# In Defense of Picasso*

George Katsiaficas
*Wentworth Institute of Technology*
*Boston Massachusetts*

**Abstract** *By reviewing three recent productions about the life and work of Picasso—a play, a video, and a museum show—a political critique of the patterns of portraiture explores possible explanations for contemporary negativity regarding Picasso.*

Significant events and personalities disappear for a time, only to reappear in new forms. So it is with the work of Pablo Picasso in Boston. Seldom discussed here for years after the cool reception initially afforded his art by the Brahmins of this city, suddenly Picasso's art and life have taken center stage in the cultural life of the Athens of America. Alongside the Museum of Fine Arts' (MFA) blockbuster show, "Picasso—The Early Years, 1892–1906," Steve Martin's hilarious play, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, played the Schubert Theater. If we add the pay-per-view screening of *Surviving Picasso* (also available in video stores), we find a veritable Picasso revival underway.

Ever since the Spanish Armada, Anglo-Saxon superiority has become a matter of course in relation to Spain, to Spaniards and, for that matter, to anything Mediterranean. Boston's new rendition of the life of Picasso is no exception. These portrayals of Picasso do injustice to his politics and personality. Instead of a politically committed and aesthetically revolutionary human being, we are presented with a genius, an egomaniac, who is both fawningly celebrated and hypercritically ridiculed. Stories of Picasso's sexual exploitation of women, of his crass use of them as toys, or, in what amounts to the other side of the coin, of his dire misogyny and castration fears are widely circulated. How do such stories originate and become "fact," even among people who know nothing about his art?

Part of the answer can be found by watching Anthony Hopkins play the role of Picasso. We are at a loss throughout this performance to keep up with Picasso's numerous mistresses, ex-wives, and lovers. Nor is his apparent collaboration with the Nazis ever explained. The film's jumpy cutting from one scene (and significant other) to another has something of the feel of Gabriel García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* At least García Marquez provided a list of his characters and their relationship to each other. This film purposely seeks to confuse us, thereby assembling a collage of Picasso's politics and love life that is singularly unflattering.

* I would like to thank Foad Vafei, Eliza Dame, Irene Gendzier, Horst Henke, Teodros Kiros, Greg deLaurier, and Billy Nessen for their comments and criticisms.

0739-3148/98/010091-05 © 1998 Caucus for a New Political Science

The crudest forms of control—illustrated in one instance by Picasso kidnapping one of his wives when she tries to leave him—are how we are informed he dealt with any semblance of autonomy in his women. The prudish morality of Victorian England permeates the film's inner message, as does the subtle preference for more genteel (read "English") forms of male domination. Picasso is portrayed as the kind of man for whom a woman—any beautiful woman—is the only thing of importance. For this sex maniac, all that matters in a woman is that she is young and infatuated with his genius. His unique abilities are little more than a vehicle for scoring with the opposite sex.

Fortunately, some of the paintings assembled in the MFA's show tell a different story. Anyone who could create these tender faces of human beings, who could paint torsos of so wide a variety with such sensitivity to the humanity of the body (not its nudity), must have had the ability almost to cast a magical spell. With the wave of his hand, Picasso could transform commonplace junk into works of art—a bull's head appears where before was a bicycle seat and handlebars. Conversely, he could make the figure disappear (as with his analytic cubist paintings).

By the age of 25 (when the MFA show ends), Picasso had found a wealth of material to appropriate. Although he had experimented with many styles, he had not yet found himself. Almost by accident, the MFA show has assembled the raw material from which we can see the young man mature, but we have to know what we are looking for. This was a man of feeling, not a cold detached man always in control—the kind so beloved by the British and typified by their crown prince. After Picasso's best friend, Carles Casagemas, committed suicide in 1901, the young artist, struggling desperately to make a name for himself, brought nothing but blues to the canvas, as if he were possessed by some force beyond his control. At the time, he fretted that he might never emerge from this monochromatic compulsion. For years, he lost the ability to play with forms, to deconstruct them and assemble them afresh with his own distinctive touch, a talent so remarkable even at an early age that his father, an art instructor and something of a painter himself, is said to have given away his brushes after watching his young son complete one of his own unfinished paintings. Interpreting Picasso's blue period, I understand him to be deeply mournful and melancholic, not in the midst of an intellectually constructed aesthetic experiment.

How else can we understand why Picasso's ability to assimilate emergent forms and take them in directions even their originators never imagined was no longer available to him? Evidence abounds in the MFA show of how the artist had already appropriated the avant-garde styles of his day (as well those of artists he admired from previous centuries). We see him wrestle with the colors and symbolism of Gauguin, toy with the painterly transgressions of Van Gogh, imitate the exaggerated limbs of El Greco, and even experiment with the fleeting moments so important to impressionists. His painting *The Fourteenth of July* tingles the viewer's feeling of place. One is easily swept into the canvas, feeling the joviality of the event as though standing by balcony or street corner. Picasso not only imitated master strokes from the past, he often surpassed their most brilliant accomplishments as easily as a child picking up a new toy. So why did he lose his touch? Why did he suddenly fall off the edge? These are unanswered questions in the MFA's presentation. The need to sanitize a bohemian artist and make him acceptable to the viewing public treats his blue

period as chronological event or aesthetic choice, not as a deeply felt block. No mention is made of his numerous experiments with opium, hashish, and different forms of sexuality. Invisibility is the status afforded the anarchist movements and popular uprisings in Andalusia, even though they had a huge impact on Picasso and his contemporaries.[1]

Picasso's status as a member of a circle of outsiders—foreigners, misfits, homosexuals, and marginalized intellectuals—in the art world of Paris at the turn of the century is similarly unthematized. His masterpiece, *The Funeral of Casagemas*, is hung as part of his blue period, but we are left clueless that the subject's suicide was the cause of Picasso's melancholy—a depression obvious enough in his ghastly self-portrait hanging alongside it. Without any understanding of Picasso the man, his art becomes analyzed formally rather than understood as autobiographical and substantive. Accordingly, one critic comments that, in this particular self-portrait, Picasso "made himself appear far more mature and world-weary than he was at the age of 20." No matter that he painted himself recuperating from the suicide of one his best friends, a fellow Spaniard with whom he had learned the ropes as a foreigner in France, a man many people believe was also his lover. Here is one example of how Picasso, the man, is buried beneath academic explanations of his art.

