



## The Case for Intentionality: Matisse and Bergson in Cronan's *Against Affective Formalism*

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Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. pages, 69 b&w photos, 20 color plates. \$30.00 (paper). \$90.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8166-7603-3.

In a 1914 interview with the Parisian daily *Le Journal*, Henri Bergson paraphrased a contemporaneous comment by Auguste Rodin to observe that “the cinematograph taught the painter that photography was wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Todd Cronan's *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* works a latency discernible in this statement to argue that the ‘affective formalist,’ apparently Bergsonian orientation of influential assessments of Henri Matisse have actually suppressed the significance of a complex interrogation of the status of representation for the work of the painter and the philosopher. Pushing against the grain of a long affective turn that has understood Matisse as the exemplar of a physiologically-based aesthetics of sensation, this book returns to an inaugural moment of modernism in an effort to demonstrate a more irreducible backstory.

Matisse has been read relative to Bergson since the early 1910s, but Cronan's aim is to provide evidence—via sustained close readings of visual and philosophical texts in context—of a dialectical, often contradictory oscillation between the desire for intentional signification and the fantasy of ‘direct’ communication in the oeuvres of both Bergson and Matisse. Situated at the nexus that connects questions in art history to continental philosophy and aesthetics, the value of this argument lies in its interventionist recovery of a concept of artistic intentionality that remains pertinent to the subtending approaches of fields as diverse as affect theory, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology, art history, literary criticism, film and media studies, and the art world.

What is affective formalism? While the stakes of modernism are central to the argument of this book, *Against Affective Formalism* turns to Deleuze to answer this question. Cronan observes that the year 1988 saw the simultaneous publication, in English, of a new edition of Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896) and a first translation of Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism* (c.1966). Deleuze's centrality as Bergson's interpreter within the postmodern Anglophone academy visibly inflects the approach of contemporary affective formalism: a critical framework within which the effect on the beholder generated by the material properties of a work of art—form, color, visual rhythm in painting, say—is granted priority over cognitive questions ranging from the artist's conscious or unconscious intent, to the beholder's identification with the artwork in question. All aesthetic judgments are based in a viewer's affective response to a work of art. But ‘affective formalism’ might be characterized as an interpretive approach that foregrounds a description of the viewer's response to the materiality of the medium over an evaluation of the facts surrounding the artist's intentional deployment of that medium as the ground of a materialist expression.

Affective formalism does not begin with Deleuze, and Cronan's first chapter is devoted to its historicization. Tracing the origins of the affective approach in an anti-representationalist discourse beginning in the nineteenth century, and fully realized by the French Symbolists, Antonin Artaud, and Paul Gauguin, he describes an essentially unbroken tradition organized around the gravitational centers of the ‘first’ and ‘second’ affective turn. Key to the modernist discourses of affectivity was an interest in the possibility that form might be made to signify independently. From the very beginning of a Matisse criticism, for example, an affect-oriented approach to the artist found evidence for its claims in Matisse's own fascination with the agential capacity of line and color to impose unmediated sensorial and emotional effects on the viewer. Matisse's forceful paintings were described as playing on the viewer like an instrument, unleashing a percussive forcefield of visual rhythm. In this reorientation of critical attention toward the beholder's embodied experience of the work of art, the first affective turn constituted a significant recalibration of existing models of spectatorship.

By comparison, the second affective turn involved a shift in critical attention from the viewer to the medium itself. The Matisse criticism of the postmodern period tends to characterize the experience of the viewing subject as an affective merger with the artwork, whose effect is described as unavoidable, immersive, and almost annihilating. The art historian Yves-Alain Bois, for example, describes the interaction between beholder and painting as a ‘psychobiological,’ virtually traumatic encounter. Cronan understands the second affective turn to have liquidated the representationist framework, and on this level, to constitute a radicalization of the claims of its historical antecedents. The work of art becomes “a being of sensation and nothing else,” so that sensation—rather than representation—comes to replace artistic intention as the privileged site of spectatorial experience, and thus of critical interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

It is at this point that the 'against' of *Against Affective Formalism* comes into play. The broad stakes of Cronan's argument pivot on the assertion that to posit the efficacy of a work of art in its unavoidable physiological effect on the beholder is to dismantle the conditions of possibility for meaningful conversation about the signifying capacities— affective, materialist, or otherwise—of aesthetic form. Put differently, what the elimination of intentionality also eliminates is space for disagreement. An interpretation of Matisse's painting presented wholly in terms of its embodied effect on a critic, Cronan argues, absolves the artwork of the capacity to fail to signify. Further, it secures the critic an artificial consensus since the critical judgment is framed in fundamentally non-contestable terms. What is deemed lost in this theoretical move is recalcitrance and aesthetic risk. By reigniting a concept of artistic intentionality, Cronan seeks to reassemble the conditions of possibility for critical debate. An explicit acknowledgement of the artist's agential capacity to stipulate an expressive intent, he suggests, makes the artwork once again subject to the vicissitudes of aesthetic failure, and this in turn enables the construction of contestable interpretations.

