

# Is logical analysis adaptable for art criticism?: A comparison between Russell and Fry

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## Introduction

In this paper I will take up the topics of Bertrand Russell (1872-1964), who is regarded as an out-dated philosopher in the domain of logic today, although in the early 20th century he was quite accomplished. Following that period, with the rapid advancements in the field of logic, he came to be forgotten. However, his approaches are still thought of as remarkable. A. J. Ayer (1910-1989) has described Russell as “the Picasso of modern philosophy”[1]. Ayer himself remained a logical positivist after the 1950’s, increasing the importance of the late Wittgenstein. Finding a base in Ayer’s statement, A. C. Danto is perhaps the first to call Picasso “the Russell of modern art” in his 1996 essay [2]. Danto, also an analytic philosopher, later became one of the leading art critics of his time. Taking into account these statements given by Ayer and Danto, interestingly, Russell evolved his new logic and Picasso developed his new pictorial form at the same time in the early 20th century.

In the following analysis, I will try to explain that Russell’s logic, taken as seemingly irrelevant to painting, is actually applicable to it. It is not what Russell himself had intended, but plausible through the mediation of an art critic who knew Russell’s logic. Roger Eliot Fry (1866-1934), who was one of Russell’s friends since their college days [3], was also a dedicated proponent of modern art. I will show that the analytic method proposed by Russell finds its analogue in the cubist painting. As we have seen, it is already touched upon simply by Ayer and Danto, but they left out a concrete confrontation between painting and Russell’s logic. In the following chapter, we will confirm an analogy of logical propositions to paintings through the comparison between Fry’s criticism and Russell’s theory, and eventually, try to suggest the point where they break away.

## 1. Russell’s analytic philosophy and Picasso’s analytic Cubism

How did Russell’s method of “analysis” develop to be received with a big impact in his time? Bertrand Russell commenced his philosophical and mathematical studies in 1890 at Trinity College, Cambridge. Initially, he supported idealism under the influence of a Hegelian philosopher, John Ellis McTaggart (1866-1925), but eventually refuted it with one of his friends, George Edward Moore (1873-1958), as they were not interested in “why things exist” but “how things exist”. In his memoirs “My Early Belief”, one of Russell’s friends, John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), recapitulated about Moore’s analytic method as follows: according to Moore’s method, “you could hope to make essentially vague notions clear by using precise

language about them and asking exact questions. It was the method of discovery by the instruments of impeccable grammar and an unambiguous dictionary”[4].

“How things exist?” Posing such a question, Russell often invoked everyday things such as a table or glasses. Russell thought that a table or glasses could be known when they did not appear in anyone’s sight, since they could still be described. Russell preferred to use the proposition “the present king of France is bald” which consists of the parts “being the present king of France” and “being bald”. There, “the present king of France” functions as a “denoting phrase”. A denoting phrase can denote a certain object in correspondence to the everyday world, but also can denote no particular object. From a viewpoint of existence, the proposition “the present king of France is bald” is “false”, since there is no king of France today. The traditional logic deriving from Aristotle had put stress on such a correspondence between a denoting phrase and its real referent. But, even though a proposition itself is “false”, it makes some “false” meaning as a full-described proposition. And we must be able to know any kind of meaning of propositions from its described propositional form.

In his article “On denoting” (1905), Russell demonstrated that all propositions could be thought and discussed whether its denoting phrase had its real object or not [5]. He used the word “acquaintance” to designate a visual phenomenon. “All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking about many things with which we have no acquaintance”[6]. When we examine the proposition “the present king of France is bald” in relation to the real world, we have to abandon examining it immediately since there is no present king of France. Even if this proposition is false, it is important to provide some special method in order to examine the expressed meaning in it. By introducing variable “x”, Russell analyzed the proposition as follows: when “x is the present king of France” and “x is bald” is compatible, then the proposition “the present king of France is bald” is true. Russell called such an expression that contains variables “x” and turns into a proposition by substituting for “x” a particular noun, a “propositional function”. In this way, the meaning of the proposition “the present king of France is bald” can be analyzed independently of its correspondence to reality. Russell called this method “description theory”.

