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Author(s): Benjamin H. D. Buchloh


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Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression

Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.
—Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and the Black Square, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import? And how did this shift come to be understood as an autonomous achievement of the masters, who were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability, for the reinstatement of figuration? If the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation—the visual and spatial ordering systems that had defined pictorial production since the Renaissance and had in turn been systematically broken down since the middle of the nineteenth century—were reestablished, if the credibility of iconic referentiality was reaffirmed, and if the hierarchy of figure-ground relationships on the picture plane was again presented as an “ontological” condition, what other ordering systems outside of aesthetic discourse had to have already been put in place in order to imbue the new visual configurations with historical authenticity? In what order do these chains of restorative phenomena really occur and how are they linked? Is there a simple causal connection, a mechanical reaction, by which growing

* I wish to thank Jo-Anna Isaak for reading the manuscript of this essay. I have limited my investigations here to European phenomena, even though I am aware that a comparable movement is presently emerging in North America. The reasons for such a limitation are best described by Georg Lukács: “We will restrict our observations to Germany, even though we know that expressionism was an international phenomenon. As much as we understand that its roots are to be found everywhere in imperialism, we know as well that the uneven development in the various countries had to generate various manifestations. Only after a concrete study of the development of expressionism has been made can we come to an overview without remaining in the abstract” (“Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus” [1934], in Probleme des Realismus, vol. 1, Gesammelte Werke, vol. IV, Berlin. 1971, p. 111).
political oppression necessarily and irreversibly generates traditional representation? Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socio-economic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that we witness, for example, in European painting of the mid-1920s and early 1930s?

It would certainly appear that the attitudes of the Neue Sachlichkeit and Pittura Metafisica cleared the way for a final takeover by such outright authoritarian styles of representation as Fascist painting in Germany and Italy and socialist realism in Stalinist Russia. When Georg Lukács discussed the rise and fall of expressionism in his “Problems of Realism,” he seemed to be aware of the relationship of these phenomena, without, however, clarifying the actual system of interaction between protofascism and reactionary art practices: “The realism of the Neue Sachlichkeit is so obviously apologetic and leads so clearly away from any poetic reproduction of reality that it can easily merge with the Fascist legacy.”

Paradoxically, however, both traditional Marxism and standard liberalism exempt artists from their responsibilities as sociopolitical individuals: Marxism through its reflection model, with its historical determinism; liberalism through its notion of the artist’s unlimited and uninhibited freedom to produce and express. Thus both political views extend to artists the privilege of assuming their determinate necessity to produce unconscious representations of the ideological world.

But would it not be more appropriate to conceive of these radical shifts of the period between the wars, with such decisive selections of production procedures, iconographic references, and perceptual conventions, as calculated? Should we not assume that every artist making these decisions would be aware of their ramifications and consequences, of the sides they would be taking in the process of aesthetic identification and ideological representation?

The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation in present-day European painting reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism; or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice; or, worse yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come.

In order to analyze the contemporary phenomenon, it may be useful to realize that the collapse of the modernist idiom is not without precedent. The bankruptcy of capitalist economics and politics in the twentieth century has been consistently anticipated and accompanied by a certain rhythm of aesthetic manifestations. First there is the construction of artistic movements with great potential for the critical dismantling of the dominant ideology. This is then negated by those movements’ own artists, who act to internalize oppression, at

1. Lukács, p. 147.
first in haunting visions of incapacitating and infantilizing melancholy and then, at a later stage, in the outright adulation of manifestations of reactionary power. In the present excitement over “postmodernism” and the “end of the avant-garde,” it should not be forgotten that the collapse of the modernist paradigm is as much a cyclical phenomenon in the history of twentieth-century art as is the crisis of capitalist economics in twentieth-century political history: overproduction, managed unemployment, the need for expanding markets and profits and the resultant war-mongering as the secret promise of a final solution for late capitalism’s problems. It seems necessary to insist upon seeing present developments in the larger context of these historical repetitions, in their nature as response and reaction to particular conditions that exist outside the confines of aesthetic discourse.