If the film version of Picasso vilifies him, the MFA's collection of his work presents a clean image, one so sanitized, however, that even this man whose entire youthful existence was an attempt to damn bourgeois society, to protest its sterility by living and painting differently, has been made acceptable to the same people who, in his own day, were precisely the ones he sought to disturb. It is no accident that review after review of the MFA show grovels at the feet of the great master, the show's curator, and the paintings—even though many of the pieces in this show are clearly inferior pieces, ones rejected, mutilated. and discarded by Picasso himself.

The show in Boston initially opened at the National Gallery in Washington. Left out of most attempts to establish the pedigree of the MFA show by linking it to its Washington sister institution is any mention that over two dozen paintings hung in DC failed to make the trip to the Hub. Nor did MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art in New York) agree to let even one of its Picassos travel to Boston. As a result, the leftovers hung in the MFA sometimes have the feel of a motley assortment of inferior paintings, many done on off days. Take the still life with flowers (done in Gosol in 1900), remarkable only for how out of place it seems alongside other pieces of the same period. Upon close examination, this painting reveals slash marks meant to mutilate it—probably by the artist who rejected its place in his aesthetic trajectory. And the cantankerous *Lady in Blue* was left behind in Madrid when Picasso returned to Paris in 1901.

There are a number of drawings and paintings worth more than a second look, extraordinary pieces in which Picasso's enormous talents and inspired subjects are brought together. None has more presence than his portrait of

[1]For background on these movements, see Temma Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona* (California, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Also see Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Felix Feneon: Asthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siecle Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

Gertude Stein, lent at the last minute by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Picasso labored for weeks trying to finish the canvas but could not come up with an appropriate face. He finally gave up and went on one of his rare trips. Upon returning, he quickly finished the face, only to have Ms Stein complain that it did not look like her. Unruffled, he is said to have replied that with time she would come to resemble it.

Steve Martin's play captures more of the intellect of Picasso than either the film or the MFA show, but his caricature of Picasso is facile, and a superficial and equally unflattering portrait of the artist emerges. The story is short and sweet: Picasso and Einstein meet by chance in a Parisian bistro in 1904. After a few words of introduction, they recognize the similarity of the unique contribution each will make to the 20th century. When Elvis shows up, they come to the conclusion that the 20th century is an epoch to celebrate because men of culture will have more of an impact than men of power. We can overlook for the moment Martin's ignorance of the tremendous suffering caused by powerful men in this century. World War I alone had a horrific effect on humanity destroying, among other things, the utopian imaginings of several generations.

For all its intelligence and humor, Martin's play provides the same stereotypes of Picasso's character as the screen version. In Martin's script, Pablo meets a young female in the Lapin Agile, or at least he thinks he does, since it turns out they have already slept together. At another point in this one-act production, he asks if can have anything he wants simply by painting it, a query whose potentially magical implications are buried beneath the materialistic personality Martin created to utter them. While Picasso's character is not well developed, Martin's witticisms carry the production. The script reveals why this actor is so funny: he is able to write with the same facility with which he brings us to laugh at his screen antics. In his portrayal of Einstein, we encounter someone with a sense of humor, whose intelligence and propriety are unquestioned, and it is Einstein's role (superbly performed by Mark Nelson) that is most memorable.

Why does Martin's play succumb to the tired portrayal of Picasso as womanizer without heart? One reason is that in this age of the sexual counter-revolution, when stigmatization of people with AIDS is common and promiscuity rare, it is difficult to discuss a womanizer as other than evil. But there are different kinds of such creatures: there are those who simply and heartlessly use women for their own vices, and others for women are taken into their hearts, held in intimate embrace, and made keys to the fulfillment of their own passionate desires. Clearly Picasso was the latter. Unlike men whose separation of reason and emotion permits them to analyze affairs of the heart dispassionately and keep the appearance of purity intact, Picasso's heart and mind were inextricably linked—in both his art and his love life.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, some of the Left's most enduring personalities have been lampooned mercilessly in the mainstream media. Mao Zedong was named a pedophile, Brecht an authoritarian police spy, and Picasso a womanizer and Nazi collaborator. Left out of this revisionist history is any mention of his membership of the Communist Party and his commitment to democracy. How long until we read that Che was a CIA agent?

Creative personalities like Picasso rarely appear in history, and when they

do, as with Mozart or Michelangelo, alongside their prolific accomplishments are stories of personal conflicts and unfulfilled relationships. The contemporary atrophy of utopian imagination contributes to the subsidiary cult of ego-bashing. For a variety of reasons, posterity bequeaths a legacy of personal disparagement to our greatest artists, negative assessments of their character which often overshadow their talents and productivity. Part of the reason rests quite simply in the fact that we all feel small in comparison to these prodigies. What better way to compensate than to project personalities unworthy of our envy? If we all reached for the stars the way these individuals did, what entrenched forces of order would last?