

THE CUBIST DETECTIVE, OR THE ECLIPSE OF THE *FLÂNEUR*

Roger Rothman

This essay concerns the historicity of spectatorship, the ways in which methods of viewing (and of interpreting that which is viewed) can be seen to have changed over time. Modes of visual engagement change, the horizon of expectation shifts, and methods of interpretation are transformed. By all accounts, one of the most significant shifts took place with the Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque—a shift not only in terms of pictorial construction, but also in terms of visual reception.

Typically, historical periods are bounded by military events. Thus is so-called “high modernism” bound by the two World Wars. On the one hand, this is surely a disciplinary convenience, a useful tool to unite a disparate assortment of objects, practices, and discourses that have nothing more in common than the coincidence of their having taken place between two wars. One wonders, however, is there, in fact, a collection of salient experiences that one can say were common, if not universal, in the years between 1914 and 1945? In approaching this question, one would do well to begin, as Slavoj Žižek has recently done, with the case of Ernst Jünger, for whom face-to-face combat in the trenches of World War I was to be celebrated as the purest example of an authentic interpersonal encounter (6). For Jünger, the immediacy and unambiguousness of warfare served to underscore the otherwise persistent anxiety that everyday social interactions were superficial, if not altogether phony.

Jünger’s wartime reflections are indicative of a broad sweep of interwar experience. For example, Tristan Tzara, although at odds in almost every way with Jünger, was nonetheless in full agreement regarding the inauthenticity of