

# The monochrome and the readymade

Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 288pp., £80.00 hb., £20.99 pb., 978 0 82236 245 6 hb., 978 0 8223 6260 9 pb.

The title of Jaleh Mansoor's *Marshall Plan Modernism* provides a number of clues about the author's methodological ambitions. The juxtaposition of the term 'modernism' with an economic programme not only unsettles its meaning but implies an intention to cast a new light on this moment in the history of art. However, as always happens when two substantives are placed side by side, the semantic relationship between the terms remains obscure. The word order of Mansoor's title encourages us to treat 'Marshall Plan' as a qualifier and Modernism as the subject, but regardless of the way in which the sentence is structured, the title is made up of two juxtaposed nouns without preposition. From the outset, Mansoor implies that the relationship between the economic and artistic spheres proposed in the book will not be univocal.

Covering both art history and theory, *Marshall Plan Modernism* is a dense book which has developed from Mansoor's doctoral thesis. Mansoor's work is not entirely unfamiliar to an English readership, since parts of the thesis have previously been published as articles in the journal *October*. However, whereas the artistic practices considered in the book are largely the same as in the thesis, a new theoretical framework is in evidence. The references to French poststructuralist philosophy, which once characterised Mansoor's research and signalled its connection to the *October* school, have become sporadic, supplanted by a more materialist approach. Given that the object of study remains unaltered, one would expect the implications of this theoretical shift to be discussed in some detail, not least because the particular nature of the move – from post-structuralism to Marxism – calls for some 'grounding'.

Mansoor's research hinges on a body of artistic practices that emerged in post-war Italy, a country which was one of the main beneficiaries of the Marshall economic plan. Her analysis is predominantly concerned with a selection of works produced by Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri and Piero Manzoni from the early 1950s to the late 1960s. What ties the three artists together, according to the book, is not a deliberate affiliation to an

artistic current, but their attempt to recover and combine certain formal tropes associated with the early twentieth-century avant-garde, such as the monochrome and the readymade. In Mansoor's reading, this redeployment signals the unconscious resurfacing of failed revolutionary aspirations (monochrome), and a renewed drive for accumulation on the part of capital (readymade). In addition to identifying elements of the works that index these returns, the book also throws light on tropes marking a departure from the past such as the cutting and burning of the canvas. These formal features were absent in the earlier generation of monochromes, and would bear some relation to the forms of political resistance that emerged in Italy in the years of the economic 'miracle'.

In making this claim, Mansoor is heavily reliant upon Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*. The economist's account of the development of capital through long cycles of accumulation, in which each cycle simultaneously supersedes and recuperates aspects of its predecessor, is crucial to Mansoor's understanding of art history as a whole. In her analysis, the practices of the Italian artists are connected both to the long and recursive temporal trajectories of capitalism and its increasingly global scale. Their distance from indigenous artistic traditions, and their interest in tropes of the international avant-gardes, would demonstrate 'the obsolescence of the national state' and Italy's inscription within a broader capitalist space through the Marshall Plan.

