Picasso and Truth, From Cubism to Guernica

Citation for published version:

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Burlington magazine

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Reviewed by CHRIS MIELE

On page 163 of this meticulous, well-crafted intellectual biography we find the exact date of the invention of architectural history: 11th September 1844. It was then that Robert Willis, the Cambridge University polymath, presented a paper on Canterbury at the Cathedral, the first of his admired ‘cathedral series’. And so, Alex Buchanan, writes, was born ‘the first book ever to be defined by its author as an “architectural history”’. Buchanan is not one to speculate. What she says in this book she says only on the basis of the most careful consideration of all relevant sources, and then only after the proposition and every source relating to it has been thoroughly turned over. Buchanan’s temper and method are at one with her subject. If Willis had anything to say about the matter, then this is the intellectual biography he would have wanted.

But the question that constantly came back to the present reviewer was whether what Willis wrote really was ‘architectural history’, even if he himself named it so. Willis was more of a building archaeologist than a historian. The world he analysed was hermetic: here is this physical evidence in a historian. The world he analysed was more of a building archaeologist than a historian, and one time architectural historian was so characteristic of the man, and for the reader this is the intellectual biography he would have wanted.

What of Willis’s legacy, which Buchanan handles in two thousand words? This is probably sufficient, but therein lies the quiet tragedy of this great intellectual. Willis is sometimes likened to Pevsner who relied on his predecessor’s cathedral series for his own marvellous entries in The Buildings of England. In fact, the two were very different writers, Pevsner quirky but also with a critical edge, Willis a man sticking strictly to the facts and avoiding aesthetics. It is telling that at a time when architecture stimulated the literary imagination, from Ruskin to Trollope, Willis set his mind on the evidence as had no one before. In another country, in Germany or France, Willis would have been an academic art historian and through the university network have created a new discipline. Instead he had to rely on a network of enthusiastic amateurs working through local societies and guidebooks.

Thus it is fitting that any study of Willis can only be an intellectual biography. There is no personal archive, regrettably because clearly Willis had charm and wit in person if not in his writings. We can be sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, that there is no personal information lurking out there, for if there was, Buchanan would have discovered it.


Reviewed by NEIL COX

Suppose that Truth is a work by Picasso.1 Such a thought experiment raises the highest hopes about the nature of art and achievement in a particular work, but it also opens the question of truth itself, both philosophically and in terms of contemporary culture. The question of truth implies the unravelling of the values of moral philosophy and epistemology, and is as much about a need for ‘untruths’ as it is about the function of the desire for truth, as well as for a distinction between good and evil, in Western culture. To recast the understanding of Picasso’s art against this extra-moral questioning is, I think, the ambition of T.J. Clark’s dazzling and sometimes troubling book.

Divided into six ‘lectures’, each with a single-word title, it retains the lyric feel and intensity of live performance that characterised the 2009 Mellon Lectures upon which it is based.2 The ‘Introduction’ has to do a huge amount of work. For a start it sets out the author’s stall in very broad-brushed terms vis-à-vis the existing scholarship on the artist. No one is named, but the target is a hagiographic and biographically focused
treat the ‘retrogressive’ tendency in modern art, everything from Chagall to de Chirico to Kahlo, as now almost preferable to year-zero radicalism, collectivism, abstraction and agit-prop, tainted as the latter are for him with complicity with dictatorships and tyrannies. The book thus offers an ethical defence of Picasso’s apparently anti-political and ‘retrogressive’ post-Cubist romanticism and mythopoetic universe. No matter how joyful or ludicrous the paintings become, Clark insists that we shall hear bass notes: of the crisis of the bourgeois order and, negatively, of the horrors of the century.

