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Review: 'Après Picasso, Le Deluge' or Why the Love Boat Won't Hold Water: James Cameron's "Titanic" and John Richardson's "A Life of Picasso"

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negativa runs also through Surrealism, but here and in the work of André Breton in particular there is an engagement with the possibility of a literature of metaphysics that coexists with the first in a tense dialogue. Just as the revolution never happened, so the dialogue is never concluded, and Surrealism remains a poetry of promise, held agelessly in a limbo between the ideal and the real, but in its human awkwardness more engaging than the pure avant-gardism of a Roussel or a Robbe-Grillet. Breton himself is best read as a writer of and for youth, with all the brashness that implies. In a photograph taken around 1930 by Man Ray, he is seen in a magnificent leather trenchcoat, caught in a posture of open-mouthed amazement, as if while strolling down the Boulevard Haussmann he had just bumped into a naked woman or a flying saucer. As in his poetry, the marvellous, the ridiculous, and the eerily intimate combine. His politics may now seem to have been mistaken, but there are few poets today who show anything approaching either his commitment to the art, his willingness to rethink its history, or his powers of vision.

Geoff Ward

‘Après Picasso, Le Deluge’ or Why the
Love Boat Won’t Hold Water:
James Cameron’s *Titanic*
and John Richardson’s *A Life of Picasso*

Three responses to Picasso: *Titanic*, directed James Cameron, Paramount Pictures and Twentieth Century Fox, 1997; *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* by Norman Mailer. 1995. Little Brown. ISBN 0-316-881732. *A Life of Picasso: Volume Two 1907–1917* by John Richardson. 1996. Jonathan Cape. ISBN 0-224-03120 1.

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'PICASSO'S *DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON* didn't really go down with the Titanic, did it?'

Trailing a bait for unwary highbrows, Picasso in the latest film version of *Titanic* retains at least some measure of his power to shock. The revitalisation of that power, I believe, is due to the latest volume of Jonathan Richardson's biography of Picasso which appeared about a year before the film and is, I maintain, a major source of its ideas and attitudes. In this extended review I treat first of the art theme in the film, then of the biography and finally of counter-tendencies to both of them in past and present criticism of Picasso.

I

Rose, the cultivated young heroine of the film, displays five paintings to show she is 'on board' and 'up to speed' with the latest in Parisian art taste: a Monet waterlilies, a Degas ballet-dancer, a Cézanne still-life and a pastiche of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* so gauche and garish that it manages to bestow compositional serenity upon the 'electrical cohesion' (Richardson's phrase) of the original. A fifth painting, based on Picasso's portrait of Vollard, is almost equally central to the meaning of the film. 'Truth but no logic' is the feminine value Rose attributes to it. By the time the first class cabins are awash with brine, however, the Picassos have long disappeared from view. Yet watching the Monet and the Degas subside beneath the waves, like banknotes in a river, endows their contours with the rolled-glass effects of Cubism; it encapsulates the history of modernist painting as crisis. Meanwhile, Picasso's *Demoiselles* hasn't really disappeared at all. Its twin themes of Thanatos and Eros are about to be realised in the break-up of the *Titanic* itself.

The heroine's jibe at the designer of the vessel as to whether his male interest in size means he has been reading Dr Freud confers phallic hubris on the ship well before it cleaves the iceberg that will sink it. The designer's troubled reply – 'Is Freud a passenger?' – is not so stupid, for over and again we hear this is the 'ship of dreams'.

The hero and the heroine first meet next to a warning sign at the stern of the ship:

NOTICE: THIS VESSEL HAS TRIPLE SCREWS
KEEP CLEAR OF THE BLADES

Although a similar sign appeared on the original vessel, no earlier film includes it. The number of 'screws' announces the Erotic theme of the film, but fear of 'blades' belongs to the Grim Reaper theme. Like the

fragmentary text that occurs for the first time in Braque's late Analytic emigré painting *Le Portugais* (redated by Richardson to spring 1912 and coincident, therefore, with the date of sinking: 15 April 1912), the sign never reappears in the film without its letters being cropped or scrambled.¹

Discreetly shrouded by the condensation forming on the windows of the veteran car in which (near other sexy consumer products in the hold) Jack and Rose triumphantly inaugurate the American sport of 'parking', the couple will achieve a hat-trick before their separation. True, there are only two roses in the holder thoughtfully provided in the passenger compartment, but Rose herself must surely be the third. Not only is the venue consistent with Henry Ford's ethos of mass-production, it updates Picasso's repudiation of Monet's *Nymphéas* which reminded him, so Richardson avers, 'of a device he had once seen in a brothel: an endless band of landscape on a roll that an old woman wound past the window of a wagon lit to give copulating clients inside the illusion of movement' (p. 105).

