

Book Review: Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia by Jaleh Mansoor

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Mansoor, Jaleh, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 288 pages. Paperback, \$26.95.

As Professor Jaleh Mansoor begins *Marshall Plan Modernism*, she highlights that the perceived gap between history, theory, and practice is nothing more than imagined (p.4). This breaking down of imagined barriers is a perfect characterization of Mansoor's work; only she chooses to break down the imagined barriers of relevancy to questions in the field. Mansoor even states that the intention of her work is to, "reopen questions of analytical and interpretive method to pose a way out of the usual impasse between formalist autonomy... and social reflective history" (p. 38). In doing so, Mansoor chooses not to create a definitive answer to questions of Lucio Fontana or Alberto Burri's work but breathe new life into questions deemed irrelevant.

In order to do so, Mansoor carefully articulates the coexistence of culture and history through the delineation of "autonomy" against the Marxist definitions of the 1950s (p.24). Mansoor begins her work by exploring the resurgence of monochromatic art as it relates to the postwar culture while it was monochrome that led to the decline of painting in 1921. Moving past her introduction of monochrome, Mansoor focuses on some of the leading figures as major contributors of this change in the cultural landscape. These were Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, and Alberto Burri. By focusing on these individuals, Mansoor can solidify her argumentative framework in snapshots of these artists and their use of unorthodox materials and brutal engagement with the medium.

As with all academic fields, there comes a point when the questions become stagnant. Focusing on the resurgence of artistic methods like the monochrome, Mansoor chooses to combat the assumed irrelevance of this narrative by illuminating a more nuanced perspective of the development of this culture of the *miracolo italiano* in the era of mass production and the

exploitation of worker's rights. In order to do this, Mansoor cites Burri, Fontana, and Manzoni as key figures in conversation with each other and responding to the cultural landscape in which they found themselves.

As a single monograph, Mansoor's work is extremely successful. The work was written with upper level academics as the intended audience. Coming from Duke University Press, the quality and contributions of *Marshall Plan Modernism* cannot be denied. However, the reader would be able to clearly follow the thread of Mansoor's framework only if they were to already have a solid background and understanding in the subject area. For this reason, Mansoor's work would be most beneficial as either a part of a reading list for upper level courses on postwar Italian culture, or as part of an edited volume that would allow the reader to see multiple perspectives in this discussion. Nonetheless, Mansoor's mastery of the subject leaves the intended audience as curious of what she may produce next.

Mansoor's *Marshall Plan Modernism* comes out of an immediate need seen in the academic literature. Mansoor argues briefly how a disconnect has developed between examinations of postwar Italian artistic culture and the worker's struggles simultaneously occurring across the nation. Mansoor attempts to answer this disconnect with a seminal rationale that these artists were creating in direct response to the political climate, not as a distinct institution, but as a two-way conversation. In order to articulate this, Mansoor begins to highlight some of the areas that she has found lacking in the research, such as studies of empire and its discontents, and revolutionary temporalities. Mansoor guides the reader to different questions, or research points, for future contribution to the field. She samples different artistic developments and highlights their political counterpart in the conversation, solidifying her argument.

Using her own self-defined goal, Mansoor is extremely successful. She did not attempt to create definitive answers to the questions of *Autonomia*, but she brought the questions to the discussion of them. In that regard, *Marshall Plan Modernism* is a crucial work for any cultural examinations of post war culture and the worker's struggles of the period. Mansoor connected these previously separated concepts into a conversation that can do nothing but improve our understanding of the subject. While improvements could be made, Mansoor's work will prove to be a vital addition to the academic discourse of the subject.

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