In making this stick, the focus is on the conjuring of space in Picasso’s paintings. In one sense space here is that of the bourgeois: it is about things and about private life, about possessions and possession, closeness and domesticity; above all the centrality of space in the discussion is meant to signify a particular kind of world view that is a bedrock of the political despair and the will to confront the very human need is fulfilled by the compelling voice somehow adequate to Picasso’s remark- able painted worlds. To make a philosophical text illuminate painting so evocatively, to such wonderful degrees, is a signal achievement. The political despair and the will to confrontation with the amoral that motivate the equation Nietzsche/Picasso could itself, perhaps, be subjected to a kind of genealogical testing. What is the choice of Nietzsche as guide meant to produce for our sense not only of Picasso from the perspective of the present moment, but of a critical history of culture today? We should not miss the decision to make Nietzsche central – not Marx, not Benjamin, not Freud, not Adorno. What all-too-human need is fulfilled by the compelling force of Nietzsche as cultural origin?


literature dismissed as apotropaic, an ideological machine designed to protect us from exposure to the destabilising force of Picasso as Truth. Of course, Clark grants that the autobiographical question must in some way be at the centre of the artist’s project; the question is who the ‘I’ that ‘writes’ might be? Arthur Rimbaud’s dictum ‘Je est un autre’, favoured by Picasso, is a touchstone in Clark’s negotiation of the problem. This kind of argument has been made before. What is different about Clark’s approach is his insistence that, first, ‘the way to particularity in art is via absolute aesthetic generality’ – here he means to insist on art, to hang onto the notion of sensuously embodied ideas – and, secondly, that what Picasso’s ‘autobiographical’ project does is question the last remaining ‘universal’ left to our culture – the ‘fiction of subjectivity’ (pp.12–13). The first of these points underpins the value placed in the book on the sustained interrogation of single works; the truth (or ‘untruth’) will be got out of them no matter how long it takes, and no matter how many dialectical turns or ambivalences need to be embraced. The second opens up the broader historical argument: that Picasso’s art tarry with the world of the bourgeois, the nineteenth-century form of subjectivity that spreads across all things and shaped them in its image. The art-historical politics of this argument have to do with the fact that only in 1909 and 1911 – and maybe even only in 1910 – that functioned as the zenith of Modernism and as the leitmotif of the book. In Picasso and Truth, intense pessimism over the twentieth-century landscape of destruction and pogroms leads Clark to

But such art-historical cavilling misses the real challenge: what is that title, and the looming philosophical presence in the book: Friedrich Nietzsche? There have been numerous attempts in the past to associate Nietzsche with Picasso, but Clark’s engagement is considerably richer and more sustained. This is a departure for him too – none of his previous books has been so explicitly marked by philosophy. Nietzsche functions as a guide or a provocateur at certain moments in the argument, and Clark draws freely on texts from what Nietzsche specialists call early, middle and late periods. For previous scholars, Nietzschean interpretations of Picasso revolved around his formation in the Wagnerism of the Barcelone period – and that his own Nietzsche-sounding discourse of truth and falsehood (‘art is a lie that makes us realise truth’, ‘truth is a lie’, etc.). Clark largely eschews this frame. Instead, Nietzsche functions as the prophet of the modernity that Picasso represents, one where the will to truth has faltered, where the pathological introduction or internalising of instincts is to be overcome, and one where art in its ‘untruth’ both reflects and confronts life-denying nihilism. The argument about space in painting is about the twilight of the idol of certainty; the drama of Clark’s book is to show how Picasso’s loyalty to a world of things in rooms is made to coexist or merge with a world of pure spaces and structures, and beyond this – perhaps as a result – to make monstrosity and disorder in the everyday. In this book Nietzsche thus represents a profound manifestation of how inadequate to Picasso’s remarkable painted worlds. To make a philosophical text illuminate painting so evocatively, to such wonderful degrees, is a signal achievement. The political despair and the will to confrontation with the amoral that motivate the equation Nietzsche/Picasso could itself, perhaps, be subjected to a kind of genealogical testing. What is the choice of Nietzsche as guide meant to produce for our sense not only of Picasso from the perspective of the present moment, but of a critical history of culture today? We should not miss the decision to make Nietzsche central – not Marx, not Benjamin, not Freud, not Adorno. What all-too-human need is fulfilled by the compelling force of Nietzsche as cultural origin?