In retrospect, we realise what gives the film's pastiche of *Demoiselles* its bleak distinction. The frieze-like composition of the original *parade* is broken up into a *rotary* pattern: it's all screwed up, like propeller blades. Its softened fragmentations serve a purpose: the evasion of copyright fees, yes, but also the subordination of individual talent to mass nostalgia. By absorbing the film-code of 'dissolve' into its indecisive structure, the pseudo-*Demoiselles* domesticates the shock of the new into fashionable memory. Picasso's challenging image was 'so long ago' – though I acknowledge that disjunctions of the body in Picasso's art are enthusiastic thefts not only from Vesalius's sixteenth-century anatomical plates (Richardson, p. 89) but from Méliès' popular films.²

Riding on the railings of the stern, the couple eventually plunge down vertically – down, down, down – into the ocean.

Unaccountably the bark then rises up again, occasioning more excitement. So it is that in the ingenious computer animation of the ship's

¹ The *Titanic* tragedy is unlikely to have inspired Picasso. 'Superficial' was his verdict on attempts to 'expand the character' of the Little American Girl in Diaghilev's *Parade* ballet of 1916. The idea was for her to dance a "Steamboat Rag" originally called "Titanic Rag", which Satie had adapted from Irving Berlin, to the added accompaniment of type-writers, a Morse-code machine tapping out SOS's [sic] and a disembodied voice intoning: "Cube tic tic tic tic on the hundredth floor an angel has made its nest at the dentist's tic tic tic *Titanic* toc toc *Titanic* sinks brightly lit beneath the waves . . . ice-cream soda tic tic." Very thin stuff", as Richardson remarked on Picasso's behalf in the biography that will presently concern us (p. 421).

² See Natasha Staller, 'Méliès' "Fantastic" Cinema and the Origins of Cubism', *Art History*, 12: 2 (June 1989), pp. 202–232.

final minutes, Cameron's Computer Nerd refers to the stern – torn-off and hugely bobbing before its final descent as 'her whole ass sticking up in the air, and that's a *big* ass, we're talking 20, 30,000 tonnes', to which Old Crone (Rose as is) reprovingly retorts: 'That's the *forensic* version', before the magic lantern of her memory projects the Romantic version of the saga until the end of the film.

Most would agree that human love encompasses every kind of sexual activity, but I cannot think love ascendant in Cameron's vision. What exactly is the film 'shafting'? Here we must proceed beyond conscious Hollywood Freudianism into the genuine unconscious of the film. The second volume of Richardson's biography tells us that on seeing *Demoiselles*, Matisse

let it be known that he regarded the *Demoiselles* as an attempt to ridicule the modern movement. He was going to get even with Picasso, he said, and made him beg for mercy. This threat made for some great paintings. (p. 45)

Avant-garde art often highlights women as objects of revulsion and desire, but rivalry with men is what counts here, and to his credit Richardson makes much of Picasso's many contacts with the homosexual world, including homoerotic jokes that passed between Picasso and Braque about who was Mr and Mrs in their artistic 'marriage'. *Titanic* takes competition of this kind into commercial cinema. 'I am the king', we remember Cameron saying as he clasped his phallic statuette at the Oscars. Earlier film versions of the *Titanic* still required a sense of dignity about the loss of real lives. Compared to the veil drawn over the gruesome spectacle of the ship's final moments in the 1953 film – where an explosion punctuates the cut from Welsh hymn singing on a slanting deck to silent long-shots of the ship's vertical slide – Cameron dwells endlessly on the final agonies.