However, further put forth in Russell’s description theory, he proposes that whether the proposition is significant or not is based on the judgment of the subject who analyzes it. In 1914, he tried to reconstruct his theory accordingly, focusing on the autonomy of logic in his article “The relation of sense-data to physics”[7]. In order to prove the existence of an individual object without any cognitive subject, he proposed the concept of “sensibilia” instead of sense-data and tried to separate a proposition from its cognitive subject. This “sensibilia” means literally “those which are able to be sensed”, or “the appearance that thing presents in places where there are no minds to perceive them”[8]. In Russell’s own definition, it means “those objects which have the same metaphysical and physical status as sense-data, without necessarily being data to any mind”[9]. He said that the relation between a *sensibile* and sense-datum is similar to the relation between a man and a husband. That is, “a man becomes a husband by entering into the relation of marriage, and similarly a *sensibile* becomes a sense-datum by entering into the relation of acquaintance”.

So how does one explain the existence of *sensibile* which have no percipient? To resolve

this question, Russell resorts to a conception of “perspective”. According to his account, this conception derived from Leibniz’s idea which made a clear distinction between the space as perceptions within each monad and the space in which these monads themselves were disposed. On one hand, when a percipient sees objects, they are disposed into its private space. This space is a phenomenon within a private perspective (view) of the percipient and there are as much private spaces as percipients. On the other hand, this private space does not contain *sensibilia* which are independent of any percipient. This means that there is a more comprehensive space which contains *sensibilia* and percipients themselves. Russell calls this kind of space “perspective space”. In a lecture which was titled “The Ultimate Constituents of Matter” (1906), he explains the relation between each three-

dimensional private space and perspective space which embraces these private spaces in its own three-dimensional space as follows: “... the one all-embracing three-dimensional space is logical construction, obtained by means of correlations from a crude space of six dimensions. The particulars occupying this six-dimensional space, classified in one way, from “things”, from which with certain further manipulations we can obtain what physics can regard as matter; classified in another way, they form “perspectives” and “biographies”, which may, if a suitable percipient happens to exist, form respectively the sense-data of a momentary or of a total experience”[10]. Within this embracing space which enables infinite possible perspectives, there can be a perspective which belongs to no one (fig.1). This figure shows that one coin is seen in different distorted ways from each perspective. We will review this figure later concretely in comparison to a vision of paintings.

Russell’s analytical philosophy, as Ayer and Danto have suggested, can compare to the cubist method, because cubist painting also shows its own “analytic” method. Russell’s analytic philosophy shows that a proposition such as “the present king of France is bald” can be decomposed into plural propositional functions and, according to their relation, it can be considered a significant proposition whose meaning is analyzable. Meanwhile, what method has Cubism achieved by decomposing a figure into plural elements?

It is known that Cubism began with Pablo Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* in 1907. As its name suggest, cubist paintings consist basically of cubes and represent the same figure seen from different directions or angles on one picture plane to make distortion in the shape of a visual object. On the other hand, by doing so, they can express the changing or movement which traditional representation has never acquired. In traditional representation of space, a single-point perspective reveals a throw of one painter’s gaze, like as in Russell’s private space, being seen by one percipient deploys things into a single perspective [11]. And this painter’s

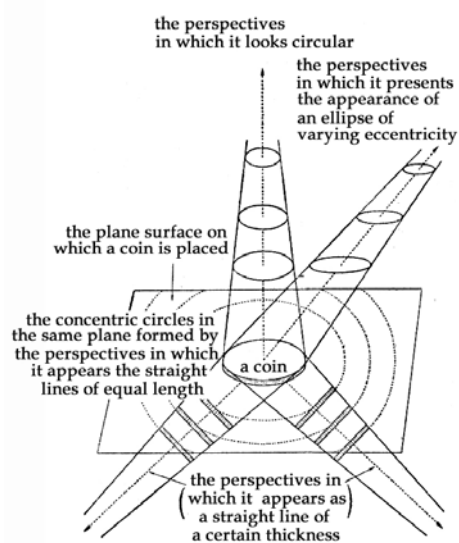


fig. 1: “Phenomena of a coin from the perspectives” by Minosuke Emori in Japanese version of *Mysticism and Logic*, p.184.



