

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Marnin Young

book review of

Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh by James H. Rubin

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009)

Citation: Marnin Young, book review of *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh* by James H. Rubin, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring09/impressionism-and-the-modern-landscape-productivity-technology-and-urbanization-from-manet-to-van-gogh-by-james-rubin>.

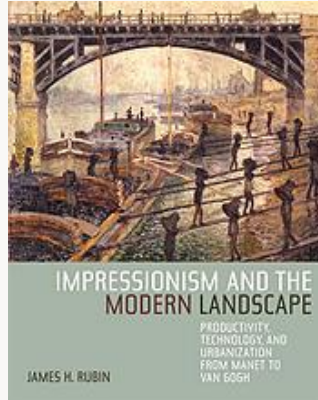
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



James H. Rubin

Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008

256 pp.; 125 b/w ills.; 24 color plates; index;

Cost: \$49.95

ISBN 978-0-520-24801-4

What are we to make of modernism's relation to modernity? In approaching this recalcitrant and enduring question, James H. Rubin's new book, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh*, offers two substantially new tacks. Through a careful balancing of visual analysis and social history, it seeks to break out of the current limitations of art historical methodology. The book also strives, more or less effectively, to dismantle the still-dominant account of Impressionism as simply the painting of leisure. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape* derive from these twin ambitions.

Let me begin with method. Rubin is as aware as anyone that the underlying concern of his book has been discussed repeatedly from a variety of different angles. Formalists have long insisted that modernism, by its very definition, had no relation to modernity. It was precisely a turning away from the social world of industrialization, urbanization, economic and political upheaval towards the immanent critique of the limits and possibilities of a given artistic medium. In the more nuanced and sophisticated versions of this story, modernism's relation to modern culture as a whole was dialectical and negative, a principled retreat from, or refusal of, politics and representation. In such accounts, modernism was nonetheless driven by its antagonist—its horrific and inescapable twin—modernity. The best formalist histories of modern art acknowledge this fact; indeed, they take it as the very core of the problem, if not the ultimate goal of their inquiries. Roland Barthes, for instance, memorably declared that “a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it.”^[1]

And what of those treatments of late nineteenth-century art which begin with History? Usually passing under the sign of the social history of art, they can be traced back to Meyer Schapiro's extraordinary and well-known passage on Impressionism in his 1937 essay “The

Nature of Abstract Art.”^[2] Schapiro’s account, taken up seriously only in the late 1960s, could be understood as refocusing art historical analysis on the subject matter rather than the form of Impressionist painting. Modernity in a rigorously historical sense—involving new classes, new forms of economic production, and above all, new forms of leisure—became the central focus of painting; consequently, the history of such painting was well advised to attend carefully to such content. The danger, as one art historian associated with this project has recently pointed out, is the drift of the social history of art toward mere “social iconography.” “That is, toward a practice where what art historians were mainly expected to do was *read out* of a picture (plus some accompanying documents) a set of social contents or referents, and behind them or in them a set of patron expectations and viewer understandings.”^[3] This version of historical analysis has come “to constitute something of a new default function for the field.”^[4] So much so, one might add, that for many of us, it is initially puzzling to grasp what the alternative might be.

A closer reading of Schapiro brings the problem into focus. Where some art historians focused on his evocations of Impressionism’s presentation of “realistic pictures” of “the objective forms of bourgeois recreation” (modernity), they all but ignored his equivalent and dialectical insistence on “the new Impressionist techniques” (modernism) which approximated “conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenade and the refined consumer of luxury goods.”^[5] Schapiro and other ambitious historians of late nineteenth-century art sought to manage not only the dynamic interplay of artistic modernism and social modernity, but also to establish the mediations between social facts and artistic forms in the material circumstances of the production, circulation, and reception of images. For them, modernism offered a means of representing modernity that was, itself, a material intervention within the ideological practices and norms of the modern world. To bring to bear an art history that grapples with the complex intertwining of form and History—in other words, with pictorial meaning as something embedded within the social uses of images—is the challenge facing any account of modernism and modernity seeking to supersede the false antagonism of formalism and the social history of art.

