

How does Paula Rego's art illustrate a shift in theoretical ideas from modernism into the postmodern era?

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How does Paula Rego's art illustrate a shift in theoretical ideas from modernism into the postmodern era?

In this essay I am going to outline some of the concepts of modernism as a series of progressive ideas that lead to the second wave of the feminist movement and a change in social attitudes. I will then investigate the theoretical ideas of interpretation, meaning and narrative through the work of Paula Rego.

The term modernism is used to describe western art, architecture and design from the late 19th century through to 1970. From Cézanne to Beuys, this was a period of 'constant innovation' characterized by a succession of ideas and movements that continually challenged a preceding period. Art changed significantly in these seventy years. Artists began by rejecting naturalism, realistic representation and the classical traditions of academic art. They continually experimented with technique and form. They questioned art and the society in which they lived. Above all it was a patriarchal environment where the male artist controlled the creativity and the male dominated authority sold it. Women appeared in art as 'exterior representations either of something else – monuments of Justice, Liberty, Peace...or as objects of men's desire.' (Appignanesi, R & Garratt, C. 2007. P95) (Graham-Dixon, A. 2008, p400)

Modernism can be seen to have developed in three steps.

Firstly, with so many advances in sciences, psychoanalysis, photography and the sheer speed of industrialization at the turn of the 20th century, artists raced to keep up. Artists like, Cézanne, Picasso and the Cubists, Duchamp, Dada and the Surrealists were interested in developing new ways of representing a reality. (Appignanesi, R & Garratt, C. 2007. P45) (Fig 1,2,3,4),

Secondly came abstraction and the idea of art 'representing the unrepresentable.' Artists used forms that had 'no source at all in external reality.' For example, Kandinsky explored the idea of art having a 'pattern of form, colour and line' just

as music has a 'pattern of sound.' In the 1940's Pollock, Rothko and the American abstract expressionists developed their ideas of abstraction. By the late 1960's Carl Andre and minimalist artists started to 'eliminate all elements of expressiveness.' They paired abstraction down to create 'very simple and pure forms of art using modern, industrial materials like concrete. The material became the art. (Wilson, S & Lack, J. (eds.) 2008) (Fig 5,6,7,8),

Finally, the 1960's. This was a period of artistic, social and ideological change. Conceptual art became the term used to describe a new range of unconventional art practices like land art, art made from found objects, written art, photography, film and video art. Artists combined art and language to create performances. For example, Joseph Beuys walked around an exhibition with his face covered in honey and gold leaf describing the pictures to a dead hare he was carrying in his arms. Artist as performer and performance as the art. Conceptualism questioned the artistic process. (Fig 9)

During this time, the second wave of the feminist movement was developing and gaining momentum, questioning conventional assumptions about sexuality and the female role in society.

Their ideas worked to 'dislodge the male dominated, modernist wedge driven between art and life. The elitist, marketeering authority made up of 'predominantly white, western, apparently heterosexual men of the upper middle class' was challenged. Their assumptions of 'national, sexual, environmental and ethnic identities were questioned and a sense of identity became crucial to postmodern thinking. (Stangos, N. 2006, p272-6)

For the first time in a serious way, women entered the creative arena and delivered the female perspective.

Their objective was to express the experience of women in their own terms and create art that was recognizably female.' (Graham-Dixon, A. 2008, p572) 'Feminism had engendered a recognized art movement. (Reckitt, H & Phelan, P. 2001, p68)

Another development was interpretation and in 1967, the French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes proposed that everything in life and culture could be decoded.

In a notorious essay, he proclaimed the 'death of the author' He meant the traditional, heroic "Author" passing on his words of wisdom to a grateful, and essentially passive, public. (Sim, S & Van Loon, B. 2009. p72)

The viewer has the ability to make his or her own meaning, regardless of the artist's intentions. 'That narratives take on a life of their own after they leave the author and pass into general circulation.' (Sim, S & Van Loon, B. 2009. p73)

The viewer has an individual belief system so art is open to interpretation.

