

## Henry Fuseli's alternative classicism

Review of:

Andrei Pop, *Antiquity, Theatre & The Painting of Henry Fuseli*, Oxford University Press 2015, 288 Pages, 64 black and white and 11 colour illustrations, ISBN: 9780198709275

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In his pioneering study, *Tracks in the Snow: Studies in English Science and Art* (1946), Ruthven Todd wrote of the work of the Swiss-born painter of supernatural and terrible subjects, critic and translator, writer on art and sometime Keeper and Professor of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, Henry Fuseli (1741-1825):

Today, when we are stumbling towards an understanding of our dreams, we have found in the word 'unconscious' an admirable excuse for liking, say, the desolate arcades and squares of Chirico, the plasmic dancing amoeba of Miro and the flexible watches, the crutch-supported buttocks and the hidden images of Salvador Dali. Like Fuseli, we have a passion for the inexplicable

Todd was reflecting of more than a century of neglect, since the artist's death, firstly a 'stream of appreciation [that] continued as a trickle, sometimes almost underground' then, after around 1900, outright neglect or hostility. He registered his own interest in Fuseli, published in the context of a wider study of the creative interrogation of materialism and empiricism in William Blake and John Martin, and in literature, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as part of a growing tide of literary and art historical investigation, pioneered by scholars in Switzerland, including Paul Ganz and Arnold Federmann, and by some contemporaries in England including Sacheverell Sitwell, John Piper and Geoffrey Grigson, the latter two being dedicatees of *Tracks in the Snow*. Todd also quoted John Piper, who had written in *Signature, a Quadrimestrial of Typography and Graphic Arts* (no.10, November 1938): 'Fuseli reappears today quite naturally. Our transitional period reflects his own. There were as many schools of painting in his day as there are now, and they were as divergent; and Fuseli's work is probably *closer* now than it has been since his death'. For Todd, and Piper, Fuseli's art was both proto-modernist in its character, and provided a route into understanding modernity itself, as something fraught, anxious and disturbing. Their interest in Fuseli, far from being strictly or narrowly art-historical, was emphatically geared towards a recovery of the artist as a culturally pertinent figure for the modern world.

Andrei Pop's ambitious, thoughtful and original new study of Henry Fuseli has a family resemblance to Todd's earlier book, in seeking to take lessons for the modern world from his example, and in bringing the question of modernity and its subjectivity so forcibly into play in interpreting his art. Whereas, for Todd, the relevant aspect of modernity was the discovery of the unconscious, Pop directs us to consider his ironic or reflexive articulation of a new understanding of classicism in a liberal, modern culture of pluralism and relativism. What Pop terms the 'Neopaganism' manifested by Fuseli arises from the de-centring of European

subjectivity from the mid-eighteenth century, specifically in the wake of the discovery of the remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1748. If the chronology is canonical, and apparent in any number of established studies of Neoclassic art, style and thought, Pop wants us to see in Neopaganism something far more extensive and historically resonant than the simple stylistic change or revival, even allowing that such was or could be highly politically charged, at least in the context of the French Revolution. Quite properly shifting his temporal framework backwards in time (although initially enthusiastic about the Revolution, Fuseli's distinctive take on antiquity was largely formed two decades earlier, in the late 1760s and 1770s), Pop accounts for the emergence of Neopaganism as an historically decisive new sense of alienation from the classical past, which might be manifested variously as comedy or tragedy, or fantasised as a dream or vision. Fuseli, as the painter of brutally tragic or weirdly comic paintings, often pivoting around the themes of imagination, daydreaming or nightmares, obviously provides rich territory for exploring these claims. It might, even, be said that it is the artist's thematic occupations which have helped define and set the limits on Neopaganism as conceived here.

Although securely grounded in very wide and searching reading of primary and secondary literature, the breadth implied of Pop's arguments is closer to Todd than to much recent work on Fuseli. Much of this has focussed on Fuseli's engagement with his literary source materials (Milton and Shakespeare above all) and on his involvement with emerging cultures of visual spectacle, apparent in the mainstream exhibitions of contemporary art held in London annually from the 1760s, but also a wider culture of technologically-driven urban entertainments including the magic lantern shows, phantasmagoria, and mass-produced print media. Including, notably, Luis Calè's major study of Fuseli's ill-fated Milton Gallery, and exhibitions in Stuttgart, Zurich and in London, these have tended to situate the artist in the context of the new commercial realities of late-eighteenth century Britain, as well as aligning him with aesthetic developments in the form of the Gothic and Sublime.<sup>1</sup> These more thematically exploratory studies have been possible because of the earlier foundational work undertaken on the artist. This includes Eudo C. Mason's still-useful compilation of Fuseli's writings and Frederick Antal's posthumous *Fuseli Studies* (1956) which identified the artist's 'novel, partially irrational mannerist-classicist idiom' as transitional between eighteenth-century classicism and nineteenth-century romanticism. Most importantly, there was the monumental *catalogue raisonné* of Gert Schiff (1973), the cornerstone of modern Fuseli studies, as well as the more recent edition of the English correspondence and the *catalogue raisonné* of prints by David Weinglass, and Gisela Bungarten's critical edition of the Academy lectures - the most extensive and influential body of academic art writing in early nineteenth century Britain, whose wide relevance for

