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In the preface to his study of *The Visual Grammar of Pablo Picasso*, Dr. Enrique Mallen quotes the following remark by the Spanish painter: ‘Mathematics, trigonometry, chemistry, psychoanalysis, music and what-not, have been related to cubism to give it an easier interpretation. All this has been pure literature, not to say nonsense, which brought bad results, blinding people with theories.’ To this Dr. Mallen adds: ‘I can only hope that Picasso’s opinion would be somewhat altered after reading this book’ (xiii).

The scientific method that might shed light on Picasso’s work that Dr. Mallen has in mind is cognitive psychology, more precisely, recent cognitive studies of perception. The central thesis of his book, if I may try to put it succinctly, is that one may draw a parallelism between the various stages of Picasso’s artistic creation leading to Synthetic Cubism and the four stages of visual perception as shown by studies in cognitive research. These stages are the following: (1) image-based (retinal), (2) surface-based (depth), (3) object-based (analytic description of three dimensional objects) and, (4) category-based (synthetic identification of objects as known types). Mallen equates these stages with three well-established periods in Picasso’s work: the first two with the so called Cézannian Cubism, the third with Analytic, and the fourth with Synthetic Cubism.

Many books have been printed on the work of Pablo Picasso, arguably the most important artist of the twentieth century. Indeed, Picasso is as new and relevant today as he has been for over a century. His relevance and impact are most noticeable these days in Spain where some of the largest museums in Madrid, Barcelona, and Málaga celebrate, along
with the art world, a triple anniversary: 2006 marks the 125th anniversary of the birth of Pablo Picasso (whose genius could be spotted in his artwork as a child). It also marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival in Spain of the Guernica, the large mural painting ordered in 1937 by the government of the Second Spanish Republic that has become one of the world’s greatest visual documents against war in general, and fascism in particular, and which is also one of Picasso’s most uncharacteristically ostentatious works (but then again, Picasso did just about everything). And finally, it is the seventieth anniversary of the naming of Picasso as director of the Museo del Prado. Sufficient reasons for there to be a great spread of his works in Spain this summer, and of relevance here because the organizers at El Prado used the Picasso Project — Mallen’s online browser to which I refer below — for their research while they were putting together the exhibition, and mentioned Mallen’s contributions in the exhibition catalog.

Picasso has become an elementary part of our culture. Just about everyone knows something about Picasso, just about everybody would feel privileged to stand in front of a Picasso, and just about everybody, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has something to say about Picasso. His work is often enigmatic, but an enigma that not only contains but also offers the keys to starting a dialogue. Picasso was a maker of singular signs and has become himself one of the most recognizable artistic signs. Both Picasso the man and Picasso the sign remain mysteries open to countless explorations. Both have become myths, both are rich in legends. ‘I wanted to be a painter,’ he is reputed to have said, ‘instead I wound up as Picasso.’

The incessant flow of general and critical interest about Picasso indicates that, regardless of how much has been said about him and his work, it is always a good time to join in a dialogue with a man and an oeuvre that are essentially open to conversations and permutations. In view of the triple anniversary (and all the fervor indicates that if there were no such anniversaries, they would certainly have been invented), Mallen’s book comes out at an especially fortuitous time. And his book offers more than yet another study. His critical work is linked with the On-Line Picasso Project (OPP) in which he has catalogued over nine thousand original works by Picasso (the curator Ingo Walther has estimated that there are over thirty thousand original works by Picasso). Besides making available a large number of works by Picasso, the project is a valuable browsing interface that contains relevant historical events in the artist’s life, a list of museums and collections, and an extensive bibliography. It is an ample visual party and educational tour to explore the many treasures in the OPP browser. While reading Mallen’s book, I
preferred, at times, to refer to color photographs in books, but I often
needed to consult the OPP, particularly to access many of Picasso’s pieces
that are not easily available in print.

Mallen’s book offers a new approach within the extensive bibliography
on the work of Picasso. The book rides astride two disciplines: recent
theories of perception and classic readings on Picasso’s work (art history).
Largely, the theories of perception and the traditional art history readings
constitute two juxtaposed pillars in Mallen’s study; that is to say, he dis-
cusses each in separate chapters or sections of his book and it is left to
the reader to establish the correspondences. I say largely because Mallen
at times uses semiotics to bridge the two disciplines and provides other
internal links to support his thesis. His argument is strengthened when
he gives specific examples of how recent theories of perception fit in the
traditional readings of Picasso.

Mallen’s rendition of the theories of perception is meticulous and clear.
Indeed, at one level his book can be read as a primer on these theories.
He embarks on the description of what may be called an empirical
approach to the question of perception. He circumscribes his field to re-
cent research in the area of visual perception but leaves his study open to
discourse with other lines of thought. His study reminded me, for ex-
ample, of the contributions of the late French phenomenologist Maurice
Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968). I was curious to know how recent theories
of perception addressed paradoxes such as the one posed in Plato’s
Meno, a paradox that Merleau-Ponty uses to question empiricism: ‘And
how will you inquire into a thing, Socrates,’ asks Meno, ‘when you are
wholly ignorant of what it is? What sort of thing among those you don’t
know will you set up as the object of your inquiry? Even if you happen
to bump right into it, how will you know that it is the thing you didn’t
know?’ (Plato 1984: 163).