If the current debate does not place these phenomena in historical context, if it does not see through the eagerness with which we are assured from all sides that the avant-garde has completed its mission and has been accorded a position of comfort within a pluralism of meanings and aesthetic masquerades, then it will become complicit in the creation of a climate of desperation and passivity. The ideology of postmodernism seems to forget the subtle and manifest political oppression which is necessary to save the existing power structure. Only in such a climate are the symbolic modes of concrete anticipation transformed into allegorical modes of internalized retrospection. If one realizes that melancholy is at the origin of the allegorical mode, one should also realize that this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression. What is taken as one of the key works for postmodernist aesthetics and the central reference for any contemporary theory of the return to allegory in aesthetic production and reception, Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was written during the dawn of rising fascism in Germany. Its author was well aware of the work’s allusion to contemporary artistic and political events, as is confirmed by Benjamin’s friend Asja Lacis:

He said that he did not consider this thesis simply as an academic investigation but that it had very direct interrelationships with acute problems of contemporary literature. He insisted explicitly on the fact that in his thesis he defined the dramaturgy of the baroque as an analogy to expressionism in its quest for a formal language. Therefore I have, so he said, dealt so extensively with the artistic problems of allegory, emblems, and rituals.2

Or, as George Steiner describes it in his introduction to the English edition of Benjamin’s study:

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As during the crises of the Thirty Years’ War and its aftermath, so in Weimar Germany the extremities of political tension and economic misery are reflected in art and critical discussion. Having drawn the analogy, Benjamin closes with hints towards a recursive theory of culture: eras of decline resemble each other not only in their vices but also in their strange climate of rhetorical and aesthetic vehemence. . . . Thus a study of the baroque is no mere antiquarian archival hobby: it mirrors, it anticipates and helps grasp the dark present.  

**Repression and Representation**

It is generally agreed that the first major breakdown of the modernist idiom in twentieth-century painting occurs at the beginning of the First World War, signaled by the end of cubism and futurism and the abandonment of critical ideals by the very artists who had initiated those movements. Facing the deadlock of their own academicization and the actual exhaustion of the historical significance of their work, Picasso, Derain, Carrà, and Severini—to name but a few of the most prominent figures—were among the first to call for a return to the traditional values of high art. Creating the myth of a new classicism to disguise their condition, they insisted upon the continuation of easel painting, a mode of production that they had shortly before pushed to its very limits, but which now proved to be a valuable commodity which was therefore to be revalidated. From this situation there originated their incapacity or stubborn refusal to face the epistemological consequences of their own work. Already by 1913 their ideas had been developed further by younger artists working in cultural contexts which offered broader historical, social, and political options to dismantle the cultural tenets of the European bourgeoisie. This is particularly the case with Duchamp in America and Malevich and the constructivists in Russia. But, even in Paris, such artists as Francis Picabia recognized the imminent demise of cubism. Upon his return from his first journey to New York in 1913, he wrote, “But, as you know, I have surpassed this stage of development and I do not define myself at all as a cubist anymore. I have come to realize that one cannot always make cubes express the thoughts of the brain and the feelings of the psyche.”  

And in his “Manifeste de l’Ecole Amorphiste,” published in a special issue of *Camera Work* in 1913 he was even more explicit: “One has said of Picasso that he studies objects in the way a surgeon dissects a cadaver. We do not want these bothersome cadavers anymore which are called objects.”

