The Cubism Seminars

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Cubism and the Politics of Form | Pepe Karmel

In the four decades after World War II, art historians reconstructed the formal evolution of cubism in remarkable detail. Texts by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Jean Paulhan, and Dora Vallier, based on conversations with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, served as the point of departure for the scholarship of British and European art historians such as Douglas Cooper, John Richardson, and John Golding. In the United States, the work of scholars such as William Rubin was often influenced by Clement Greenberg’s powerfully reductive theory of modernism. Cubism played a central role in Greenberg’s narrative. In his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940), he wrote: “The destruction of realistic pictorial space, and with it, that of the object, was accomplished by means of the travesty that was cubism.”

Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical. . . . The picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth. . . . In a further stage realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface. Sometimes this advance to the surface is accelerated by painting a segment of wood or texture trompe l’œil, or by drawing exactly printed letters, and placing them so that they destroy the partial illusion of depth by slamming the various planes together. . . . As we gaze at a cubist painting of the last phase we witness the birth and death of three-dimensional space.

Cubism offered the paradigmatic example of modernist “purity,” jettisoning every element of traditional art that might distract from the viewer’s awareness of the flatness of the support. Greenberg returned to this topic in a 1959 essay, “The Pasted Paper Revolution,” in which he focused on the invention in 1912 of papier collé as a turning point in the history of modern art, writing, in a famous passage:

The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined in it. . . . The flatness of the surface permeates the illusion, and the illusion itself re-asserts the flatness.

Greenbergian formalism reached an acme of influence around 1960, when the artists he endorsed—painters such as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Morris
Louis, and Kenneth Noland, plus the sculptor David Smith—seemed to constitute the culmination of the modernist tradition, unimpeachably avant-garde yet broadly endorsed by critics, curators, and collectors.

By 1970 the situation within art history had shifted. After the political, social, and cultural ferment of the 1960s, formalism seemed arrière-garde rather than avant-garde. It had become the aesthetic language of the establishment, the house philosophy of blue-chip galleries and museums. For younger historians such as Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark, the social content and political effect of art seemed more important than its purely formal evolution. In 1973 Nochlin threw down the gauntlet with an essay titled “The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law.”

Within the world of cubist scholarship, however, formalism remained the order of the day. The result was to focus more and more attention on a smaller and smaller group of artists. In his exhibition The Cubist Epoch (1971), Douglas Cooper included 321 works by forty-seven artists. In 1983, when Cooper and Gary Tinterow organized The Essential Cubism: Braque, Picasso, and Their Friends, 1907–1920, they cut back their checklist to four “masters” (Braque, Gris, Léger, and Picasso) and seven “associated” artists. Six years later, William Rubin’s Pioneering Cubism included 390 works—more than any other cubist exhibition before or since—but just two artists: Picasso and Braque.

What did change in the cubist scholarship of the early 1980s was that Greenbergian formalism gave way to a new, semiological formalism championed by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. Where Nochlin and Clark responded to the political debates of the 1960s, Krauss and Bois were influenced by the linguistic model of structuralism, the intellectual revolution that swept France in the 1960s. For the structuralists, the historic achievement of cubism was not its emphasis on flatness but its apparent demonstration that art could function as a language of arbitrary signs. The critical apparatus of structuralism was completely different from that of Greenbergian formalism, and yet it focused attention on the same moments in the development of cubism: the creation of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon in spring 1907, the breaking open of the “closed form” in the summer of 1910, and the inventions of papier collé and constructed sculpture in summer–fall 1912. Meanwhile, the list of “essential” artists shrank to one: Picasso, whose graphic inventiveness ranked higher, semiologically, than Braque’s mastery of textures and of pictorial structure.

There were, of course, significant exceptions to the dominance of formalism in cubist scholarship. In his brilliant survey, Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art, published in 1960, Robert Rosenblum stepped outside the narrow borders of art history to draw parallels between the multiple perspectives of cubism, the polytonality of Stravinsky, and the disjointed narratives of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Rosenblum was also the first scholar to analyze the newspaper clippings in Picasso’s papiers collés as clues to the hidden content of his cubist work. In 1966 Edward Fry published a pioneering anthology of early...
critical responses to cubism, reconstructing the cultural context of its reception. In the 1970s Leo Steinberg drew attention to the psychosexual symbolism of Picasso’s first cubist works. Linda Dalrymple Henderson pointed out suggestive parallels between cubism and non-Euclidean geometry. But it was not until the late 1980s that a new generation of younger scholars, including Patricia Leighten, Mark Antliff, David Cottington, Lewis Kachur, and Jeffrey Weiss, solidly resituated cubism in the context of social, political, and intellectual history. In 2001 Antliff and Leighten provided a dazzling synthesis of these approaches in their book *Cubism and Culture*. Not coincidentally, they returned to the earlier tradition of scholarship, analyzing cubism as a broad movement rather than concentrating exclusively on the work of Picasso and Braque. In my own book, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism* (2003), I focused on Picasso but tried to place cubism in a broader context of intellectual history.

Even today, however, the debate over the political significance of cubism remains pretty much where it was in fall 1989, when William Rubin convened a group of scholars to discuss his exhibition *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*, at the Museum of Modern Art. Although Patricia Leighten was not included in the list of speakers at the two-day symposium, she was present as a discussant, and the participants frequently referred to her recently published book, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914*. Here, after tracing the evolution of Picasso’s political opinions, Leighten argued that it was no coincidence that his first *papiers collés*, assembled in fall 1912, incorporated a series of newspaper articles about anarchist and pacifist demonstrations against France’s participation in the Balkan Wars. The purely formalist analysis of the *papiers collés* missed an essential aspect of their significance.

In the discussion after one presentation, Pierre Daix, Picasso’s biographer and longtime friend — and the author of the catalogue raisonné of Picasso’s cubist work — seemed unequivocally to confirm the accuracy of Leighten’s argument. Daix recalled a discussion with Picasso about the newspaper clipping in one collage, referring to a “huge demonstration” against the First Balkan War. When Daix asked the artist if he had included the article on purpose, he responded, “Oh yes, I found that in the newspaper, and it was my way of showing I was against the war.”

However, most of the papers at the 1989 symposium addressed cubism from a formalist perspective. Shifting away from the usual focus on Picasso, Christine Poggi presented a groundbreaking analysis of Georges Braque’s concept of “tactile space.” Two of the contributions, Yve-Alain Bois’s “The Semiology of Cubism” and Rosalind Krauss’s “The Motivation of the Sign,” established semiology as the new orthodoxy in cubist scholarship. In the discussion after Krauss’s presentation, Leighten acknowledged the value of semiology but added: “What does bother me about what you’re doing is the sense that nothing else is valid.” Why deny the political content of Picasso’s *papiers collés*? Krauss responded: “I think one needs a model for how politics enters the work. It can’t just enter
the work by walking in... We need a model for how it gets instituted within the aesthetic structure.” However, the semiological emphasis on the “arbitrariness” of the sign left little room for content, political or otherwise. At the conclusion of the symposium, Rubin proclaimed a “consensus” as to the value of the semiological model, which has indeed remained the current orthodoxy in cubist studies. A few years later, when the symposium proceedings were published, Leighten memorably dismissed them as an example of “Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-as-Usual in New York.”

For the last twenty-five years, discussion of the political significance of cubism has remained trapped within the binary opposition laid out at the Picasso-Braque symposium. Cubism is understood in terms of either its iconography or its form. For scholars interested in content, Henri Le Fauconnier’s *Abundance* of 1910–1911—a cubist rendition of a nude with a fruit basket—is significant as a cubist affirmation of the French rural tradition; for scholars interested in form, it is an unsuccessful pastiche of cubist faceting. From one point of view, Picasso’s incorporation of an article on a left-wing demonstration highlights the anarchist implications of *papier collé*; from the other, the subtle syntax of *papier collé* expresses the “aesthetic,” nonpolitical character of cubism.

What is absent from both these positions is any acknowledgment that the formal language of cubism can itself be seen as a political statement. It is a critical cliché that cubism represents an artistic revolution. Why do we say “revolution,” rather than “transformation” or “innovation”? The connotations of the word are obviously important. Cubism’s radical break with the previous language of Western painting and sculpture has served critics and artists as an irresistible symbol for the other political, social, and cultural revolutions of the early twentieth century.

The political opinions that Picasso and Braque held in the years 1908–1914, and that they did or did not intend to express in their work, are only part of the political meaning of their work. What matters more is that the new visual languages they invented during these years were seized upon by other artists—the futurists, the suprematists, the constructivists, and the Berlin Dadaists, among others—as vehicles for the expression of political ideas and experiences. Whatever cubism was in itself, it looked political to the artists who were some of its first and most important viewers.

In the pages that follow I try to provide an overview of the different ways in which cubism became a politicized visual language in the years 1911–1923, and of how the politics of form in the early twentieth century continues to shape our understanding of modern art today, a hundred years later.

**Primitivism and the Strongman**

For three decades after its creation, Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* remained virtually unknown. Exhibited briefly in 1916, it was purchased by couturier Jacques Doucet in 1924...
at the urging of his advisor, André Breton. Because of the painting’s provocative subject matter, Doucet hung it in his back staircase, where it was seen only by a handful of visitors. In 1937 Doucet’s widow sold Les Demoiselles to the Galerie Jacques Seligmann. The gallery in turn sold it to the Museum of Modern Art, which was at that time undergoing renovations. The painting did not go on prolonged public view until 1939, when it was included in Art in Our Time, the inaugural survey for MoMA’s reopening. That fall, when Les Demoiselles was presented as a highlight of MoMA’s great Picasso retrospective, Alfred H. Barr Jr. defined its importance for an American public:

The Demoiselles d’Avignon is the masterpiece of Picasso’s Negro Period (1906–1908), but it may also be called the first cubist picture, for the breaking up of natural forms, whether figures, still life, or drapery, into a semi-abstract all-over pattern of tilting shifting planes is already Cubism; cubism in a rudimentary stage, it is true, but closer to the developed cubism of 1909 than are most of the intervening “Negro” works.21

Barr thus stressed the formal structure of Les Demoiselles’s composition and discounted the importance of the painting’s subject matter.

Strange at it seems in retrospect, it was only in 1972, when Leo Steinberg published “The Philosophical Brothel,” that scholars began seriously to consider the painting’s subject matter. For the next two decades, art historians delved into the psychosexual themes of Demoiselles and the monumental Three Women of 1908, Picasso’s even more formally adventurous reworking of the 1907 canvas.22 These themes were clearly linked to the “primitivist” aspect of Demoiselles, Three Women, and much of Picasso’s early cubist work, whose geometric forms in many cases recall African masks and figure sculptures. Meanwhile, the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibition “Primitivism” in Twentieth Century Art provoked heated discussion about whether the modernist appropriation of non-Western art was not itself another form of European colonialism and exploitation.23 Picasso’s crude, hulking figures of 1906–1908 (what Barr had called his “Negro Period”) now acquired a political character, whether as symbols of latent sexism and racism or as expressions of anticolonialism.24

However, it would be a mistake to see Picasso’s masculine and feminine figures of these years simply as images of an Other, domestic or non-Western. From 1906 through 1908, Picasso’s geometrification of anatomy serves primarily to clarify and monumentalize the human form. In a painting such as Standing Nude of 1908 (fig. 1), extracted from studies for Three Women, the division of forms into clearly demarcated planes meeting at sharp edges dramatically reinforces the monumentality of figures and objects. Although the pattern of planes and edges within the figure is echoed in the patterning of the background, the two remain distinct, and the nude confronts the viewer as a powerful, coherent form. Mark Rosenthal and other scholars have emphasized Nietzsche’s
importance as a source for the imagery of Picasso’s saltimbanques and a proponent of “Dionysiac” barbarism. In *Standing Nude*, Picasso invents a “primitive” anatomy combining the élan vital of Bergsonian evolution, the procreative sexuality of Venus Genetrix, and the brutality of Nietzsche’s Superman. Simultaneously masculine and feminine, the figure represents not the Other, but the Self.

