

The political significance of materials in Cubist facture (1909-1918)

Theories of Media and Art

This proposal argues for evaluating cubist facture as an artistic practice of deauratization through the use of materials entangled in a network of industrial production which function as devices for the disordering and displacing of the boundaries between fine arts and popular art. This proposal is embedded in the field of media aesthetics, which puts forward some questions concerning the relation between the emergence of new modes of representation, perceptive habits and technique or facture with regards to new artefacts, appliances and media. As Elo puts it, 'how to relate our sense experience to the technological processes that significantly contribute to our sense of reality?' (Elo, 2018: 35).

In Cubism, the incorporation of materials and facture processes previously excluded from the fine arts advances issues that arise from Benjamin's reflections on the artwork's technical reproducibility in 1936, on its destructive effect on the aura and on the process of desacralization that the artistic objects undergo. This viewpoint will allow us to argue that the politic potential of the Cubist revolution should not be restricted neither to a formal level, due to its rejection of academicist codes, nor to the 'message' of the newspaper texts of the *papiers collés*. The materials themselves and the way they are fashioned, that is, Cubist facture, is infused with political significance in virtue of the symbolic value both materials and techniques acquire in the artwork.

(1) The deauratization process that takes place in Cubist facture can be traced back to the dawn of Cubism, during the period that Douglas Cooper named as *High Cubism* (1909-1914). In Braque and Picasso's experimentation during summer 1912 we can find the first records of the introduction of non-conventional materials such as cardboard, newspaper, wallpaper, music sheets and sand. Out of these explorations, Braque's first *papiers collés* emerge in autumn: charcoal drawings with glued shreds of *faux bois* wallpaper; as well as Picasso's iconic cardboard *Guitar* (see Umland, 2011).

The tactile values and materiality that Cubist facture imprints and etches on the surface acquire a value which is independent from the representative dimension of the piece, expanding the figure towards a dimension of tactility generated by a material and textural language: dense and light, rough and soft, volume and flat.

Cubist artworks tear the purity of figure and, nevertheless, they do not completely abandon pictorial codes, but rather 'work with and against historical styles, subjects, and techniques, reconfiguring the remnants of the classical and the modern, the hermetic and the popular, the handmade and the mechanized' (Poggi, 2011: 103). This tension in cubist facture emphasizes the representational system and highlights the double nature of the artwork as both a material and a symbolic devise, which Poggi designates as the dichotomy *table/tableau* (see Poggi, 1988). The object dimension of the artwork foregrounds its materials and modes of production. This condition in turn the historically conditioned 'perception medium'.

(2) Material exploration acquires new dimensions in Cubist facture between 1914 and 1914, a period which Cooper designates as *Late Cubism* and which concurs with World War I. Against an interpretation of *Late Cubism* as a formalist call for order, this proposal analyses the political signification concealed beneath the materials' choice and the mode of artistic production during this period among artistic communities in the Parisian rearguard. I will argue that Cubist facture vindicates a material precariousness which responds to its geopolitical emplacement where, as Juan Gris puts it in 1916, artists 'should at least have the finesse of not shouting from the

rooftops' their artistic achievements. Not painting the war is not escapism, but rather 'was equivalent to a merely masked desertion of patriotism's rhetoric' (Green, 2016: 9). Wood, gouache, polychrome stone and metal sheet appear in Picasso, Gris, Laurens, Lipchitz and Braque's works, which object to the anesthetization of war policies effected by artistic propaganda.

Which operation does Cubist facture carry out against massive propaganda? What kind of perception regime does it enable? Newspaper, metal sheet and wallpaper refer to a system of industrial production that already pointed towards the forthcoming Pop Art (see Rosenblum, 1990) and, at the same time, material experimentation opens up a new sensory space that distances itself from naturalist transparent representation. However, does this entail a distancing from reality? This proposal argues that texture, density, and stroke in Cubist facture stand for a vindication of the tactility of experience and an intimate material proximity since 1909 and that, from 1914 onwards, they respond to and criticize the false and illusionist spectacularization of allegedly realist artistic propaganda.

Keywords: Cubist facture, Picasso, artistic materials, artistic experimentation, political engagement.

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