Cronan argues that Matisse's materialist preoccupations run alongside, rather than annul, a persistent commitment to exploring the paradoxes of representation. As a result he views the long history of affect-centered Matisse criticism to have provided an only partial account of the artist's aims and concerns. And since this criticism has been buttressed by a reference to Bergson from the first, Cronan offers an independent reading of Bergson's methods and ideas.

Arguing that the vast secondary literature has underplayed the significance of Bergson's commitment to intentionality, the second chapter of *Against Affective Formalism* aims to restore the balance by providing an account of the philosopher's early experiments with hypnosis. Bergson distinguished between 'weak' and 'strong' forms of intention, characterizing the former as utilitarian habit, while figuring the latter as his most privileged image of human intentionality: artistic intuition. For Bergson, who Cronan sees as ocular-centric, freedom is *seeing clearly*. The artist's role is to make manifest and visible a dimension of emotional experience previously latent within the viewer at the level of intuition. While Bergson was to eventually distance himself from hypnosis, the practice seemed for a time to offer an empirical, scientific verification of these ideas. In Cronan's reading, Bergson approached the mechanics of the hypnotic transaction as more or less analogous to those of the aesthetic situation: in both instances, the acting agent works through a medium to trigger emotions slumbering deep within the experiencing subject. What is critical for Cronan's argument—perhaps even the key claim of his book—is that Bergson's account of hypnotic triggering describes a scenario within which the hypnotist *intends to do the triggering*; while the hypnotized subject experiences an affective state *always-already latent* on the level of intuition. By comparison, affective formalist interpretations of Matisse are accused of absorbing the kernel of the Bergsonian concept while stripping away "its intentionalist setting, which requires both the artist's and the beholder's agency."<sup>3</sup> Rephrased, where Bergson conceived the interaction between hypnotizer and hypnotized in Brechtian terms that permit both participants to retain agency, affective formalism reassembles the hypnotic scenario while evacuating the artist's agency in favor of an emphasis on the communicative power of the medium. Cronan's detailed account of Bergson's experiments with inducing trance states—one dimension of the importantly empirical backdrop to his philosophy—is one of the most valuable dimensions of this book, since it historicizes Bergson's conception of affective transfer in a manner that demonstrates the ongoing value of a direct reference to these Bergsonian source texts.

The third and fourth chapters of Cronan's book—its full second half—are devoted to close readings of works by Matisse. The analysis moves between different periods in the artist's production, shifting between psychoanalytic and phenomenological registers in an attempt to engineer a reversal of critical emphasis from the question of the medium to the question of the artist. Cronan's case for intentionality is advanced by a twofold structure: on the one hand, he describes Matisse's foregrounding of a sense of the almost insurmountable distinction between artist and beholder, world and work; and on the other, offers compounding visual evidence of the artist's sustained effort to overcome this fact of difference *through* the mechanics of representation. In a fascinating series of paired works, for example, Matisse is seen to paint the same subject in two different styles, alternating between a distanced high-angle view of a still life, and a close-up, highly tactile presentation. This oscillation between the realist and the phenomenological mode—between a position of skeptical distanciation and a fantasy of direct material encounter with the world— suggests an effort to negotiate the full spectrum of the representational framework by remaining suspended between its polarities. In Cronan's view, the stakes of Matisse's project should be apprehended as metaphysical: as involved in an interrogation of the capacity of aesthetic form to perform the incommensurate task of representing the self to the other. Matisse's achievement, he concludes, is "to bridge difference without subsuming it, to deny neither his difference from the world nor his connection to it."<sup>4</sup> To absorb Matisse's oeuvre wholly within a single interpretative paradigm is thus to deny the complexity of its thematization of the limits of human expression.

Cronan's conclusive chapter attends to Paul Valéry as an exemplar of the literary critical shift from an author-centered to a reader-centered framework—an analytic reorientation whose consolidation by deconstruction made it paradigm-setting for the Anglophone humanistic disciplines. Yet for Valéry, as for Cronan, the case for authorial intent does not fundamentally diminish the significance of spectatorial experience, nor deny the validity of the reader's affective encounter with the medium. Rather, *Against Affective Formalism* can be understood as a full-bodied engagement *with* the affective turn. Cronan's post-post-structuralist advocacy of the profoundly unfashionable concept of artistic intentionality is an attempt to draw collective attention to the almost invisible theoretical privilege we now award the reader and the text: an effort to speak truth to power that strives to model a more self-conscious middle way.

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## Notes

1. This unusual interview, granted to mark the occasion of Bergson's election to the *Académie française*, was recently translated and re-published. See: Michel Georges-Michel, "Henri Bergson Nous Parle De Cinéma," *le Journal* February 20, 1914.; and Louis-Georges Schwartz, "Henri Bergson Talks to Us About Cinema," by Michel Georges-Michel from *le Journal*, February 20, 1914," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 82. Bergson refers to Rodin's comments in a collection of loose interviews with Paul Gsell. See: *Auguste Rodin and Paul Gsell, Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, trans. Jacques De Caso and Patricia B. Sanders (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1984).
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 164.
3. Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 94.
4. *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 167.

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