The political valence of such “primitive” figures is best understood by looking at their echoes in the work of contemporary artists such as the Italian and Russian futurists and the English vorticists. The futurists and the vorticists found the subject matter of cubism distressingly old fashioned but were radically transformed by the encounter with its formal language. Cubist figures like Picasso’s *Standing Nude* spawned a new race of mecanomorphs in their work. The programmatic misogyny of Italian futurism was expressed in Filippo Marinetti’s proclamation of his love of war and his “scorn for woman.” Umberto Boccioni’s post-1911 soccer players, bicyclists, and warriors are intended as avatars of hypermasculinity despite their lyrical curves and glowing colors (fig. 2). A similar combination of chest-thumping masculinity and casual misogyny is evident in Russian futurism and English vorticism. While the Russian futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* is best known for Kazimir Malevich’s proto-abstract set designs, its libretto, by Aleksei Kruchenykh, is permeated with the same air of belligerence found
in Marinetti’s manifestos. In the first act, a pair of “futurian strongmen” announce that they are “organizing a slaughter,” “toppling mountains,” and locking up the “fat beauties.” Matters go downhill from there. A particularly violent, even sadistic quality is evident in the geometricized imagery of vorticism. In Jacob Epstein’s Rock Drill of 1913, for instance, the robotlike body of the miner seems permanently welded to the metal tripod that supports him and to the pneumatic drill that emerges from his groin, equating desire and aggression (fig. 3).

Contrasting futurist images such as Boccioni’s Dynamism of a Soccer Player with vorticist works such as Epstein’s Rock Drill, Hal Foster notes that “[t]he futurist motifs of the burst of energy and the gesture forced free of the body, and futurist lines as vectors of force and traces of speed, tend to disintegrate form and to interpenetrate objects,” while vorticist images tend to emphasize the solidity of the body. (He points, as well, to an ambiguity in the vorticist imagery of body armor: does it simply express the potential violence of the machinelike body, or does it also serve as protection against shocks inflicted upon the body from outside?)

Underlying these different versions of futurism is a Nietzschean belief in violence as a cleansing, creative force, an idea popularized by Georges Sorel in his Reflections on Violence (1908), which was translated into English in 1914 by T. E. Hulme, the philosopher of the vorticist group. Nor did the Nietzschean cult of violence lose its inspirational value for modernism after World War I. Benito Mussolini, who presented himself as a living incarnation of Nietzsche’s superman, was a widely admired figure in the 1920s. It was not until Adolf Hitler’s rise to power that it became apparent how catastrophically Nietzsche’s ideas might be misused.

What remains ambiguous is the political significance of cubist primitivism, along with its sequels. Is it an endorsement of racist colonialism, of gender stereotypes, of protofascism? Or is it a critique of these? Nietzsche and Sorel, the philosophical counterparts to cubist primitivism, do not fit into our conventional categories of “right” and “left.” They inspired Mussolini and Hitler, on one hand, and Lenin on the other. Political positions cannot always be neatly arranged along a spectrum from left to right.
Cubist primitivism and its sequels offer an uncanny premonition of the age of strongmen, who have walked out of the pages of philosophy and onto the stage of history, beginning with Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler and continuing with Joseph Stalin, Juan Perón, Mao Tse-tung, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saddam Hussein, and Vladimir Putin. But they ceased to be an important factor in modern art after around 1925. T. J. Clark has argued that Nietzsche continued to be a significant source of inspiration for Picasso through the 1920s. This may be true. Still, in 1932, the year Hitler ran for president in Germany, Picasso told an interviewer: “I will never fit in with the followers of the prophets of Nietzsche’s superman.”

**Fragmentation and Anarchism**

Over the course of 1909–1910, Picasso and Braque abandoned the goal of monumentality, instead pursuing a ceaseless division of form. Figures and objects became more and more fragmented and less and less recognizable. This evolution was highly uneven and is more pronounced in Braque’s work than in Picasso’s. Nonetheless, Picasso’s Still Life with Liqueur Bottle of summer 1909 (fig. 4) represents an early instance of extreme fragmentation. Picasso compensates for this by massing the shards of form into a mountainous heap, like a sinister parody of the compositional pyramid of Renaissance tradition.

The fragmentation here is so thorough that it is difficult to discern what exactly the picture represents. Indeed, it was not until 1971 that the subject matter was clearly identified, and then only because Picasso drew a sketch showing the “real” objects in the picture. The cylindrical form set at an angle at lower left, broken up into tiny facets, is a bottle of the Spanish liqueur Anis del Mono, which indeed comes in a faceted glass bottle. The unrecognizable form at the center of the painting is a botijo, a ceramic drinking jug in the shape of a cock. These and other objects are arranged on a table in the foreground, shown as a series of brown facets, while the gray-green planes above represent
the desolate landscape of Horta de Ebro, seen through a window. Straight-edged facets, jostling against one another within a loose lattice of diagonal lines, have replaced the harmonious interwoven curves of Standing Nude. The jagged facets and the flickering light that plays across them imbue the composition with nervous energy.

Over the following year, Picasso’s and Braque’s compositions grew increasingly fragmented. By spring–summer 1910, the facets no longer joined along their edges to form a continuous skin enclosing the figure. Their edges flared out into space, exposing an empty volume within the figure where previously there had been a solid mass. This centrifugal tendency was, however, countered by the appearance of a new pictorial structure. The diagonal lattice that had held together Picasso and Braque’s pictures of 1908–1909 now became a rectilinear scaffolding of vertical and horizontal lines, like an old-fashioned jungle gym. Anchored to this rectilinear scaffolding, the facets stabilized into discrete planes, usually suspended parallel to the picture plane but sometimes tilted at an angle to it.

The invention of this revolutionary new pictorial model triggered an astonishingly productive period in the careers of Picasso and Braque, who painted hundreds of pictures in the two years from summer 1910 through summer 1912. The combination of a rock-solid structure with unprecedented freedom of invention and execution established this new form of cubism as a new classicism, one that could provide a point of departure for countless other artists. However, the classical balance of this phase of cubism seems to have made it unsuitable as a model for political art. It was the chaotic fragmentation of 1909, not the ordered complexity of 1910–1912, that appealed to groups like the futurists and the vorticists.

We can trace the influence of cubist fragmentation in Carlo Carrà’s Funeral of the Anarchist Galli (figs. 5 and 6), the most important political statement of Italian futurism. Thanks to the research of William F. Valerio, it is now clear that Carrà’s painting takes great liberties with the historical record it claims to represent. Rather, it is an attempt to create an effective political myth by means of painting. The narrative associated with the painting presents Angelo Galli as an important figure in Italian anarchism, martyred in the turmoil of a May Day riot, whose funeral in turn provokes another riot, as the police assault his anarchist mourners. Almost every detail of this narrative is untrue. Milan had experienced violent anarchist revolts in the 1890s, but by 1906 the city government was dominated by reformist socialists, who defended workers’ rights and ordered the closing of factories for much of May to permit the celebration of labor. On May 11, 1906, Galli—a minor anarchist organizer—tried to force his way into a factory on the outskirts of the city to confirm that no one was at work there. When the concierge refused to admit him, Galli assaulted the concierge—and his wife—whereupon the concierge pulled out a knife and stabbed Galli. An elaborate funeral was organized in the piazza in front of the ornate civic cemetery, with speeches in Galli’s honor made by both anarchists
and socialists. The police were present to maintain order but lowered their lances as a sign of respect when Galli’s coffin went by. At that moment, the anarchists carrying the coffin swerved from their assigned route and tried to break through the police lines. They hoped, apparently, to carry the coffin back into the city and provoke an unauthorized demonstration there. The police formed an impenetrable barrier, and, after a scuffle, the funeral procession returned to its planned route around the piazza. Newspaper accounts of the events differ according to the political position of the newspaper, but there is no evidence of a riot like the one depicted in Carrà’s painting.  

It was only four years after the event that Carrà began to plan a major canvas representing Galli’s funeral. In the interim, Georges Sorel had published his Reflections on Violence, and Carrà’s painting can be read as the visual expression of Sorel’s inspirational “myth” of violent revolution. What mattered was not to represent events accurately, but to create an iconic image of violent confrontation in the hope of provoking a real-life enactment of the image.  

Carrà’s 1910 sketch for the composition (fig. 5) is drawn with long, feathery strokes gathered into swirling masses, in a symbolist style similar to that of Umberto Boccioni’s triptych States of Mind. The backlit mourners bearing Galli’s coffin form an indistinct, undulating mass, silhouetted against the dark facades of industrial Milan, and advancing toward the viewer. Carrà pushes the mob back into the depths of the picture, leaving the foreground empty except at the left. Here, a squad of policemen, mounted on massive horses, pushes into the picture, riding slowly and grimly toward the mourners. The arrangement of contrasting groups in depth against an urban backdrop suggests the staging of an opera from the school of verismo.  

The finished canvas (fig. 6) presents the same basic cast of characters but in a radically different style. Christine Poggi provides a vivid summary of the painting’s effect:

The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli explodes with violence; the repeated rhythm of pounding fists seems to shatter the surrounding space, while the blood-red cover of the coffin merges with the red glow of the sun to set the picture aflame. All trajectories and gestures are now set on a diagonal, including the bourgeois gentleman who raises his cane at the far left, the horseman’s lance that seems to intersect it, and the lunging anarchist in the foreground, who brandishes a stick overhead with his right hand, while preparing to throw a red stone with his left. Even the blue pylon in the distance seems to topple forward as space implodes.
The drama of the scene is now conveyed not by the disposition of figure groups but by the fragmentation of forms, organized along diagonal axes, as in Picasso’s and Braque’s cubist pictures of 1909 (see fig. 4).

In addition to the formal features noted by Poggi, the sky above the figures and the street below them are divided into concentric ovals traversed by diagonal bands, colored with alternating patches of dirty orange, yellow, blue and greenish white. Carrà’s rhythmic alternation of warm and cool colors recalls the studies associated with Picasso’s Three Women of 1908 (see fig. 1). However, the concentric ovals have no counterpart in Picasso’s or Braque’s work. They may have been inspired by scientific studies of shock waves, captured in images as concentric circles radiating outward from a spark. Carrà may have used this scientific imagery to translate the shock of revolutionary violence into abstract visual terms.

