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Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance. (The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1988). By John Shearman. 281 pp. incl. 201 b. & w. ills. plus 25 col. pls. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992), $49.50. ISBN 0-691-09972-3 (HB); 0-691-01917-7 (PB).

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 as well as early twentieth-century scholars (p.6). Yet it is Shearman himself who finds *Rezeptionsgeschichte* '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 mediate always run the risk of being criticised from all sides. In a recent review, for 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 the assumed presence of the spectator influenced artists' designs, choices and creativity.

The first stage, which is discussed in the first chapter (*A more engaged spectator*), deals with the problem of the artist's acknowledgement of a viewer who is not yet totally absorbed. The chosen example is Donatello's bronze *David* which, according to Shearman, is characterised as Beloved, while the head of Goliath might be interpreted as Donatello's self-portrait. This is a new interpretation of this celebrated statue, and the author concludes from this example that a proper understanding of the work depends on the spectator's 'willingness to read it realistically in behavioural or narrative terms' (p.27). If I understand him correctly, Shearman argues that such a bronze group does not need a viewer to be operative, and yet it needs a *sophisticated* viewer in order to convey its real message. The rôle of the viewer as interpreter is therefore essential because it is only when he or she decodes this message that he or she can fully understand the work's stylistic implications.

The second stage, which is illustrated in chapters one, two (*A shared space*), three (*Portraits and Poets*), four (*Domes*), and part of chapter five (*History*), proposes that the spectator must enter into the artist's subject to complete its plot. A group such as Verrocchio's *Christ and St Thomas* can be appreciated by anyone, but it is not self-contained because it is the spectator who, as 'object', complements the narrative: in this case Shearman reproduces a fifteenth-century Florentine woodcut which represents *Christ appearing to the Apostles through the closed doors* to argue that the subject matter is complete only when the spectator realises that he is in the position of one of the apostles. There are some problems with such an interpretation: for example, does this mean that women could not become part of the narrative because they could not identify themselves with the apostles? But the author's clever and imaginative reading of the involvement of the audience in the meaning of renaissance works of art remains one of the most persuasive ideas, and a concept that is already familiar to those who know his earlier essays.

The third stage, which is discussed in chapters one, five (*Energy*), and six (*Imitation, and the slow fuse*), is well illustrated by the analysis of Cellini's *Perseus*. In the visually literate environment of sixteenth-century Florence the artist assumes the complicity of the spectator in the very functioning of the work of art. The viewer is no longer simply an 'object' used to complete the narrative, but he or she 'becomes an accomplice in its aesthetic functioning' (p.58).

Shearman's book, therefore, is very consciously structured. In the first chapter – which functions as an overture – the three stages are clearly illustrated by the three Florentine monumental bronze groups. The following chapters are dedicated to specific genres or types and some of the arguments have already been discussed by the author in previous publications: chapter two deals with altar-pieces and reuses some of the material contained in his masterly Charlton 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 domes, expanding upon his splendid articles on the Chigi Chapel and Correggio's domes in Parma; chapter five deals with history painting and is partly based on the author's work on Raphael's *Stanze* and tapestry cartoons; the last chapter, which deals with the issue of the privileged spectator as accomplice in the artist's quest for Imitation, is dedicated to drawing, sculpture and painting.

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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