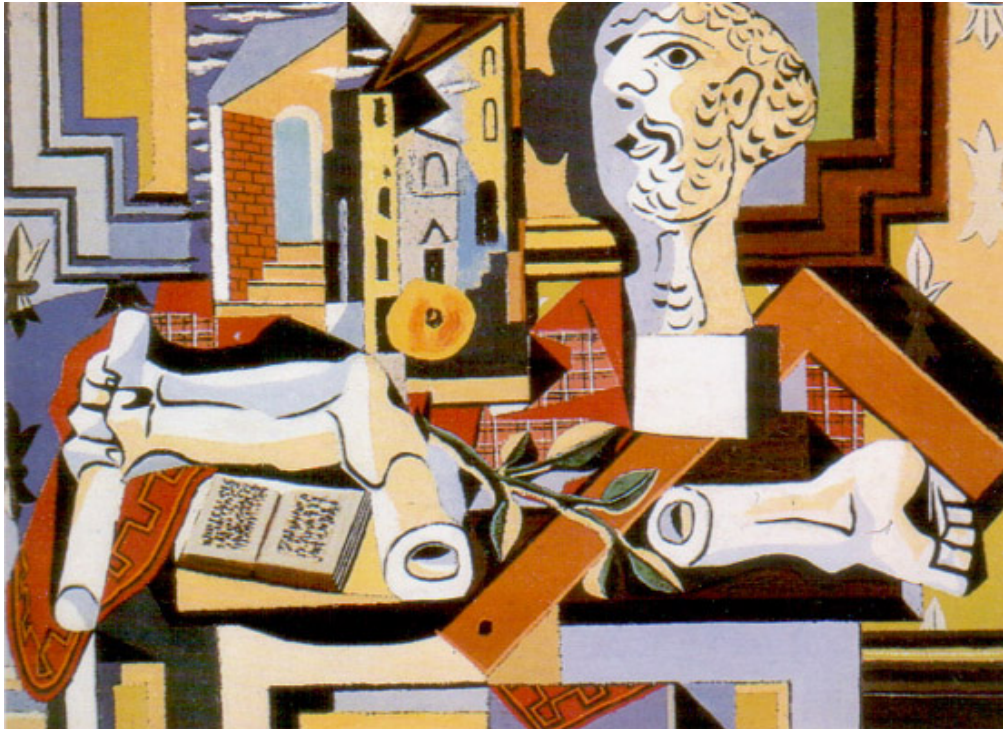


Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The art of the Parisian avant-garde and the First World War, 1914-1925*, Thames and Hudson, London 1989. 251 illustrations, 8 in colour. ISBN 0 500 23567 8.

This remarkable account of the effects of the First World War on the French avant-garde blends an analysis of visual art with social and literary history to form a broad cultural picture. Silver's argument is that the triumph of right wing ideology during and after the war pushed avant-garde artists into making more conventional works which manifested ideas of discipline, order and construction, and often contained references to classicism. This development is seen in terms of a retreat by the avant-garde from their experimental height, as a diversion from their true path, and the author is not afraid to say that the post-war painting of Juan Gris or Roger de la Fresnaye is weaker than their pre-war work.

Although this analysis covers many types of writing and image making, from large scale oil painting to cartoons, from philosophy to journalism, it is not an examination of the mentality of the culture as such. Rather the concentration is on the effect that ideological and social forces had on the artists themselves. The retreat of the avant garde, Silver argues, was partly due to the subconscious absorption of deep seated wartime attitudes, partly a conscious response to political and social pressures. The suspicious and paranoid atmosphere of wartime Paris, and its presumed effect on civilian foreigners such as Picasso and Gris, is well described. One of the problems with such a universal account which takes as its focus the conscious or unconscious motivations of the artists lies in dealing with the exceptions. Matisse figures prominently in Silver's account of avant-garde retreat yet his shift towards a style close to Cubism in the wartime years is difficult to fit into this picture. The problem is particularly acute since the explanations offered for these stylistic changes are based on a kind of loose psychological motivation for which convincing causal links are very difficult to establish. In a comparison of the *Red Studio* (1911) with the *Piano Lesson* (1916), Silver highlights the geometry and what he calls the monochrome regimentation of the later piece stating that art appears here as grand, heroic and moral, as "discipline, as obligation"; this may or may not be a conscious change, for Matisse was "probably unaware" how much his thinking was shaped by wartime attitudes. Matisse's post-war Orientalism on the other hand was "a self-conscious affirmation in the face of anti-Orientalist critics". While the ambiguous nature of the Orientalist

piece in this period is explored (it was at once associated with exotic pre-war extravagance and with nationalist and colonialist attitudes), it is still difficult to square with Matisse's supposed submission to wartime ideology. These problems are features of a bipolar analysis of retreat or resistance described in psychological terms: if Matisse makes works more in keeping with Silver's construction of the ideology that is a retreat, if less a resistance. Equally plausible psychologicistic explanations can be thought up for any particular action.