Like futurism, Berlin Dada looked to cubism for a visual language capable of expressing the tensions and conflicts of modern society. Indeed, George Grosz’s first major canvas, The Funeral of the Poet Oskar Panizza (1917–1918) manifests the influence of both cubism and futurism. The painting is typically seen as an updated Dance of Death, inspired by Panizza’s most famous work, The Council of Love (1895), a play dramatizing the outbreak of syphilis at the court of the Renaissance pope Alexander VI. As Matthew Gale has observed, the motif of the coffin, the splintered composition, the red and yellow palette, and even the title of Grosz’s painting are all reworkings of elements of The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli. Grosz’s painting was followed by a series of extraordinary drawings and prints evoking the anarchic street life of wartime Berlin, with its parade of military officers on leave, wounded veterans begging for alms, greedy businessman, and prostitutes posing as respectable women. In contrast to the loose, open arrangements of Grosz’s later satirical sketches, his drawings of 1918–1922 are typically constructed around a tightly organized structure of overlapping cubist planes. Nonetheless, the figures, buildings, and billboards in the early works of this series obey a consistent, “realistic” rule of scale: larger in the foreground, smaller in the background.

By 1920 Grosz had grown more daring: in a drawing like Querschnitt (Cross Section) (fig. 7), the oversized head of a man in a bowler hat and the large body of an angry nude woman float in space in front of multiple views of city streets and building facades, populated with smaller images of wounded veterans, self-absorbed businessmen, and a firing squad executing civilians in front of a brick wall. Grosz’s “cross section” of contemporary Berlin is not a simple slice of life, but combines close-ups and long shots, multiple locations, and different moments in time. Compared to this, the original cubist idea of multiple perspectives—a glass seen simultaneously from the side and from above—was relatively static. Grosz takes the idea of multiple perspectives and puts it in the service of a mobile, cinematic consciousness, building up a complex, layered image of urban experience by cutting constantly from one view to another.
Just as The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli provided a model for The Funeral of the Poet Oskar Panizza, so too Grosz’s Querschnitt seems to have provided the prototype for Hannah Höch’s Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands (fig. 8). In English, the title of Höch’s work—Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany—implies that the artist is stabbing aggressively into the “beer belly” of the bourgeois Weimar Republic. However, comparison with Grosz’s drawing suggests that “cut” here should be understood not only as an incision but also as a cross section. Grosz provides a cross section of typical social “types” found in Weimar-era Berlin. Höch goes a step further, using the new medium of photomontage to depict a series of specific individuals who typify the new Weimar Republic. We see Kaiser Wilhelm, the symbol of the bad old German empire; Höch’s colleagues in the Berlin Dada group (helpfully labeled “Dadaisten”); the government ministers Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske, despised by the Dadaists for their role in suppressing the Spartacist rebellion of winter 1918–1919 (labeled “antidadaistische”); and a variety of other cultural figures, including Albert Einstein (identified as an honorary “dada”).

In recent decades, Höch’s collage has been recognized as one of the masterworks of Berlin Dada, and much scholarly attention has also been devoted to her other collages. However, discussion of Cut with the Kitchen Knife has focused on its iconography and not on its role as a pioneering example of photomontage.

A number of different artists claimed to have invented photomontage sometime in the years 1918–1920. Höch and her romantic partner Raoul Hausmann, for instance, said they began making photomontages after going on vacation at a seaside resort where they saw photographic memorials to men who had served in the German army, with photographs of individual men’s heads pasted onto stock images of uniformed soldiers. As this anecdote reveals, the term “invented” is problematic here. What Höch and Hausmann did was to appropriate a vernacular kind of picture making and adapt it to the needs of avant-garde art. Much the same might be said of Picasso and Braque’s “invention” of collage. Collage practices were common in late nineteenth century culture. Picasso and Braque showed how they could be integrated with the new pictorial structures of cubism (a development discussed below).

The fact that Höch and Hausmann incorporated photographs instead of—or as well as—printed and patterned materials represented a step away from collage as practiced by Picasso and Braque. However, the decision to use photographs did not in itself dictate any particular kind of pictorial structure. In Hausmann’s early photomontages, such as Tatlin at Home or Dada Triumphs, and in Höch’s montages done after Cut with the Kitchen Knife, montaged elements are usually combined according to one of two syntactic principles, neither of them cubist. Many elements are cut out more or less intact from their sources and inserted into imaginary interiors with steeply raked floors, modeled on Giorgio de Chirico’s “metaphysical interiors” of 1916–1918. Other elements are cropped...

8. **Hannah Höch**, Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919–1920, photomontage and collage with watercolor. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
so that they will fit within the borders of faces or figures. For instance, in Tatlin at Home, Hausmann takes the image of a piece of industrial machinery and trims it so that it is contained within the contours of Tatlin’s cranium and brow. (A large control wheel is left floating above Tatlin’s head like an industrial halo.) As in the fantastical sixteenth-century paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the viewer first perceives what seems like a “normal” head and then realizes that it is made up of incongruous elements. The aspects of Dada photomontage borrowed from De Chirico and Arcimboldo lead directly into oneiric surrealism.

There are a number of “Arcimboldo” elements in Cut with the Kitchen Knife, such as the upside-down wrestlers who have taken the place of the Kaiser’s mustache, at upper right. However, the composition as a whole is neither centered on a single, Arcimboldo-style figure nor arranged within a De Chirico—style perspective. As in Grosz’s Querschnitt, heads, figures, and objects are distributed throughout every quadrant of the picture, areas of higher density alternating with passages of comparatively open space. As in Grosz, the varied figures and objects float in a shallow space defined by overlapping images and by variations in size: large heads and objects advance toward the viewer, while the small figures seem to recede. Photographs of city streets, at upper right and lower left, correspond to Grosz’s building facades and sidewalks.

In sum, Höch has used photomontage to translate both the iconography and the cubist syntax of Grosz’s drawing. Remaking Grosz’s urban typology with photographs yields a more specific repertory of political and cultural figures. Remaking his syntax strips cubism of its geometric vocabulary, since most of Höch’s heads and figures are cut out along their rounded, natural contours. However, the underlying cubist structure of overlapping surfaces advancing from a closed back plane survives this transformation. This subliminal residue keeps the composition from dissolving into a visually inert state of genuine randomness. Although the individual elements of Höch’s collage remain legible, the surprising juxtapositions and rapid shifts of scale make the image feel chaotic,
forming a powerful representation of the political and social turmoil of the early Weimar Republic. As in Carrà’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (see fig. 6), visual fragmentation serves as a symbol for social and political disintegration.

**Utopian Geometries**

In the course of 1911–1912, the structure of Picasso’s and Braque’s pictures evolved from a scaffolding of vertical and horizontal lines to an arrangement of vertical and horizontal bands. In paintings such as Picasso’s “Ma Jolie” (The Museum of Modern Art, New York) and Braque’s *The Emigrant* (The Portuguese; Kunstmuseum Basel), these bands advance and recede in space while remaining parallel to the picture plane. (The parallel bands are generally accompanied by larger diagonal planes, tilting forward and back in the shallow spaces of the compositions.) In August 1912, when Braque had the idea of cutting out pieces of wood-grained wallpaper and pasting them into one of his drawings, it was easy to answer the question of how to fit these heterogeneous elements into his existing design: he cut the wallpaper into strips corresponding to drawn bands already present on the sheet.45

The gray, brown, and green surfaces of Picasso’s and Braque’s 1910–1911 paintings had been animated by subtle gradations of light and dark. The new medium of papier collé replaced these gradations with stark contrasts between the strips of patterned or colored paper and the white sheets that supported them. In Braque’s first essays in this medium, the pasted strips and the background sheet are covered with numerous passages of charcoal shading analogous to the shading of 1910–1911 cubism. However, it quickly became evident to Picasso and Braque that their compositions would have greater pictorial impact if they diminished or even eliminated the role of shading. In a work like Picasso’s *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass* of fall 1912 (fig. 9), it has been eliminated from most of the image, persisting only in the elegantly drawn wineglass, which seems a relic from a previous phase of cubism. The rest of the composition is constructed from strips of patterned, printed, or solidly colored paper, glued together without any shaded passages to soften their juxtaposition.

It may seem at first glance as if the pictorial syntax of cubism has been completely transformed by the advent of the new medium. What has really happened, however, is that the suppression of shading has laid bare cubism’s existing structure. In *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*, the rectangular sheet of paper holding the wineglass emphasizes the vertical axis of the composition, the rectangular strip of newspaper emphasizes the horizontal, and the square section of sheet music mediates between them. The diamond patterning of the wallpaper in the background seems to offer a joking reference to the diagonal lattices of 1908–1909 cubism.

It is because they contrast with the axial structure of the grid that the other elements of the composition seem so striking despite their simplicity. The black strip at the
bottom — representing either the base of the guitar or a table on which it sits — begins as a simple horizontal and then expands downward into a curve. The blue trapezoid above — fusing the guitar’s neck with its upper body — leans inward, tilting away from the vertical axis of the composition. The wood-grained strip at left, representing the side of the guitar, simultaneously tilts inward and bulges upward and outward. The circular white sound hole proclaims its independence from the grid both by its shape and by its subtle displacement downward, away from the actual center of the composition.

In works such as Head of a Girl from early 1913 (fig. 10), Picasso reverts to a more complex structure of overlapping strips, similar to the structure of “Ma Jolie” (winter 1911–1912). In other respects, the painting mimics the look of papier collé, not just in details like the painted wood graining of the central vertical strip but also in the clarity with which the compositional structure is laid bare. The repetition of elements from Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass highlights another important aspect of 1912–1913 cubism: Picasso and Braque’s recognition that an abstract shape can “represent” many different things, depending on its placement and context. The double curve at the left of the fall 1912 papier collé represents the side of a guitar; in the early 1913 painting the same shape represents the side of a girl’s head. Similarly, the vertical strip at the center of the composition is transformed from guitar neck to human face. It is precisely this multivalence that the semiological interpretations of Krauss and Bois are intended to explain.46

Picasso’s and Braque’s 1912–1913 work thus offers a double lesson. On one hand, it demonstrates that subtle, complex compositions can be constructed from arrangements of simple geometric elements. On the other, it shows that simplification can magnify rather than diminish the figurative power of a shape. Paradoxically, the more abstract a composition, the greater its metaphorical value. (Bois refers to this phenomenon as “iconic elasticity.”) Here we find the closest visual equivalent to the subtle allusiveness of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry.47

For some early viewers, Picasso and Braque’s new style seemed excessively precious and detached from the real world. In summer 1920, when the Berlin Dadaists organized the First International Dada Fair, it included (along with Höch’s Cut with the Kitchen Knife) a collage by George Grosz and John Heartfield (fig. 11) “correcting” the excessive aestheticism of Picasso’s Head of a Girl. Unfortunately, the actual collage has disappeared, and we know it today only from the reproduction in the catalog of the Dada Fair.48

Grosz and Heartfield started with a photograph of Picasso’s work (presumably one of the prints that Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, as Picasso’s dealer, distributed for
marketing and educational purposes). To this they added additional photographic and typographic elements. The tilted axis of the girl’s eyes and nose was offset by a tilted band with an upside-down photograph of a seated soldier labeled “Grosz.” A horizontal band crossing the girl’s neck revealed the head, eyes, and pince-nez of a man who appears to be the critic Carl Einstein. A narrow band at the bottom of the image (mimicking the captions found in nineteenth-century albumen prints) contains a caption, “L'A V I E  H E U R E U S E  (D r .  K ar l  E in stein  g ewi d m et)  G ros z -H eartfield  m o n t . ,”  which translates as “T H E  H A P P Y  L I F E  (d edicated to D r .  K arl  E in stein)  Montage  b y  G ros z -H eartfield.”  Other elements added to the image include a vertical band specifying that this is “Vollendete Kunst” (“Perfected Art”).