The least fortunate passenger is the one whose legs are smashed on a propeller ('KEEP CLEAR OF THE BLADES') after leaping from the stern and before he hits the sea. The luckless double whammy sends him spinning onwards in still greater agony – like the astronaut Hal disumbilicated outside the hull in *2001*. . . (Note the same clustered constellations of the universe reflected in the ocean.) Were this *Schindler's List* there'd be an outcry of indignation, but since it was an 'accident', the wreck of the *Titanic* is no one's fault except the entire British aristocracy personified at Captain's Table. That there were no locked doors restraining the lower decks from reaching the lifeboats, that the Scotsman did not shoot the Irishman and another passenger before shooting himself (the company paid the meagre sum of \$5000 to compensate his Scottish village for this slur), that it was the hands of crewmen that were broken as they tried to climb on board the boats, is of

no historical interest in the film. Class oppression trumps exploitation of the workers. Applauding the exposure of class hierarchy in the film, China's General Secretary of the Party, Jiang Zemin, also chose the very Western metaphor of 'Trojan Horse' to draw attention to Hollywood's latest ideological and economic invasion of his country. With over four and a half million dollars already grossed in profit, perhaps the ultimate metaphor of the film is 'market penetration'.

But as the epic to end all epics, this film also 'shafts' itself. We hear that no one will ever risk this much money on an epic again, etc., that the director risked millions of his *own* money to get real footage of the *Titanic* in its present location. Preventing anything of the same kind from ever happening *again* is a primary paradigm of modernism itself. But let us not forget those cunning submersibles from which real footage of the wreck was shot. A vast machine that can only do one thing and a tiny bathyscope that can do a million things is a postmodernist distinction that refloats the old idea of progress.

Thus even in its final role as plunger, the *Titanic*, like the male *Tyrannosaurus Rex* (fact), has no true penis. It is an impotent relic of the aristocratic dominance that precedes true democratic capitalism on the side of the Atlantic that it failed to reach, but whose multicultural society the watery lower decks immortalise. Meanwhile, as a real-life artist in London 'foxed her pretentious art-loving friends by doing Picasso drawings with a pen attached to a sex-vibrator',³ vibrating robots (dubbed 'Dunkins' to conceal their Russian origin) waver out umbilically to probe bank-safes in the sodden bedrooms of the wreck. This is virtual sex-technology enacted by furry freaks with 'SNOOP VISION' on their visors, foxier by far than rustbucket itself. (Nerd's fearful ugliness and louche laugh are absolutely no impediment to sexual success in this respect, though bank-safes are notoriously indiscriminating with their favours.) Even Crone seems moved.

Splicing Freud and Picasso as the boat descends, the heroine shouts at her fiancé: 'I'd rather be his whore than your wife!' Sex *is* her secret, analysed by shedding clothes, for Jack prevaricates as he orders her to model: 'Over on the bed – the couch!' Like Picasso's socially superior and reproving mistress, Fernande, this beauty sports red hair. At one point Rose undergoes *passage* into the *parade* of *Demoiselles* to underscore for her self-discovery. The bright Cézanne apples that stand between Jack and his Rose-*Demoiselles* are somehow his eyes and her breasts glued to one another in an anomalous fusion of sight and touch. It is difficult to believe that this

³ Paul Johnson, 'To Hell with Picasso', *Spectator*, 27 May 1995, reprinted in *To Hell with Picasso and Other Essays* (London 1996) pp. 204–5.

scene could have been created without direct knowledge of the analysis of the painting by William Rubin, Anna C. Chave and other art historians. This raises the interesting possibility that art *analysis*, not art alone, is fuelling contemporary cinematic production.

Cubism both did and did not start with *Demoiselles*, but the role the film gives to painting is close to the apocalyptic realism credited to Cubism by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1930. Picasso's

genius . . . links him to all those who aim at the most direct possible expression of reality. . . . The lowly bottle, the glass, the pipe, are bathed in the tense and inert atmosphere that precedes accidents, riots, and cataclysms.⁴

Soon the faux-bois panels of the deck are splitting Braquishly asunder and the hull is rending like a broken bough. Corpses subsequently bobbing in panelled Kapok waistcoats, ice striated down their ghoulish features, are 'real life' replications of that other painting by Picasso, glimpsed briefly early on: the *Portrait of Vollard*. It is a memento of the business class who didn't make it to the boats.

