

## Cubism: Art and Philosophy

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**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that the development of cubism by Picasso and Braque at the beginning of the twentieth century can be illuminated by consideration of long-running philosophical debates concerning perceptual realism, in particular by Locke's (1689) distinction between primary and secondary properties, and Kant's (1781) empirical realism. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1920), Picasso's dealer and early authority on cubism, interpreted Picasso and Braque as Kantian in their approach. I reject his influential interpretation, but propose a more plausible, Kantian reading of cubism.

**Keywords:** Braque, cubism, formalism, Kant, Locke, Picasso, realism, space and time.

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### The Cubist Revolution

Since the Renaissance artists have attempted to represent how things look from a particular, one-point, perspective. The picture frame can be seen as holding a transparent sheet through which viewers look, and from which, behind the painting, the scene recedes. Cubists reject such an 'illusionist' approach since, according to Braque:

*„The whole Renaissance tradition is antipathetic to me. The hard and fast rules of perspective which it imposed on art were a ghastly mistake which it has taken four centuries to redress. [...] Scientific perspective is nothing but eye-fooling illusionism. It is simply a trick—a bad trick—which makes it impossible for an artist to convey a full experience of space, since it forces the objects in a picture to disappear away from the beholder instead of bringing them within his reach, as painting should“* (cited in Versteegen, 2014, p. 294).

Further, it is a misrepresentation of what we actually see. Such perspective assumes that the viewer is motionless, that their vision consists of input to a single eye, and that everything in the visual field is in focus. In contrast, cubist works represent simultaneously the shapes and surfaces of objects from different perspectives. Objects are 'analysed' in terms of facets at shallow angles to the picture surface, and they do not recede from the eye. Facets are held together by grids or scaffolding lines, a constraint that contributes to the angular geometry of the works. In a series of drawings by Juan Gris, starting with *The Eggs* (1911), one can sense traditional perspective beginning to fracture, with the journey to full-blown cubism culminating in *Bottles and Knife* (1912).<sup>1</sup> (That same precariousness can be sensed in cubism itself: holding sway for a few short years, shimmering, briefly, before it fragmented into futurism, constructivism, abstraction and all the rest.) Gris is usually considered to be the third serious cubist, along with Picasso and Braque. These true, high or austere cubists are distinguished from salon cubists, such as

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<sup>1</sup> See Weiss et al. (2003) and Galassi & McCully (2011, p. 18) for the claim that it is important to consider series of cubist works and that 'certain essential abstract principles of the oeuvre can be accounted for only by observing the individual works in their fullest expression as multiple permutations of a single idea' (ibid. xv).

Fauconnier, Gleizes and Metzinger, who created works with a superficial cubist look, as a mere ‘decorative idiom’ (Cooper, 1971, p. 128). The latter were widely disparaged: ‘their appreciation of true cubism was barely skin-deep and they employed a timid sort of faceting and cubification as a pictorial system’ (ibid. p. 127). The Italian writer and artist, Ardengo Soffici, accused them of *„deforming, geometrizing and cubifying randomly, without aim or purpose, perhaps in the hope of hiding their innate, ineradicable, and fatal banality and academicism behind triangles and other shapes“* (cited in Rubin, 1989, p. 44).

Cubists employed various techniques to realise, in Braque’s phrase above, a ‘full experience of space’. The emphasis on volumes led cubists away from the eye and visual appearances, to tactile experience of reality. The subject matter of their paintings were things that you wanted to touch. Braque explained that his still lives evoked ‘tactile space’ (cited in Verstegen, 2014, p. 293): there are tables with newspapers to leaf through, musical instruments to grasp and pluck. Braque, always more willing to articulate the approach than Picasso, says: ‘It isn’t enough to make visible what one paints; it must also become tangible. A still-life ceases to be a still-life the moment it can no longer be reached with the hand’ (cited in Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 42). Volume is also given by ‘passage’: ‘The merging of planes with space by leaving one edge unpainted or light in tone’ (Richardson, 1996, p. 97). Objects are tipped so volumes can be seen from within. Richardson describes Picasso as having ‘a fetish for keys’ (1959, p. 127)—keys being the most tactile of objects; grasped and manipulated many times a day: ‘A key in a centrally placed drawer in a cubist still life invites us to turn it so that we can probe the space and touch the objects’ (ibid.). There is no vanishing point in cubist works, no destination behind the transparent screen towards which one’s eye is led; one’s eye, rather, is loosely directed by the artist to rove over rooftops and table tops. Thus, *[s]pace was [...] “materialised” instead of being evoked by illusion’* (Cooper – Tinterow, 1983, p. 72). Paradoxically, though, at the same time the flatness of the picture surface is emphasised.