As Brigid Doherty notes in an analysis of this montage, the catalog of the Dada Fair lists it as one of a series of “Korrigierter Meisterbilder!” (“Corrected Masterpieces!”), and a second caption in the catalog describes it specifically as a “Korrigierter Picasso.” What exactly needed to be “corrected” in Picasso’s painting? Apparently, Grosz and Heartfield disapproved of Picasso’s retreat from the radical new medium of collage (as papier collé was usually described) to the traditional medium of painting. They may also have disapproved of the apparent lack of political content in Picasso’s work. Montage—their variant on collage—seems to have been invented to address these “failures.”

If the Berlin Dadaists believed that the highly abstracted language of 1912–1913 cubism was nonpolitical, not all artists shared that opinion. On the contrary, the protagonists of the Russian avant-garde considered it the ideal visual language of a new socialist
society. The cubism of this period provided the model for the “utopian geometries” of suprematism and constructivism. Although Kazimir Malevich did not visit Paris in 1910–1914, he studied examples of cubist works that appeared in Russian collections and temporary exhibitions, looked at reproductions in avant-garde journals, and probably also collected the photographs circulated by Kahnweiler. Malevich’s *Samovar* of 1913 mimics the look of Picasso’s and Braque’s work from 1911–1912, while his *Lady at an Advertising Column* shows the influence of Picasso’s work of 1913–1914. In contrast, Vladimir Tatlin’s work responds almost exclusively to the cubist constructions that were reproduced in the pages of *Les Soirées de Paris* or that he studied firsthand when he visited Paris in 1914.

As we have seen, the visual fragmentation of works like Carrà’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* or Höch’s *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* evokes a longed-for apocalypse. José Ortega y Gasset writes in his influential essay “The Dehumanization of Art” (1925) that the modern artist “is brazenly set on deforming reality, shattering its human aspect, dehumanizing it,” leaving the viewer “locked up in an abstruse universe, surrounded by objects with which human dealings are inconceivable.”

“Why this desire to dehumanize?” Ortega asks. “Why this disgust at living forms?” Why has “mocking aggressiveness” become such an important “factor in aesthetic pleasure”? Ortega’s answer is that this willful dehumanization is a response to the “weight of tradition” that “encumbers” the modern artist. Dehumanization is a “futuristic instinct” to break free of the old art, which threatens to “smother” new creation. Nor is this a purely artistic impulse: “Hatred of art is unlikely to develop as an isolated phenomenon; it goes hand in hand with hatred of science, hatred of State, hatred, in sum, of civilization as a whole.” For Ortega, cubism, futurism, and Dada are all manifestations of the same fundamental revulsion against the status quo. Once bourgeois society has been demolished, a new and better society can arise, founded on anarchist or socialist principles. However, the artistic and political emphasis in these movements is on the necessary spasm of destruction.

Similar ideas appeared in Russian cubo-futurism. By 1915, however, Malevich began to shift his emphasis toward a very different art, prefiguring the new, more harmonious society of the future. This shift has largely been ignored in the literature on Malevich, which tends to focus on philosophical statements such as his essay “God Is Not Cast Down” and his book *The Non-Objective World*. However, in his essay “On New Systems in Art” (1919), Malevich quite clearly interpreted the evolution of modern art as a reflection of social and technological changes. Art reflects nature, he argued, but nature itself is not static:

Villages have grown up among the fields, and towns in which there are churches, palaces, factories, monuments. Railways have cut through the fields, locomotives rush through them, boats and ships sail up the rivers, motorcars run on the streets of the villages and towns. . . . Each day nature emerges further and further from the old green world.
Necessarily, these changes are reflected in modern art: “The new life gives birth to a new art.” Industrialization provides a new language for art: “Our will is chained to natural and technical discoveries, and...we must create in the same way as our technical life.” Artists are driven to “scientific geometric methods” by “the general pattern of universal development.”

From impressionism through cubism, Malevich argues, modern artists have developed a series of pictorial languages with their own expressive values, independent of subject matter: “Cézanne, Picasso and Monet all extracted the painterly like a pearl from its oyster.” The “painterly,” for Malevich, consists of the systemization of formal contrasts: horizontal vs. vertical, curved vs. straight, static vs. dynamic, shiny vs. matte, and so on. Malevich’s emphasis on contrast seems to reflect the influence of Fernand Léger, whose series of paintings Contrasts of Forms of 1913–1914 was accompanied by essays arguing that “[p]ictorial contrasts used in their purest sense (complementary colors, lines, and forms) are henceforth the structural basis of modern pictures.”

The task of modern art, as Malevich sees it, is not literally to depict the modern world, but to communicate its fundamental characteristics using indirect, painterly means. The futurists approach this goal, using “objects and machines” as the “means or symbols for expressing...the moving urban energy...of Moscow, Berlin, or New York.” However, the effectiveness of their work remains limited by their attachment to recognizable, “objective” subject matter. Malevich concludes by expressing the hope that the new suprematist style of pure abstraction will lead “to new systems, beyond the muddle of objectivity [i.e., the depiction of recognizable objects] to a purely energetic power of movement.”

It is not immediately obvious how Malevich gets from the “energetic power” of modern society to the geometric forms of his suprematist paintings. It may be true, for instance, that the architectural environment of the modern city is structured by geometric forms, but our experience of that environment rarely possesses the clarity of geometry. Rather, as Malevich himself points out, the dynamism of urban life finds appropriate expression in the swirling forms of futurism. Why, then, does Malevich insist that his clearly structured, geometric paintings offer an ideal expression of modern industrial society?

Intuitively, one wants to say that the arrangement of geometric forms on the tabula rasa of a blank support provides an effective metaphor for the rational reconstruction of society after the demolition of the ancien régime. Indeed, in the literature on the Russian avant-garde, some such connection is generally taken for granted. Perhaps because it seems so obvious, only a few scholars have tried to spell it out. Victor Margolin, for one, summarizes the “three common beliefs” of the diverse factions of the Russian avant-garde:

Artists belonged in the vanguard of social change and should strive to make the characteristics of a utopian society visible.
Art was not an isolated discursive practice on its own aesthetic terrain.

Forms which could be perceived as objective and precise were the most appropriate basis for visual statements.60

Similarly, trying to define the link between geometry and politics in a 1920 composition by El Lissitzky, T. J. Clark writes: “The metaphor (like the formal language) was essentially simple — some might say, simple-minded. Flatness just was the totality, meaning the Plan, the System, the Organization. FLATNESS = ENERGY + INTERNAL LOGIC.” (The “Plan” here was the plan for a national electrical network laid out in the resolutions of the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party in April 1920.)61

We can expand on Clark’s formulation by noting that, by 1900, the industrial economies of Europe and the United States had become highly structured. In all advanced nations, the most important sectors of the industrial economy — such as steel, oil, chemicals, meatpacking, and transportation (the railroads) — were each controlled by a handful of giant firms. The dynamism of earlier, laissez-faire capitalism had been replaced by a new, more static system of trusts and cartels. The rise of the giant corporation run by technocrats seemed to blur the distinction between capitalism and communism. To Lenin, trying to drag the Soviet economy out of its feudal past, it seemed logical to believe that the Soviet Union could bypass capitalism and build a modern industrial economy run by engineers under the direction of the Communist Party. As soon as they gained power, the Bolsheviks nationalized all heavy industry in Russia, and tried to nationalize all agriculture as well.62 Artists shared in the hope that a utopian future could be realized, not by an anarchist apocalypse, but by setting aside politics in favor of rationality and efficiency. It was this belief in the effectiveness of technocratic management that provides the meaningful content of the often-used phrase “utopian geometry.” The dynamic but legible order of geometric abstraction seemed to symbolize the possibility of effective economic and social planning. As Jean Arp later commented: “Various Russian and Dutch artists” were producing abstract works that were “a homage to modern life, a profession of faith in the machine and technology.”63

But how does the geometric imagery of a particular artist, and a particular painting, relate to this larger set of ideas?

Let us take as an example Malevich’s Supremus No. 56, painted in 1916 (fig. 12). Here we find a series of flatly colored rectangles (and a pair of curved forms), attached to a handful of narrow lines and set against a textured white ground. Each individual element of the composition is drawn from the vocabulary of 1912–1913 cubism. Malevich’s colored rectangles resemble the cutout segments of colored paper found in Picasso’s collages (see fig. 9). The painted white ground imitates the white paper support found in many papiers collés (although not in Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass). Picasso himself had used a similar white ground in paintings such as Head of a Girl (see fig. 10).
However, Malevich’s pictorial syntax is quite different from Picasso’s. Instead of being enclosed within vertical and horizontal bands, his shapes are arranged into configurations of larger and smaller rectangles attached at right angles to linear spines. Instead of echoing the borders of the image, each configuration is positioned at a different angle. While the elements of Picasso’s images are all roughly at the same scale, Malevich works
simultaneously with multiple scales: the large configuration at upper left is surrounded by a number of smaller configurations, each with a similar structure: a long, narrow spine with a number of broad, colored crossbars. It is not clear whether we are looking at larger and smaller versions of the same motif, all arranged on the same plane, or at configurations of similar size, arranged in depth so that the nearer ones seem larger and the more distant ones smaller. The use of multiple scales to suggest nearness and distance recalls Grosz’s Querschnitt (see fig. 7), albeit in abstract form. What is different is the recursive (or “fractal”) quality of Malevich’s composition: the sense that the individual, small-scale elements of the picture resemble the composition as a whole.

The basic configuration in this work (as in many of Malevich’s suprematist compositions) consists of a long spine with one or more crossbars. It unmistakably resembles a cross, and indeed it is a cliché of Malevich scholarship that his cruciform compositions are “abstract” versions of traditional Russian icons. However, the cruciform shape also resembles another motif—the airplane—that can be more firmly linked to Malevich’s thinking about modernity. In “On New Systems in Art,” the airplane serves as the symbol of man’s spiritual, “intuitive” desire to go beyond the limits of nature and economic necessity. “Reason supposes . . . that man made the railway engine for an economic, material purpose. . . . Intuition, however, disagrees.” The railway engine engenders a new dream: “to fly from the face of the earth by the speed of its energy.” The invention of the airplane translates this dream into a reality, “a real bound into space.”