Here Jack, the American incarnation of the artist, ignores the Picasso paintings Rose points out to him but, to judge from his prostitute drawings, Jack, like Picasso has 'put himself about a bit'. His amiable erotic drawings prompt our heroine to recline for his crayon in something like the posture of Manet's *Olympia*, though his style is closer to *Playboy Magazine* than to hermetic Cubism. Jack's drawings in the film have drawn legal interest from the estates of Steiglitz and Brassaei. Though the Director claimed them as his own, the very name of the hero, Jack Dawson, possibly reveals a double plagiarism. Richardson has a chapter title, 'The Other Cubists: *Jackdaws* in Peacock's Feathers' (my emphasis). The loving treatment given to the 'Blue Heart of the Ocean' (the rock around Rose's neck) has to do with Paloma Picasso, the artist's perfumed and bespangled daughter. It has to do, that is to say, with the rewards anarchic progenitors bestow on dutiful offspring. Since Blue Diamond – wealth – remains a constant concern in the film, it is a surprise when old Rose accidentally drops the diamond deep onto her lover's grave.

We first see old Rose fashioning pots, which we all know is an anal activity in contrast to the phallic acts of sketching and painting. Clearly she's got something she wants to hold on to, but you can't take it with you, you know, and since the bludgers have their youth, let them work for their

⁴ Georges Monnet [Claude Lévi-Strauss], 'Picasso and Cubism' (1930), trans. Dominic Faccini, *October*, 59 (Winter 1992), p. 52.

happiness. 'A woman's heart has many secrets in its depths.' Plop! This is a peculiar relinquishment of grief.

II

Titanic's offering of new sexual stereotypes for old owes more to the shattering effects of feminism on the contemporary male ego than to anything that happened in 1910, but the film's sexual sensationalism is mild compared to Richardson's discoveries about the lives of *la bande à Picasso*. Turning now from *Titanic* to the biography that I believe inspired it, Richardson's portrait of Apollinaire's mistress, who was 'happy to smoke opium and be whipped and sodomized by him . . .' (p. 348), is a sufficient indication of what the book holds in store. A series of accidents dating from 1949 led Richardson into the hedonistic world of Picasso's *Life*. But why his emphasis should have fallen on Picasso's obsessive sexuality – apart from the fact of it – I do not know. Perhaps Roland Penrose, Richardson's one-time companion in research, would have known.

In a documentary of the 1960s an already frail Penrose, by then director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, positively crowed *not* about Picasso's art but about the Spaniard's bull-like virility: 'He really was very, very, very virile. Very virile indeed. Really *very*.'

Richardson's biography and *Titanic* are national rivals for the Picasso myth. Clearly, *Titanic* was the victor at the box office, but in the sphere of cultural capital Richardson easily vanquishes his nearest American rival, Norman Mailer. Mailer, by contrast, translates Picasso into American so completely that nothing either French or Spanish is left about him. 'How intensely do Pablo and Fernande personify at this point all those . . . marijuana romances of the Fifties and Sixties in America where lovers found ultimates in a one-night stand, and on occasion stayed together' (p. 145). With little or none of Richardson's capacity to discriminate in the midst of advocacy, Mailer contrives an affinity between the artist's temperament and his own to present to a younger generation a model of the worst aspects of Picasso's sexually destructive personality. He also aligns himself with the American tradition begun by Greenberg of finding little of value in Picasso's career after Cubism.⁵ When it is a matter of a convincing insider's deployment of fresh biographical material, the British still do it better if Richardson and Mailer are representative comparisons.