<sup>1</sup> Luis Calè, *Fuseli's Milton Gallery: 'turning readers into spectators'*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2006; Christoph Becker and Claudia Hattendorff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli: das verlorene paradies*, exhibition catalogue, Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1997; Franziska Lentzsch et al, *Füssli: The Wild Swiss*, exhibition catalogue, Zurich: Kunsthau, 2005; Martin Myrone ed., *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Britain, 2006. See also Matthias Vogel, *Johann Heinrich Füssli – Darsteller der Leidenschaft*, Zurich: ZIP-Verlag, 2001; Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

the art and culture of the time is still routinely overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Alongside those publications were several key exhibitions, most importantly Werner Hoffman's show in Hamburg in 1974 in the series 'Kunst um 1800', which thereby placed the artist in a wider European context, and the London version of the same exhibition which, lacking that intellectual context, appeared rather more like an attempt at situating him as an unlikely Old Master, and the focussed but important presentation of Fuseli as the central figure of a cosmopolitan 'Circle' of likeminded artists working in Rome in the 1770s, featuring at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven in 1979.<sup>3</sup> These various efforts have, in effect, provided an ever more finely graded historical context for Fuseli's art. Where once he might have been cast into some grandly abstracted transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, or from Enlightenment to Modernity, he is now more likely to be considered alongside his precise contemporaries in relation to exhibiting strategies, market forces, new technologies and audiences.

One of the main strengths of Pop's study is that it offers a rich new basis for addressing the question of Fuseli's ambivalence or ambiguity, the queasy slippage between comic, tragic and absurd in his work, his contrary and contradictory persona. In the past this features of Fuseli's art and life have led to a proliferation of compound terms, in which the artist's supposedly transitional, or ambiguous, status is marked: he has been both Neoclassical and Romantic, and a purveyor of the Neoclassical-Horrific, Troubled Classicism, the Horrific-Sublime and Sado-Mannerism. Pop addresses this ambivalence as a challenge to moral norms, throwing helpful light on the famous lines from William Blake celebrating the Swiss artist as 'both Turk and Jew'. As elucidated by Pop, Blake identified Fuseli's challenge to the mainstream 'in cultural terms, through a mask of foreignness' (p.12).

Explicitly embracing a biographical standpoint ('intentions as such belong to living beings, and the beings that make the things found in our art-history books are human', p.18), Pop identifies Fuseli as a 'painter-migrant', whose experience of travelling to England from Switzerland through Germany, and whose return to England after a crucial period in cosmopolitan Rome, was critical (perhaps unique?) in making this grasp of Neopagan cultural relativism possible and productive. This emphasis on individual biography gives drive, clarity and purpose to the study, with successive sections dedicated to his exploration of Neopaganism's appearance as tragedy, as comedy, as dream and as amoral eroticism. These take into account and offer fresh readings of many of Fuseli's most familiar works, the much-published and over-interpreted drawing *The Artist in Despair over the Grandeur of*

<sup>2</sup>Eudo C. Mason, *The mind of Henry Fuseli : selections from his writings*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951; Frederick Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956; Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825*, 2 vols, Zurich: Berichthaus; Munich: Prestel-Verlag 1973; David H. Weinglass, *The collected English letters of Henry Fuseli*, New York: Kraus International, 1982; David H. Weinglass, *Prints and engraved illustrations by and after Henry Fuseli: a catalogue raisonné*, Ashgate: Aldershot, 1994; Gisela Bungarten, *J.H. Füssli (1741-1825) "Lectures on painting" : das Modell der Antike und die moderne Nachahmung*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Gert Schiff and Werner Hoffman, *Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825*, exhibition catalogue, Hamburg: Kunsthalle, 1974; Gert Schiff and Werner Hoffman, *Henry Fuseli, 1741-1825*, exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Gallery, 1975; Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli circle in Rome: early Romantic art of the 1770s*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1979.