Even in 1923 these polemics continued among various factions of the Parisian avant-garde. On the occasion of the first performance of Tristan Tzara's "Cœur à Gaz" at the Soirée du Cœur à Barbe, a fistfight broke out in the audience when one of the artists present jumped onto the stage and shouted, "Picasso is dead on the field of battle." But even artists who had been allied with the cubist movement realized by the end of the second decade that it was exhausted, without, however, necessarily advocating a return to the past. Blaise Cendrars, for example, in his text "Pourquoi le cube s'effrite?" published in 1919, announced the end of the relevance of the cubist language of form. On the other hand, in the very same year a number of ideological justifications appeared for the regression that had begun around 1914-15. Among the many documents of the new attitude of authoritarian classicism are a pamphlet by the cubist dealer Léonce Rosenberg, *Cubisme et Tradition*, published in 1920, and Maurice Raynal's "Quelques intentions du cubisme," written in 1919 and published in 1924, which stated, "I continue to believe that knowledge of the Masters, right understanding of their works, and respect for tradition might provide strong support." If properly read, this statement, in its attempt to legitimize the academicization of an aging and ailing cubist culture, already reveals the inherent authoritarian tendency of the myth of a new classicism. Then as now, the key terms of this ideological backlash are the idealization of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters, the attempt to establish a new aesthetic orthodoxy, and the demand for respect for the cultural tradition. It is endemic to the syndrome of authoritarianism that it appeal to and affirm the "eternal" or ancient systems of order (the law of the tribe, the authority of history, the paternal principle of the master, etc.). This unfathomable past history then serves as a screen upon which the configurations of a failed historical presence can be projected. In 1915, when Picasso signals his return to a representational language by portraying the cubist poet Max Jacob, recently converted to Catholicism, in the guise of a Breton peasant, drawn in the manner of Ingres, we get a first impression of the degree of eclecticism that is necessary to create the stylistic and historical pose of classical simplicity and equilibrium, with its claim to provide access to the origins and essentials of universal human experience. Subsequently this historicist eclecticism becomes an artistic principle, and then, as in Jean Cocteau's "Rappel à l'Ordre" of 1926, it is declared the new avant-garde program.

In Picasso's work the number and heterogeneity of stylistic modes quoted and appropriated from the fund of art history increases in 1917: not only Ingres's classical portraits but, as a result of Picasso's journey to Italy in the company of

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6. See William Rubin, *Picasso*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p. 224. The awareness of Picasso's decline eventually developed even among art historians who had been previously committed to his work: "Picasso belongs to the past... His downfall is one of the most upsetting problems of our era" (Germain Bazin, quoted in Rubin, p. 277).

Cocteau, the iconography of the Italian commedia dell’arte and the frescoes of Herculaneum (not to mention the sculpture of the Parthenon frieze and the white figure vases at the Louvre, the peasant drawings of Millet, the late nudes of Renoir, the pointillism of Seurat, as Blunt, Green, and other Picasso scholars have pointed out). And, of course, there is the self-quotation of synthetic cubist elements, which lend themselves so easily to the high sensuousness of Picasso’s decorative style of the early twenties.

Again it is Maurice Raynal who naively provides the clue to an analysis of these works when he describes Picasso’s 1921 *Three Musicians* as “rather like magnificent shop windows of cubist inventions and discoveries.”8 The free-floating availability of these cubist elements and their interchangeability indicate how the new language of painting—now wrenched from its original symbolic function—has become reified as “style” and thus no longer fulfills any purpose but to refer to itself as an aesthetic commodity within a dysfunctional discourse. It therefore enters those categories of artistic production that by their very nature either work against the impulse to dissolve reification or are oblivious to that impulse: the categories of decoration, fashion, and objets d’art.

This transformation of art from the practice of the material and dialectical transgression of ideology to the static affirmation of the conditions of reification and their psychosexual origins in repression have been described as the source of a shift towards the allegorical mode by Leo Bersani:

It is the extension of the concrete into memory and fantasy. But with the negation of desire, we have an immobile and immobilizing type of abstraction. Instead of imitating a process of endless substitutions (desire’s ceaseless “travelling” among different images), abstraction is now a transcendence of the desiring process itself. And we move toward an art of allegory.9

This becomes even more evident in the iconography of Pittura Metafisica, which de Chirico and the former futurist Carrà initiated around 1913. The conversion of the futurists, parallel to that of the cubists, involved not only a renewed veneration of the cultural tradition of the past—as opposed to their original fervent antipathy to the past—but also a new iconography of haunting, pointlessly assembled quotidian objects painted with meticulous devotion to representational conventions. De Chirico describes his paintings as stages decorated for imminent but unknown and threatening acts, and insists on the demons that are inherent in the objects of representation: “The metaphysical work of art seems to be joyous. Yet one has the impression that something is going to happen in this joyous world.”10 De Chirico speaks of the tragedy of joy, which is nothing other than the calm before the storm, and the canvas now becomes the stage upon which the future disaster can be enacted. As the Italian historian Umberto Silva pointed out, “De Chirico is the personification of Croce’s Italian disease: not quite fascism yet, but the fear of its dawn.”11

