

Turman on White (2014)

White, Claire. *Work and Leisure in Late Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Visual Culture: Time, Politics and Class*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. xiv + 246. ISBN: 978-1-137-37306-9

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In *Work and Leisure in Late Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Visual Culture: Time, Politics and Class*, Claire White presents a fresh, interdisciplinary perspective on the “alternation of toil and festivity” during the nineteenth century (1). White’s interests in nineteenth-century French literature and art, labor, leisure, and class politics align elegantly in this work, which ranges from Émile Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* novels to Jules Laforgue’s poetry and Maximilien Luce’s Neo-Impressionist paintings. White’s comprehensive analysis of a variety of genres offers multiple approaches to reading nineteenth-century French class politics through the lens of the work/leisure dichotomy and the artist/artisan/poet’s negotiations of his own role in a modern industrialized society.

In the introduction, White traces the development of the definitions of work and leisure from the legacy of the ancient Greeks to Diderot and d’Alembert’s entry for *Travail* in the *Encyclopédie*’s emblematic text of the Enlightenment. She ultimately winds her way through the nineteenth century via Marxism, looking to the ideology behind capitalism in order to negotiate “the ways in which political and cultural voices came to converge upon the potential for leisure to transform the worker’s cultural experience” (28). The book sets out to examine how labor and leisure maintain a critical mark in terms of “contemporary visions of art’s class-bound agendas” and broaches the essential question of why leisure time is necessary and connected to liberty and intellectualism (40).

White bookends her study with chapters on Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series, looking first to the notion of space for the working class during fin-de-siècle Paris; she then rounds out her study with a thorough analysis of Zola’s now often overlooked socialist novel, *Travail* (1901), the second installment in his final series of novels, *Les Quatre Évangiles*, in which the author’s views on labor reform, function, and beauty coalesce inside a Zolian utopia. In Chapter one, White focuses on the notion of *la partie de campagne*, or workers’ pastoral excursions, highlighting certain scenes in *Nana* (1880), *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), and *L’Œuvre* (1886) among others to explore the ways in which the country visits awaken a new sense of self-determination among the worker protagonists. Using Henri Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* (1974) as a critical backdrop, White pinpoints the powerful connection between space and leisure as engendering a fantasy of departure, which in turn initiates “the transformation of leisure into another industry” as a “victory for neocapitalism” (56).

White effortlessly shifts from a spatial analysis of Naturalist novels to a temporally centric reading of Jules Laforgue’s references to Sunday leisure in her second chapter, entitled “Dominical Diversions: Laforgue on Sundays.” A close reading of select poems by Laforgue supports her thesis that “if, according to Schopenhauer, the Sabbath necessarily induces boredom in the absence of striving, Laforgue goes some way towards explaining this dominical phenomenon as a symptom of capitalism’s restructuring of temporal experience” (94). With a theoretical framework inspired by Blaise Pascal, Eduard von Hartmann, and Arthur Schopenhauer, White convinces us that the notion of Sunday as a day of rest from work was merely a perpetuation of the institutionalization of workers even during their ostensible “free” time, which was not emancipatory but rather enforced the continuation of capitalism and productivity.

In the third chapter, White embarks on a visual analysis of the anarchist politics behind Luce’s seemingly unassuming Neo-Impressionist paintings depicting the everyday private moments of the worker’s life. Paralleling the discussion of space and leisure for the worker in her first chapter’s analysis, White insists that in this context, “the radicalism of Luce’s artisan painting lies [...] precisely in [the] relocation of the worker” (135). This critical chapter in the study fluidly connects literary and visual analyses by emphasizing Luce’s progressive manifestation of “connections between Neo-Impressionist art, anarchist politics and the working classes, which gestured towards the very different direction that the movement might take towards the end of the century” (123).

Throughout the book, White carefully orients the reader by succinctly highlighting various political, cultural, and countercultural attitudes surrounding the implications of work and leisure from Revolutionary France to the fin de siècle. The only missing piece in this meticulously polished study is a more detailed rendering of the feminine experience. White explicitly addresses this issue, devoting several pages to acknowledging future research potential in this vein (33–34). Perhaps the most compelling element of White’s book lies in her vibrant animation of the otherwise routine details of everyday life: “If we are to properly grasp the dynamic between modernity and modernism, then, it has, ultimately, to be thought through these terms of

work and leisure, through the most unremarkable rhythms of the everyday” (198). In conclusion, White’s book provides an innovative interdisciplinary approach to questions on the discourse surrounding nineteenth-century French literature and art, framing the larger philosophical debates generated by the tensions between modernity and modernism in the context of work and leisure.

Volume: 44.1-2

Year:

- 2015