“Modernist Painting”
Clement Greenberg

Summary of the Argument
Greenberg’s concern in this essay is to argue that there is a **logic** to the development of **modernist** art and, in particular, modernist **painting**.

He identifies the essence of **Modernism** as

the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to **criticize** the discipline itself — not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.

[85, emphasis added.]*

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*Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass* (Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe), 1863*
This essential feature of Modernism is the intensification of a *self-critical* tendency that began with the 18th-century German philosopher **Immanuel Kant**.

“Modernism”, Greenberg tells us, “criticizes from the **inside** [rather than from the outside], through the **procedures** themselves of **that which is being criticized**.” [ibid., emphases added.]

This starting point has important implications for the thesis of **autonomy**.

[Cf. Clive Bell’s argument in “Art and Significant Form”.]
According to Greenberg, every “formal social activity” requires a **rational justification**, i.e. there must be **reasons** given to justify a particular activity. **Without** this justification, the activity in question (e.g. painting, philosophy, physics, poetry, mathematics, etc.) is **discredited** and **weakened**.

Many take the view that this is what happened with **religion**.
Post-Enlightenment art — roughly speaking, art produced after the 18th Century — was once in precisely this situation of needing a justification.

So, according to Greenberg, it was called upon to establish its own autonomy by means of a “deduction” — an argument for its legitimacy and its capacity to provide us with experience that cannot be obtained through any other art or social practice.
This process of self-justification must be done piecemeal—**medium by medium**.

To be truly modern, each art form is called upon to discover and exhibit, through its **own procedures**, 

- the unique contributions that it makes to **human experience**, as well as

- the contribution it makes to **art** as a whole.

As a result of this self-justification, each art form achieves greater **specialization** and **legitimacy**.
In Greenberg’s account, the uniqueness of an art form is ultimately linked to the specificity of the medium and the characteristics it shares with no other form of art.

Once this specificity has been discovered, Greenberg claims, the progressive modernist is called upon to purge all elements not essential and specific to the medium.

Nothing borrowed from the medium of another art form can be tolerated.
Thus, under Modernism, each art must search for “purity” and in that purity, absolute **autonomy** not only from other advanced **art forms**, but from mundane **everyday life** and **popular** (mass) **culture** as well.
The Specificity of the Medium

It follows that pre-Modernist realist painting presents a problem because it tends to conceal the specificity of the medium and the purity of painting.

Realism encourages the viewer to move through the surface and into the illusionistic space of the representation.

Juan Cotan, Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber, c. 1602
Modernist painting, on the other hand, uses the painting itself to call attention to the characteristic features of painting:

- the **flat surface**,  
- the **shape** of the **support**,  
- the properties of the **pigment**.

All these things that are **denied** by traditional painting are **reasserted** by modernist painters — Manet and his successors.
Modernism reasserts the **two-dimensionality** of the picture surface. It forces the viewer to see the painting *first* as a **painted surface**, and only *later* as a **picture**.

This, Greenberg claims, is the best way to see **any** kind of picture.
For example, since sculpture is inherently three dimensional, it is absolutely necessary that pure modernist painting challenge any illusion of three-dimensionality.

It must do this in order to sustain its autonomy.

This is the real rationale for abstraction; not simply to avoid representation, but to avoid the impurity and inauthenticity of representing three dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.
A **painting** is to be looked **at**, not looked into.

Its **space** is to be traveled through with the **eye** alone.

According to Greenberg, this sort of **resistance to sculptural effects** is very much a part of the **historical tradition** of painting in the West.
This testing of the indispensable in any given medium is not tied to a pull towards freedom.

It is not, as Nietzsche would say, a **Dionysian** feature of artistic practice.

Rather it is a **self-disciplining** of art—in Nietzschean terms, it is **Apollonian**—and a testing of the limiting or **boundary conditions** specific to an art form.
This movement in art has never been followed explicitly; it has not been a program followed consciously by artists.

Rather, the individual achievements of artists seem to be a vehicle for the larger unfolding pattern or rationale.

[Cf. Hegel's theory of history and Arthur Danto's claims about “the end of art”.]
Finally, Greenberg claims, picture-making has a logic of its own and is part of a continuous development within a tradition.

In other words, Modernism is not a radical breaking away or liberation from all that is old and established in art.

It is not something radically new.

It is merely art’s self-awakening.