‘theory’. Indeed, it appears that Gombrich and Shearman have two very different notions in mind. For Gombrich the term implies a systematic approach. Shearman, instead, maintains a more flexible view: ‘what is perhaps eccentrically English about the account that follows’, he writes ‘is that I cannot reduce it to a theory or system, and my mistrust would only grow if I could’ (p.8). It is precisely this lack of dogmatism that makes Shearman’s conclusions generally convincing. At the same time, however, this does not mean that this book has no theoretical premises or implications. To be more explicit, the theory interacts with the praxis but the author is not interested in building a systematic model.

Only connect is lucidly organised around the analysis of three different types of viewer responses to renaissance works of art, and they are investigated under the correct assumption that some of the material contained in his masterly Charlotte lecture on Pontormo’s Capponi Chapel in S. Felicita; chapter three is concerned with portraits and here the reader will find some ideas published in Shearman’s influential article on Raphael’s portrait of Baldassare Castiglione; chapter four analyses the relationship between viewer and decoré, expanding upon his celebrated articles on the Chiigi Chapel and Coreggio’s domes in Parma; chapter five deals with history painting and is partly based on the author’s work on Raphael’s Stanzce and tapestry cartoons; the last chapter, which deals with the issue of the privileged spectator as accomplice in the artist’s quest for Limation, is dedicated to other sculptural examples.

In the end, the notion of the spectator remains somewhat elusive and the author’s promise of focusing on the particularisation of the viewer is not entirely fulfilled. More could be done from the point of view of gender and of psychoanalysis, for example. Yet it is impossible not to be seduced by the enormous richness of this book: the author’s intimate familiarity with and
profound knowledge of Italian renaissance literature, his unmatched skill in re-reading celebrated works that have been analysed many times, the importance of the issues raised and discussed – all make *Only connect* one of the most inspiring art history books of recent times.

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