With the discussion of Picasso's response to the *rappel à l'ordre* the problems are particularly acute. Silver is plainly right that some critics used Picasso's adoption of a classical idiom for part of his work as evidence of a more general return to order, but he neglects other readings of these works (which are after all far from being straight pastiches), above all the idea of play. This relatively straight reading of Picasso's Cubist and non-Cubist work leads Silver into some strange interpretations. The proto-Surrealism of Picasso's *Studio with plaster head* (1925) is ignored in favour of a reading that sees it as a nationalistic and architecturally constructed image.

A way around this type of problem might be to examine the likely readings of particular styles and subjects given the ideological and social background, and Silver's analysis is at its best when he does this. Given these readings, the psychological motivations of the artists are largely irrelevant. The disjunction between the production and reception of the work of art is however largely ignored except in the discussion of the first performance of *Parade* which, Silver argues, was a failure due to a misreading of the public mood.

Cocteau is quoted on the extremes in politics meeting in this period. Cocteau saw himself as being on the extreme right yet thought that he could chat to Tzara or Picabia who were "my neighbours from the other end of the world"¹. There is a general problem in defining and identifying political features in cultural issues during this period partly due to the very complete appropriation of right wing cultural values by the left. Silver's discussion of the Purist movement is a good example of these difficulties. It is true, as Silver states, that Purism stressed qualities of order, construction and clarity that were typical of French post-war values and that these values were among those admired by the right. But what is not assessed is how far these qualities were necessarily associated with the right and how far they could be appropriated by the liberal left. The linked issue of nationalism is also important here; again Silver is right that recognisably French objects, like the Bourdeaux bottle, were held up as paradigms of order in Purist painting and it is certainly possible to find anti-German sentiments within the Purist movement, in Le Corbusier's attitudes to German architecture, for instance. However, the universality of Purist doctrine was clearly spelled out by its authors and exemplified in the internationalism of its journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*. In plotting Le Corbusier's meandering political path from technocratic liberal, to extreme left and then to extreme right, McLeod has shown how easy it was to cross to the other end of the world.²

In order to sustain the argument of a general call to order, it is necessary that Silver downplays the importance of Dada, and that the study ends in 1925, the year in which he sees a crucial break in the *Union Sacrée* consensus, with the emergence of Surrealism. Dada is marginalised as a scandalous and frivolous affair for the aristocratic rich. This is to underestimate the genuine conceptual innovations of the movement and the continuity of personnel and programme between the Dada and Surrealism. In general Silver underestimates the degree of resistance to right wing ideology and the extent of the

cynicism with which wartime propaganda was regarded.³ As a consequence he sees the survival of Cubism in the post-war period as “strange”, though no doubt a matter of resistance. Christopher Green has recently given a very full account of the factors underlying this survival.⁴

Silver establishes a connection between the Cubist style and the depiction of the war. Cubism was much practiced at the Front (for instance in Léger’s drawings of Verdun) and Silver attributes this to similarities between the style and modern warfare, both being new and both involving the dislocation of objects. It is perhaps possible to go further in making formal associations between aspects of the Cubist style and the visual experience of war. Many of the descriptions (found for instance in the work of Barbusse and Dorgeles) of devastated villages, of improvised uniforms or sandbags, stress the heterogeneity of materials and the dislocation of objects rendered in earth colours. These descriptions are reminiscent of pre-war Cubist painting and especially collage even in the elements that make up the *mélange*, newspaper, cloth and domestic objects. In this way Cubism became retrospectively associated with the destruction of the war.

Silver’s book is remarkable as an attempt on a grand scale to relate specific features of works of art in the modern period to social and political factors. It features an extraordinary mixture of popular imagery, literature, political writing and art historical analysis which is handled with clarity—and often with humour. For those that have read Silver’s thesis of 1981 on which this book is based, it will be disappointing that not more has been modified or added, but since that thesis was an exceptional and pioneering piece of work it is very positive to have it made available in a more accessible form with good illustrations.

Notes

¹. Cocteau in *Le Coq*, no. 1 (1920); quoted in Silver, 307.

². Mary McLeod, *Urbanism and Utopia: Le Corbusier from regional syndicalism to Vichy*, PhD, Princeton, 1985.

³. These issues are explored in Jean Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, Leamington Spa, 1985.

⁴. Christopher Green, *Cubism and its enemies: Modern movements and reaction in French art, 1916-1928*, New Haven and London, 1987.