5. The Mellon Lectures remain available as podcasts at www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/audio-video/mellon.html.
Picasso: Architecture and Vertigo argues could have been productively related to or Cubism: A Study in Conflicting Explanations’, paintings, and in particular about Van Dyck’s “King and spent time discussing and rearranging them. On III took the time (despite a heavy cold) to visit Wilton towards London from the landing at Brixham, William Elder had been secretary to three successive Orange egodocuments and History in Amsterdam, stresses its more attention, and in this short account of the diary, Huygens also formed a remarkable library – in the cat-
alogue of the sale, published by the Leiden booksellers Huygens also argues how Hans Arp’s use of plaster as the Ray’s photograph points out the argument of the nineteenth-century processes of fiddling or bricolage – but remains aware problems such as propping open a window through of the day, as Twyman points out in his chapter on ‘the chromolithographic artists’. Printing historians are for the most part interested in letterpress and typography, rather than illustration. Book historians deal with the book as a phenomenological object, publishing and the book trade.

Twyman starts off his bible with the development of colour printing in general, as old as printing itself. Lithography proved to be the best technique for printing in colour, although technical demands, such as registration and transparency of the inks had to be solved before the technique could develop into the vast industry that arose from it. The development, from the end of the nineteenth century, of photomechanical methods of reproduction, falls outside the scope of this book. Chromolithography had to give way to three- and four-colour reproduction from screened negatives, first in relief printing, then in offset and gravure – common practices today.

It is hard to understand the craftsmanship of the ‘chromiste’, the man determining the number of colours to be used, and the order in which they had to be printed to yield the intended result. We can hardly imagine the skill with which such a person could analyse colours of a work of art, by pure instinct and experience, and render them faithfully in the final result by using twelve, sixteen or whatever amount of colours were superimposed. Anyone familiar with the Arundel Society’s huge chromolithographic Beowulf must have been astonished by the fact that colours were not separated using filters and photography, but by experience alone. All methods used in chromolithography – and there were many – are here extensively treated and well illustrated in a way we can all understand.

Inevitably there is some overlap with Twyman’s ear-
ier writings on lithography. His Lithograph 1850-1875 (1970), is now outdated by further research, but the publication of his Panuzi Lectures, held in 2000 (Breaking the mould: the first hundred years of lithography, published by the British Library in 2001), heralded the book here under review. It is very well produced, designed and typeset by Rob Banham, who deserves full credit for the successful book here under review.

Christopher Brown

Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contem-
porary, Ed. by Anna Deenze and Julia Kelly

Huygens Jr, Secretary to Stadholder-King William of

Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn

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ing of photography to the work of Melissa McGill;

his ‘concrete’ forms was intended to maintain the psychic nuances of material, scale and reference and the psychic nuances of media imagery derived from the recent past.

Other contributions give greater focus to the original
issues of Surrealism, and Julia Kelly notes the Dada artis’ interest in the Inventors’ Fair in Paris which preceded Breton’s concentration on the unconscious properties of the flea-market discoveries. She also points out the argument of the nineteenth-century anthropologist Henry Balfour that the origins of art could be found in suggestive natural forms, such as the mandrake root – memorably explored in Man Ray’s photographs Annaeus carrying his father. Steven Harris argues how Hans Arp’s use of plaster as the basis of his ‘concrete’ forms was intended to maintain its ‘involuntary’ nature. Valuable contributions also come from Simon Baker, linking Breton’s understand-
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the burlington magazine

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‘I am aware’. Michael Twyman states in his preface to this new book, ‘that I am merely scratching the surface of an enormous subject’. This ‘scratch’ has resulted in a bible of 728 pages and over eight hundred illustrations. Deeply rooted in the tradition of those lectures at the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication at Reading University, Twyman has devoted his life to the study of a technique that was developed in the sixteenth century, flourished in the second half of that century, and started its decline in the first decades of the twentieth.

To art historians lithography is known by the many artists who used the technique as a printmaking tool, culminating in the coloured posters of the first half of the twentieth century. But art historians tend to neglect all commercial work, even the poster industry was part of this.

Production of these colourful and well-collected items was in no way different from the commercial practice of the day, as Twyman points out in his chapter on ‘the chromolithographic artists’.

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Books