As was the case in Picasso’s conversion, the futurists now fully repudiated their earlier nonrepresentational modes and procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization. They further rejected the collage techniques by which they had forced the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous materials and procedures within the painted surface, and through which they had underlined the interaction of aesthetic phenomena with their social and political context. It is surely no accident that one of Severini’s first paintings to manifest his return to history is a work called Maternity, which represents a mother suckling an infant in the traditional pose of the Madonna. Even more conspicuous perhaps is the case of Carrà, who had been one of the most important futurists due to his development of nonmimetic pictorial signs, his systematic transgression of verbal and visual codes through the insertion of verbal fragments within painting, and his mechanization of pictorial production processes and their juxtaposition with pictorialized remnants of mechanical production processes. Carrà turned at that time to representational depictions of biblical scenes in the manner of Tuscan painting.

To the very same extent that the rediscovery of history serves the authoritarian purpose of justifying the failure of modernism, the atavistic notion of the master artist is reintroduced to continue a culture oriented to an esoteric elite, thus guaranteeing that elite’s right to continued cultural and political leadership. The language of the artists themselves (or rather these particular artists, for there is an opposite definition of artistic production and culture simultaneously developing in the Soviet Union) blatantly reveals the intricate connection between aesthetic mastery and authoritarian domination. Three examples from three different decades may serve to illustrate this aesthetic stance:

Hysteria and dilettantism are damned to the burial urns. I believe that everybody is fed up now with dilettantism: whether it be in politics, literature, or painting.—Giorgio de Chirico, 1919.\(^{12}\)

12. Giorgio de Chirico, *Valori Plastici*, Nos. 3–4, Rome, 1919. This phenomenon finds its earliest explicit manifestation in de Chirico’s declaration “Pictor sum classicalus,” with which he concludes emphatically his call for a return to the law of history and classic order, a manifesto called “The Return to the Craft” published in *Valori Plastici* in 1919. Like Carlo Carrá in his “Pittura Metafisica,” also published in 1919, de Chirico not only requests the return to the “classic” tradition and the “masters” of that tradition (Uccello, Giotto, Piero della Francesca), but to the specific nationality of that tradition. This is the most obvious of the three historical fictions in that authoritarian construct of
Socialism has only been invented for the mediocre and the weak. Can you imagine socialism or communism in Love or in Art? One would

return to the past, since the nation-state as a socio-economic and political ordering system did not exist at the time of these masters' production.

It is only logical to find Carrà's name subsequently among the artists who signed the "Manifesto of Fascist Painting" in 1933 which reads as follows: "Fascist Art rejects research and experiments. . . . The style of Fascist art has to orient itself towards antiquity."

It seems that with increasing authoritarianism in the present the projection into the past has to be removed further and further away—from Renaissance to antiquity in this case. More explicitly we find this substitution of present history by mnemosynic fictions of past history in an essay by Alberto Savinio, published in Valori Plastici in 1921: "Memory generates our thoughts and our hopes. . . . we are forever the devoted and faithful sons of Memory. Memory is our past; it is also the past of all other men, of all men who have preceded us. And since memory is the ordered recollection of our thoughts and those of the others, memory is our religion: religio."

When the French art historian Jean Clair tries to understand these phenomena outside of their historical and political context, his terminology, which is supposed to explain these contradictions and save them for a new reactionary anti-modernist art history writing, has to employ the same clichés of authoritarianism, the fatherland, and the paternal heritage: "[These painters] come to collect their paternal heritage, they do not even dream of rejecting it. . . . Neoclassicism is lived as a meditation on the exile, far from the lost fatherland which is also that of painting, the lost fatherland of paintings" (Jean Clair, "Metafisica et Unheimlichkeit," in Les Realismes 1919-1939, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1981, p. 32).
burst into laughter—if one were not threatened by the consequences.—Francis Picabia, 1927.13

and finally, Picasso's notorious statement from 1935:

