岩手大学教育学部研究年報　第67巻（2007．02）59～69

Subjectivity and the Inadequacy of Language

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（2007年12月 7 日受理）

Writer Tom Clark was in a bar in Bristol, England in 1965. In walked the seminal American poet Allen Ginsberg, who was in town for a reading. Ginsberg had spent the previous several years traveling all over the world, and the last year visiting countries to which his own government had forbidden travel, namely Cuba, Czechoslovakia, and Russia. He had been received enthusiastically by the intelligentsia in those places, and by the young people in particular, as a kind of visionary prophet who could offer them new insights into how they might regard and implement their desires of freedom of expression while living in the world around them, claustrophobic as their lives must have been in those communist-socialist regimes.

Ginsberg left Bristol the next day taking Clark along on a hitchhiking and bus trip through England, studying everything from the work of local poets to the ancient tools used by the first inhabitants of that country. He also spent much time absorbed in investigating the artistic, literary and scientific pursuits of the country's celebrated luminary of 200 years before, William Blake; and he took time even to pick a flower supposedly from the grave of King Arthur.[1]

His conversation with Clark continued throughout these pursuits across England, and it focused in particular on what seems on the surface to be a rather surprising topic for Ginsberg to have been considering as a major influence on his thoughts and writings, that being the work of the French painter Paul Cézanne and the beginnings of Cubism.

> I got all hung up on Cézanne... It was about the same time that I was having these [William] Blake visions ... I suddenly got a strange shuddering impression looking at his canvases. ... There's a sudden shift, a flashing that you see in Cézanne's canvases. Partly it's when the canvas opens up into three dimensions rather than flat. Partly it's the enormous spaces which open up in Cézanne's landscapes.[2]

As someone so deeply influenced by William Blake, by the poets Basho and Issa and Zen Buddhist teachings, by Shakespeare, and by his fellow American Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso, I think we can say that it was not merely dilettantish nor eclectic for Ginsberg to

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have embraced Cézanne’s work, which to most is a purely visual manifestation. Indeed, we need to expect all luminaries such as those mentioned in the above list to, shall we say, embrace what they can and then run with it for their own needs of expression. One might even say: it is what all this work of humankind is there for. All are painters, brushes in hand and canvas propped and ready, gazing at the landscape before them. And one may go further to say that Ginsberg, as have others, sought to reduce to basics the nature of the found material to shapes that could be reckoned, expanded and set to useful purpose... Utilization: the basic shapes are derived and acted upon.

Cubism. What does the term call to one’s imagination on first hearing it? A cube: a three-dimensional block constructed along the lines and angles of a square. In Cubism, the subject matter is broken up, analyzed, and reassembled in a form abstracted from nature. Picasso and Braque initiated the movement when they followed the advice of Paul Cézanne, who in 1904 said artists should regard and render nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone. In a letter Cézanne had written to artist Emile Bernard in 1904, he set forth his ideas of reducing what is seen in nature to basic forms and planes:

> “Treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth... lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature for us men is more depth than surface, whence the need to introduce into our light vibrations, represented by the reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blueness to give the feel of air.”[3]

The term *cubisme* was coined by art critic Louis Vauxcelles around 1908, while attending an exhibit of paintings by Braque and Raoul Dufy, who had in fact created their paintings at a site that had been frequented by Cézanne years earlier.[4] Cubism subsequently became one of the most influential art movements of the twentieth century, formalized by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who were greatly inspired by African sculpture, and by painters Paul Cézanne and Georges Seurat.

In another letter to Bernard, sent in 1905 a year before his death, Cézanne wrote:

> “... I pursue the realization of that part of nature, which, coming into our line of vision, gives the picture. ... we must render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that existed before us. ... Now, being old, nearly seventy years, the sensations of color, which give light, are the reason for the abstractions which prevent me from either covering my canvas or continuing the delimitation of the objects when their points of contact are fine and delicate; from which it results that my image or picture is incomplete. On the other hand, the planes are placed one on top of the other from whence neo-impressionism emerged, which outlines the contours with a black stroke, a failing which must be fought at all costs. Well, nature when consulted gives us the means of attaining this end. ...”[5]

Thus Cézanne initiated such an influential movement in the history of art, couched in an apology for his shortcomings stemming from old age!