One reason for the compelling nature of the narrative is that Richardson never shrinks from the role of partisan. We are left in no doubt of the

⁵ Leo Steinberg discusses this tradition in 'The Philosophical Brothel', *October*, 44 (1999), 65–74.

author's aversion to Gertrude Stein (enigmatic obfuscator), Juan Gris ('brave bourgeois'), Diego Rivera (false accuser of plagiarism), Jaime Sabartés (sycophantic, narcissistic secretary), even Apollinaire (cowardly betrayer). The biases are presented as Picasso's, and accompanied by vivid evidence. Against the pretence of academic impartiality it is bracing to see Gleizes, Metzinger and the other 'Cubist Followers' returned through Picasso's eyes to the lowly status of Jackdaws. I shall comment presently on Richardson's discussions of the women in Picasso's story, but there is certainly no shortage of them in the cast. The portrait of Marie Laurencin as an irritating, promiscuous and whimsical blue-stockings is far from flattering, but it certainly provides a vivid 'angle' on who she was and what she did, together with no less than a dozen of her drawings and paintings. Even apparently extraneous anecdotes in the book have far-reaching implications. Consider the genealogy of Léger's 'tubist' highlights from the study of Léger following Le Douanier Rousseau into the Louvre. There, confronted with Bouguereau's detested nudes, the elderly artist simply exclaimed 'Look at the highlights on the fingernails!' (p. 113).

What makes Richardson's approach so English is his reiteration of John Golding's thesis of 1959 that Picasso sought the real without falling into realism. Empirical certainties constitute a bridge with the biological evidence of Picasso's overpowering sexuality:

Picasso was determined to produce work that would be '*bien couillarde*' – a favourite phrase of Cézanne's that means literally 'ballsy.' 'A painting should have balls' became a catchphrase. Picasso and Braque were famously *couillarde*. . . . Palpability made for reality, and it was the real rather than the realistic that Picasso was out to capture. (p. 103)

Despite this pragmatic approach to Picasso's art and life, Richardson is aware of ongoing theoretical debates. Speculations upon Picasso's sexuality and painting processes would hardly have been associated with the tower of Corunna in volume one without awareness of Lacan's and Foucault's theories of specularly, nor is it likely that an early application of the term 'deconstructive' to art would have been noted without the contemporary vogue for Derrida.

Satisfying another requirement of contemporary art history, Richardson is well placed to chart the world-wide progress of Picasso's institutional acceptance. Only an insider could have turned the credit for Picasso's world-wide reputation so decisively, from the American to the German dealers. By this late stage of the book (chapter twenty) Picasso's genius is assumed, but what are we asked to believe it consists in? Richardson contests John Berger's thesis of the late '60s and Patricia Leighton's of the late '80s that Picasso's art is motivated by Spanish left-wing activism,

though Leighton's case for the statistical significance of radical content in the newsprint of Picasso's collages is simply ignored.⁶ Richardson's profile of an egotistical artist indifferent (or opportunistic) towards larger political forces is convincing enough. Instead we are asked to believe that Picasso's art was primarily engaged in sexual rather than political experiment. Richardson is decidedly ambivalent about the feminist issues that consequently arise. On the one hand he is critical of Picasso's misogyny and gives a sharp analysis of his adoption of a little girl who wrote an alarming list while under his care which ended 'tit, redhead, asphyxia' (p. 32). On the other hand, Richardson rails against those 'self-promoting "moralists", who choose to judge this great artist, born into another age and another culture, by the light of today's cant' (pp. 8–9). Thus the Andalusian analogy between the eye and the sexual organ – *mirada fuerte* or 'strong gazing' – is constantly brought forward from the first volume (pp. 10–11) to the second to support the contention that Picasso's predatory treatment of women – 'First the plinth, then the doormat' (p. 19) as one of them remarked – was historically and culturally inevitable to him. This leaves a heavy onus on the author to explain what remains 'great' about the art rather than the artist. In this respect it is interesting to consider Richardson's disregard of Richard Wollheim's psychoanalytical critique of Picasso, especially since Wollheim, equally averse to feminist 'neo-puritanism', is a friend who hailed him as Picasso's foremost biographer and is credited in the biography's acknowledgements with often having put his 'ideas in order'. These were unlikely to have been psychoanalytical ideas, for in *Painting as an Art* (1987), Wollheim offered the striking argument that the triumph of touch over vision in many of Picasso's cubist works involves an inward-turning of 'the destructive power of the gaze', resulting in a denial of the blissful sexual reciprocity between men and women achieved in greater works.⁷ That Richardson should entirely avoid his friend's argument perhaps implies that negative consequences from *la mirada fuerte* hindered his task of keeping