Picasso, Mallen tells us in the preface to his book, affirmed that he cre-
ated his work intuitively, apparently unaware of ‘the parallel accomplish-
ment in the sciences,’ a correspondence that Mallen wishes to establish.
Meno wonders how can one know something one does not already
know. The answer to this riddle, suggests Merleau-Ponty, is to give pri-
mary to perception as it is experienced through what he called the lived
body, a working philosophical idea that extends the horizons of our sen-
sory system as well as those of the processing mind beyond the confines of
our skull. Once a distinction between mind and the brain is understood —
a distinction clearly made by Henri Bergson (1988) at the beginning of
the twentieth century — our customary linear understanding of time dis-
pels. And what is intuition but the knowledge of what can be and, be-
cause we know it, already is? The extension, or the other side of this, is
Plato’s response to Meno that he cannot teach him anything new because it is all a recollection.

As Picasso did in interviews, Merleau-Ponty questioned the certainty of objective scientific conclusions (how can we know something that we do not already know?). So does the theory of quantum physics. To forward this argument, let me use the following example. In his talks with quantum theory physicist David Bohm, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1986) explained that the mind is not revealed but rather hidden by our thoughts, and that perception is always pristine when free from the illusion of (linear) time — a way of expressing the metaphysical notion of intuition encompassing creativity. When Picasso mentioned intuition as an explanatory metaphor for avid and clever critics, he was not talking about practical or philosophical intuition, but about artistic intuition, and he was placing the creative act beyond empirical and rational explanations of our habitual notions of space and time.

I do not think that many Picasso scholars much appreciated the publication of Norman Mailer’s Picasso: Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man (1995), but Mailer, nonetheless, had some provocative things to say about that period of Picasso’s work that particularly interests Mallen. ‘Cubism is compelling because it is eerie, resonant, and full of the uneasy recognition that time itself is being called into question … we have stepped right out of our sense of the present into that other, more mysterious tense of time which is best described as time-other-than-the-present. That puts us into a landscape of the psyche where past and future dwell, all of that inner world of night, dreams, memories, and primitive forebodings’ (Mailer 1995: 310). This is a radical inversion of the expected longings to find solace and refuge in the here and now, and thus it unveils a truth about the artist’s work at one of its recognized extremes. Systole and diastole in eyes full of wonder. Many sayings have been attributed to Picasso regarding a return to unconditioned perception, an ability to see the world with the wonderful eyes of a child. ‘I could paint like Raphael, but it has taken me a lifetime to learn how to paint like a child,’ comes to mind. One thing is for certain: Picasso’s creativity was neither paralyzed by critical hang-ups about the past nor by existential worries about the future — he turned it all to art. Look at all that Picasso lived and all that he did: a lifetime needs not be too short if it is fully lived, thought Seneca.

As an art historian, Mallen’s work stands on the shoulders of giants in the field, building upon their contributions — his command of this literature is impressive. Visual Grammar offers a solid understanding of the development and significance of cubism based on extensive readings. It is here that we can appreciate Mallen’s sensibility for philosophical questions. Following Christopher Gray (1953: 43–50) he argues, for instance,
that since Kant had shown that ‘there can be no direct perception of form
... art must be regarded as an organism in its own right, not as an imitation
of nature or as artistic style” (135). Mallen dovetails this philosophical postulate with an aspect of his book that may be most interesting to
semioticians, and one that leads to his conclusions.

Mallen studies the gradual shift towards internal production of meaning in the transition between analytic and synthetic cubism (which was,
essentially, Kahnweiler’s intuition): ‘Each unit attaining a meaning by its relation to the other elements of the system — and fully significative — each facet of the canvas corresponding to a possible change of orientation in space’ (191). Mallen puts this in Saussurian terms: ‘it is not the
objects themselves that matter, but their relation within the system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic oppositions’ (202). In this reading, Picasso progressively acknowledged the exile of the referent from the signifier/signified bubble. Thus, ‘when Picasso spoke of something that is more real than reality in art, he meant that reality exists only insofar as it is constituted by systems of signs’ (252). He could mean that, of course, be-
cause he knew that reality, the air we breathe, the food we share, the love
we make, is also that elemental art from whence signs derive.

Reasoning along these lines, Mallen, makes an audacious proposition at the end of his book, one that gives a theoretical and creative advantage to Picasso over Georges Braque — who was likely the originator of cubism — at the height of their vertiginous (and friendly) competitive explorations into a new and revolutionary artistic realm. The most significant conversations among good friends are often so private and intimate that the code is too secret to reconstruct. Studying their artistic production, Mallen argues that there is a marked difference in the outcome of the dialogue between Braque and Picasso. At the end of their shared in-
quiry, he sees Picasso’s sign fully disconnected from its referent. ‘In this
Picasso differs from Braque, whose concept of the sign remained synec-
dochical (fundamentally iconic) even during the late Synthetic Cubism. It
is precisely the pure semiological notion of the sign adopted by Picasso
that allows him to explore the confluence and interchange of metaphor
[though of as internal recoding] and metonymy [external recoding] in
painting’ (265).