*„By thus bringing objects nearer than ever before to the surface of the canvas, the artist hoped to put the spectator into the closest possible touch with the physical reality of things and so draw him into the spatial element which they inhabit“* (Richardson, 1959, p. 9).

Cezanne was a key influence. Gleizes and Metzinger, in *Du Cubisme* (1912), the first major study of the movement, suggest that: *„[t]o understand Cezanne is to foresee cubism“* (cited in Chipp, 1975, p. 209). He, too, created volumes from flat coloured planes, and used subtle distortions of perspective: in *Basket with Apple, Bottle, Biscuits and Fruit* (1893), for example, the plate of biscuits is tilted towards the viewer and the two sides of the table do not seem to meet under the tablecloth. Picasso and Braque acknowledged their debt to ‘The Master of Provence’, quoting from him in their works: the drapes in the proto-cubist *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) derived from Cezanne’s *Female Bathers in Front of a Tent* (1883–5), as are the poses of some of the figures (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 9).

Some of the more impenetrable works such as *The Dressing Room* (1910) and *The Accordionist* (1911) skirt close to abstraction or what Cooper disparagingly calls, ‘cubism’s misbegotten child’ (Richardson, 1959, p. 40). Picasso and Braque, though, were vehemently ‘realist’. Their distortions may presage surrealism and abstraction to come, but they were wholeheartedly engaged in *„solving the strictly pictorial problem arising out of their intention to find a wholly new and precise way of recreating tangible reality on canvas“* (Cooper, 1971, p. 62).<sup>2</sup> Rubin nicely observes that *„some of the dramatic tension of this high Analytic Cubism follows from the*

<sup>2</sup> Gombrich (1959, p. 263) is somewhat unimpressed by cubist claims to realism: *„Cubists [...] kicked aside the whole tradition of faithful vision and tried to start again with the “real object” which they squashed against the picture plane. One can enjoy the*

*paradoxical situation in which he [Picasso] finds himself as an utterly representational painter in an increasingly abstract art*“ (1989, p. 24). Viewers are aided by triggers or signposts—or what Picasso called ‘attributes’ (cited in Gilot & Lake, 1964, pp. 65–6)—that enable us to orientate ourselves with respect to the shimmering facets and thus appreciate the subject matter of these works. Carefully placed amidst otherwise inscrutable configurations of facets and scaffolding we find a coat button, guitar strings, the f-holes of violins, cigarette smoke, an ear lobe or eyelid, and a quiff of hair. An anecdote recalled by Richardson nicely captures Picasso’s attitude to abstraction: ‘People who urged Picasso to look more favourably on abstract art because it was the pictorial equivalent of music would be told “That’s why I don’t like music”’ (Richardson, 1996, p. 165).<sup>3</sup>

### Lockean Realism and Kant’s Transcendental Idealism

Kahnweiler (1920) related cubism to John Locke’s (1689) distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are those whose existence is independent of the existence of a perceiver, such as shape and size. Secondary qualities such as colour, smell and felt texture depend on the existence of a perceiver and are not possessed by objects themselves: The haystacks that Monet painted at sunset (1890–91) were not themselves golden, but the physical composition of their surface, and the particular way this surface reflects light rays into our eyes, causes in us the experience of seeing this colour. Impressionists painted the fleeting images and plays of light that strike the viewer; cubists, in contrast, can be seen as focusing on primary qualities, those that constitute the volume of objects and the relations between these volumes. Colours were muted—only there to depict form and volume; visual effects, as Lockean secondary qualities, were of little interest. In order to depict this primary reality, Picasso and Braque were not restricted to reproducing the natural effects of light. It was used where it was needed, as one might explore a large sculpture or a building in the dark with a flashlight; figures had an inner light, diffusing out between overlapped planes and facets. Cubist paintings are thus, in a sense, sculptural. Picasso did turn to sculpture, but, at least at first, the results were a less radical departure from the canon. His *Head of a Woman* (1909–10) is more or less a traditional bust, albeit with distortions. Radical departures, though, were to come. Carving was replaced by the construction of cubist guitars and glasses of absinthe; voids were used to depict volumes, light itself depicted by pointillist dots, and paint applied to works to inhibit the natural effects of shadow. In Boccioni’s *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912) and Archipenko’s *Head: Construction with Crossing Planes* (1913) facets were slotted together in 3 dimensions.