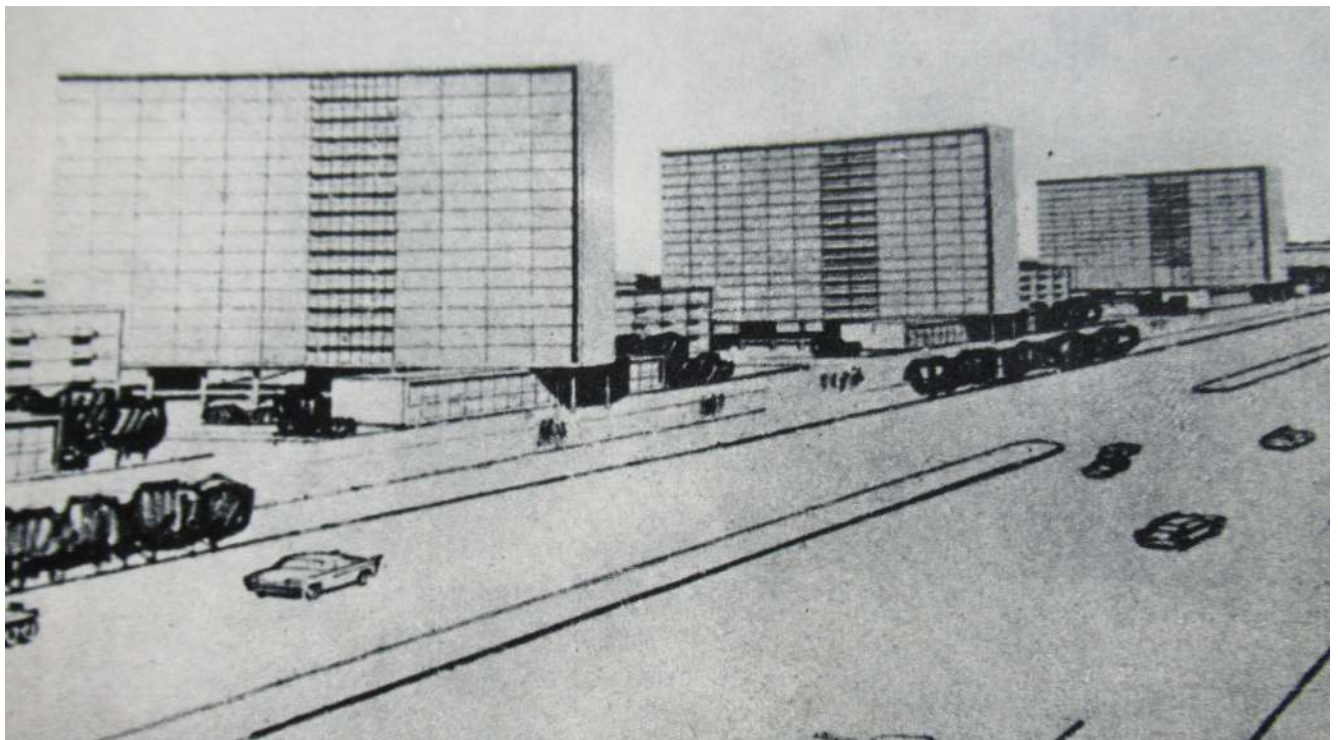
By connecting the works of Fontana, Burri and Manzoni to contemporary macro-economic events, *Marshall Plan Modernism* challenges established art historical accounts and opens up new interpretative paths. In particular, the book marks a departure from the secondary literature on Alberto Burri, which tends to trace his burning of canvasses back to the violence he experienced during the Second World War. Yet while Mansoor's rejection of a narrow autobiographical perspective is a major strength of the book, she also overstates the impact that the international movement of capital may have had on post-war Italian artists, nearly obliterating historical

and political factors immediately preceding and in geographical proximity to the production of the works of art considered. The termination of the fascist regime, for example, has to be acknowledged as one of the reasons for the tendency to privilege avant-gardist tropes over the national futurist heritage. After twenty years of policies which discouraged the importation of foreign art and favoured a return to indigenous sources, artists were eager to reconnect to an international scene. Mansoor's reading, however, suggests that Italy's incorporation within a broader economic capitalist space simply wiped out, almost frictionlessly, these historical wounds and cultural heritage.

In the introduction to the book, Mansoor appears to revive the debate on art historical method by situating her work in relation to other critical approaches. Her declared aim is to overcome the impasse between 'formalist autonomy' and 'social reflective history' by offering a 'third' way that might reveal the radical aims of the works under consideration. Nevertheless, the introduction and following chapters do not engage with historical debates on art historical methodology. Nor do they refer to more recent attempts to rethink the relationship between Marxism and art history. Given the introduction's bold declaration of intent, one would expect the author to expand on her own proposal in relation

to the current state of the debate. After all, the schism between 'formalist autonomy' and 'social reflective history' which Mansoor declares she wants to surpass has already been replaced by more intricate methodological frameworks.