Through his observation of what he saw around him and, significantly, the objects' relationship to each other, he embarked on a so-called reduction to the most basic three-dimensional shapes of cone (from triangle), sphere (from circle) and cube (from square).

Cézanne's principal intention, according to *Gardner's History of Art*[6], was to enable painters, by treating what they saw in nature as cylinder, sphere and cone, to establish significant forms within a space wherein the actual properties of the two-dimensional picture surface and the illusionary effects of three dimensions were deliberately and subtly attuned.

This was further augmented by his use of the split plane, whereby the lines of the background (such as a wall panel or wall corner) do not follow straight across or down as logic would tell us, but rather, one side is shifted away from the straight line direction as it meets an object on the foreground. Good examples of this technique of moving or shifting the viewer's eye can be found in his still life apples series, and in many of his portraits. (*Note: Readers who are interested in viewing the works of Cézanne online are encouraged to visit the many sites available. One good representative site in particular is:* http://www.expo-cezanne.com/1.cfm)

What in Cézanne Ginsberg Said He Saw

We keep in mind that the nature of a painting executed on a flat two-dimensional surface, a canvas, is a two-dimensional rendition of what the artist intends to put there. There being a range of perspectives that artists have employed through the history of painting by which to give an illusion of three dimensions, this topic of 'perspective' can be a way to identify or characterize a particular painter's style; a way for us—the viewer—to see how that artist intends for us to perceive his imagery. For many artists the rendition of nature via some honest perspective has been the work of a lifetime; a struggle that the artist paints to overcome. Maybe this was Cézanne's challenge as a visionary.

Cézanne, clearly expostulating his cubist ideas of form and color volumes, painted his first definitive work in this mode in 1878, a collection of apples on a cloth. His ideas were further put to work in his Mont St. Victoire series throughout the rest of his life.

Of course when we read in the letters above what Cézanne was thinking, and then recall what radical work was happening at that time in all realms of thought and discovery, we can in hindsight see how his "new way of seeing" had been joined by the great leap in scientific and philosophic thinking in the latter part of the 19th century. Not a direct person-to-person influence, no doubt; but history shows that a general air of radical changes pervades the realm of a society's matrix of thinkers, and therefore, influence comes more often by inference and stealth underground. During this period of profound change, physicist William Rankine introduced the idea of potential energy, and Darwin and Wallace first presented their ideas on evolution and natural selection. Von Baeyer discovered the first barbiturate. Mendel published his work on heredity, and radio waves were produced for the first time. Pasteur identified bacteria. Mendeleyev published the Periodic Table, a way to organize the basic chemical elements into a visual-relational system. Profound advances were made in psychology, music, literature... Advances in thought.

It would take another half century or so to make the connection between so-called Eastern and Western thought. In his enlightening book *The Tao of Physics*[7], Fritjof Capra makes the argument that the plethora of thought and belief systems practiced by the cultures and religions of the world can be said to share many of their key tenets, and in particular, the ways in which many scientists see nature and what they attempt to explain is closely allied with many of the Eastern ways of perceiving the universe and our integral part in its mechanics.

And yet it is our common language itself that often precludes a clear understanding of such phenomena. Our language is limited not to what the human mind is capable of imagining, but rather, to habits and patterns it had previously formed in explaining that which has already been thought and perceived. Capra presents two statements on the dichotomy of language and thought, one from D. T. Suzuki, who through his writings and lectures introduced the teachings of Zen Buddhism to many in the West:

> The contradiction so puzzling to the ordinary way of thinking comes from the fact that we have to use language to communicate our inner experience which in its very nature transcends linguistics.[8]

The physicist and Nobel-laureate Werner Heisenberg presents a further thought on the insufficiency of language:

> The problems of language here are really serious. We wish to speak in some way about the structure of the atoms... But we cannot speak about atoms in ordinary language.[9]