The roots of the empiricist battle with scepticism lie in Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley (1709) and Hume (1739–40) provide arguments to show that we cannot have knowledge of the primary properties of objects—of the world independent of our experience. Kant’s (1781) transcendental idealism is a response to such wholesale scepticism. It may be the case that we cannot have knowledge of things-in-themselves, but we can, as we will see in the next section, have knowledge of empirical or phenomenal reality.

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*resulting confusion of telescoped images as commentary on the unresolved complexities of vision without accepting the claim that they represent reality more really than a picture based on projective geometry*“—Gombrich, here, echoing an early uncomprehending review of an exhibition of Picasso’s drawings at the Stafford Gallery, London (1912), in which a reviewer quipped that a depicted „skull [...] has obviously been under a steam roller“ (Galassi – McCully, 2011, p. 40).

<sup>3</sup> Semiotic interpretations of cubism take cubist pictures not to depict via resemblance, but via arbitrary signs. This is not a convincing interpretation of analytic cubism given the clear, albeit fragmented, appearances that are presented. It is, though, a more plausible interpretation of synthetic cubism: „From 1914 to 1917 cubism changed to rather flat surfaces, it was no longer sculptural, it was writing“ (Stein, 1938, p. 39).

Cubists have been interpreted as Kantians, by, amongst others, Kahnweiler and Roger Fry (1978). Kahnweiler uses Kantian terminology to delineate two phases of cubism. The analytic phase, that upon which we focus here, involved the analysis of objects into facets, whereas, from 1912 on, the goal of synthetic cubism was not the depiction of objects in the world, but the creation of new aspects of reality. Tableau-objets were created using collage and papier collé; paintings of cluttered tables could now include real newspapers. The self-conscious awareness of artifice was there from the beginnings of cubism in the flattened perspective and focus on the picture surface, but synthetic cubism emphasizes this to a greater extent. The Kantian terminology, though, is misleading; it does not mark the semantic distinction that it does in Kant. Second, their move away from fleeting appearances has been seen as an attempt to capture Kant's transcendental thing-in-itself, with Gris explicitly committed to this approach, concerning himself with 'the relation between the things in themselves' (cited in Green, 1992, p. 21).

It is not, though, illuminating to think of cubism in this way. There are two reasons for this. First, for Kant, things-in-themselves cannot be experienced. We can only ever have direct awareness of our own experiences, and not the transcendental world from which, presumably, these experiences are derived. Kahnweiler does seem to be aware of this point: he agrees that „[t]he thing in itself [...] is not within the art-historian's competence; nor is it capable of any investigation, since it is unknowable and indefinable.“ Nevertheless, he claims that it is „that element [...] of whose presence before our eyes we are conscious; and which we call beauty“ (Kahnweiler, 1969, p. 88). The coherence of this is not clear.

Second, in later works Picasso adopts a pluralist approach where, within the same work, we have cubist representations alongside naturalistic, traditional ones. This is so, for example, in *Still life with Compotier* (1914–15) and *Still Life with Playing Cards and Peaches* (1914). This suggests that cubism does not aspire to the one true representation of reality—to a representation of things-in-themselves. The message of these works seems to be that these styles are complementary (Cooper, 1971, pp. 215–17). Braque's famous trompe l'oeil nail in his *Violin and Palette* (1909) draws attention to the contrast between naturalism and cubism, and could be interpreted as saying that „[a] picture depends upon external reality, but the Cubist means of recording this reality—unlike the means devised by the Renaissance—are not absolute but relative. One pictorial language is no more “real” than another, for the nail, conceived as external reality, is just as false as any of the less illusionistic passages in the canvas—or, conversely, conceived as art, is just as true“ (Rosenblum, 2001, p. 45). This pluralist claim is illustrated in Picasso's drawing, *The Studio* (1933). In the depicted artist's studio there are two artistic representations of the same female model, one a broadly naturalistic sketch resting on an easel, the other a balloon-like sculpture sat on a table, the latter in the style of his beach paintings of the 1920s and 1930s.

### Cubism and Kant's Empirical Realism

It is more illuminating to focus, not on things-in-themselves, but on Kant's empirical realism and his account of the cognitive input that is necessary for our lived experience. I shall first note various ways that the creative role of the viewer's mind is stressed by commentators on cubism and by le bande à Picasso (his circle of poet and artist friends); second, I shall suggest a Kantian reading of this creative input.