The concept of the 'viewer' was also analysed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser's theory of 'interpellation.' He suggested that images and text work by catching the attention and targeting the codes and conventions of social groups. (Appignanesi. R & Garratt, C. 2007. P74).

To be interpellated by an image, then, is to know that the image is meant for me to understand, even if I feel that my understanding is unique or goes against the grain of a meaning that seems to have been intended. (Sturken, M & Cartwright, L. 2009. p50)

Modernism ideas about the representation of 'reality, abstraction and concept' within a male dominated authority were now seriously challenged by innovative art practices and the feminine perspective of women artists. There was a shift in the relationship between artist and viewer and a concretizing of the narrative content of art as a complex conversation between artist, audience and viewer. An image is there to be read and can tell a story, the viewer is free to interpret this narrative and an image can target the viewer.

We had now reached a time when so much more was considered to be art. The emphasis had shifted from viewing a picture to being involved in its interpretation. The feminist artists built on this too and were given their opportunity to contribute.

Exploring this female perspective and narrative, I will consider 5 works painted between 1965 and 1990 by the feminist artist Paula Rego, whose practice during a fifty-year career has developed from semi abstract to figurative. Her work addresses the subjugation of women and violent relationships between the genders. Narrative is central to her work,' to paint, Paula Rego must have a story; and her favourite way of telling a story is to paint.' (McEwen, J. 1992, p16)

Rego was born in 1935 in Portugal into a middle-class, catholic family during the Salazar regime and educated in the formal academic style taught at the Slade School of Art in 1950's. She grew up in a patriarchal society but was able to develop as an artist in London during the radical 1960's.

She was inspired by the Surrealists 'central ambition to understand and communicate inner dreams and desires' and 'excited by its determination to erode all the boundaries and break all taboos.' (Bradley, F. 2007, p6)

The Cobra Group and their 'semi abstract paintings of brilliant colour and violent brushwork inspired by primitive and folk art' also influenced her. (Graham-Dixon, A. 2008, p521) However, it was the naïve, childlike simplicity of Dubuffet that gave Rego the confidence to 'abandon serious grown-up easel based art and simply draw and draw until the pictures came, raw in both colour and mood.' (McEwen, J. 1992. P57) Drawing is the fundamental practice in Rego's practice. She says:

'I love doing it, and I love looking at it. Good drawings are more intensely alive than any other art – they are about being alive.'
(Bradley, F. 2007, p42)

Her sources are wide ranging, inventing, adapting and adopting pre-existing stories to create paintings full of narrative and imagination. She turns the narrative upside down, plays with the expected and unexpected and changes the rules. She collects from her own experiences and stories, other people lives, books, newspapers, magazines, films, cartoons, myth, nursery rhymes, legend, politics and religion. Her pictures mix the real with the invented, the willed with the unconscious, love with despair. She delights in the antisocial and sets out ambiguous scenarios with characters ranging from Snow White to dying dogs and toys to weeping cabbages. (Bradley, F. 2007) (McEwen, J. 1992)

The idea for *Stray Dogs* 1965 (*The dogs of Barcelona*) (Fig 10), came from a story in the *Times* reporting that the Spanish authorities were killing stray dogs with poisoned meat. Rego depicts a frieze of dogs running across the top of the picture and raw flesh; writhing dogs and enormous flies sit below. A white figure from the fable of the Rich man and Lazarus represents the beggar Lazarus whose sores were licked by dogs. The inspiration for the very top of the painting came when the artist found her husband 'snogging' another woman. She was livid and introduced the woman into the picture as a 'large black tongue.' (<http://www.webofstories.com/play/17609> Number 19. A difficult period for my work.) A threatening, heavy dark area 'representing sloth, indifference and immediate self-interest.' (Bradley, F. 2007, p14) She paints the injustice of the dog's cruel deaths and of betrayal in her own life.