fig. 2: Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Favorite Custom*, 1909, oil on panel, 66×45.1cm, Tate, London.



fig. 3: Pablo Picasso, *Portrait d'Ambroise Vollard*, 1910, oil on canvas, 93×66cm, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



fig. 4: Pablo Picasso, *Tête d'homme moustachu*, 1912, oil on canvas, 61×38cm, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

private space which shows a single fixed view is also possessed by the viewer who watches his painting. In other words, viewers are restricted in their vision according to the single-point perspective in traditional paintings. Generally, Renaissance paintings are known to be obedient to this single-point perspective (*perspectiva*), but actually it is rather academic paintings painted later on the model of them that are willingly loyal to it (fig.2) [12]. While these pictorial spaces constructed according to a code of *perspectiva* are occupied by each viewer who watches them, cubist pictorial space abandons a single-point perspective so that there are plural vanishing points; in other words, it is not occupied by a single percipient.

In the later half of 19th century, before the cubist movement began, a French painter named Cézanne created singular paintings to put the gap of vision between both eyes into his picture plane [13]. Cézanne's method of painting did not consist of

drawing contours to designate a shape then paint inside of them, but in putting touches directly on the canvas to leave colored facets. As in seeing an object, both eyes see from slightly different angles, so that its shape is represented distortedly. By considering their gap strictly Cézanne created this effect in his paintings. Moreover, in Cézanne's picture plane, the three-dimensional depth is shallow and its composition does not converge to a single point.

As a result, viewer's gaze can hardly penetrate into this depth before it is drawn backward. It is said that Cubism originates itself from this kind of method that seizes the objects facet by facet. But, unlike impressionist color patches, these facets still have a slight depth or three-dimensionality which is not acquired through an imitation of reality. If Picasso's method around 1907-8 is called "proto-Cubism" or "Cubism cézannien", it is because his method is similar to Cézanne's. In Picasso, a decomposition of three-dimensional space goes further than introducing the gap between both eyes in a pictorial plane. In 1910's *Portrait d'Ambroise Vollard* (fig.3), while the head of Vollard leaves an aspect of three-dimensionality, the rest is decomposed in its shape. In 1912's *Tête d'homme moustachu* (fig.4), all is so decomposed into plane rectangles that the picture plane no longer shows any depth. The current from 1908 to 1911 or 12 is called "analytic Cubism".

These paintings do not show a fixed space seen by one subject but perspectives of plural percipients. Moreover, there exists a figure which should not have actually appeared to one's vision and could not exist but as a *sensible*. The cubist method, as we have suggested in the above explanation, turns our attention from the relation between a subject and a painting toward the relation among components themselves within a construction on a picture plane. It is very similar to Russell's analytic method as these cubist paintings seem to embody his "perspective space".

## 2. Seurat's "empty space" and infinite distances – an analysis of colour

We regard the constituents of Russell's theory of propositions as minimal denoting phrases, and thus not phoneme. Therefore, it seems to be inappropriate for his theory to include shapeless colour in an analysis. A phenomenon of optical objects, Sense-Data, always has colour. Russell's theory of propositions enabled us to show the relationship between sense-data and sensibilia in conceptual forms. Unfortunately, we can describe sensible colour by verbal expressions, but not perceive it. What are important for geometric compositions such as analytical cubism, are lines, forms and their location. So, analytic cubists eliminated colour which constitutes one of form and organized a monochromatic plane that often included grey, blue and ochre. Now, I would like to consider the possibility that we can take the relationship between sense-data and sensibilia perceptually, as colour, which is one of the essential elements of paintings, is impossible to be recognized by mathematic model or words (description).