Apollinaire claimed that „[c]ubism differs from earlier painting in that it is not an art of imitation, but an art of imagination“ (cited in Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 20); Cooper, that it involves „the art of painting new structures with elements borrowed not from visual reality but from the reality of knowledge“ (1971, p. 109); whereas Green stresses that „the artist's conceptual powers [...] go beyond sensation“ (1992, p. 31; my emphasis). There is a shallow sense in which this is so. Our knowledge of the human body and of traditional ways of depicting

this, allow us to see, for example, the figure in Picasso's *Standing Nude* of 1910. We have to apply such knowledge to the drawing since the descriptive content of such a work is so minimal. It is in this move away from visual appearances and towards the involvement of cognitive capacities that we see the influence of primitive art. Golding, echoing the now archaic terminology of the cubist epoch, puts it thus: „*As opposed to Western art, Negro art is more conceptual, much less conditioned by visual appearances. The Negro sculptor tends to depict what he knows about his subject rather than what he sees*“ (1989, p. 59).

There is, though, according to Kant, a deeper sense in which the mind constructs what we see. Early modern empiricists such as Locke and Hume saw experience as passive, something that impinges on us. Hume calls such experiences, impressions; the world forming impressions on the mind as a stamp forms an impression in wax. Kant, however, in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* (1781, A19–49), argues that the mind imposes spatio-temporal order on experience. Space and time are not things independent of us; they are preconditions of experience—necessary aspects of experience through which we must engage with the world; what Kant calls ‘forms of intuition’. Kant has two arguments for this claim. First, the idea of space cannot be derived from impressions (in Hume’s sense) since spatiality is already built into our impressions: I see that the glass is to the left of the newspaper. Second, I can think of space with objects removed, but I cannot think of the absence of space; representation of space is thus prior to representation of objects. Further, as well as this spatio-temporal filter, experience must also pass through further filters corresponding to the ‘categories’. These result in experience of the world always conforming to certain fundamental ways of conceiving of that world—we have no choice, for example, but to see the world in terms of enduring substances in causal relations to each other (1781, A79/B105).

Commentators on cubism gesture towards such an account: „*The arrangement of bottles and fishes [in Braque’s Still Life with Fish on a Table, 1911] is not embedded in a spatially recognizable background [...] Spatial integration of the objects in the picture develops only in the viewers’ minds*“ (Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 42). The viewer fuses multiple views into a single image, reconstructing objects from dislocated facets, bringing to bear their conceptual understanding of those objects. Braque, in his 1917 *Thoughts and Reflections on Art*, says ‘[t]he senses deform, the mind forms’ (cited in Versteegen, 2014, p. 295), and a more developed description of the constructive role of the mind is given by the cubist sculptor, Archipenko: „*One can say that Cubism had created a new cognitive order in respect of pictures [...] [T]he viewer is himself creatively active, and speculates and creates a picture by building upon the plastic character of those objects that are sketched out as forms*“ (cited in Gantefuhrer-Trier, 1996, p. 30). Such constructive effort can be felt as one searches for life in the more difficult canvases, those not readily decipherable to the untrained eye. The claim is not that cubist works have distinctive features that trigger such Kantian synthesis. For Kant, all experience has this structure. Apprehending a teapot actively involves forms of intuition and the categories. The teapot does not sit there in space that is independent of observers, waiting to be seen. Space, rather—and thus volume—is a precondition of experience—a feature imposed on experience by the mind of the viewer. The claim is that cubist works can make us aware of such acts of synthesis, and therefore that such an account of visual experience can be seen as one of the subjects of these works. The self-reflexivity of cubism’s form of modernism is therefore Kantian in flavour.

Last, let us consider cubism’s relation to time. Cubist works are quiet and still—motionless individuals sat in chairs, abandoned tables of clutter. Futurists reacted against this stillness, feeling „*that cubist painting lacked that vibration and sense of flux which they regarded as inseparable from any true modern experience of reality*“ (Cooper, 1971, p. 170). The stillness of cubism, though, is superficial. First, there is a sense of motion in certain works: Picasso’s *Standing Female Nude* of 1910, for example, was an influence on Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), and movement is also implied in some of the more austere works:

the viewer moves between the interlocking planes of the buildings in *The Rio Tinto Factory at L'Estaque* (1910). Second, movement is implicit in the fundamental approach of cubism, with different perspectives tracking movement around the café table or around figures in portraits. Referring to the figures in *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Golding says, „[i]t is as if the painter had moved freely around his subject, gathering information from various angles and viewpoints“ (Golding, 1959, p. 58) and we, the viewer, follow his path in our imagination. Cubist works slow us down as we search for clues and triggers: „Time is a vital constituent in one's encounters with such paintings. And the experience is more akin to reading a text in which a scene or person is described than to looking at a representational painting of a scene or person“ (Cowling, 2004, p. 227). Third, as discussed above, cubists explore tactile space, and with tactility comes the implication of movement and thus time. Fourth, the temporal aspect of cubism can be seen in Kantian terms. Just as space is imposed on experience by 'outer sense', time is similarly imposed by 'inner sense'. It is a precondition of experience that it is presented to us in temporal succession. Experience of an objective world is necessarily both spatial and temporal. Again, the claim is not that there is something distinctive about cubist works that triggers Kantian synthesis; this also must occur in everyday experiences such as watching someone descend the stairs. The claim, rather, is that cubist works make manifest the acts of synthesis involved in our experience of the empirical world; they are not an attempt to depict things-in-themselves.