We can more easily understand the kind of universe Isaac Newton described in 1704, universal gravitation, his three laws of motion and classical mechanics, developed along what writer William Burroughs termed “the Aristotelian construct.”[10] Newton’s work can be described as a more-or-less linear cause-and-effect system of forces that move from A to B and on to C in a predictable, clock-time pattern. Yet the system fails when put to the task of explaining contemporary science or philosophical thought. Ours too often is a language system that seems to trudge slowly, heavily behind us, and we encourage it to catch up by adding vocabulary to it, or by creating inference of its grammar that may help it to describe each of the subsequent stations of thought at which we arrive. To illustrate this, let a physicist try to explain the concept of gravity without using mathematical equations; and even after more than 90 years following Albert Einstein’s publication of his General

Theory of Relativity, how many of us can say we understand his ideas and concepts? Heisenberg was concerned about the difficulty of grasping the concept of quantum physics, writing further that "...We have at first no simple guide for correlating the mathematical symbols with concepts of ordinary language." [11]

Of course 'language' may be defined in terms of whatever category of human thought it is intended to describe. In addition to spoken and written forms, there are the languages of music and of vision, each comprised of a lexis that conveys the medium to the music listener/performer, and the viewer/artist.

In truth, the language—whether spoken, written, visual, or musical—has failed to keep up with us, and has remained unsatisfactory by preventing us from communicating these ideas to each other in a comprehensive way. Poets and painters who worked and died in obscurity are lauded for their genius years after. The cliché is true. Walt Whitman struggled for recognition—or at least for a greater readership among the public. Renoir and other Impressionists were ridiculed for many years for their radical break from the standard painting techniques of the period. Van Gogh died in poverty and despair. Mozart died a pauper; Mahler was ridiculed and booed off the stage. We humans do visionary things; then we wait for common language to catch up. We are only now coming to terms with Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, published back in 1939. Gertrude Stein's cubist literary work is still being reduced to tossed-off quotes and soubriquets.

Gertrude Stein can be termed a cubist writer in the sense that her choice of vocabulary, her patterns of phrase and her ear for the word is a system of reduction to basic form. Cézanne, and following in his steps Picasso and Braque, obtained for themselves such a method. Stein said in an interview in the *Transatlantic Review*: "Everything I have done has been influenced by ... Cézanne", he being the first painter to "conceive the idea that in composition one thing is as important as the whole."[12]

Stein and the Swiss-born French writer Blaise Cendrars moved in this way with their literature[13]. In fact, in the case of Stein it *was* a direct person-to-person influence. Picasso had offered to paint her now famous portrait, and she came to see, during her daily sittings for him, a clearer way for her to describe the objects and people around her through writing. In her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein says of herself that she

> ... felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world. It was a long tormenting process, she looked, listened and described. She always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal. One of the things that always worries her about painting is the difficulty the artist feels and which sends him to painting still lifes, that after all the human being essentially is not paintable. ... She experimented with everything in trying to describe. She tried a bit inventing words but she soon gave that up. The english language was her medium and with the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved.

> ...After the return to Paris she described objects, she described rooms and objects, which joined with her first experiments done in Spain, made the volume *Tender Buttons*.[14]

Marianne DeKoven, in her article *Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism*, links Stein's style with that of the cubist painters:

> They share an orientation toward the linguistic or pictorial surface, a movement in and out of recognizable representation; both shatter or fragment perception and the sentence (canvas), and both render multiple perspectives.[15]

The grammar, then, is to be found not in the standardized form governing written or spoken language; it is much more insightful and inclusive of the stimuli around us, and figured as the basic shapes of thought and perception. To read one of her portraits one must be keenly aware of the *ear* of the word, as much as the *eye*.

