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Review of Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism

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methods of access, despite the dangers of being damned into performing only themselves, and forged potent critiques of cultural practices. *Early American Women Critics* is a gutsy book about gutsy performers.

Jeffrey H. Richards
Old Dominion University

Bernice B. Rose, ed., *Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism*. New York: PaceWildenstein, 2007. 188 pp. £79.95; \$75.00.

PaceWildenstein's exhibition *Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism* ran from 20 April to 23 June 2007 in New York. Those lucky enough to have seen it will surely recall a nice selection of well-known works and less widely published works, including pictures from private collections and from major museums in the United States and abroad. I expect the show itself would have ranked as a proud achievement for most museums. In addition to the fine selection of works on view, though, the gallery included specimens of early cinematographic equipment, which, while they may well be familiar to the historian of early film, helped introduce the exhibition's premise to the art historian whose training is more strictly confined to painting. A screen near the entrance to the exhibition showed video from a vintage, hand-coloured film of the type of dancing made famous by Loïe Fuller; a room adjacent to a gallery of paintings showed examples of the early films that Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and their circle saw in the same years they developed cubism. I found the show not only a valuable opportunity to see a remarkable selection of paintings but also a welcome chance to learn about cinema and film technology at first hand, so to speak.

Very roughly speaking, the argument of the show and of the catalogue that accompanies it is that early film provides a crucial and under-researched context for the emergence and development of cubism. The context, sources and influences of cubism have been topics of intense research for a long time, and discussion of early film's role in inspiring the invention of cubism is nothing new, either. That's especially true if one considers a broad notion of cubism – one that would include, say, the early work of Marcel Duchamp or the cubist-inspired researches of the Italian futurists. Duchamp's interest in the work of Etienne-Jules Marey has stood as an example of the way painting looked to technologies connected to the development of film for hints about incorporating movement in traditionally static pictorial art. Picasso's and Braque's cubism, however, cannot be understood quite the same way. It does not combine views of an object into a series of successive positions viewed from a single vantage. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the dealer who more than anyone else nurtured nascent cubism, reported Picasso's disdain for attempts to make static pictures depict objects in movement. In fact, in *The Rise of Cubism*, which he wrote during the First World War, Kahnweiler reported that Picasso had dismissed (what he understood to be) the futurists' representation of successive positions of an object to evoke movement but suggested that something more satisfying might be achieved either by using a clockwork mechanism to set parts of works of art into motion literally or by using animation to assimilate the technology of moving pictures to pictorial art.¹ I know of no example of Picasso trying either strategy, but Kahnweiler bears witness (already, in 1915) to the attraction cinema (and the representation of movement) held for Picasso, at least.

Nor is cinema's stature among Picasso's closest colleagues in doubt. Guillaume

Apollinaire and Max Jacob, the two poets who were almost inseparable companions of Picasso's during crucial years around the invention of cubism, both paid homage to film in their work. Finally, thanks to memoirs of Picasso's and Braque's associates, such as the poet André Salmon's, we have accounts of the interest the *bande à Picasso* took in cinema.

To date, the best discussion of a specific proposed influence of film on cubism is Natasha Staller's 'Méliès' "Fantastic" Cinema and the Origins of Cubism', which briefly reviews evidence of the *bande à Picasso*'s enthusiasm for early film and then, in greater detail, traces correspondences between early film's 'trick' techniques (practised most famously by Georges Méliès) and the transformations Braque and Picasso worked on representing in their cubist paintings.² Staller does not propose that the cubists borrowed motifs, or that their works look like those of Méliès or of any other filmmaker; rather, she claims 'Picasso and Braque took the tricks and effects also found in three-minute films shown in the street fairs or the basements of billiard parlours and transformed them into the instruments of high art' (Staller 1989, 202). That transformation, Staller is careful to point out, is always fundamentally different from the operations Méliès performs – when Méliès breaks apart a body, it can be reassembled; when Méliès inserts text into his works, it can be read (univocally); when Méliès combines 'real' and 'fake' objects, he leaves their logical or causal relations like those of their ordinary counterparts. The cubists Picasso and Braque, on the other hand, bent trick film's techniques toward irreparable disruption (Staller 1989, 213–17). Staller's project is worth glossing here, if only because it figures prominently in the catalogue – she appears often in the notes and the terms of her argument are the terms on which the catalogue's essays proceed.

In the first essay of the catalogue, 'Cinema and the New Spirit in Art within a Culture of Movement', Tom Gunning traces developments in the history of film's first decades that he unifies in their relation to motion. So the story of a bicycle ride by Alfred Jarry, the serpentine dance of Fuller and her imitators, Méliès's trick films, early chase scenes, even the widespread practice of showing unrelated short films in rapid succession, and of course the discontinuities of cubism, all count as moments in a history of motion in representation. Gunning's essay provides a wide-ranging and thoroughly informative survey of relevant context for the reader who has not studied early film, but like Staller, he makes the argument, wider in scope than hers, that the technologies of film are part of a history of representation that emphatically includes cubism, even if there is no specific formal parallel or influence to be found: 'In the 1890s cinema, a technology of motion was born. In the visions and imaginings of the artists watching in those early audiences, an art of motion was conceived' (31).