Malevich’s fascination with airplanes was expressed even more directly in his later writings and pictures. In his book The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism (1927), he includes a page of photographs showing “The Environment Which Stimulates the Futurist.” This includes locomotives, bridges, city streets, ships, and zeppelins. Another page of photographs dedicated to “The Environment Which Stimulates the Suprematist” includes the image of a biplane in flight and aerial views of cities. In the 1920s Malevich did a series of drawings of “planits,” futuristic houses intended for the inhabitants of the new communist utopia. The layouts of these imaginary houses resemble the compositions of his paintings from 1915 to 1919, expanded into three dimensions as if seen in an axonometric view. A 1924 drawing, Future Planits for Leningrad, shows a “pilot’s planit” in the shape of an airplane, with wings and a tail crossing a long fuselage: an updated version of the architecture parlante invented by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux in the eighteenth century. The resemblance between this pilot’s planit and the cruciform configurations in Supremus No. 56 (see fig. 12) suggests that the 1916 painting might be read as a vision of an aerial utopia, like the flying cities of J. J. Grandville’s Un autre monde (1844) but redesigned in a cubist idiom. In effect, the painting offers us an aerial view of a series of mobile structures flying at different altitudes, so that some appear larger and others smaller. The repetition of a few basic configurations, at different scales and in different orientations, suggests a geometric utopia combining rationality and freedom in equal measure.
Like much of the work of the suprematists and the constructivists, Malevich’s painting offers a highly idealized, indeed fantastical image of the future to be brought about by technological progress and political revolution. Two years later, Lenin and the Bolsheviks tried to implement their technocratic ideals by nationalizing all of Russian industry. Together with the effects of the ensuing civil war, the results of nationalization were catastrophic. Industrial production fell to 13 percent of its prewar level. Agricultural production also plummeted, leading to widespread famine in 1921–1922. T. J. Clark has written eloquently about the heartbreaking gap between the utopian visions of Russian avant-garde artists in the early 1920s and the nightmarish reality in which they lived and worked.

It was not until after 1928, when Stalin implemented the first of the Five Year Plans, that the Soviet Union began to experience anything resembling the economic growth anticipated in 1917, and, even then, the growth in industrial output was achieved at the cost of tremendous suffering by both the peasantry and the industrial working class. In a further bitter irony, the Soviet government abandoned its support for avant-garde art at the same moment that it began to create the industrial society that the artists had dreamed of. By 1934 socialist realism was the official cultural policy of the Soviet Union.

What survived, outside Russia, was the dream of a technocratic future expressed in the language of geometric abstraction. This was the vision of the Bauhaus, although the Nazis closed that down in 1933, at the same time that the Soviet government was moving to suppress avant-garde art in Russia. Along with modernist architecture, geometric abstraction enjoyed a striking revival after World War II, supported not by political revolutionaries but by industrialists and corporate executives.

The same context inescapably shapes our understanding of cubism. Whatever Picasso did or did not intend to communicate by including that particular fragment of newspaper in Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass (see fig. 9), we cannot look at the work today without implicitly recognizing it as the ancestor of suprematism and constructivism. It becomes imbued, retrospectively, with the technological utopianism of the Russian avant-garde. Its flat, colored shapes, arranged in a shallow space, lay out the basic language of modernism, with its inextricable mixture of aesthetic, social, and political ideals.

The Rise and Fall of Montage Aesthetics

If papier collé is a significant point of departure for geometric abstraction, it is equally important as the origin of montage. Fifty years ago, abstraction in its varied forms seemed to be the most important innovation of modern art. Today, after another half century of “postmodern” and contemporary art, it would seem more accurate to identify montage as the central current of modern art, broadly understood. Furthermore, since the collapse of formalism, montage aesthetics, in the guise of “critical theory,” has
emerged as a dominant method for thinking about modern and contemporary art. It plays a central role in the writings of the influential “October school,” in Fredric Jameson’s analysis of pastiche as the characteristic mode of postmodernism, and in the countless references to Walter Benjamin’s arcades project. This final section reconstructs, not the history of montage, but the evolution of montage aesthetics.

Once again, let us return to Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass (see fig. 9) as a point of departure. In a brilliant exploration of “music hall modernism,” Jeffrey Weiss has shown how Picasso’s incorporation of newspaper headlines and articles into such papiers collés corresponds to the practice of contemporary musical revues. Not only did such revues include skits and songs about contemporary events, but the performers also often dressed in costumes that reproduced elements of newspaper typography and layout (fig. 13). The cubist practice of papier collé thus existed from the outset in a public space of political satire.

The full significance of this becomes clear only if we look at it in a broader historical context. Here, I draw on Jürgen Habermas’s analysis of the changing meaning of “representation” in the public sphere. Under the ancien régime, Habermas argues, royal governments reinforced their authority by representations of their own monolithic power. (We might take Hyacinthe Rigaud’s portraits of Louis xiv and Louis xv as ideal types of the visual representation of power.) With the emergence of civil society in the late eighteenth century, representation became instead a means by which public opinion sought to influence government, sometimes via the press, sometimes via the mechanism of electoral politics. (In contrast to Rigaud’s royal portraits, Jacques-Louis David’s Oath of the Horatii and Eugène Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People might serve as ideal types of the representation of public opinion.)

Public opinion is not, of course, a monolithic mass. Bourgeois societies are endlessly divided on political questions. The “vulgar” Marxist model proposes a simple linkage between the economic interests of a given “class” and its political opinions, but reality is far more complex than that. Indeed, if we take “class” in its canonical Marxist sense — as a social group occupying a given place in the “relations of production” and
acting in concert to further its collective interest—it may be questioned whether “classes” exist as political actors. There are social groups with shared economic interests but conflicting political ideas; groups with shared political ideas despite their conflicting interests; groups with political ideas based on religion, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference, irrespective of economic position; and so on. Groups flicker in and out of existence as circumstances change.

In a modern, liberal society, the public sphere described by Habermas consists of a constant exchange of representations among these groups. This exchange is as much a part of democracy as the more formal mechanisms of parties and elections. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the music hall was an important element of civil society: a place where public opinion was debated and shaped. The music hall format survives today on late-night television, with its combination of comic monologues, skits, and musical performances. It is no coincidence that authoritarian regimes intent on quashing protest often begin by forbidding satire.

The “music hall modernism” described by Weiss thus makes visible a political aspect of cubism corresponding to neither primitivist simplification nor anarchist fragmentation nor utopian geometry. Those aesthetic positions function as allegories of social order: images of possible worlds. Papier collé and montage represent not the world but its reflection and refraction in the mass media. With their mash-ups of headlines, newsprint, signboards, advertisements, and grainy photographs, montages are allegories of social discourse, images of the public sphere itself. An artist working in the medium of montage may intend to deliver a specific political argument, but the medium itself subverts that argument, reminding the viewer that every message exists in a universe of competing messages.

The work of Berlin Dadaists such as Grosz, Heartfield, and Höch (see figs. 7, 8, and 11) provides a vivid illustration of the political instability of montage. The artists loudly proclaimed their allegiance to the German Communist Party. Even the decision to describe their work as “montage” rather than “collage” was political. Collage, with its emphasis on the glue (colle) used to adhere different materials, might be construed as formalist. “Montage” derives from the German Monteur, which is usually translated as “engineer.” Indeed, the word can mean “engineer,” a white-collar professional, but the more common meaning is closer to “mechanic.” Montage is the blue-collar version of collage.

At first glance, montage may seem simply a form of visual anarchism, enacting an adolescent rebellion against the oppressive orderliness of the real world. What
montage adds to futurist anarchism is the preservation of unmodified figures and objects, as in Höch’s Cut with the Kitchen Knife (see fig. 8). The utopian goal of montage is to jolt us out of our acquiescence to existing reality. Cutting its elements away from their usual contexts, montage forces us to confront them afresh. The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky argued in 1917 that this process of ostranenie (“making strange” or “defamiliarization”) had been at work in modern literature since the eighteenth century but emerged in the visual arts only with Picasso’s cubism. However, there is nothing specifically political about Shklovsky’s ostranenie. The Berlin Dadaists politicized collage by using it not only to isolate found elements of reality but also to juxtapose them in ways that change their meanings, dissecting and subverting the existing social order. In its original form, Dada montage offers an image of the space of public debate: it casts our assumptions into question, but it does not tell us how to think.

After 1923, Dada montage in Berlin underwent multiple displacements. Its spirit of lacerating social critique migrated into new movements such as verism and New Objectivity. Often, these movements were carried on by the same artists with the same goals but in radically different styles. Hannah Höch and John Heartfield continued to work primarily in the medium of montage, the former focusing largely on issues of gender, the latter adopting an Arcimboldo-style technique to make satirical, anti-Nazi cartoons, published in the left-wing journal AIZ (Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung). Designed to impose a single meaning on the viewer, not to encourage open-minded reflection, Heartfield’s later compositions are more effective as propaganda than as art.

Meanwhile, the main line of the medium’s evolution underwent a geographical displacement, continuing in the Soviet Union after it had been effectively abandoned in Germany. In this new setting, the development of montage was shaped in large part by the state’s continual attempts to repress the open-ended, critical qualities of the medium and to transform it into a vehicle for the representation of power.

Finally, the concept of montage was displaced from the still image and attached to the narrative media of theater and film. In 1923 Sergei Eisenstein borrowed the word “montage” from Berlin Dada to apply to the latest developments in Russian theater. When he moved from directing plays to directing movies, Eisenstein brought the word with him, with the result that “montage” became a core concept in film theory. Around the same time, the idea of theatrical montage returned from Moscow to Berlin, where it became an organizing principle of avant-garde political theater.

Art historians such as Margarita Tupitsyn and Brandon Taylor have traced the development of photomontage in the 1920s and 1930s. Theater historians such as Edward Braun and John Willett have demonstrated the key role of montage in Russian and German avant-garde drama. Film historians such as Gerald Mast and Annette Michelson have analyzed the contrasting ways in which Eisenstein and his rival (and friend) Vsevolod Pudovkin implemented the idea of cinematic montage. What has not
been done is to examine the interrelationships among photomontage, theatrical montage, and cinematic montage, which, together, define the concept of montage aesthetics.\footnote{It has long been debated whether avant-garde photomontage was invented independently in Russia or was imported from Germany.\footnote{In either case, its active development in Russia accelerated beginning in 1923, when Aleksandr Rodchenko designed a set of photomontage illustrations for Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poem Pro eto (About this). Rodchenko’s illustrations for the individual stanzas of the poem are in a loose-limbed, narrative style unmistakably derived from the photomontages of Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch. However, his photomontage for the cover of Pro eto is in a profoundly original style that has left an indelible mark on graphic design in the twentieth century (fig. 14).}}

The cover design is centered on the bold image of a woman’s face, staring wide-eyed at the viewer and framed by a dramatic alternation of white and black backgrounds. Mayakovsky’s name is spelled out in block letters, placed in a white horizontal band at the bottom of the cover. Both here and in the title, above, the lettering functions as an integral element of the design, its blocky forms echoing the rectangular format of the composition as a whole.

