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# On Anacronismo

Daniel Barbiero

In 1535 the architect and historian Serlio published *L'Architettura*, a survey of classical architecture and a practical guide for its recreation. In publishing this sort of how-to manual for Renaissance architects hoping to recapture the grandeur of the classical age, Serlio helped to facilitate the return of the Grand Manner of architecture.

Anacronismo has done for Italian painting of the 1980s what Serlio did for Italian architecture of the Cinquecento. Serlio's work entailed the restoration of an aesthetic tradition, and so did Anacronismo. (We can now speak in the past tense about this painterly movement that itself chose to speak in the past tense. The 1980s are virtually over. And the term Anacronismo, though perhaps too general, is useful. We can safely apply it to the work of Mariani, Ferroni, and DiStasio, if not the work of others self-consciously working within the Southern Baroque tradition.) Yet whereas Serlio wanted to restore the grand gravity of Roman classicism, Anacronismo retrieved something more modern and *sottile*: *la Gran Maniera* of the Baroque. In so doing, Anacronismo crystallized and apotheosized one of the major trends of Italian postmodern painting: the restoration of History.

Modernist dogma, which was perhaps first and best exemplified by Futurismo's utter denial of all that preceded it, wished to liquidate history in favor of a present moment that would, in turn, be liquidated by the moments proceeding from it. This Modernist

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vision of historical discontinuity was originally meant to be liberating, and at first it was. But Modernist discontinuity, in an attempt to circumvent the sentimentality of nostalgia, led to a certain terrorism of the Present—in the name of the Future—and one that, having been elevated to the level of dogma, inevitably led to an artistic impasse. In placing its hope in the irreversibly forward march of history, Modernism substituted a nostalgia for the future in place of a nostalgia for the past. But without a past, the present is unintelligible and the future unimaginable. Therein is found the root of Italian Postmodernism's rejection of Modernism's denial of precedent: that is, Italian Postmodernism's peculiar formula of affirmation by way of a double negation. Can we then agree to see Italian Postmodernism as a rebellion against the negation of the continuity of time?

There were some, especially here in America, who chose to see Italian Postmodernism's reclamation of the Grand Manner of painting as a mere regurgitation of a past style. But was it? Can the rediscovery of the painterly values of *la Gran Maniera* really be dismissed as so much reactionary nostalgia?

But it was Late Modernism that had grown nostalgic. Its aesthetic of unbridled subjectivity had grown nihilistic and solipsistically impotent. Its dogma of artistic self-creation *ex nihilo* now engendered only confusion and estrangement. Even Modernism's will to aggression and fondness for shocking imagery had been absorbed and overtaken by mainstream television and movies. Out of desperation, and in the name of aesthetic purity or economic defiance, Late Modernism attempted to polemicize the art object out of existence. But that only served to leave a vacuum, and Late Modernism's denial of the art object became a symbolic denial of all corporeality. And the death of a sense of corporeality is the death of art's vitality.

The return of figurative painting in the late 1970s came as a surprise, though it shouldn't have. Perhaps a sense of balance needed to be restored, and a void filled. And even though some of the New Figuration distorted and dismantled the figure according to Expressionist dicta, one thing was certain: the body was no longer a thing to evoke aesthetic shame. This was especially true of the *Transavanguardia*. With its revival of the figure as a sanctioned subject for art, Postmodernism's at least cursory acknowledgment of sensuality provided the shock Late Modernism no longer could.

Perhaps we can see the rise of Italian Postmodernism as coming at least in part at the expense of Late Modernist aesthetic



puritanism. Much of Late Modernism—Minimalism and Conceptualism, for instance—is strikingly prudish, involving a mannered anti-naturalism that turns *indifferenza della natura* into an indifference toward nature. But against Late Modernism's apparent bias against the physical, Italian Postmodernism, and especially Anacronismo, posited the renewal of a corporeal art. (This is in distinct contrast to the so-called Body Art of the late 1960s and 1970s, which subordinated the body to a position in which it became nothing more than a staging ground for its own degradation or, in at least one extreme case, its own annihilation.) What Italian Postmodernism relearned was the bodily romanticism that drove much of the Southern Baroque's better painting.

In fact, commentary on Anacronist painting must always return to the corporeality of the Southern Baroque as a point of reference. How else to contextualize the fleshy solidity of the figures that appear in the paintings of Mariani, DiStasio, and Ferroni? Like the Caravaggisti before them, the Anacronisti work within a space that can best be described as eroticized. Even an intangible thing such as light is given a solidity that pushes it to the point of the purely physical.

The figures that inhabit these Anacronist paintings become something approaching pure body, that is, latent sexual signifiers in an elaborate if undefined sexual code. This is true even if, as is the case with some of Ferroni's pictures, the figures are physically unattractive, at least in some "ideal" sense. (But isn't the disregard for the conventionally attractive one of the liberating aspects of this democracy of flesh and potential desire?) These bodies are immanent sexual actors, carnal engines at rest but with the potential for the realization of movement, not yet active subject or passive object, but ready at any time to assume either role. This is the case for any of Mariani's single nude figures (that is, outside of the explicitly allegorical role they play in the picture), or DiStasio's crossbearer in *Lungo il cammino*, for instance, or Ferroni's group in *Il rosso e il giallo*. One intuits the same latent sexuality in the religious tableaux of the Caravaggisti.

