

SERIALISM & SEMIOSIS:

Lecture 10: Picasso's Cubism: Politics and/or Semiosis

- 1990: Picasso's primitivism is part of a cultural discourse in which "Africa" conveyed widely accepted meanings that cannot be extricated from allusions to its art and people.
– Patricia Leighton, "The White Peril and *l'art nègre*..."
- 1981 /'98: The extraordinary contribution of collage is that it is the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign.
– Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso"
- I. Picasso's escape *via* Paris: from paternal academy, and provincialism
 - A. The international "Youth Style" (Jugendstil, Joven Tut, Arte Joven magazines)
 - B. Impressionist modes and motives, Barcelona → Paris
 - C. "Blue period"
 - 1) the depressed *flâneur* (harlequin)
 - 2) a "Moorish" Spaniard in France
 - II. Picasso's escape *from* Paris: The Demoiselles d'Avignon
 - A. Picasso's self-described "exorcism" – of what?
 - B. The way modern abstraction works
 - 1) African sculpture as "*raisonnable*" (conceptual)
 - 2) towards a system of visual signs (away from representing towards signifying)
 - C. Colonialist critique through performing the primitive (how different from Gauguin?)
 - III. Cubism– hermetic language, or popular culture?
 - A. "*Braque, c'est ma femme*" – the codes of a private language
 - 1) Georges Braque - wit, conceptualism, pattern, (French) fancypaint traditions
 - 2) Pablo Picasso - weight, sculptural concerns, "modeling," oscillations between depth/surface
 - B. The force of caricature in the portraits
 - C. Opening out to newspaper and commodity culture through collage (Krauss vs. Leighton)
 - IV. Cubist constructions and the conceptual force of African sculpture

(Selected images on verso)

Images (selected) for **Lecture 10**

all works are by Picasso unless noted, and are oil on canvas unless noted

review: Toulouse Lautrec, Englishman at the Moulin Rouge, 1892

Jules Cheret, Palais de Glace, 1893

Picasso, El Quatre Gats, 1899, lithographic poster

La Vie, 1903

Saltimbanques, 1905

Gertrude Stein 1906

Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907

Babangi-speaking people, Mask, carved wood (French Congo, probably 19th c)

Georges Braque, Standing Nude, 1907-08

Braque, Houses at L'Estaque, 1908

Picasso, Cottage and Trees, 1908

Braque, Violin and Palette, 1909-10

Picasso, Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1909-10

(for comparison: Cezanne, Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1899)

Braque, The Portugese, 1911

Picasso, The Aficionado, 1912

Ma Jolie, 1911-12

Still Life with Chair Caning, 1912, collage

Au Bon Marché, 1912-13, collage

Landscape with Posters, 1912-13

Bowl with Fruit, Violin, and Wineglass, or, as Krauss identifies it, The Violin (Violin and Fruit) 1913 collage

Guitar, 1912 cardboard, later reconstructed in sheet metal and wire

Grebo peoples, late 19th century wooden mask owned by Picasso

Mandolin and Clarinet, 1913

The Absinthe Glass, 1914, edition of painted bronzes

Untitled, public sculpture in Chicago's Daley Plaza, installed 1967

Krauss reviews the system developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, known as “semiotics”. Semiotics becomes known around the same time Picasso and Braque were making collages in their movement dubbed “Cubism.” (That is, Saussure was dead by 1913 but his students collated lecture notes as *A Course in General Linguistics* published posthumously in 1916. The work became a sensation, founding an entire discipline and revolutionizing the study of all forms of culture.) Krauss reminds us of the terms of this system:

signifier – (material), bit of collaged newspaper, oilcloth, or paint

signified – (concept or thing), that to which the material refers – also known as the *referent*: bottle, “journal,” violin; but can also be abstract *qualia* (the texture of wood, the sense of roundness)

Krauss does not discuss in detail the crucial third term for Saussure (and Picasso):

sign – (material + concept), the unit involving *both* signifier and signified in a SYSTEM OF SIGNIFICATION.

A pertinent quote from Saussure, noting the difference between *langue* (as codified) and *parole* (as spoken):

"A **sign** is the basic unit of language (a given language at a given time). Every language is a complete system of signs. *Parole* (the speech of an individual) is an external manifestation of language."

Finally, Saussure was a structuralist who believed that the relations between signs and referents was stable enough to study in a scientific way. But his theories, famous in the ‘teens and ‘20s, were radically revised by *post*-structuralism in the 1960s, which held that nothing about language is stable. For post-structuralists, signification depends on an ever-shifting system of “slipping signifiers.” Crucially, even in Saussure, the notion of mimesis (imitation) is gone – the relation of the sign to the world (or signified) is completely arbitrary. Thus the only way signification can happen is in relation to an entire system of signs. The only operative factor is the play of *difference* between such signs in a system, a “difference” which will, in post-structuralism, become linked to gender performance, differentials in power, and the slipping assembly of the subject. (Wo/man.)

Do you agree with Krauss that collage “opens a rift” with “modernism proper” by “setting up discourse in place of presence...”? Or might we want to see her 1981 essay as a willed updating of Saussure/Picasso for a postmodern reading? Semiotic and historical food for thought

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