One of Russell's friends, art critic Roger Fry, introduced contemporary French art to England in the early 20century, giving the works of artists such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin the name of "post-impressionists". He equated the "relation" between colours and forms in paintings with "the way the constituents are put together"[14]. One of Fry's cardinal terms was "significant form"; the common quality is significant form, that is to say, forms related to one another in a particular manner, which is always the outcome of their relation to  $x$  (where  $x$  is anything that is not of itself form) [15]. "X" is an assignable sign which has the feature of a variable in a propositional function. When the relation between forms and " $x$ " is significant, Fry called these forms of art work "significant form". In this statement, he insisted

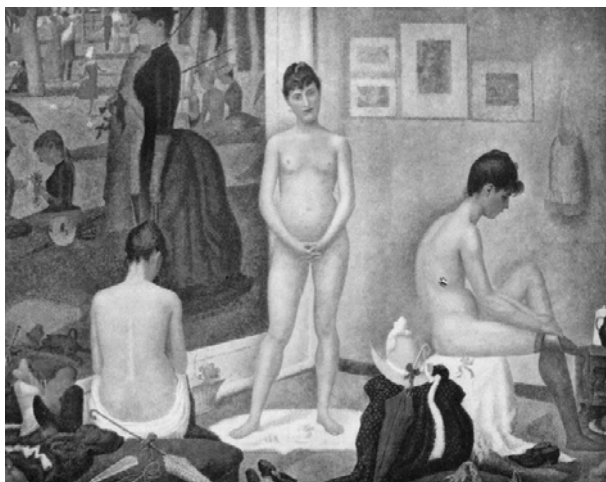


fig. 5: George Seurat, *Les Poseuses*, 1888, oil on canvas, 200×251 cm, The Barnes Foundation.

that the normative form did not exist beforehand, but that the form is altered by the way the constituents are put together. Fry emphasized “Looking at” more than Russell did. His form is of a plastic quality made up of optical constituents.

Look at George Seurat’s *Pouseuses* (fig.5). The quiet atmosphere around the models’ picture plane implies that his painting is not completely representative. The model presented in this painting was taken from a number of sketches he made. If we are seeing one model in three poses, not three women posing together, Seurat has made the same model pose from the back, side and front views in a corner of his room and reconstructed them. He emphasized a special plane. As we have discussed, Russell thought “the way the constituents are put together” in the propositional form is more important than if the constituents exist or not. Likewise, Fry placed more emphasis on “the relation of forms and colour to one another” within the pictorial form and less on the “accuracy in the imitation of the appearances of nature”[16]. He viewed a painting as the place where a new world is created. Regarding *Pouseuses*, Fry mentioned “...but it is less remarkable here where the deliberate arrangement by the artist of the models in the studio gives already a certain air of unreality to the thing seen”[17]. The expression of Seurat’s painting is, “...primarily designs of specially conceived spaces filled by specially interpreted luminosities and colour vibrations”[18]. Fry asserted that Seurat’s painting, even if it is representative, is different from a traditional picture plane which is occupied by one percipient, as, in Seurat’s painting, the same model appears from several perspectives at different times.