It is interesting and instructive to look at metaphor and metonymy in
these terms. Following an article by Victor Grauer (1998), Mallen argues
at the end of his study that ‘the final metaphorical stage of Cubism al-
lowed Picasso to arrive at what [Grauer] terms multireferentiality ... which led to the liberation of pictorial signs from syntax altogether’
(303). I would like to add that if we think of metaphor as a form of
internal production of meaning and of metonymy as its external and
complementary counterpart linked to the syntagmatic axis, we should also consider that every metaphor tends to become metonymy and that every metonymy tends to become metaphor. And this is a dynamic that manifests itself both diachronically and synchronically in the language of art, and one that Mallen captures very well in the conclusion to his book. ‘What had started as a search for the essential aspects isolating the object concluded with the realization that those same features linked all objects in a complex unified totality that went beyond the constraints of visual grammar’ (303).

A scholar must limit his field; something hard to do when the subject is Picasso. Who would not like to study, for instance, the artist’s many recreations of Velázquez’ Las Meninas, that classic meta-icon with which he loved to play in the late fifties. Picasso was ahead of his time as a fun-loving artist who loved tradition as much as its recreation. Mallen’s meticulous study focuses on specific aspects of Picasso’s work. It is only in the last pages that he ventures, as others have, an interpretation of an aspect of Picasso’s work in the context of his life. In some of the paintings of the last stages of Synthetic Cubism, writes Mallen ‘lively colors and rounded forms burst forth in still lifes and portraits of the summer, which may reflect Picasso’s happiness with Eva and his financial success … Eventually the problem of Eva’s illness, implicit in the drawings in which we see a highly preoccupied young man, becomes thoroughly apparent in the canvas on the theme of the artist and his model that he quite secretly executes around this time’ (266). Thus, at the end of an objective study that attempts to systematically link artistic creation with recent theories on visual perception, Mallen yields to explaining Picasso, the sign, in terms of Picasso, the man in love. We may try to be objective when talking about Picasso, but we’ll just be feeding our subjectivity, because more than any other modern artist Picasso, the sign, is linked with Picasso, the man, like a myth to its countless recreations.

An eye on the many photographs of the artist at work shows that Picasso painted with his whole body — he liked to paint his body and be close to the ocean and other places where he could enjoy horizons. The room where he worked, the women he loved, the shirts he wore are as important as the metaphorical and metonymical tensions that struggle in his work. Love and death; life and its artistic recreation. He spent the last decades of his life with sexy Jacqueline, and critics like to remember his erotic art, but he also did ceramics. Past the highly abstract efforts of cubism, our artist, now with glasses, can be seen happily painting jugs where handles become ears adorned with stripes, a return to the elemental in the complex like in his 1957 rewritings of Las Meninas. With Picasso we are never too far from Las Meninas, that emblematic example of the erasure
of frames he loved to turn inside out — frames that separate the creature from the creator, the us from the other, the described from the object of description, the serious from the playful, etc.

Would The Visual Grammar have altered Picasso’s opinion about the possible links between cubism and developments in the sciences? Maybe. Have I been persuaded that a parallelism can be established between some of the key developments in Picasso’s art and recent operations of vision? At a metaphorical level, yes, I have. Mallen’s study concludes with Picasso’s work in 1914, since its focus is on the evolution and significance of the various stages of cubism. Picasso accepted the challenges of abstraction, and took them to their limit. Cubism’s playful aftermath, however, its rich wake, full of surprises and happy variations, was left to other studies — I am sure Enrique Mallen today must have an eye on them.

I am left to wonder, looking at the many metamorphoses and creative evolutions and involutions that came afterwards, if Picasso was not in fact an invention of Picasso.

In addition, The Visual Grammar of Pablo Picasso contains over ninety pages of schematic illustrations of some of the works discussed in the book. These black and white line sketches provide interesting insights about the structure and tensions of Picasso’s paintings. Not being computer savvy, I would have liked to know how these sketches were generated. The book also provides a detailed list of works cited as well as an extensive bibliography and a clear index. It has no footnotes, which speaks very well of Mallen’s compositional and narrative skills.

I recommend this book to readers interested in contemporary theories of perception. They will find in it a clear and well-organized exposition of some of these theories. I also recommend it to those interested in understanding the development, progression and significance of Picasso’s cubism; Mallen presents an excellent synthetic command of the extensive critical field surrounding Picasso’s artistic revolution. And I recommend it to those wishing to establish correspondences between the two fields. To think, a teacher once told me, is not to invent anything new, but to establish correspondences — correspondences, which, when a book is good, reach way beyond its orbits.

References


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