⁶ Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914*, (Princeton, 1989), ch. 5. The latest view on this issue rejects both Leighton and Richardson. In a work that came to my attention after the completion of this essay, Rosalind Krauss follows David Cottingham in arguing that what is represented in collage 'is precisely "the dislocation between the artistic and political avant gardes"'. . . . Krauss enlists Michail Bakhtin to force home the point that not only is the 'political' interpretation of collage naive, it is – and this is her main point – intellectually conservative, more conservative than the collages themselves. It amounts to an attempt to force them back into a straight-jacket of unequivocal meaning when the whole point, for her, is that that is the object of their critique.' See Paul Wood, 'Picasso in Words', review of *The Picasso Papers* (1998) by Rosalind Krauss, *Art History*, 21: 3 (September 1998), 433.

⁷ Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London, 1987), pp. 286–295.

the readers' sympathy for his subject. There is scant account of unconsciousness in Richardson's Picasso: the sex life and the art are transparent to each other.

To take two paintings. Richardson's brilliance at deciphering details appears to advantage in the treatment of the great *Harlequin* of 1915. Missing is any formalist account of how the figures of Harlequin and Pierrot in this painting perpetually fold together and apart with the satisfying clatter of an old ironing board. Instead the author is moved by the evidence of conspiratorial rivalry with a painting by Matisse. The startling discovery is that the unfinished portion of the canvas within the painting delineates an unmistakable profile of Picasso himself. This provides the biographical connection with Picasso's love-life and the death of his lover Eva Clavel from cancer, for Picasso draws attention to himself and hides 'against the blackness of Eva's mortal illness and the blackness of war' (p. 387). He might have added that the red and white stripes that roll down the profile cheek in apparently random fashion – are they tears? – perhaps hark back to the stains that trickle from the window frame near the death bed of his sister in the 1897 history painting *Science and Charity* discussed in volume one (pp. 80–82). But the use of Eva to generate sympathy for Picasso entails egregious special pleading. Eva was earlier framed as the 'scheming woman' who replaced the great love of Picasso's life. On Picasso's behalf the author wrings our hand at the suffering endured and care lavished as Eva lay dying of cancer in hospital, but it is difficult to remain sympathetic to Picasso on learning that he had started an affair with yet another woman before her death. Crocodile tears flow freely over Eva: 'Picasso could not forgive anyone close to him for dying' (p. 377). Across the years we are asked to pity this susceptibility. Sterner verdicts are ascribed to envy and consigned to the footnotes. Sonia and Robert Delaunay 'had always thought Picasso "a shit"' (p. 460n).

Picasso's *Still Life Au Bon Marché* was at the centre of controversies between historians and semioticians at the MoMA Symposium in 1992 and offers richer possibilities for Richardson's approach. In view of all that Richardson has found about the seamy side of Picasso, Rosalind Krauss's fastidiousness seems comically naive: 'I just cannot imagine', she says, 'Picasso . . . making that area with the TROU ICI, clipping into her genitals. I find this repellant and also counterintuitive as a reading.'⁸ Richardson takes consequent satisfaction in further 'opening up' the secret analogy between Eva's body and the box of lingerie by finding an analogy

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, quoted in Tom Ettinger, 'Picasso, Cubism and the eye of the Beholder: Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Psychology', *American Imago*, 53: 1 (1996), 72.

with *Woman in an Armchair* which 'portrays Eva genitally with folds of her chemise arranged to make the same *trou ici* point. In the collage, Picasso hides his mistress away in a box, or turns her into one, while also signalling that we have access to her' (p. 289). But there is still a question of value here. While insinuating private sexuality into the public container, might the game of show-and-tell not also be to demystify the erotic lure of new commodity fetishes, by extracting them from the boutique window and unmasking their relation to commercial profit? To think so might restore an analytical edge to the vicarious hedonism of the art.