Thus the Anacronisti have done what the Southern Baroque did before them: they have recognized and extracted the sensuality lying dormant in their subjects. That is quite different from mere appropriation or parody of the Southern Baroque style. The recognition of a particularly unsublimated sensuality is at the heart of bodily romanticism, and in fact it is the unsublimated quality of sensuality that separates bodily romanticism from the etherealized, almost disembodied romanticism of much Northern Euro-

pean painting. One can see the intimation of bodily romanticism, though in a rather coarse form, in the narcissistically perverse erotic and coprophiliac fantasies of Francesco Clemente (though this is not to say that Anacronismo was somehow prefigured by the Transavanguardia). And for those who distrust any art that cannot be described as revolutionary, let us apply that term to Anacronismo. For in the present day, with its rampant commercialization and commodification of sexuality, the rediscovery—indeed, resacralization—of the physical being is nothing short of revolutionary.

While restoring the body to its position at the center of art's sensual universe, Italian Postmodernism has gone beyond the appropriation of the aesthetic conventions of the past. What Italian Postmodernism has recovered is the essence behind those conventions—the essence of corporeality in art. (Had Anacronismo merely reissued the aesthetic conventions of Baroque figurative naturalism, it would have accomplished nothing more than the creation of an illustrative art with unusual subject matter. But the anarchical sensuality that lies beneath the Anacronist's well-controlled surface provides a lifeblood that illustration can never have.) One can almost go so far as to say that the return of *la Gran Maniera* is inseparable from the return of the body as fit subject matter for painting. And an awareness of the body has underlain so much art in the grand Western tradition, from the bodily proportioned  $\tau\alpha\acute{\xi}\iota\zeta$  of Classical architecture onward.

By restoring the grand bodily tradition of the Southern Baroque, Italian Postmodernism in its Anacronist guise broke with the Modernist tradition of anti-tradition. But in its restoration of figurative naturalism, Italian Postmodernism gave advanced art a pictorial appeal and vitality that offered it a way out of the arid hermeticism that marked some of Late Modernism's more arcane experiments in formalism.

If Anacronismo had done nothing more than demonstrate that a vital figurative naturalism was still possible in the wake of Modernism, it would have done much. But Anacronismo also managed to help retrieve painting's narrative function, and with it, the capacity of painting to impart information in a linear, legitimately textual fashion. And that is partly the result of the Anacronist's use of allegory.

It isn't surprising to find the Anacronist wing of Italian Postmodernism reviving allegorical painting. Allegory is by nature a discursive ligament binding together present and past, and this would seem to be an appropriate avenue for Anacronismo to



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explore. For in building an allegory, Anacronismo had to construct a discursive line running backward to the almost archetypal idea that the allegory embodies, and then forward to contemporary interpretation in light of concerns specific to the present moment.

Thus, in Mariani's *E' vietato ridestare gli dei*, we feel we can trace the sleeping figures back to a primordial moment when the creative force, as symbolized by these sleeping gods, awoke for the first time. But at this particular moment, the moment of Mariani's allegory, we can read the picture as Mariani's ironic injunction to let the allegory sleep, to let the creative force stay dormant. And yet awakening the creative force of the allegory is something that Mariani is doing right before our very eyes.

This allegorical picture, and others like it (for instance, Ferroni's enigmatic painting of a game of chess), depict only one moment of a narrative, but that moment must epitomize the entire narrative. Thus, the moment of the allegory—the moment in which Mariani's gods lie dormant—is an intersection of past and present, one stitch in a tissue that weaves together Then and Now. It is interesting to note that as a visual text, allegory restores the original meaning of "tissue" to the word text. Indeed, the entire school of Anacronismo might be seen as an allegory of painting's ability to weave a continuous cloth out of the raw material of History.

It is worth noting here that Anacronismo's connection to History is an unsentimental one, untinged by the nostalgia of loss that normally adheres to those fruitlessly looking backward, and to mourners. Yet in the work of the Anacronisti there is a narrative clarity that seems to preclude the descent into a painterly crepuscularismo and its perpetual twilight of melancholy longing. The connection to History is a living one: Anacronist painting served to bind past to present with an umbilical cord, not the hangman's rope.

And that brings us back around to Serlio. His reintroduction of the conventions of Classicism reinvigorated the discipline of architecture, provoking a ferment that far outstripped the temptation to meekly imitate the Roman achievement. Similarly, Anacronismo has reinvigorated painting in the Postmodern era, at least in Italy, and it remains to be seen what new developments will issue forth from the upheaval brought on by this ostensibly backward-looking movement.

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