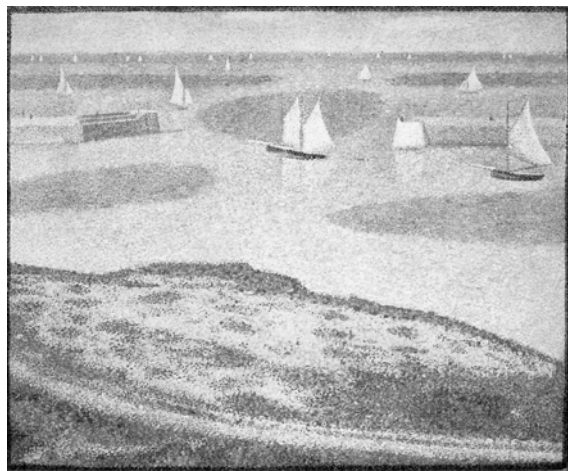


fig. 6: George Seurat, *Fishing Fleet at Port-en-Bessin*, 1888, oil on canvas, 54×65cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In the next of Seurat’s paintings, *Fishing Fleet at Port en Bessin* (fig.6), Fry alluded to an all-embracing perspective space in addition to several perspectives. “When viewed at a short range this appears as an almost flat pattern design, but retire to the other end of the room and the planes stretch to infinite distances, with almost the effect of an illusion”[19]. When taking a close look at the juxtapositioned patches of colours of pointillism, they seem to be a sequence of particles, but at an appropriate range they appear as shapes and inclinations. Going back to Russell’s theory of perspective, they appear as surfaces, a part of the forms within

our vision, their size or shape changing if looked at from different angles or distances. In fig.1, a coin looks like a precise circle when viewed from directly above, or it looks like an oval when viewed from an oblique angle above. When the coin gets too close to the eyes or too far from the eyes, it disappears out of sight. Thus, there is a practical distance within which we can look at an object. In other words, we can postulate a given perspective from a painting. Fry suggest that Seurat showed imperceptible distance and shapes in his painting. These spaces made by *sensibilia* and a given per-  
 cipient are equivalent to perspective space. Fry suggested it “is always the outcome of their relation to x”.



fig. 7: George Seurat, *Le port de Gravelines*, 1890, Oil on canvas, 73×92.5cm, The Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Seurat consciously depicted a flat picture. Fry said that Seurat’s own definition of the art of painting was “the art of hollowing out a canvas”. “Who before Seurat ever conceived exactly the pictorial possibilities of empty space? Whoever before conceived that such vast areas of flat, unbroken surfaces as we see in his ‘Gravelines’ (fig.7) could become the elements of a plastic design? And yet nothing less ‘empty’, pictorially speaking, can be imagined”[20]. According to this criticism by Fry, it is thorough Seurat’s particle field that the unoccupied perspectives come to exists in the picture area, even though no one’s perspective is captured within the plane.

### 3. Logic for description and logic for sensibility

When we postulate Russell’s perspective space, and introduce it into art criticism, we can discuss art-work from a neutral standpoint. So, this idea does not require us to think about them in the light of an absolute idea, nor to judge them by a prejudicial view of the subject of perception. Be that as it may, his perspective including variable “x” is not the only model; it is not completely objective, and thus I would like to call it the quasi-objective (a variable “x” is not “sensibilia”)[21]. Depending on this perspective, we can talk about *sensibilia* as one of the constituents of pictorial form. In other words its form is possible to be judged by abstract forms without lines; unclear shapes like a stain and even “hollow” or “emptiness” in the all-over style of painting which avoids any points of emphasis or identifiable parts within the whole canvas [22].

However, art criticism and logic must inevitably split into two directions. Even if Fry’s form is equivalent to the form of logical proposition, a painting is not as adequate an absolute as a logical proposition. Fry put emphasis on a “logical coherence” which is an internal principle unseen by the eye. But art-works are sensible compounds with colours and shapes. Therefore, he had to analyze and evaluate “the relation” of internal components of an art-work

from an aesthetic standpoint. It is from this point that there is a great divide between painting and logical proposition, or art criticism and logic. At this point, it may be beneficial to consider Russell's theories and the difference in Fry's own original criticism. It may show what painting cannot deal with through Russell's theory, and what painting can deal with through Fry's.