*Antique fragments* (1778-80), here viewed with fresh and sceptical eyes as an ironic and knowing statement about alienation from the past, the pornographic drawings, and of course the ubiquitous, continually re-interpreted *The Nightmare* (1781), posited as exemplary of the privatised, inscrutable subjectivities brought into play with Neopaganism. There is suggestive matter in all these readings, although these also take us back and forth over the career in a way which gives little regard to the chronology of his personal and professional development, his reception and commercial fortunes, or indeed the changing cultural environment.

Pop's Fuseli is, quite emphatically, a philosophical artist: as he states at the outset (p.18), 'I insist that paintings and drawings are theoretical acts, able to discharge from their form an argument as articulate as any poem, essay, or philosophical treatise'. Thus the visual arts are endowed with a sort of borrowed dignity, with very little room given for any sort of active reading, misreading or interpretation on the part of his viewers or, arguably, much allowance for the specificity of visual experience as such, not least in the various display contexts in which Fuseli's art was actually experienced by his contemporaries. Fuseli, here, is basically an artist without an audience, or at least without an audience whose opinions, expectations (or, indeed, patronage) matter very much at all. Whatever stellar company he is given by Pop in strictly intellectual terms, and however interested Pop may be in the idea of spectatorship, Fuseli is isolated as a practitioner, and in that isolation lies the risk of re-mythologizing him.

Early in the study and towards the end (p.239), Pop raises the spectre of the 'Fuseli circle'. He is obviously aware that there are other artists working on some of the same or similar themes and in closely aligned styles or manners. But he is openly reluctant to engage with these, and offers only brief discussion of a few selected figures whose art he positively connects with Fuseli's (Johan Tobias Sergel, Maria Cosway, George Romney). But given the range of different fates enjoyed (or suffered) by these and other artists, we may be not much nearer to understanding the specific nature of Fuseli's achievement without taking them into account. Given the currency of the formal mannerisms of his art, and his predilection for horrific, supernatural and erotically charged literary themes, how much does the Pop's argument apply also to other artists of his circle, and his copyists and imitators? A 'Fuselian' style became swiftly standard in book illustration; he was pastiched and emulated by draughtsmen and painters who secured at least niche markets; and the amoral bleakness of his classical tragedy may be no more amoral or bleak than that of Romney in his imposing chalk 'cartoons' created at the end of the 1770s, or of the forgotten sculptor Thomas Procter in his extravagantly violent renderings of ancient mythology. There is more than strictly art-historical questions at stake here, for the issue is really to what degree is the artistic Neopaganism identified by Pop unique to Fuseli, or uniquely meaningful in his manifestation of it.

It is here that Pop, while he contributes significantly to the historicist interpretation of Fuseli's work manifested in recent scholarship, also departs from it. Much of the recent work on Fuseli has been directed towards exploring his idiosyncrasies as historically legible, whether in terms of market tactics, political ideology, nationalist cultural values, or more strictly aesthetic factors. Arguably, Pop ends up re-asserting a sense of Fuseli's exceptionalism; the artist is, in effect, re-affirmed as a self-possessed 'master', and detached from the material influences of the commercial and professional worlds he occupied. What difference would taking greater account of his contemporaries and the reception of his work make? That is

not the task that Pop has set himself, but there are consequently open questions around whether the Neopaganism identified here has actively been modelled around the example of Fuseli, about the wider currency or legibility of Neopaganism. Can the representativeness claimed for Fuseli, in this regard (p.5), really be upheld?

As a study of Fuseli's seriousness as an artist, suggestive of ambitious new ways of understanding his relationship with modernity, this is a significant contribution to the literature. Where Todd located Fuseli in relation to De Chirico, Dali and Miro, and to the post-Freudian opening of the unconscious, Pop ultimately puts Fuseli into a constellation of thinkers and artists including Degas and Goya, Weber and Nietzsche as well as, more predictably, Winckelmann, Lessing and Herder. The effect is often exhilarating, but Fuseli remains, as conveyed in Blake's often-quoted lines, 'Both Turk and Jew' a contradictory figure. While Pop's Neopagan Fuseli is unlikely in the long run to have any more definitiveness than the Neoclassical, Romantic, or proto-Surrealist Fuseli, and while it may not in its details find much favour among more materially minded art historians, the argument presented so energetically and intelligently here undoubtedly makes for a valuable, subtle contribution to the literature and provides a fresh framework for the artist which will have to be taken into account in future interpretation of his work.

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