Clearly rising to this challenge, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape* attempts to steer the study of late nineteenth century art back into deeper waters. Immediately acknowledging his debt to Schapiro, as well as those scholars who followed, notably T.J. Clark and Robert L. Herbert, he insists that his account of Impressionism will seek to balance an earlier emphasis on Impressionism’s social background with “greater depth regarding the meanings of its style and techniques” (8-9). Throughout the book Rubin does indeed present in-depth historical research on the content and context of Impressionist paintings, juxtaposed with attentive and largely compelling readings of those same works. In the end, however, this back-and-forth from social history to visual analysis is done with far too much equanimity. The book offers equal time, but only rarely does it suggest ways of bridging background and foreground, subject and technique, modernity and modernism. Nothing else in the book, for instance, matches the dialectically rich claims of its concluding comments on the social meanings of Impressionist technique:

“The dual reading of Impressionist technique to evoke both leisure and productivity thus reflects an exquisite, if ultimately fragile, reconciliation of the two symbiotically related sides of modern society and economy and corresponds to an early and

optimistic phase in progressive bourgeois (as opposed to reactionary and nostalgic) version of utopia” (194).

Whatever its limitations on the methodological level (and they are more practical than theoretical), *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape* presents an argument about Impressionist painting that is both provocative and largely new. Rubin’s account focuses on the representation of industry, urbanization, and other modern motifs of productivity. As the author acknowledges right away, this book is by no means the first study to point out the problematic representation of industry in the Impressionist landscape.^[6] In earlier accounts, however, Impressionism found ways to avoid industry and class, or to integrate it into the pastoral suburban landscape in ways that evaded the ideological problem of modernity: “Industry is masked or distanced or immobilized.”^[7] At times, French painting in the late nineteenth century—the work of Edouard Manet or Georges Seurat, for example—revealed, or even revealed in, the contradictions of modernity; but Impressionist landscape, it would seem, sought primarily to avoid the problem of confronting those contradictions.

To the contrary, Rubin insists that key Impressionists working in landscape painting—most prominently, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Armand Guillaumin—in fact *embraced* the ideology of modernization in a variety of different ways. The work of these artists “embodies not so much the dislocations associated with modernity—though these are certainly present in Impressionist imagery—as the ideal of progress that in the capitalist version of the utopian social myth would lead to universal harmony” (14). While previous art historians have either avoided the problem of modernity, or insisted that Impressionism itself avoided the problem, Rubin argues that we have missed Impressionism’s attempt to harmonize the contradictions of modernity through its ideological commitment to productivity as a model for both artistic and social progress.

With these claims in mind, Rubin proceeds to analyze a new constellation of images, juxtaposing, for instance, Pissarro’s *Railroad Crossing at Pâtis, near Pontoise* (1873-74; private collection), Paul Cézanne’s *Railroad Cut* (c. 1869-70; Munich), photographs of the *Chemins de fer du Nord* by Edouard Baldus, and illustrations from Auguste Perdonnet’s *Traité élémentaire des chemins de fer* (Paris, 1865). Organized by subject, the book moves from sections on roads and bridges to ports, rivers, and canals, from city to country by way of railways and train stations. (He also deals, somewhat less convincingly, with Impressionism’s embrace of photography as a new mode of viewing). This structure allows him to deal with the social history of such material—what he calls Impressionism’s “other landscape”—in great detail. As Rubin points out, landscapes depicting leisure have dominated the spectrum of analysis of Impressionism for too long, and he does an impressive job of demonstrating how numerous these alternate landscapes really are and how important the subject matter was to French culture, especially in the 1870s. There is no doubt that *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape* will open up an entirely new range of material for analysis within the field of Impressionist studies.

Rubin has been developing this argument for some time. In 1999 he wrote of Pissarro’s 1873 series of paintings of factories near Pontoise: “For Pissarro, who worked five years in his family’s business before deciding to become a painter, productivity and labour—

agricultural or industrial—rather than leisure, were essential.”[8] This is largely consistent with his current analysis of the same motifs: “While Pissarro’s attitude toward industry seems to be one of acceptance, even approval, its near-ubiquitous presence in his landscape has not spoiled the balance he perceived even in the more densely traveled environment of Marly and Bougival”(141). What is new is the attitude Pissarro seems to have had towards these landscapes. Where a decade ago, Pissarro was still the Proudhonist who subscribed to the leftist journal *La Lanterne* and had “a strong sympathy for the rural working classes,” he is now complicit rather than oppositional.[9]

“It may seem that Pissarro’s combination of old and new, and of weekend bourgeois and local working folk, reflects ambivalence toward modernity, an inability to accept it frankly by discarding the past. That would be a simplistic view, however, because for Pissarro, as for Monet, at least until the later 1870s, and other Impressionists modernity was progressive rather than intrusive”(83).