And also, of her concept of *remembering*: "Remembering is the only repetition," and that when one wrote—or painted—in the present tense, and as there being no past, there is no memory of the thing being described (or painted). Stein continues:

> The painters were naturally looking, that was their occupation and they had too to be certain that looking was not confusing itself with remembering. Remembering with them takes the form of suggesting in their painting in place of having actually created the thing in itself that they are painting.[16]

We experience a multiple impact: time and space

The crucial thing here is to note that when we view a painting of, say, apples, we do not regard each apple as a repetition, because we look for differences among the apples and regard the painting in the present tense. Stein's view is that the phrases she uses in her portraits are to be viewed in a similar way, and although there is the time-continuum built into the act of reading, we should hold the series of images/words presented to us *on the same canvas*. She called this 'writing in a continuous present' tense.[17]

Couple this with her intention to portray words as audible shapes, and we can tie the eye with the ear to discern a written portrait. Here are the first five paragraphs of a portrait she wrote of Pablo Picasso:

> One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was

> one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.
>
> Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one working and was one bringing out of himself then something. Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one bringing out of himself then something that was coming to be a heavy thing, a solid thing and a complete thing.
>
> One whom some were certainly following was one working and certainly was one bringing something out of himself then and was one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of him.
>
> Something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning, a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning.
>
> One whom some were certainly following and some were certainly following him, one whom some were certainly following was one certainly working.[18]

Given what we know of Picasso's radical artistic directions, especially at the time this portrait was published (1909), we can bring such previous knowledge to the work and the imagery it evokes. But even without such *remembering*, it conveys a movement of shapes and colors; a *rhythm* of the imagery. They become nearly metaphoric of the cubist image that *is* Picasso.

Pictorially, we find in Picasso's, Braque's, Duchamp's and other cubist painters' work a splitting of perspectives; whereas beforehand the history of painting had been grounded in two- or three-point perspective (usually the size of the object diminishing away from the viewer), the cubists portrayed the object from, shall we say, 'a multiple point of view'. A continuous present, where the viewer sees the objects from several positions at the same time, within the same space on the canvas. One can readily see this, in fact, in Picasso's famous portrait of Gertrude Stein: her face and body are portrayed as a set of slightly off-center planes, a technique Picasso was to use in so many of his paintings and sculpture. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) is a fine example of movement portrayed as a series of overlapping planes of a figure across the canvas. The cubist forms and color planes cascade, giving us an added perspective of *movement* on the surface of a two-dimensional canvas.

If Gertrude Stein can be said to have generated the medium of literary cubism as a direct influence of what the cubist painters were doing all around her, then later writers can be seen to have worked strictly within the realm of literature itself to develop their means of expression.

Peter Nicholls used the phrase “a constant negotiation of the *barrier* between opposites” to comment on French poet Paul Reverdy’s work, and it is an apt way to consider many of the problems the cubist artists and writers were attempting to solve. He refers to *a syntax of space*.[19]

Author William Burroughs, an influential voice for the Beats of the 1950’s and a contemporary of Allen Ginsberg, had pursued some interesting experiments at that time in his writing. While Burroughs cannot be called a literary cubist writer *per se*, one of these phases of his work can be termed cubist. The process he developed was not so much writing as reorganizing. He called these “cut-ups”, and gives credit for the idea to fellow writer and poet Brion Gysin, adapted from French Surrealist poet Tristan Tzara’s earlier technique. The process involves reducing existing works, such as published magazine articles, to their basic form of column and letter by cutting them at random (vertically so as to be aligned with the columns) and joining the several pieces together as split-plane pieces. It would be as if you were to cut this page of text vertically, and then lay it part way over another piece of text in, say, another journal, a newspaper, or even a fashion magazine. The reader would then derive a new meaning from the joined planes by reading, as usual, from left to right, but across the split, thereby joining the two parts—or perspectives—into a resultant third meaning. Burroughs’ own ‘negotiation of barriers’ was accomplished in this way. He even cites the work of earlier writers, such as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and John Dos Passos’ *USA*, in that they too may be regarded as collages of imagery. His interest was to offer the reader something that conventional narrative cannot, by establishing new connections between images, “and one’s range of vision consequently expands”[20] each time the reader rearranges the pieces.

We find many examples of cubist imagery in the cinema, primarily through the style of how the images or shots are edited. Films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L’année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961) directed by Alain Resnais and written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, portrays a story told through a series of vignettes that nearly repeat each other. Even the camera angles, action and pace are nearly duplicated—but are never the same. The technique of cyclical editing used to tell the story gives the viewer the aspect of Stein’s ‘continuous present’ as the forms and planes of scene, dialog and story split and are rejoined in many ways.