Other constructivists had already experimented with placing lettering within a colored band. They seem to have adapted this device from the cubist practice of cutting out newspaper headlines and using the strips of paper as compositional elements in papiers collés such as Picasso’s Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass (see fig. 9). Lettering within a band offered a way to create the visual effect of information taken from the real world and montaged into a composition, without having to rely on a “found” element such as a headline. By enlarging letters into thick sans serif forms and running them together, evenly spaced, the constructivists were able to make a line of lettering into a single unit that functioned as a powerful abstract element even without an enclosing band. Rodchenko uses this device for the words Pro eto at the top of his composition.\footnote{Rodchenko’s illustrations for the cover of Pro eto are in a profoundly original style that has left an indelible mark on graphic design in the twentieth century (fig. 14).}
The overall effect of the cover suggests a political poster. The lines of block text look as if they should spell out a party slogan and the name of a charismatic political leader. The woman’s riveting eyes address the viewer like the gaze of a Christ Pantocrator, demanding the viewer’s obedience. By 1923 Mayakovsky was indeed a leading political writer, composing revolutionary poems and dramas while coining slogans for posters and advertisements for government-run department stores. However, Pro eto is not a political poem; it is a passionate declaration of Mayakovsky’s love for Lili Brik, the woman depicted on the cover. Banished from Brik’s presence after a quarrel, Mayakovsky set aside his political agenda to write a romantic epic.79

Like Mayakovsky, Rodchenko put his art in the service of the revolution by designing posters and advertisements. A 1925 poster announces the availability of “BOOKS (IN ALL AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE),” published by LENGIZ, the acronym of the Leningrad Publishing Company (fig. 15).80 The central composition derives from El Lissitzsky’s poster Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge (1920). In Lissitzky’s design, the Soviet army is symbolized by a red triangle descending at an angle from upper left to lower right, piercing the white circle representing the counterrevolutionary army of the White Russians. In Rodchenko’s 1925 design, the two shapes have exchanged places, so that, instead of entering the circle, the triangle seems to be emerging from it. More specifically, it is emerging from the mouth of the woman (once again Lili Brik), who seems to be shouting the word “books.” Rodchenko systematizes the design principles used in the cover for Pro eto, fitting all of the lettering within a series of colored bands and geometric shapes. However, the energy of the design is diminished by its symmetry, clarifying the decorative pattern but sacrificing the dynamism of Lissitzky’s original composition. (To preserve the symmetry, the acronym LENGIZ appears at both top and bottom left.)

By the end of the 1920s, official Soviet policy had turned against avant-garde design. Formalism was seen as a decadent, bourgeois tendency. Politically committed artists like Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Gustav Klutsis struggled to reconcile their artistic beliefs with their political commitments. The kind of aesthetic compromise needed to survive under Stalin’s increasingly repressive regime is epitomized by a poster design that Klutsis created in 1930 to illustrate the slogan “Let Us Fulfill the Plan of the Great Projects” and recycled in 1931 with a dramatic red background and new text declaring, “Workers and Women Workers — Everyone for the Reelection of the Soviets” (fig. 16). Klutsis began with a photograph of a worker’s raised hand (actually, his own hand), and reprinted it in different sizes, arranged so that a giant hand seemed to emerge from a sea
of smaller hands, all of them signifying their enthusiastic, unanimous support for the policies of the Communist Party. The tower of assenting hands rises at an angle from the lower right corner of the composition to the upper left, while the two text blocks are set at a diagonal. Together, text and image form a cross like the blades of a giant windmill, its rotary motion evoking the power of the people’s will. The abstract quality of Klutsis’s composition is, in effect, hidden behind the photographic image of the hand and the politically correct slogans of the text, and his poster avoided the ire of the government censors.

By the end of the 1930s, even this limited degree of abstraction was no longer acceptable. Rodchenko’s poster Peace! Bread! Land! of 1937 (fig. 17) includes a strip of newspaper headlines, like Picasso’s Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass from 1912 (see fig. 9), but the composition as a whole has nothing in common with cubism. As it did so often, the Stalinist regime here invoked the figure of Lenin as a kind of secular saint, speaking to a vast, adoring crowd. The strip of newsprint at lower right no longer disrupts the unity of the image. The headline, repeating “Peace! Bread! Land!,” the popular slogan that had
helped Lenin seize power in 1917, functions as a placard attached to the podium. There is a bitter irony here: the name of the newspaper, Rabocchi (Working), and the headline are in the language of Ukraine, where Stalin’s collectivization policies had caused a horrendous famine in 1932–1933, comparable to the one that Lenin’s original collectivization policies had exacerbated in Russia in 1921–1922. The Soviet government repressed the results of the national census for 1937—the year of Rodchenko’s photomontage—in order to avoid confirming the loss of population in Ukraine.83

As Brandon Taylor observes, the totalitarian governments of the Soviet Union and of Nazi Germany both endorsed the use of photomontage for propaganda purposes. Taylor reproduces a photomontage mural from the exhibition Deutschland (Berlin, 1936), showing Hitler standing in front of vast crowds of workers and soldiers. The resemblance to Rodchenko’s 1937 Lenin poster is chilling. In some ways the anonymous German mural is more effective. Where Rodchenko’s Lenin is shown in three-quarter view, addressing the crowd, Hitler, with his hand raised in the Nazi salute, directly faces the viewer, inviting him to join the adoring crowds in the background. Photomontage was acceptable, in other words, as long as it abandoned the cubist form language that had given birth to it.

However, government repression was not necessary to achieve this abandonment of cubist principles. As Taylor recounts, the exhibition Fotomontage (Berlin, 1931) brought together the leading practitioners of photomontage from Holland, Germany, and the Soviet Union. Even the former Dadaists agreed that, if photomontage were to serve left-wing causes, it would have to follow the new “constructive” model epitomized by the recent work of Lissitzky, Klutsis, and Rodchenko. As an image of the public space of political debate, montage was dead.84

The Rebirth of Political Montage

By the late 1950s Marxism seemed virtually extinct in Western Europe and North America. Much as the dinosaurs had been killed off by the impact of a giant asteroid and the subsequent climate change, the appeal of Marxism had been drastically diminished by Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s regime and by the post–World War II economic boom that made the working class feel that trade unionism was more attractive than revolution. However, the wave of protests that swept Europe and North America in 1968 suggested that the New Left might succeed where the old left had failed. This first wave
of protests was followed by a wave of economic shocks: the stagflation of the 1970s, the brutal recession of the early 1980s, the deindustrialization of the North American economy, the return of a boom-crash cycle similar to that of the late nineteenth century, and an increasing gap between rich and poor—more precisely, between the superrich and everyone else.

Among the intelligentsia there were numerous attempts to revive Marxism in a modified form, stripped of the doctrines that had justified Lenin’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” and Stalin’s Great Terror. In an earlier era, leftists had emphasized Marx’s concept of exploitation, which spoke to the experience of the working class; after 1968, a new generation of leftists focused on Marx’s concept of alienation, which spoke more loudly to intellectuals. Much attention was paid to Marx’s early writings, which could be used to support a more humanist Marxism, one giving the cultural “superstructure” equal weight with the economic “substructure.” In the nineteenth century Marx had described religion as the opium of the people. In the mid-twentieth century, anti-Stalinist leftists from Clement Greenberg to the Frankfurt School had assigned this role to mass culture and “kitsch.” After 1968 the critical obsession with kitsch quietly vanished. Scholars who grew up on the Beatles and Andy Warhol were no longer willing to dismiss popular culture wholesale. Conversely, the academic industry of “cultural studies” revealed political agendas hidden within every form of art and entertainment, both “low” and “high.”

The new critical situation presented a quandary for artists. Avant-garde art could no longer claim to be politically progressive just because it was not kitsch. On the contrary, the esoteric quality of movements such as minimalism and conceptual art seemed inherently elitist, even if the artists belonging to those movements thought of themselves as leftists. By the mid-1970s there was nothing new or shocking about standardized geometric modules, algorithmic progressions, or oracular statements inscribed on gallery walls. It looked as if the evolution of abstract art had run its course.

Finding a way forward for the avant-garde required a revival of other options from the history of modernism. Few artists wanted to return to the stylized naturalism of Ben Shahn or André Fougeron, the major political artists of the postwar era. The two most viable options for the “postmodern” artists of the era after 1975 were montage and photography. The latter will not concern us here, and I will also set aside installation art, the three-dimensional form of montage. In the remaining pages, I focus on contemporary political montage that clearly exposes its indebtedness to cubism, abstraction, and earlier montage.

It should be noted that the Neo-Dada artists of the 1950s and 1960s had revived the medium of montage per se. However, these artists for the most part avoided politics or suggested only broad criticisms of American culture as violent or absurd. The
reemergence of explicitly political montage took place only in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the work of artists such as Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, and Mary Kelly.

During the same years, montage theory was brought back to life by a series of seminal publications. In 1968 Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” finally became available in English. Here, the discussion of still photography leads ineluctably to film, whose visual language Benjamin sees as defined by Eisensteinian montage. In effect, the repeated shock of filmic cutting becomes paradigmatic of modern experience, smuggling avant-garde aesthetics into popular entertainment. Eisenstein’s influence was also decisive in the creation of a new journal of critical theory, October, founded in 1976 by two art critics (Rosalind Krauss and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe) and a film theorist (Annette Michelson). The journal took its name from Eisenstein’s 1928 film, signaling the editors’ belief in the continued relevance of montage aesthetics.

A year later, in 1977, the British publisher, New Left Books, released Aesthetics and Politics, an influential anthology of the crucial texts of the so-called Brecht-Lukács debate, similarly asserting the vitality of montage and its “alienation effect.”

The rekindling of interest in the Brecht-Lukács debate was only part of a more general revival of interest in György Lukács. His early books Theory of the Novel (1920) and History and Class Consciousness (1922) were both published in English in 1971. In the latter, Lukács argued that, while the bourgeoisie could advance its own interests behind a self-deceptive facade of talk about freedom and equality, for a socialist revolution to occur in the industrial economies of countries like Germany, England, and the United States, the proletariat would need to achieve a clear consciousness of the revolutionary role spelled out for it by Marxism. If, instead, the working class were seduced into the “false consciousness” of trade union activism, it would improve its own condition but preserve capitalism. (This is, of course, exactly what happened.)

The idea of “false consciousness” also played a key role in the thinking of Frankfurt School thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, who enjoyed revivals in the 1970s and 1980s. What they meant by false consciousness was something quite different. In their seminal essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944; published in English, 1972), Horkheimer and Adorno analyzed modern culture in general (both high and low) as a means to distract the public from the evils of capitalism. Not a word here about trade unionism. Nonetheless, the similarity of the concept made it possible for Lukács, the old Stalinist, to be conscripted into the new Marxist humanism.

The original editors of October dismissed the importance of “Lukács’s views of Brecht.” But not all critics shared their opinion. In his widely read Theory of the Avant-Garde, published in German in 1979 and translated into English in 1984, Peter Bürger argued that art could not be truly avant-garde unless it was also politically progressive and revived Lukács’ antithesis between realism and montage as an opposition between
Within this climate of critical opinion, political montage has become one of the most important currents in contemporary art. Let us examine two examples.

Barbara Kruger’s Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground) (fig. 18) looks back explicitly to Aleksandr Rodchenko’s cover design for Pro eto (see fig. 14). Again, we are confronted with a woman’s face, looking straight at us. The blocky white lettering is contained within a series of rectilinear bands, evoking the lettering of constructivist posters (see fig. 15) Here, all of the bands are a bright, “Russian” red. Again, the composition is divided between light and dark, although this time the division is vertical rather than horizontal. Where Rodchenko simply shifts from a white background to a black one, Kruger opts for a more complex procedure, printing the left half of the photograph as a “normal” black-and-white image and the right half as a “negative” image. The two halves are enclosed by narrow red bands, which stand out clearly from the black-and-white photograph.