The fundamental difference between the two theories is in the idea of "to see" and "to be seen". As mentioned above, Russell thought of "things that can be seen" as an "appearance" of the object. His theory allowed us to discuss perspective space without percipients, a percipient's private space, and objects that should be in a particular place. Following this thought of Russell's, we can recognize that painting exists in perspective space, although the subject of perception who integrates pictorial space does not exist. However, for Fry, the "appearance" without percipients, or "sensibilia" can not only be described as constituents of form, but also judged. "Sensibilia" should be perceived as sense-data. Because art-works including painting have colours and texture, Fry as an art critic had to judge them from an aesthetic standpoint. Seeing colour definitely requires the faculty Fry calls "sensibility", which responds to life and "corresponds to our desire for variety, multiplicity, chance, the unforeseeable [23]".

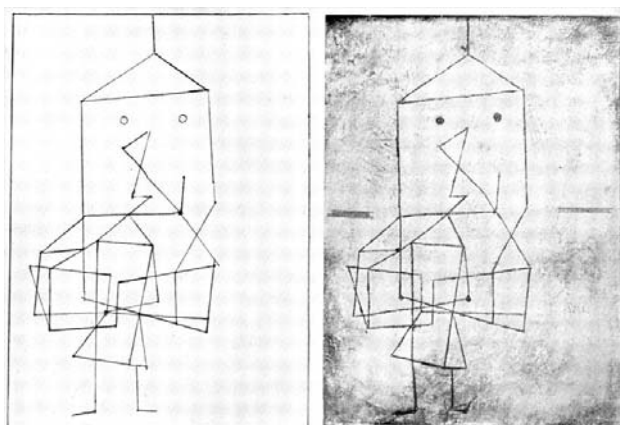


fig. 8: "Drawing by Paul Klee (right) and ruled copy (left)" in *Last Lectures*, p.16.

When we perceive an art-work as sense-data with colour, we see it by the senses. Its surface represents an artist's sensibility. On the other hand, when we recognize the art-work as an ideal unity, we see the internal relation within it logically, but taking into account the various elements that make up the painting, we see the artist's sensibilities reflected in the painting. For example, if we notice the texture of Cézanne's painting, this can be seen as a trace of the artist's sensibility. If we notice his painting as a form, there

exists logical relation. In his lecture on "sensibility (1933)", distinct from ordinary logic for mathematics or science, Fry called logic for art "sensual logic", "it [intelligence] can even be replaced by a machine as in calculating and logical machines... The order it seeks for, and partially establishes, is one of absolute uniformity – all circles are identical statements of a proposition – all ellipses which correspond to a given formula are identical. But the distinguishing characteristic of living things is precisely that each one is unique – all the leaves of a tree conform to a recognizable type but no two leaves of a tree are identical in shape"[24]. His statement reminds us of Leibnitz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles. Fry compares Paul Klee's drawing with its copy drawn by a scale and a compass (fig.8). The ruled line of the copy is truly representative of the original and its composition reflects Klee's sensibility. However, the original shows more than a drawing itself: lines which form the upper triangle are drawn vigorously from the top downward to the rectangle body; in the middle of the



rectangular face, jagged lines are drawn carefully; and there are lines with unequal width in the leg parts. Furthermore, the pressure of the drawing makes a roughness of surface and shows texture. These two drawings represent the same composition, but they are two entirely different things. It is the difference that a viewer can be aware of only by one's sensibility.

There seems to be no difference between Klee's drawing and the ruled copy from an all-homogenizing perspective. Both appear to be simply geometrical compositions. In an unoccupied perspective, we can recognize a partial difference, but we cannot note a difference between textures because everything is flattened. Seurat's painting as mentioned-above, even if it contains representations of unoccupied perspective, the same as Russell's logical constructions, it is necessary to be judged by a critic who has aesthetic vision.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined, through the criticism of Roger Fry, the analogy between painting and logic, including "colour" and "texture" which we cannot perceive by way of description. This type of speculation has not been explored completely by previous works, such as Ayer or Danto. Russell thought logical components contain not only a mathematical formula and language but even that of matter and space. His ideas enable us to deal with art-works as equivalents for logical proposition.