Jennifer Wild's contribution, 'The Cinematographic Geographies of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque', does even more to expand the terms of the discussion of cinema as a context for cubism. Wild presents a detailed review of the actual modes of film viewing in Paris and in the more remote locations where Picasso and Braque encountered it. In doing so, she reveals (again, perhaps especially usefully for the art historian who has not made a specialist's study of early cinema) the variety of venues and combinations in which early cinema was shown – among magic acts and in taverns, for instance – and therefore the variety of experiences cinema viewing entailed. She backs up her survey of these modes of exhibition with references to and quotations from the writings of figures associated with the cubists, such as Apollinaire, Jacob and Maurice Raynal. Along the way, Wild offers a rare and exciting kind of contribution: a discussion of a specific and indubitable iconographic source in early cinema for works by Braque, *Program 'Tivoli-Cinéma'* (Rosengart Collection Museum, Lucerne, 1913) and *Guitar and Program: 'Statue d'Epouvante'* (private

collection, 1913). Especially in the latter work, Wild's reading carries from the film to the painting, providing not just good source hunting but a real thematic motive for the borrowing – the film *Statue d'Épouvante* is the story of a sculptor whose daughter dies of a broken heart. The sculptor gets his revenge on the man who caused her demise by delivering her body to his wedding as a commissioned statue titled *Melancholy*. As Wild points out, Braque's reference to the film offers 'visual fodder for the contemplation of mimesis, duplication, and decay' (157).

The volume closes with an exhibition checklist and a handy piece of reference material: a selected and annotated filmography of works Braque and Picasso might easily have encountered in their regular cinema-going rounds during the cubist era. Entries include dates, production companies, directors' names and selective summaries of the plots and action.

The centerpiece of the volume is Bernice Rose's own essay, 'Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism', a rambling, imaginative, often provocative 110-page discussion of early cinema's role in cubism. Rose follows a roughly chronological route in her discussion and, along it, develops several themes: the representation of movement, the appearance of cinematic apparatus in various forms as a half-submerged element of cubist iconography, a parallel between Leonardo's *sfumato* (the soft, 'smoky' haze of his distinctive brand of atmospheric perspective) and the envelope of light from the cinema screen, and the importance of early flying machines to cubism's iconography as well as its thematic interest in modernity's new brands of motion. Rose brings these themes up throughout her discussion, mingling them together deliberately, as if to prevent a narrow conception of her task (tracing the influence of early film on the cubism of Braque and Picasso) from luring the reader back from her interdisciplinary mood onto more clearly mapped terrain within art history's traditional competence. And I think that goal is laudable, even if the result is nearly unreadable. Her prose is difficult to begin with. She frequently writes long sentences that refer in obscure ways to remote points. She boldly asserts as fact what she should, for the sake of clarity as well as rhetorical effectiveness, first propose and then argue. Moreover, having chosen to organise her discussion along chronological rather than thematic lines, she has foregone the kind of separation of themes that would make parsing her arguments easier. For the reader who would prefer a quick summary of the issues and arguments that figure centrally in Rose's text, I recommend the archived video of Rose's appearance, along with PaceWildenstein's director, Arne Glimcher, on the *Charlie Rose Show*. It offers brief discussions of central points and some nice views of the exhibition itself.³

Sometimes, Rose's compressed and elliptical style drove me to distraction, if not disbelief:

'Loïe' [Fuller] played a come-hither game with her dance, alternatively revealing and concealing her body; but just her presence as a technologically armed woman, presenting herself on stage in a provocative announcement of modernity seems to have possessed Picasso. Thus it was not Loïe as a person, or even celebrity, but as a constant icon of technological prowess, sexually mutable and terrifying in her power to create the sensation of endless movement, and to re-create herself endlessly in movement – and in whatever guise – that captured Picasso's attention. And it is this daring figure, this split, this doubled and redoubled Loïe that Picasso portrays in the *Demoiselles [d'Avignon]* [Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1907] and in a series of paintings through 1908 of single and multiple figures portrayed as if in movement from pose to pose, but not yet in motion. (46)

Is Rose suggesting that the figure of Loïe Fuller actually appears in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*? Leaving aside for a moment her unsupported assertion that Picasso was specifically drawn to the figure of Fuller, Rose's suggestion that the *Demoiselles* is to be understood as evoking movement of any kind, let alone dance, is a surprising one. Defending it will require more than asserting that the women hold *contrapposto* poses and that such poses 'install[] a metaphysics of movement' (47). Studies for the *Demoiselles*' sister-project, so to speak, the *Three Women*, such as Rose reproduces on page 45 along with images of a dancer imitating Fuller, can be, and have been, connected with a kind of pinwheel movement (by Pepe Karmel), but that's another claim.