Both Rodchenko’s 1923 cover and Kruger’s 1989 poster exist in an ambiguous terrain between public and private, but they traverse this territory in opposite directions. Rodchenko’s cover design looks at first glance like a political poster but is revealed, when the viewer opens the book, to be the emblem of a private passion. Kruger’s design looks like an advertisement, addressing the viewer as an individual consumer, but proves on closer inspection to link consumption to the political issue of women’s rights. In contrast to the strongly individual character of Lili Brik’s face, the woman in Kruger’s image has the regular features and immaculate make-up of an anonymous professional model. She is an idealized Everywoman, with one of those generic faces that encourage white viewers to see themselves in advertisements, and to feel that the message is meant especially for them. Kruger hijacks this generic quality by adding the caption, “Your body is a battleground.” Read narrowly, the caption refers to the battle over abortion; more broadly, to the idea that women do not have control over their lives, and will not obtain it as long as men have the right to tell them what to do—or what not to do—with their bodies. (The “negative” image of the woman’s face, at right, suggests the alienation of living out a social role that is dictated instead of chosen and may also allude to the additional layers of discrimination endured by women of color.)

Kruger’s adaptation of the banded lettering of Russian constructivism evokes cubism at second hand, insofar as the banded lettering was originally intended to mimic...
the strips of newspaper pasted into papiers collés. It is tempting to see a more direct reference to cubism in the way in which Kruger highlights the word “battleground,” recalling the headline “LA BATAILLE S’EST ENGAGÉ,” in Picasso’s Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass (see fig. 9). But even if the cubist reference is inadvertent, Kruger’s image belongs to the tradition of “music hall modernism” that begins with cubism: the tradition of papiers collés as a visual space of satire and debate and as a representation of personal opinion rather than state ideology.

Cubism and the Russian avant-garde are also key points of reference for Thomas Hirschhorn, who has emerged in the last few decades as an artist making explicitly political work in the media of montage and installation. Like most of his work, Hirschhorn’s Cross of 1992 (fig. 19) is assembled from what seem to be ephemeral materials: scraps of cardboard, printed matter, and photographs, tacked to the wall in a configuration recalling Malevich’s Supremus No. 56 of 1916 (see fig. 12). Here, Malevich’s allusions to the Christian cross and to the airplane as a utopian symbol are subsumed within a broader reference to the Russian avant-garde as a potent historical symbol. We cannot look at Hirschhorn’s piece without thinking about the utopian aspirations of suprematism and constructivism, their ultimate suppression by the state, and the larger tragedy within which that suppression was embedded.

If the overall composition of Hirschhorn’s work evokes the suprematism of 1915–1923, his choice of materials recalls the cubism of 1912–1913, with its deliberate inclusion of crude, “nonart” materials such as wallpaper, newspaper articles, advertisements, box lids, and pieces of corrugated cardboard. For Malevich’s meticulous brushwork, Hirschhorn substitutes detritus from the worlds of marketing and distribution, bringing the soaring aspirations of suprematism back to earth with a thud. It is not enough to imagine the future, he seems to say: we also need to think about how we get there. Capitalism is not going to be swept away by an apocalyptic revolution, leaving a clean slate for the delineation of a perfect society. Like it or not, the future will have to be made from the junk we are surrounded by. This is a novel message for utopian abstraction.

It might be objected that Kruger and Hirschhorn aspire to a politically effective art but do not actually achieve it. Their work is shown in galleries and museums frequented by the liberal intelligentsia—that is, by people who largely share their political views. How many minds have their posters and installations actually changed? It is true that both artists have tried to get out of the usual settings of the art world. Kruger has displayed her compositions as billboards on city streets, and, for the 2002 Documenta, Hirschhorn erected Bataille Monument in a working-class Turkish neighborhood. But do such forays into the real world yield actual political results, or do they simply expand the artist’s montage to include chunks of the real world? How can we distinguish between genuine political intervention and pseudo-political gesture?
Similar questions have been posed about the political effectiveness of *papiers collés* like *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*. Yes, Picasso included newspaper clippings describing anarchist demonstrations and antiwar protests. But the clippings were fragmentary and hard to read. Sometimes they were upside down. Unlike Kruger’s posters, *papiers collés* were never blown up and displayed in the streets. If they were shown anywhere, it was on the walls of affluent collectors. As Pierre Daix pointed out in his conversation with Picasso, in many cases the *papiers collés* went into boxes in Kahnweiler’s stockroom and did not reemerge into public view until the 1920s. So who exactly was supposed to be influenced by the newspaper clippings in the *papiers collés*? “Well,” Picasso told Daix with a laugh, “I knew that people would find this later and understand.”

Picasso’s comment, however offhand, reveals a complex, long-term view of the relationship between art and politics. The political value of art is not to be judged by its immediate, instrumental effect. Nor does the fact that the public for avant-garde art consists primarily of affluent, well-educated collectors and museumgoers mean that it is inherently conservative or nonpolitical. That would be true only if we accepted the Lukácsian view that the proletariat is the only progressive class, that it must be imbued with a Marxist “class consciousness” in order to realize its historic destiny, and that communist revolution is the exclusive goal of left-wing politics. Under those circumstances, art can be progressive only if it is realistic, if it appeals to the working class, and if it offers a “correct” Marxist view of history. This is the artistic ideology of the Russian Revolution and all the failed revolutions that followed it.

If we look instead at the democracies that opted for the social welfare state instead of communism—the United States, France, Great Britain, and (after the tragic detour of fascism) Germany and Italy—we find a very different political model at work. It is true that in all of these nations except the United States, major political parties have allied with workers’ unions. Nonetheless, politics has functioned in practice as a debate among various factions of the bourgeoisie, sometimes defending the interest of their own narrow group but equally often speaking on behalf of other groups. In capitalist societies, where politics is an activity carried on by the bourgeois elite, political art addresses that elite.

Let us, then, set aside the argument that the varieties of avant-garde art deriving from cubism cannot be progressive because their fragmentation is anarchist instead of socialist, or because their geometric forms constitute a utopian allegory too erudite for the working class, or because the language of montage does not provide the proper Marxist analysis. On the contrary, what is remarkable is that cubism, a century after its invention, still provides the formal vocabularies for the most effective political art of our time. To the critical montages of Barbara Kruger and Thomas Hirschhorn, I would add the dystopian architectures of Peter Halley and the fragmented allegories of Julie Mehretu. But that would require another essay.
NOTES

I thank my research assistant, Marci Kwon, for her help in investigating the scientific representation of shock waves as well as the relationship between Berlin Dada and Brechtian aesthetics. I also thank Harry Cooper for his incisive criticisms of the text and his copious bibliographical suggestions, which have significantly expanded the following notes.

1 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's Juan Gris: His Life and Work, written during World War II, includes an important discussion of the development of cubism in the work of Picasso and Braque, which has served as a foundational text for all subsequent scholarship; it was translated into English by Douglas Cooper (New York, 1947). Kahnweiler's brief introductory text for Les Sculptures de Picasso (Paris, 1948) in English, The Sculptures of Picasso, London, 1949; with photographs by Brassaï), has also exercised a decisive effect on our understanding of cubism.


5 Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," parts 1 and 2, Art in America 61, no. 5 (September–October 1973): 54–61, and no. 6 (November–December 1973): 96–103. Curiously, the revival of social history by art historians such as Nochlin and T. J. Clark did not refer to the antecedent of Arnold Hauser's The
For a critique of the semiological reading of cubism, see Pepe Karmel, Picasso and the Invention of Cubism (New Haven, 2003), 99–111.


Rubin’s suggestion that Picasso’s feelings about sexuality and prostitution should be considered in the broader context of contemporary French culture was then taken up by Michael Leja in “‘Le Vieux Marcheur’ and ‘Les Deux Risques’: Picasso, Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Maternity, 1890–1907,” Art History 8, no. 1 (March 1985): 66–81.


12 Many of the new approaches to cubism that emerged in the late 1980s were represented in Art Journal 47, no. 4 (winter 1988), a special issue titled Revising Cubism, edited by Patricia Leighten; see in particular Leighten’s editorial statement and the articles by Christine Poggi, Mark Antliff, and David Cottington. Fuller versions of the contributions by these authors appeared in book form: Patricia Leighten, Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914 (Princeton, 1989); Mark Antliff, Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parian Avant-Garde (Princeton, 1993); Christine Poggi, In Defence of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage (New Haven, 1992); David Cottington, Cubism in the...


“Discussion,” in Zelevansky, Picasso and Braque: A Symposium, 74–76.


Discussing Abundance in the catalog of The Cubist Epoch (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971), Douglas Cooper wrote: “Le Fauconnier has simply disguised a conventional allegorical subject by giving it a superficially Cubist look” (71). Discussing the same painting thirty years later, Antliff and Leighten note that its “forms are geometrized and painted with earth colours, the space compressed though not substantially distorted”; but they devote most of their attention to the painting’s rural imagery and to the importance of the Château de Duingt in the background, which they explain as a historic symbol of French Catholicism (Cubism and Culture, 116–117).

David Cottington’s 1988 article, “What the Papers Say: Politics and Ideology in Picasso’s Collages of 1912” (see note 13) would have seemed to position him as an ally of Leighten in the debate over cubism and politics. However, his paper for the 1989 symposium “Cubism, Aesthetics, Modernism” (published as Picasso and Braque: A Symposium) takes an opposite tack, arguing that the left-wing implications of Picasso’s newspaper cuttings were neutralized by the esoteric syntax of his papers collés (58, 64–68). For Cottington, the fact that these works appealed to a small group of wealthy collectors rendered them inherently “estheticist,” which is to say, right wing. Both Cottington and Krauss, in her talk, “The Motivation of the Sign” (see notes 7 and 16, above), noted contemporary comparisons between the work of Picasso and Braque and the poetry of Mallarmé, which they analyzed as a paradigm of nonpolitical—indeed, antipolitical—art.

The historic role of Three Women in the development of cubism was first clearly pointed out by William Rubin, in “Cézannism and the Beginnings of Cubism” (as in note 2). However, Rubin believed that Three Women had been repainted in fall 1908 in response to Braque’s August 1908 landscapes, which qualified as the “first” cubist paintings. Leo Steinberg, in “Resisting Cézanne” (as in note 10) took issue with Rubin’s arguments on multiple grounds. In Picasso and the Invention of Cubism (as in note 7), 32–42, I proposed an alternative chronology, with Three Women as the “first” cubist picture and the precursor to Braque’s August 1908 landscapes.


The two groundbreaking articles in this new, politicized interpretation of Picasso’s primitivism are David Lomas, “A Canon of Deformity: Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and Physical Anthropology,” Art


29 Hal Foster, “Prosthetic Gods,” Modernism/Modernity 4, no. 2 (April 1997): 5–38, reprinted in Foster, Prosthetic Gods (Cambridge, MA, 2004), chap. 3. “In sum,” Foster concludes, “futurist art favors the explosive, while vorticist art focuses on the fixed” (Prosthetic Gods, 131). “Fixed” seems the wrong word here, as vorticist images (such as those by Wyndham Lewis that Foster discusses) often suggest solid, armored bodies in motion. On the whole, Foster tends to analyze the geometricized or mechanical bodies in avant-garde art as reaction formations against shock rather than as symbolic expressions of incipient fascism or of industrial power. His point of departure in “Prosthetic Gods,” as in his earlier essay “Armor Fou” (first published in October, no. 56 [spring 1991]: 64–97), is Walter Benjamin’s well-known analysis of shock as a fundamental condition of life in modern society, which leads Benjamin (and Foster) to invoke Freud’s analysis of ego formation as a protective barrier against shock. See Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 160–165.