Further, for Kant, such synthesis is the foundation of self-awareness. He was famously 'woken from his dogmatic slumbers' by Hume's scepticism. Hume (1739–40, 1.4.6) had argued that we only experience one impression after another and never our own self who we take to be having these impressions. As an empiricist, Hume therefore concludes that we should not believe in the existence of selves; we are just bundles of fleeting impressions. Kant's response is to argue that self-consciousness—or the 'unity of apperception' (A105)—is grounded in acts of synthesis: I become aware of myself as I synthesize spatio-temporal intuitions into, for example, the experience of seeing someone descending the stairs. Perhaps, then, cubism not only makes manifest the active cognitive input that we bring to experience, but also the very existence of our selves. One does not lose oneself in a cubist picture; one finds oneself.

Formalist interpretations of cubist works limit their aesthetically significant properties to the planes, lines and muted colours on the surface of the canvas. Fry, in the preface to his exhibition catalogue for the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London (1912), offered an early influential formalist interpretation of cubism: „They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. [...] The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form—a visual music; and the latter works of Picasso show this clearly enough“ (cited in Rubin, 1989, p. 406). However, the richness of these works belies such interpretations. Abstract art may be limited to such formal properties, but, as we have seen, cubism is not abstract: it can therefore be judged on how well it captures the atmosphere of the café or the character of a person, as, by all accounts, he evidently did in his portraits of the art dealers Ambroise Vollard (1910) and Wilhelm Uhde (1910). To understand cubism one also has to be aware of its subversive role with respect to Renaissance perspective, and its relation to a roll-call of artists through the ages to which Picasso, in particular, makes reference: Cezanne, El Greco, and Ingres, to name but a few. Lastly, I have suggested here that these works concern the process of seeing and Kantian conceptions of this. Cubist works do have a distinctive form, one that at times offers a kind of shimmering beauty—a 'prismatic magic': „As cubism evolves, Picasso presses his analysis beyond the study of volumes to the point at which it becomes 'a melodious fabric of lines and tints, a music of delicate tones—lighter or darker, warmer or cooler—whose mystery increases the pleasure of the viewer'“ (Rubin, 1989, p. 44). In addition to this form, though, there is multi-faceted content: a certain work can depict the social world of zinc bars in Paris at the start of the last century, art-historical

themes concerning perspective and the norms of realism, and philosophical theories concerning vision and the role of our cognitive faculties in experience.

It is highly unlikely that Picasso and Braque read Kant. Kahnweiler, questioning the veracity of Françoise Gilot's (1964) account of life with Picasso, asserts that „*Picasso never, never spoke of Kant or Plato*“ (cited in Ashton, 1972, p. xxvii). Both his partner during the cubist years, Fernande Olivier, and Gertrude Stein attest that Picasso did not read much at all, apart from, perhaps, some of the poetry of his friends (Rubin, 1989, pp. 54–5). Further, both Picasso and Braque explicitly stated that they were not driven by philosophical or theoretical concerns and Picasso, in particular, seemed to delight in obfuscating his intentions when directly asked about his work—or, as Cocteau (1956, p. 93) put it: „*He never dissected the doves that came out of his sleeves*’. *Picasso did discuss cubism with a select few: with, of course, Braque: ‘During [the Cubist] years, Picasso and I said things to one another that will never be said again [...] ‘All that’, he insisted, ‘will end with us’* “ (cited in Rubin, 1989, p. 41); with Matisse: „*We must talk to each other as much as we can. When one of us dies [Matisse said to Picasso], there will be some things that the other will never be able to talk of with anyone else*“ (cited in Gilot & Lake, 1964, p. 247); and with Diego Rivera: „*We had dinner together and stayed up practically the whole night talking. Our thesis was cubism—what it was trying to accomplish, what it had already done, and what future it had as a new art form*“ (cited in Richardson, 1996, pp. 369-70). These lost conversations are some of the most tantalising in the history of art, but, if we take them at their word, they were unlikely to amount to explicit discussion of philosophical theory. Nevertheless, the suggestion here is that their painterly and sculptural sensibilities led to philosophical insight concerning the Kantian structure of experience.

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