Rose makes a lot of claims that raise doubt – sometimes even doubt about what claim she is making. Multiplying examples would serve no purpose, but does she really mean to say, of the guitar-playing figure in Braque's famous *Le Portugais* (Kunstmuseum Basel, 1911), that a 'cinéphile would recognize one of "his" identities as that of the comedian Max Linder, identifiable by his moustache' (96)? Or, more to the point, since she considers Braque (like Picasso) a *cinéphile*, is she arguing that Braque meant the painting of a Portuguese as in some sense a painting of Max Linder as a Portuguese (because she sees a moustache on him)? I think I can begin imagining how to make the claim – it would involve piling up references suggesting that moustaches could, in 1911, read as Max Linder all on their own, or finding some connection between Linder and Iberian iconography earlier than the 1913 *Max Toreador* – but Rose doesn't travel that route. She opts, here and elsewhere, for dropping a provocative and unqualified suggestion into the space where an argument would go.

And frankly, I think we should be grateful to her for doing that, even if I wish she had found the time, space and energy to support such suggestions. (By the way, Picasso's *Untitled [Man with Moustache, Buttoned Vest, and Pipe Seated in an Armchair]* [Art Institute of Chicago, 1915] turns out to be Max, too [139].) The imaginative proposals she makes are often truly thought provoking. Consider her suggestion that several cubist paintings – Braque's *Mandora* (Tate Britain, London, 1909-10), Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1910), Picasso's *Half-Length Female Nude* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1910), Picasso's *Portrait of a Woman* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1910) – substitute parts of the cinematographic apparatus (cranks, lenses, cones of light) for parts of persons or objects (59, 70, 83, 87). Rose offers no relevant evidence beside the paintings and the forms of the machines, but the connections are sometimes so suggestive (as in the case of Picasso's *Half-Length Female Nude*, especially) that one ought to bear them in mind, even if that just means remembering them until an argument comes along that shows how to make out the significance of the similarities and patterns Rose points out.

The main thing is, I think, that Rose points, beyond the carefully qualified claims of Staller's older argument, into the territory where the intersection of cubism and early film will be found and described more precisely.

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Notes

- 1 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949), 21–2.
- 2 Natasha Staller, 'Méliès' "Fantastic" Cinema and the Origins of Cubism', *Art History*

12:2 (1989): 202–32. See also Natasha Staller, *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso's Cultures and the Creation of Cubism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 137–60.

- 3 <http://www.charlierose.com/shows/2007/06/08/2/a-discussion-about-picasso-braque-and-early-film-in-cubism>, accessed 15 January 2008.

Amelie Hastie, *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. xii+242 pp. \$21.95.

The historical cupboard that Amelie Hastie opens is full of strangely unique and sometimes strangely everyday objects indeed. Out spills, for instance, Mary Pickford's *Why Not Try God?* (1934), *Candy Hits by Zasu Pitts* (1963), and *Sophia Loren's Recipes and Memories* (1998), as well as Louise Brooks' marginalia in a biography of movie mogul Harry Cohn, premier silent film director Alice Guy-Blaché's memoirs, and 1920s movie star Colleen Moore's dollhouse (valued at almost half a million dollars when it was built between 1928–1935 and now housed in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry). Hastie has gathered a remarkable array of cinema-related artifacts. Equally remarkable is what she manages to do with and through this collection in *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History*, one of the most intriguing and well-written recently published books in film studies.

Theoretically sophisticated, fully versed in scholarly debates about gender and history, and deeply – and reflexively – engaged with the mainly written texts she examines, Hastie brings precisely the right sort of curiosity to bear on the ephemera filling her cupboard. In four thematically organised chapters focused primarily on the silent era, she takes up certain highly productive female celebrities, most notably, Moore, Guy-Blaché, and Brooks. *Cupboards of Curiosity* is only tangentially concerned with the biographical details of these women's lives or with the films they appeared in or directed. Hastie is interested instead in the genres and forms – including scrapbooks, memoirs, critical essays, and cookbooks – that these women employed to offer their autobiographical takes on the movie industry and film history more generally. The result is not some randomly arranged flea-market display of movie-related collectibles but an ambitious, provocative book that, through a close reading of specific texts produced by famous or once-famous female stars and directors, engages a set of topics that are (or ought to be) near the heart of contemporary discussions of film historiography: the relations between collecting and the historical archive, between memory and historical accuracy, between authorship and historical authority, and between epistemology and historical inquiry.

Cupboards of Curiosity is best appreciated in light of two increasingly influential recent turns in the study of film history. First, international scholarly efforts to uncover and acknowledge the various important (and, like so many films, long lost) lives and contributions of the many women who worked in the film industry, especially during the silent era. (Hastie was one of the organizers of the important Women and the Silent Screen Conference (2001) and co-edited an issue of *Film History* (2006) devoted to this topic.) And, second, attempts to expand the archive of film history's primary material well beyond motion pictures, movie reviews, and promotional material generated by the industry. In different ways, both of these important and necessary initiatives raise questions taken up by Hastie. What does it mean for film history to recognise the work of these women? Where