

## Summary: Clement Greenberg “Modernist Painting”\*

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### The Definition of “Modernism”

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) It is the intensification of a self-critical tendency that began with the eighteenth-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.) This starting point has important implications for the thesis of autonomy. [See the handout on Clive Bell: “The Aesthetic Hypothesis”.]

### Self-Justification

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 (i.e. roughly speaking, art produced after the Eighteenth Century) was at once in precisely this situation of needing a justification. Thus, it was called upon to establish its own autonomy by means of a “deduction”, i.e. 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 modern, each art form is eventually called upon to discover and exhibit, through its own procedures, the unique contributions that it makes to human experience as well as to art as a whole. As a result of this self-justification, each art form achieves greater specialization and security.

### The Specificity of the Medium

The uniqueness of an art form ultimately depends upon the **specificity of the medium**, i.e. the characteristics its works share 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 can be tolerated. Thus, under Modernism, each art searches 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. (All forms of popular culture are referred to by Greenberg as **kitsch**.) [See Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”]

In this sense, pre-Modernist realist painting presents a problem in that it tends to conceal the specificity of the medium and, hence, the purity of painting. That’s because realism encourages the viewer to move through the surface and into the illusionistic space of the representation. Modernist painting, on the other hand, uses the painting itself to call attention to painting. The flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment—all these things that were denied by traditional painting are reasserted by modernist painting (which is, historically speaking, the work of Manet and his successors).

### Flatness as the Defining Feature of Painting

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 says, is the best way to see any kind of picture.

For example, since sculpture is inherently three dimensional, it is absolutely necessary that modernist, i.e. pure, painting eschew 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. [Cf. Bell.] 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, and can be found in, the historical tradition of painting in the West.

### **The Historical Continuity and Teleology of Painting**

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 that sense, Nietzsche would claim, it is Apollonian.) It is 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. Thus, the individual achievements of artists seem to be a vehicle for the larger unfolding pattern or rationale. (Cf. Hegel's theory of history.) In other words, picture-making seems to have 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.

Timothy Quigley, 1996

\* Page numbers refer to *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, John O'Brian, ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.