The reason why Russell's unoccupied perspective is useful to analyze art-works that appeared in modern art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is difficult to comprehend by the traditional way of thinking. Regarding the works of those such as Matisse and Cézanne, made without one-point perspective which represents an artist's own perspectives, refuses any narrative interpretation: With how much accuracy does it represent the original object?; Who should we focus on in the picture plane? These paintings require the objective attitude that is necessary to deal with abstract shapes the same as representative figures. When we encounter the new pictorial space which does not resemble the real world, when we discuss the plastic relation of works, Russell's theory of perspective is considered of value. However, it is necessary to employ Fry's "aesthetic vision" and "sensual logic" in order to realize the subtleties of the colour and texture of art-works [25].

## Notes

- [1] See Ralph Blumenau, *Philosophy and Living*, Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2002, p.535, "In 1941, reviewing Russell's *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), A. J. Ayer strikingly described him as, 'the Picasso of modern philosophy [who] has expressed himself very differently at different periods, and in each period he has exerted deservedly great influence and aroused extravagant hostility'".
- [2] Arthur C. Danto, "Picasso and the Portrait" in *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p.221.
- [3] There is the following mention, "Two other friends whom I met in my early days in Cambridge and retained ever since, were Lowes Dickinson and Roger Fry" in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967, p.63.

- [4] *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, vol.10, London: Macmillan & Cambridge University Press, 1972, p.440.
- [5] Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting" in *Mind*, 14(1905), pp.479-493.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.479.
- [7] Bertrand Russell, "The relation of sense-data to physics" in *Scientia*, 16.4 (Jul. 1914), pp.1-27, (rpr. In *Mysticism and Logic, and Other Essays*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1917).
- [8] Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, London/New York: Routledge, 1995, pp.80-81.
- [9] Bertrand Russell, "The relation of sense-data to physics", p.170.
- [10] Bertrand Russell, "The Ultimate Constituents of Matter" in *Monist*, 25 (Jul. 1915), pp.399-417. (rpr. In *Mysticism and Logic, and Other Essays*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1917).
- [11] There is ingenuity, of course; in overlapping the vanishing point onto a divine statue the linear perspective shows a divine stare, but meanwhile this also corresponds to the painter's own viewpoint.
- [12] Raffaello's *The Engagement of Virgin Mary* or Leonardo's *Last supper* are the typical examples of this kind of composition.
- [13] As for Cézanne's picture plane.; see Erle Loran, *Cezanne's Composition*, Berkley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947, p.77.
- [14] On the relation between Fry's "form" and Russell's "form", see my paper "Roger Fry's art criticism: compared with Russell's Logic" in *Bigaku kenkyū; Studies in aesthetics & art criticism*, in Japanese, 1(2001), pp.27-45.
- [15] Roger Fry, "A New Theory of Art" in Christopher Reed(ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.161.
- [16] Roger Fry, "Expression and Representation" in Christopher Reed(ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.63.
- [17] Roger Fry, "Seurat" in *Transformations--Critical and Speculative Essays on Art*, New York: A Doubleday Anchor Book, 1956(London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), p.257.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p.258.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p.259.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p.250.
- [21] Peter Frederick Strawson, who is a kantian philosopher as well as analytic philosopher, would take a variable "x" confusedly as "sensible". However, now that we consider "x" as a certain being, we are drawn back to an idealism to which Russell has objected. In Russell's theory, "x" is not a being but a propositional function.
- [22] It is as if we read a physical datum recorded in graphs or a diagram. We can recognize "micro data" which our sensibilities miss to seize as a part of a "macro behavior".
- [23] Roger Fry, "Sensibility" in *Last Lectures*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1939, p.28.
- [24] *Ibid.*, pp.30-31.
- [25] Now, I continue the consideration of Fry's idea of "sensibility" and "sensual logic".

#### List of Corrections

p.123, l.32: "the present king of France is bold" → "the present king of France is bald" [25/06/2009]