This will strike some as a fundamentally incorrect diagnosis of Pissarro’s politics even in the 1870s. It manifestly contradicts the painter’s later attitudes: “I don’t hold the view that we have been fooling ourselves and ought rightly to worship the steam engine with the great majority. No, a thousand times no!”[10] Rubin surely intends to unsettle some established leftist art historical assumptions about the consistency of Pissarro’s views over his lifetime, or to force us to reconsider the evidence for the earlier period, but such provocations demand rigorous defenses.

Rubin hopes that “the number of examples will force, by sheer weight of evidence” a shift in the reader’s view on the question of Impressionism’s representation of the modern landscape (9). Such an approach certainly allows him to present comparisons and relations between paintings and contextual materials that would not otherwise be brought together. At times, however, the display of research and visual analysis in *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape*, as rich as it is, substitutes for the rigorous presentation of evidence for the case. The substantiation of Rubin’s view of the progressive-capitalist-utopian version of Impressionism is to be found either in the paintings themselves or in contextual documents, but rarely do the two mutually support a specific claim for an artist’s ideological worldview or a politics that is complicit or critical of it.

The repeated use of the word “ideology” throughout the book signals one way of thinking through the limitations of the argument. Rubin is absolutely right to use the word in its Althusserian sense. The interpellation of viewers is precisely what is at stake in Impressionism’s alleged celebration (or, alternately, its evasion) of the new worldview of modernization. But as Althusser himself would have insisted, the problem of ideology is never transparently the expression of a mode of thinking or of enthusiasm for a way of life. It is unconscious: “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology.”[11] An examination of the ideological character of Impressionism’s presentation of modernity in the 1870s—Rubin’s fundamental and very persuasive project in this book—thus demands more evidence than just visual analysis and historical research on subject matter.

What evidence? Of note, Rubin makes little real use of art criticism as evidence for contemporary *mentalités*. Although major critics are mobilized piecemeal, the book offers only one instance, by my count, of a critic responding directly to a work of art: Georges Rivière's extraordinary celebration of Monet's *Gare St. Lazare* series in 1877. Likewise, there is little or no examination of artistic intentionality even on the conscious level, let alone on the unconscious. Very little correspondence and very few anecdotes from memoirs make it into the book; indeed biography is all but absent (remarkably so given its relative prominence in the 1999 book). As a consequence, the reader acquires no real sense of the ideological starting point for these artist's productions. Most importantly, the mechanisms of the transmission of ideology are largely unexamined as well. How did Monet and company absorb the ideology of productivity? What did their schools teach them? How did the media construct this celebration of modernity? How did Pissarro situate himself politically in relation to competing ideologies of modernity? How and why did his politics change? And perhaps most significantly, what did the public, critics, and other artists think of Impressionism's alleged embrace of modernity in the 1870s? Rubin writes that paintings of such things as suburban roads and city streets "signified modernity to the nineteenth-century viewer"(24). But how did they? When? For all audiences in the same way? How do works of art ideologically "interpellate" their viewers anyway? These are old questions that should still suggest whole lines of inquiry for scholars of nineteenth-century art. James Rubin's book only begins to answer such questions, but it has the exceptional merit of bringing them back to prominence.

Marnin Young
Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University
marnin.young[at]yu.edu

Notes

- [1] Roland Barthes, as quoted in Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 33.
- [2] Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (January-March 1937): 77-98. Reprinted in Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 185-211.
- [3] Timothy J. Clark, "Art History in an Age of Image-Machines," *EurAmerica* 38, no. 1 (March 2008): 5.
- [4] Thomas Crow, "The Practice of Art History in America," *Daedalus* (Spring 2006): 86.
- [5] Schapiro, *Modern Art*, 192-93.
- [6] See, for instance, Robert L. Herbert, "Industry and the Changing Landscape from Daubigny to Monet," in John Merriman, ed., *French Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 139-64. Reprinted in Herbert, *From Millet to Leger: Essays in Social Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 1-21.
- [7] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, new ed. (1985; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 188-89.
- [8] James H. Rubin, *Impressionism* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 152.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 143.
- [10] Camille Pissarro, letter to Lucien Pissarro, April 26, 1900, in Pissarro, *Letters to his Son Lucien*, ed. J. Rewald (1943; New York: Da Capo, 1995), 341.

[11] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971; New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118.