CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Pierre Michon

The Eleven

Les Onze

Presented by: Nenad Ivić

The Eleven is a narrative by Pierre Michon, one of the best contemporary French writers, describing an imaginary painting representing the eleven members of the Committee of Public Safety (including Robespierre and Saint-Just) during the Reign of Terror. The narrative is divided roughly in two parts: in the first, the life of a fictional painter Corentin, shaped by Enlightenment culture, is described; the second details a story of a commission of the painting. The text is presented as a lengthy, verbose performance of a cicerone, explaining the painting to an unnamed audience in the Louvre Museum, an ekphrasis, a painting put into words.

The text is a reflection on the history of the French Revolution, its coming into being and its subsequent destiny in art (David with Tiepolo and Caravaggio serving as models for the painting), romantic and contemporary historiography (Michelet, Hugo and French historiographical production around a bicentenary of the Revolution and of Terror), and, finally a nature of history: the Terror, an episode of the French Revolution, reveals itself as terror, anthropological constant of human existence.
In a certain sense, The Eleven can be compared to a highly influential Michel Foucault book The Order of Things (Les Mots et les Choses). Much like Foucault's book, it problematises, only in a fictional setting, complex relations between discursive apparatus (dispositif) and image, which is crucial in the contemporary society of the spectacle (Guy Debord) and the role of media in shaping contemporary political, historical and memory culture as a circuit of appearances.
In relation to the novel, and depending on the context and the purposes of the discussion, the following problems and topics can be addressed:

1. The definition of the genre of the novel in contemporary literature and on the contemporary literary market: The Eleven does not present itself as a novel but is accepted as such by critics.
2. The definition of the political: how does the political come into being? What can be considered as political in literature?
3. The problem of utilisation of historical and political paradigms and events in literature: Revolution, Terror and literature.
4. The problem of realistic mode and its limits in political/historical fictional productions (novels): style of history/politics and style in history/politics.

The Eleven was well received by the public. It was awarded the French Academy's Grand Prix du Roman (2009) and generated a substantial body of secondary literature by eminent French contemporary critics (Dominique Viart, Alexandre Gefen, Jean-Pierre Richard).

Further reading:
Demanze, Laurent 2021. Pierre Michon. L'envers de l'histoire. Paris: Corti.
Audi, Paul 2014. Terreur de la peinture, peinture de la Terreur. Sur Les Onze de Pierre Michon,

Bordeaux : William Blake & Co. Edit.

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Article

Is Pierre Michon’s "The Eleven" a political novel?

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