III

One virtue of *Titanic* was its assumption that Cubism bore upon the technological and sociological events of its day. Despite its propaganda value, it shows us what we are likely to miss about Cubism in biographies of artists. It is worth recalling, after all, the technical emphasis of perhaps the foremost literary cubist, Ezra Pound:

the best history of literature, more particularly of poetry, would be a twelve/volume anthology in which each poem was chosen not merely because it was a nice poem or a poem Aunt Hepsy liked, but because it contained an invention, a definite contribution to the art of verbal expression. (Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (London, 1931) p. 10)

So too Picasso expressed greater interest in the outcome of his experiments than in the obscurities of their motivation: 'What one does is what counts and not what one had the intention of doing.'⁹

If it were really possible to entertain nostalgia for clear, dry analysis one might pose the question: whatever happened to Winthrop Judkins's Harvard University PhD (1954), *Fluctuant Representation in Synthetic Cubism*? The knotty exegeses of its grainy reproduction are an ineffably boring but rigorously impersonal inventory of Cubism's technical procedures. The book excludes all consideration of the lives of the artists whose works are selected – Picasso, Braque and Gris – and refrains from differentiating between their personal styles in any way. It aims instead to codify the 'moves' they made in challenging the rules of natural appearances (that shadows, for example, always fall on the side opposite a light source) or dismantling the illusions of traditional Western art. In these respects Judkins's thesis rivals the efforts of Russian Formalism to defamiliarise the artifice behind illusions though he dwells upon a more positive principle of optical fluctuation which promotes oscillation between alternative

⁹ Pablo Picasso, 'Picasso Speaks' (1923), *Art in Theory 1900–1990: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, 1992), p. 211.

readings of an image. One example may illustrate the cogency of the approach. Judkins seeks to demonstrate the simultaneous operation of 'Reversal of Shape Character' and 'Articulation of Shape by Indirection' in an anonymously labelled Picasso 'Z-P 12-17, pl 570', arguing that it does not matter which of two dark images one sees first upon its dark ground:

The central point of interest and significance here is the studied indirection with which the guitar's outline is articulated. The continuity of that outline, rather than continuing around the whole guitar and closing with its starting point, moves away from it instead and completes the outline of the whole black shape – and incidentally develops in the process a reversal of shape-character from the curvilinear hip and shoulder. The attention is perforce drawn to the single whole shape which is clearly isolated and delimited by its unbroken (unfragmented) enclosing outline, particularly when that shape is given the vividness of the maximum contrast of black on white. (p. 84)

However 'academic' its procedures, this objective mode of analysis probably reveals how working architects and designers made sense of Cubist forms in projecting them into our contemporary urban environment. I said that Judkins's thesis disappeared without trace but in fact it is more likely that it went underground without acknowledgement into architectural criticism.

There is poignant irony in more recent manifestations of cubist technique. Rowe and Slutzky supplied a deficiency in the otherwise excellent Judkins. They showed the importance of subjective agency in the spectator's participation in strategies that Judkins largely confined to the artist. In their view Corbusier's post-Cubist architecture brings the spectator out of himself since the significance of its built forms can only be completed through the active play of masculine intelligence.¹⁰ Relations of power in regard to the spectator are crucial to Cubist painting, as Richardson reveals in a fascinating series of quotations:

'when I paint smoke, I want you to be able to drive a nail into it. So I added the attributes – a suggestion of eyes, the wave in the hair, an ear lobe, the clasped hands – and now you can.' Picasso went on to equate cubism with giving a long and difficult explanation to a child: 'You add certain details that he understands immediately in order to . . . buoy him up for the difficult parts.' You teach people something new, he said, 'by mixing what they know with what they don't know. Then . . .

¹⁰ Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, *Transparency* (Basel, 1997).

they think, 'Ah, I know that.' And then it's just one more step to, 'Ah, I know the whole thing.' (p. 175)

The artist may well have wished to infantilise spectators in this way, but as we saw with *Au Bon Marché*, the defamiliarisation of conventional consumer products might have had the effect of imparting strategies of radically indeterminate interpretation to the spectator. Seeing the lid of a lingerie box *as* a woman's body could not be further, as concrete thinking, from the state of passive disengagement that Margaret Morse envisages for consumers of the more recent embodiments of Cubist technique. In 'An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mail and Television' (1990), she envisaged these three avenues of passive enjoyment triggering off perpetual associations with one another through shared technologies 'which don't so much *look* alike as observe similar principles of construction and operation.'¹¹ These principles deploy just two of the techniques that Judkins enumerated in his inventory of cubism – passage and segmentation. They are enough to divide and incapacitate the alienated subject's hold on reality and enough for the 'task of reintegrating a social world of separated, dislocated realms . . . accomplished by means of an internal dualism, of *passage* amid the *segmentation* of glass, screens, and thresholds' (p. 117). The resulting state of mind nevertheless depends on fluctuation again, but this time of a mind-numbing kind, 'a utopian realm of *both/and* in the midst of *neither/nor*' (p. 106).