32 William Rubin, Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972), 82 and 204. My identification of the gray-green background as a view of the Horta landscape is based on comparison with other Horta paintings, not on Picasso’s explanatory drawing for Rubin.


34 Although Valerio mentions the Sorelian interpretation of The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli (84), he stresses its connection to the militarist agitation that swept Italy in 1919, as the Nationalist Party pushed for an invasion of Libya that would bring Italy into the ranks of colonial powers (76–85). The futurists supported the Libyan invasion as a demonstration of Italian virility, and in 1915 Carrà himself would create a major collage, The Interventionist Manifesto, urging Italy to become a combatant in World War I. However, as Valerio observes, if the violent imagery of The Funeral is meant to encourage
Italian warmongering, it suggests a puzzling internal contradiction, since the painting celebrates an anarchist faction whose members were strongly opposed to war.


37 In “Boccioni’s Fist,” Valerio suggests that these “patterns of circles that seem to be generated by a throbbing red sun” may derive from Robert Delaunay’s solar discs (89). But the earliest versions of the disc motif do not appear in Delaunay’s work until 1912, a year later than The Funerel.

38 See P. Krehl and S. Engemann, “August Toepler—The First Who Visualized Shock Waves,” Shock Waves 5 (1995): 1–18, esp. fig. 5c. See also Christoph Hoffmann, “Representing Difference: Ernst Mach and Peter Salcher’s Ballistic-Photographic Experiments,” Endeavour 33, no. 1 (March 2009): 18–23. Figure 6 reproduces Ernst Mach’s 1889 photograph of reflected sound waves. Figure 7 reproduces his 1896 photograph of the angular shock waves produced by a bullet in motion. Such images may have inspired the repeated angles of Luigi Russolo’s painting Revolt (1911) and of his Moving Automobile (1912–1913). Carrà and Russolo’s adaptations of scientific imagery seem comparable to Giacomo Balla’s incorporation of Eugène Marey’s chronophotos into futurist paintings such as Girl on a Balancing and Flight of a Swift. For Marey’s important influence on futurism in 1911, see Marta Braun, Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) (Chicago, 1992), 291–296.

39 The Council of Love mocked traditional ideas of God the Father, Jesus, Satan, and the Virgin Mary. Convicted of blasphemy by a Munich court, Panizza was sentenced to a year in prison. On his release, he abandoned his original career as a psychiatrist, concentrating instead on his provocative poetry and criticism. After falling prey to paranoid schizophrenia in 1904, he was committed to a mental asylum, where he remained until his death in 1921. Grosz’s fevered painting of Panizza’s funeral thus preceded his death by several years.


41 For an example of an early work from this series, see Grosz’s drawing Friedrichstrasse (1918), published in his Eer Emoe (Berlin, 1923; repr. New York, 1976).

42 Regarding Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann’s discovery of photocollage via postcards they saw while on vacation together in 1919, see Maud Lavin, Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch (New Haven, 1993), 17, and Höch’s text, “A Few Words on Photomontage” (1934), translated in Lavin’s work (219).


44 Brigid Doherty, in her detailed analysis of Cut with the Kitchen Knife, points out how the wrestlers have been substituted for the Kaiser’s moustache and notes that they were added after the montage’s initial exhibition at the Dada Fair of summer 1920. She also describes the work as a whole as “a cross-section of German culture circa 1920” without connecting this description to Grosz’s Querchnitt. See Doherty, Berlin Dada,” in Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris, ed. Leah Dickerman (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2006), 107–108.

45 In the 1950s, when Braque recounted the invention of papier collé, he said that he had begun by cutting out the printed strips and placing them on a blank support, and only then drawn a composition around them; however, inspection by conservators has established that the drawing generally preceded the addition of pasted elements. Hence the name given these works in Kahnweiler’s stock book: dessins avec papiers collés. For a more complete narrative and analysis of the invention of papier collé, see Karmel, Picasso and the Invention of Cubism (see note 7), 152–156.

46 As I have argued in Picasso and the Invention of Cubism (106–111), semiology seems the wrong tool for this job, but that does not lessen the acuity of Krauss’s and Bois’s observations about the deliberate ambiguity of the geometric forms employed by Picasso and Braque.
On “iconic elasticity,” see Bois, “The Semiology of Cubism” (as in note 7), 177. The comparison between cubist painting and Malarmé’s poetry seems to have been made first by the painter Ardengo Soffici, who in 1911 described the figuration of Picasso’s work as a “hieroglyph” inscribing “a lyrically elliptical syntax and grammatical transpositions of Stéphane Mallarmé.” Ardengo Soffici, “Picasso e Braque,” La voce, August 24, 1911, cited in William Rubin, “Picasso and Braque: An Introduction,” in Rubin, Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism (see note 2), 44.

It should be noted that this work is often reproduced upside down, apparently on the assumption that its external caption in the Dada Fair catalog (“Bild Nr. 74. Groz-Hearfield mont. Korrigierter Picasso”) is at the bottom of the work. Insofar as there is any consistent “up” and “down” to the layout of the catalog, the work appears to be reproduced sideways, so that the words “Vollendete Kunst” appear in the “correct” orientation. Neither of these external indications seems a dependable guide to the correct orientation of the montage. It seems safer to rely on the internal label and on the orientation of Picasso’s original image.


Ortega, “The Dehumanization of Art,” 44–45. Ortega’s argument that “the weight of tradition . . . stifles all creative power” (44) echoes Filippo Marinetti’s call, in the first Futurist Manifesto, to “set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums!” (Le Figaro [Paris], February 20, 1909; translation in Marinetti: Selected Writings, 43.)

See, for instance, Charlotte Douglas’s brief but essential monograph, Kazimir Malevich (London, 1994), or the essays in Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism, ed. Matthew Drutt (Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2003). T. J. Clark brilliantly discusses the social and political context of suprematism in Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven, 1999), chap. 5, “God is Not Cast Down,” 225–297; but his discussion of Malevich’s ideas is basically limited to a brief analysis (266–267) of the 1920 essay that gives its name to the chapter as a whole.

Malevich, “On New Systems in Art” (see note 35), 86.


Fernand Léger, “The Origins of Painting,” originally published in Montjoie! in 1913; translation by Alexandra Anderson in Léger, Functions of Painting (New York, 1973), 7. Similarly, in “Contemporary Achievements in Painting,” originally published in Les Soirées de Paris in 1914, Léger writes: “From the day the impressionists liberated painting, the modern picture set out at once to structure itself on contrasts” (Functions of Painting, 14).


Malevich, The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism (originally published in German in 1917), trans. Paul Theobald (Chicago, 1959; repr. Mineola, NY, 2003), pp. 23–25, figs. 16–35. It seems likely that aerial views of cities, with their irregular squares of buildings set within the urban grid, are one of the sources for Malevich’s compositions of rectangles arranged on a plane surface.

Malevich, Future Plans for Leningrad: The Pilot’s Planit (1924; Museum of Modern Art, New York) reproduced in Malevich (New York, 1990), 160. The term
architecture parlante — referring to buildings that make their function evident by their external shape or appearance — seems to have been used first in an essay, “Études d’architecture en France,” in Le Magasin Pittoresque, 1852, where the anonymous author writes, “Ledoux était partisan de ce qu’on a appelé depuis l’architecture parlante” (388); cited in Emil Kaufmann, Three Revolutionary Architects: Boulée, Ledoux, and Lequeu, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s., 42, no. 3 (1952), n. 82. As canonical examples, Kaufmann discusses several of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s designs for buildings at the salt works of Chaux: the Coop- ery (barrel-making workshop), with circular rings inscribed on its square elevations, the House of the River Surveyor, with a stream of water flowing through an open cylinder at its center, and (most notoriously) the Oikema (or civic brothel), with its plan in the shape of a penis and testicles (516–517, 522, and 535). In The Architecture of the Eighteenth Century (London 1969; repr. 1986), 137–138, John Summerson traces the application of architecture parlante to English and American penitentiaries. It is not clear how this idea reached early twentieth-century Russia.

69 Davies, Soviet Economic Development, 43–57.
70 I focus here on montage as a political tool, neglecting the equally important role of montage in surrealism and the influence of surrealist montage on contemporar y art.
73 See Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (1962), trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989), chaps. 1 – 3.
74 Ironically, the Dadaists’ dismissal of cubism as excessively aesthetic overlooks the cubists’ own gestures toward working-class solidarity. Kahnweiler later recalled that once, when Picasso and Braque came to his gallery to collect their monthly stipend, “they arrived, imitating laborers, turning their caps in their hands: ‘Boss, we’ve come for our pay!’” (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, with Francis Crémieux, My Galleries and Painters, trans. Helen Weaver [New York, 1971], 45. The political significance of this gesture was underscored by William Rubin in “Picasso and Braque: An Introduction,” 20.)
77 Tupitsyn, “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics,” 83 – 84.
78 The influence of cubism may also be evident in the black–white reversal where the lettering crosses the woman’s hair; in several pictures of 1913–1914, Braque creates drawn lines that change from black to white as they travel across changing backgrounds.
80 I am grateful to Sam James for translating the full text of this poster, whose content is often summarized with the single word “Books.”

81 Tupitsyn, “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics,” 99–100.

82 Tupitsyn describes Klutsis’s struggle to remain on the right side of the censors in “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics,” 105–108.

83 I am grateful to Sam James for identifying the newspaper in this photomontage and for noting that it is printed in Ukrainian, not in Russian.

84 Taylor, Collage, 90–91 and fig. 93.


86 This first montage revival was surveyed in exhibitions such as Collage International: From Picasso to the Present (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1958) and The Art of Assemblage (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961). The Houston exhibition may have provided the impetus for Greenberg’s 1958 essay “The Pasted Paper Revolution” (as in note 4).

87 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in Illuminations, 217–242; the discussion of film begins on 226. As discussed in note 29, the concept of shock is developed more fully in Benjamin’s essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in the same volume.


93 Peter Bürger contrasts the “classicist,” who draws his material from “concrete life situations” and gives “a living picture of the totality,” with the “avant-gardiste,” who finds his material by tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning,” and “joins fragments” to give them new meaning, typically “the message that meaning has ceased to exist,” Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), 70; see, however, Bürger’s argument for a neo-Brechtian aesthetic on 87–92. The critiques of his position by Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster are summarized by Bürger himself in “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde,” trans. Bettina Brandt and Daniel Purdy, New Literary History 41, no. 4 (autumn 2010): 695–715.

94 Daix cites Picasso’s comment in a discussion section of Zelevansky, Picasso and Braque: A Symposium (as in note 7), 76.

95 It is frequently argued that if contemporary art attracts and is purchased by rich collectors, it has been tainted by the market and must therefore be considered “conservative,” no matter how radical the artist’s intentions and subject matter. David Cottington, in “What the Papers Say” (as in note 20), projects this argument backward in time to the Parisian art market in the years before World War 1.