There ought to be an absolute dictatorship . . . a dictatorship of painters . . . a dictatorship of one painter . . . to suppress all those who have betrayed us, to suppress the cheaters, to suppress the tricks, to suppress mannerisms, to suppress charms, to suppress history, to suppress a heap of other things.14

13. “Francis Picabia contre Dada ou le Retour à la Raison,” in Comoedia, March 14, 1927, p. 1. “The Return to Reason” and “The Return to Order” not only espoused almost identical programs of authoritarian neoclassicism, but also shared the same supposed enemies and targets of attack. Dada was, of course, one of them, so it seems useful in this context to recall the attitudes of the literary neoclassicist T. S. Eliot towards dada: “Mr. Aldington treated Mr. Joyce as a prophet of chaos and wailed at the flood of Dadaism which his prescient eye saw bursting forth at the tap of the magician’s rod. . . . A very great book may have a very bad influence indeed. . . . A man of genius is responsible to his peers, not to a studio full of uneducated and undisciplined coxcombs” (T. S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” The Dial, vol. LXXV [1923], pp. 480–483).

Like senile old rulers who refuse to step down, the stubbornness and spite of the old painters increase in direct proportion to the innate sense of the invalidity of their claims to save a cultural practice that had lost its viability. When, in the early twenties, the former German dadaist Christian Schad attempts a definition of the Neue Sachlichkeit by portraying members of the Weimar hautemonde and demimonde in the manner of Renaissance portraits; when, in 1933, Kasimir Malevich portrays himself and his wife in Renaissance costumes; then obviously the same mechanism of authoritarian alienation is at work. In a text from 1926 Schad delivers a complete account of the syndrome's most conspicuous features:

Oh, it is so easy to turn one's back on Raphael. Because it is so difficult to be a good painter. And only a good painter is able to paint well. Nobody will ever be a good painter if he is only capable of painting well. One has to be born a good painter. . . . Italy opened my eyes about my artistic volition and capacity. . . . In Italy the art is ancient and ancient art is often newer than the new art.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Christian Schad, statement in exhibition catalogue, Galerie Würthle, Vienna, 1927. See also a nearly identical statement by the former expressionist Otto Dix: “The new element of painting for me
The idealization of the painter's craft, the hypostasis of a past culture that serves as a fictitious realm of successful solutions and achievements that have become unattainable in the present, the glorification of the Other culture—in this case Italy—all of these features—currently discussed and put into practice once again—recur through the first three decades of twentieth-century modernism. They seek to halt that modernism and to deny its historical necessity as well as to deny the dynamic flux of social life and history through an extreme form of authoritarian alienation from these processes. It is important to see how these symptoms are rationalized by the artists at the time of their appearance, how they are later legitimized by art historians, and how they are finally integrated into an ideology of culture.

The concepts of “aesthetic paradox” and “novelty,” essential features of avant-garde practice, serve as explanations for these contradictions. Here, for

resides in the intensification of forms of expression which *in nuce* exist already as givens in the work of old masters” (in *Das Objekt ist das Primäre*, Berlin, 1927). Compare this with the statement by George Grosz, a peer of Schad and Dix: “The return to French classicist painting, to Poussin, Ingres, and Corot, is an insidious fashion of Biedermeier. It seems that the political reaction is therefore followed by an intellectual reaction” (in *Das Kunstblatt*, 1922, as a reply to Paul Westheim’s inquiry “Towards a New Naturalism?”).
example, is Christopher Green's justification for Cocteau's and Picasso's neo-classicism:

For Cocteau a return to narrative clarity and to form in the novel did not mean a denial of paradox, and in the same way neither did a return to representation in painting. Indeed it seems possible that it was at least partially out of a sense of paradox that Picasso turned against the antirepresentational dogma associated with Cubism to revive Ingres in 1915. . . . Cocteau suggests that where audacity had become convention—as in the Parisian avant-garde—the resurrection of the old modes could create a special kind of novelty: that looking backwards the artist could even more dramatically look forward. There is no direct evidence that Picasso consciously aimed to create such a paradox, but the fact remains . . . that by turning back he did achieve novelty and that his perverse development of Synthetic Cubism and representational styles alongside one another between 1917 and 1921 was calculated to throw the paradox implicit in his progressive move backwards into the highest possible relief.16