One consequence of such a state of affairs is precisely a film like *Titanic* which is as likely to be seen on television as in the cinema. There is perhaps a special point to the fact that such a soporific film should have cubism at its kernel, for such a radically dislocating art movement is the ultimate challenge to the film's domesticating powers of distraction during hours of dissolves and cuts. Perhaps there is a link between Cubism and the *Titanic* incident. For George Simmel the profound affinity between an adventure and a work of art is that:

It is because the work of art and the adventure stand over against life . . . that both are analogous to the totality of life itself.¹²

While seeking to appropriate this sense of totality, the film reabsorbs the interruptions of radical art and mass tragedy back into the continuous phantasmagoria of commercial enjoyment.

¹¹ Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington, 1998), p. 99.

¹² George Simmel, 'The Adventure', *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918: a Collection of Essays, with Translation and a Bibliography*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus, 1959), p. 245.

The effects of distraction and torpor that Margaret Morse ascribes to contemporary consumerism may no less than *Titanic* be domestications of once radical attempts by Cubists to slow down and to expose the libidinal ploys that underlie commercial persuasion. In conclusion, I shall suggest that one way out of the impasse between biographical and impersonal technical approaches to Cubism is to accept very fast and very slow readings of the work as simultaneous possibilities of interpretation. According to Richardson, the equation of a 'squeeze box' with a vagina or an ivory-knobbed stick with a penis (pp. 187 and 190) is really Picasso's way of manipulating polite conventions to put private sources of gratification on display. This approach downplays the destructiveness in elisions of this kind. Perhaps Picasso's dislocations, particularly of women, are symptomatic of a damaged ego seeking compensation in the sadistic dismemberment of others who nevertheless remain aspects of himself. In a remark to Geneviève Laporte of 1944, he showed that he could easily combine a perverse artistic role as a woman with a conventional homophobia:

'I am a woman,' he told her, 'Every artist is a woman and should have a taste for other women. Artists who are homosexual cannot be true artists because they like men, and since they themselves are women they are reverting to normality. (Nigel Cawthorne, *Sex Lives of the Great Artists* (London, 1998) p. 138)

Whether one takes the erotic or destructive point of view of Picasso's assault on appearances, one need not assume that intense personal feeling is inconsistent with painstaking technical inventions. Likewise, while Richardson's biographical reconstructions of intention are no less difficult to arrive at than the technical analyses of Judkins and others, neither approach need disqualify intense spontaneous reactions to the images. Indeed, taken together, perhaps the erotic and destructive possibilities of the images derive from the viewers' psyches as much as Picasso's. To look is to embed an image within a constantly shifting matrix of unconscious memories.¹³ Tom Ettinger thought along similar lines in devising a psychological experiment. One group of viewers was exposed to split-second viewings of Picasso's Cubist *Woman in an Armchair* projected from a tachistoscope while a second group was exposed to continuous viewing of the same image. Only the prolonged viewing allowed the latent content of male and female, facial and genital features to be disguised and tamed by

¹³ Kaja Silverman, quoted Mieke Bal, 'Looking at Love: an Ethics of Vision', review of Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, *Diacritics*, 27: 1 (Spring 1997), 61.

the art-work. The first group did not have time to scrutinise the image for disambiguating clues that would allow them to arrive at respectable answers to the question: 'Would I *rather* send up to consciousness the percept of a vitalised mouth/wound/genital or a neutrally geometricised abdomen?'¹⁴ Perhaps our subliminal identifications with taboo materials run riot before the work of approximating them to more acceptable recognitions takes over. Or perhaps at its best this slower and more conscious process allows the brio of damage and desire concentrated in the psyche of the artist to be shared by many others.

Richard Read

¹⁴ Tom Ettinger, 'Picasso, Cubism and the eye of the Beholder', *op. cit.*, pp. 60 and 64.