The film *Wicker Park* (2004), directed by Paul McGuigan and written by Brandon Boyce, (and based on the original French version, *L’Appartement* (1996), written by Gilles Mimouni), uses a similar cubist device where the action takes place over a series of split-plane time frames and locales, not to mention the cross-over of what the various characters know or don’t know, or even suspect to be true. Both *Marienbad* and *Wicker Park* utilize the multi-planar perspectives regarding time, place/space, and memory.

A third film to fall into this cubist category is *Hiroshima mon amour*, also by Alain Resnais, and written by Marguerite Dumas. Its innovative use of flashbacks (memory) pose a vibrant motif for the cascading planes of character and location.

In music, we can hear the cubist pattern in Erik Satie's work[21], and in the contemporary jazz compositions of Edsel Gomez, who in fact calls his latest CD release *Cubist Music*[22]. Their gaunt rhythms, sequenced phrases and like-patterned harmonies portray the essential elements one finds in cubist works in other media. When one recalls that Satie had in fact worked with Picasso on the avant-garde ballet *Parade* in 1917, we may see how the ideas at that time were generated and cross-influenced.

We in this participatory universe

Allen Ginsberg gave a class on early 20th century French modernism at the Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.[23] At one point he focused on the experience of observing Cézanne's work, and in particular, how Cézanne, following the work of the Impressionists, utilized the physical attributes of the eye-mind in portraying his 'system' of rendering on canvas what he saw. (Cézanne referred to this as *ma petite sensation.*) He knew that volumes of bright red will shift the eye away from other volumes of dark blue or green; and he also knew that the eye cannot focus on any two such volumes of color at the same time—there must be a physical and temporal shift from one shape (a dark yellow wall) to another (an orange-red roof). Nobel laureate George Wald's work in color optics is cited as an explanation of how the system works on the perceptional level; yet as Ginsberg implies, it is the viewer's participatory impression of a Cézanne landscape that is of vital interest to us: the language of how the perception works is merely a foundation for what impresses us ultimately. And that impression cannot be readily explained by means of any language we currently know.

Nevertheless, by its very nature, cubism must draw the viewer/reader/listener into the work itself, whether or not we can convey to others the essence of what we see. The viewer of a cubist work is, through a set of shifting/shifted planes of form, shape, color and value, engaged subjectively in the experience from a multiple perspective; the viewer is thus a *participant* in the work. In fact, the key tenets of comprehending a cubist work is to bring to it what psychoanalyst Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer called *participatory knowing*[24], and harkens back to what Gertrude Stein and the cubist painters expected of the reader/viewer. In fact in contemporary scientific research, engineer and futurist Willis Harman has called for greater emphasis in scientific inquiry placed on "identifying with the observed, and experiencing it subjectively. This implies...recognition of the inescapable role of the personal characteristics of the observer..."[25] Physicist John Wheeler addressed in 1974 the impact of recognizing new qualities that emerge in connectedness: "We are inescapably involved in bringing about that which appears to be happening. We are not only observers. We are participators. In some strange sense this is a participatory universe."[26] The observer (the viewer, reader, listener) becomes an integral part of the experience by becoming enfolded in the event. For the viewer, Cézanne is said to have been able to make his apples come alive off the canvas through his cubist approach of basic forms and their corresponding relationships of color values-for the subjectivity of the viewer enfolded in the experience. If, as Carl Jung posited, we are all ‘radically connected’ in a ‘synchronicity’ of experience joined by time and place[27], then it must follow that no one’s own experience of a particular event can ever be the same as anyone else’s. And while Picasso and Stein believed that no two people can experience the same image in the same way, then we see the necessity of defining human experience as a peculiar occurrence that no other person can encounter and interpret in the same way. In other words, there can be no *universal* law regarding any aspect of human behavior— perceptional, behavioral, linguistic or otherwise. The essential factor of *human subjectivity* must be considered as an integral part of every experience.

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