She speaks through her pictures because,

The greatest problem of my life has been the inability to speak my mind – to speak the truth. Adults were always right, never answer back. To answer back felt like death, like being in a sudden huge void. I'll never get over this fear, so I've hidden in childish guises – or female guises. Little girl, pretty girl, attractive woman. Therefore the flight into storytelling. You paint to fight injustice. (McEwen, J. 1992. p17)

Rego used acrylics and collage during this period, as the quick drying, vivid colours appealed to her and made her violent, mutilated forms seem more

shocking. The brightly coloured images drawn in a doodling comic book style in, *The Punishment Room* 1969 (Fig 11) suggest girlish fun but are placed side by side with headless, limbless foreboding male figures. This story references the religious domination of Catholicism in her childhood and the stifling constraints of the Slade Schools fine art tradition.

Her paintings appear semi abstract but her images entice the viewer to move around the composition and decipher the hidden meaning or the truth behind a tortured form or a talking rabbit. For instance in *Pregnant Rabbit telling her parents* 1982 (Fig 12) Rego depicts a pregnant school-girl rabbit 'shrugging nonchalantly' at her hobnail booted, cigarette smoking father, while her mother, depicted as a crying cabbage is paling into the background. Rego is the rabbit telling her parents that she is to become an unmarried mother.

She alters the scale of the figures in *The Dance* 1988 (Fig 13) to make the woman on the left larger than life and hence increases her importance. She stares directly out at the viewer while a number of ways of being a woman unfold around her. The child dancing with her family, pregnant woman in love, a betrayed woman and a woman dancing alone. That year, Rego's husband died, so like the woman in the picture she has lost her man and is alone. This painting sums up stages of life, family and relationships. (Bradley, F. 2007, p42)

In 1990 Rego was appointed the first Associated Artist at the National Gallery. She spent a year making work related to the collection. The best known and spectacular of which was *Crivelli's Garden* 1990 (Fig 14). It is a depiction of the Virgin Mary, female saints and mythological heroines, all of who appear in paintings throughout the collection. Drawing on Portuguese culture, religious stories and the art within the National Gallery, Rego paints a set of pictures depicting real everyday women with concerns, dreams, personalities and responsibilities. Martha sweeps, Mary Magdalene dreams, Judith worries, Mary and Elizabeth meet up for a chat. She depicts 'women's humanity.'

With this selection of work I have concluded that Paula Rego's practice is in the tradition of Modernism but with a subversive and antisocial edge.

She draws on historical, psychological and literary references to find new ways of 'representing reality' but from a multitude of unexpected perspectives. She tells the story through the dying dog, young woman, betrayed woman and woman alone. She 'represents the unrepresentable' tension of violence between the genders and reminds us that dogma and oppressive moral codes are powerful and should be challenged. She exposes the injustice of authority, oppression, social stigma and the roles women are expected to play in society.

Her work explores and manipulates the postmodern ideas of interpretation and interpellation. Her narrative calls out to the viewer to feel outrage, disgust, revulsion, fear, abandonment, loss and love.

Rego's narratives are central to her work and every one of her pictures has a powerful story to tell. You just have to read them.



Fig 1, Cézanne, P. (1906) The Gardener Vallier in the Tate Collection,
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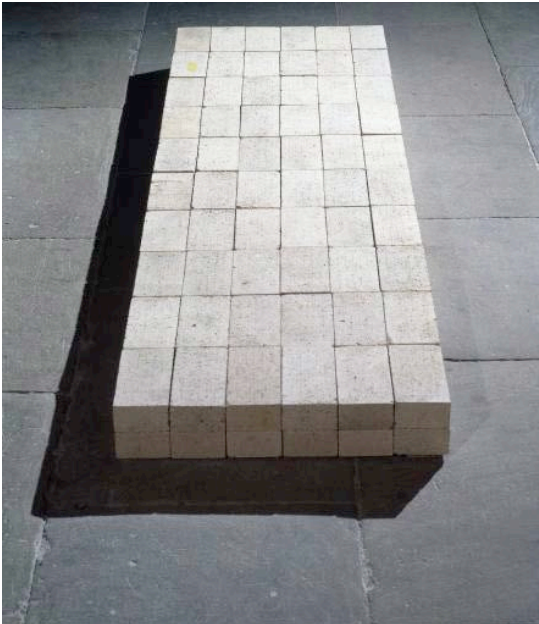


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