Mansoor appears more interested in critical approaches which originate outside of the field of art, such as those set forward by the literary critic Fredric Jameson. In the introduction, the author announces that she will adopt a definition of culture extrapolated from Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), and makes repeated use of terms such as 'symptom', 'unconscious' or 'aetiology', recalling the psychoanalytically inflected style of the latter. Echoing Jameson, Mansoor defines culture, and implicitly art, as 'the object [which] makes manifest the contradictions in the mode of production', and hints at an Althusserian notion of economic determination 'in the last instance', a key point of reference in *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson sets forward an interpretative model for literature that relies upon Althusser's critique of expressive causality and the presumed hierarchy between economic base and superstructure. As an alternative to the latter, Althusser had conceived a system made up of semi-autonomous levels, in which the mode of production does not amount to the underlying layer determining the others, but to the structure as a whole.



Jameson uses Althusser's work to call into question cultural and literary approaches that seek to establish homologies between the economical and the cultural. His final aim is to propose a new interpretative model in order to grasp the 'interdependency [between levels] in terms of a mediation that passes through the structure'. Jameson's method consists of three phases of analysis, which successively 'reconstruct' the object of study. The phases can be imagined in spatial terms as concentric frameworks: the first and narrower one coincides with the study of the individual literary work and its specific political history; the second treats the text as an example of a broader and antagonistic discourse of social classes; and the third places the work within the 'ultimate horizon of human history as a whole', conceived in Marxist terms as a sequence of modes of production.

Returning to Mansoor, we can see how Jameson's method could be of help in overcoming a reflective theory of history. However, such a framework is not applied or investigated in detail across the book. Her use of the Jamesonian concept of the 'political unconscious' can be considered a case in point. The latter is mobilised to link the violence of the post-war imperialist project to the physical and metaphorical assaults upon art, but the analysis remains confined to the work of three artists and does not address how the political unconscious was mediated more broadly by the language of art and culture in the context under consideration. What is glossed over is the second stage of Jameson's method, which approaches the text – or work of art – as a *parole* of a broader system of language before placing it in relation to the mode of production.

The absence of this intermediary passage leads, paradoxically, to the reinstatement of an analogical relationship between the artistic and the economic. For example, as Mansoor puts it: 'the violent expenditure of accumulation made manifest in war of a new scale, the atom bomb, and the ensuing continuation of that war in the excess of expenditure ... finds its way into Fontana's slashes'; or again, Manzoni's 'work operates as a forensic device through which to understand the transitions occurring in the capital-to-labour relationship'; and finally, Burri's 'decision to experiment with one destructive pro-

cess after the other, from ripping to exploding, responds fairly starkly to the sudden eruption of an accelerated, world-market-oriented productivism'. The book establishes a reciprocal relationship between artistic and economic spheres: just as works of art symptomatise the specificity of capital in the historical moment under consideration, so this latter is 'understood against' bodies of artistic practices. It remains partly overlooked, however, how this mutual influence would work in practice. Except for the account of Manzoni, the connection between Burri's and Fontana's work and the shift occurring in the political and social field is explained in fairly metaphorical terms.

*Marshall Plan Modernism's* dense analysis of artistic practices in post-war Italy considers both their link to capitalist restructuring and to the political struggles that emerged in response. The works of Manzoni, Burri and Fontana are interpreted as a 'form of resistance ... against the very same historical conditions they symptomatise', and as such they are juxtaposed to other, and more direct, expressions of political dissent that arose in the same period. In particular, Mansoor seems to draw a parallel between the gestures of the artists and the political theories and struggles of the *Autonomia* movement, which are explored in detail. It is important to observe the author's conspicuous interest in Italian Heterodox Marxism, and in the debate around autonomy that originated in that milieu. Her foray into the terrain of Marxism has a precise purpose: finding aspects which could be deployed to cast a new light on modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy. This attempt signals a certain impatience with the restricted disciplinary boundaries of art history and a desire to place art at the very core of socio-political transformation. Nevertheless, the question remains open as to whether borrowing concepts from political theory and philosophy can challenge art's marginal position and revamp its ossified discourse, or simply risks re-instating the precedence of theory over artistic practice. Any new notion of aesthetic autonomy can, perhaps, only be thought immanently, from within art's own terrain.

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