Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg

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The decline of organized leftism in the United States and the capitulation of the bulk of American leftists during the late 1930s and 1940s to what is now recognized as a specifically postwar liberalism is a phenomenon familiar enough to require no further elucidation here. Likewise, the motivation behind their support for a liberalism now characterized by a pragmatic, piecemeal approach toward social engineering and economic and political planning, and by a mistrust of scientific and technological advance as inevitably moving toward social improvement, has also long been noted. For example, George Lichtheim pointed out more than thirty years ago that while liberalism had always been concerned with privileging freedom, rationality, democracy, and, above all, the rights of the individual—concerns which had been successively and more deeply troubled by two world wars—it was not a matter of concern for Marxists until the rise of Fascism. In effect, Fascism substantially eroded their confidence in the working class—as a self-determining and responsible agent of social progress, for which they ultimately would find no practical substitute.

Yet the migration to postwar liberalism which the rise of Fascism instigated was, as some of the best scholarship has suggested, not immediate. Moreover, liberalism went through a series of ideological realignments before its virtues began to dominate formerly leftist discussion, which was only the case by 1950. While this hard-bitten, ‘realist’ approach would characterize postwar liberal theory, exemplified by Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology* (1961) and Daniel Boorstin’s *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), and would find ardent support from former leftists during the height of the Cold War, not all of postwar liberalism’s architects came, as did Bell and Boorstin, from outside of American leftist circles. Nor, as suggested by the comparatively late date of their work, would the arguments of these non-leftist ideologists have been central to the ideological migration of the Left during the previous decade.

The subtlety of this ideological shift and the identity of its originators has, arguably, been neglected in the histories of the period. Similarly, the art historical literature, which has accounted for the modernist artists and critics involved in the ‘deradicalization’ of the American Left, is also due for reconsideration. It will be argued here that the two were in fact intimately linked, with potentially important implications for the political development of modernist theory in the United States during the Cold War. For it was between the 1940s and the 1960s that what will be referred to as ‘the modernist paradigm’ was beginning to be conceptualized, most notably by the Frankfurt School theoretician Theodor Adorno and the American intellectual and art critic Clement Greenberg. This paradigm understood modernist art as experimental, autonomous and innovative, and conducted by the subjective yet rational individual. Yet its politics—whether or not the paradigm should be seen as an essentially leftist strategy for preserving radical values through political abstention, or as an apolitical aesthetic—remains a matter of dispute. Consequently, given Adorno’s institutional pedigree, his reputation as a radical...
intellectual endures, while Greenberg is remembered in the scholarship on the subject almost exclusively as an art critic, and predominantly as a formalist one. This is in spite of the fact that Greenberg, in addition to his activities as an art critic, was also a figure of no small importance within the American non-communist Left during the period in question. For, although he did publish art criticism regularly in Partisan Review between 1938 and 1955 and in The Nation during the 1940s, he was also a contributing editor of Partisan Review from 1948 to 1952, as well as the associate editor of Commentary from its inception in 1945 until 1957. And, while Partisan Review is well known to have given up its interest in Trotskyism by the early 1940s and increasingly focused on cultural politics, Commentary was strictly devoted to politics and sociology from its outset. Commentary was never concerned with art; it was established by the American Jewish Committee in order to examine the political and sociological origins of the Holocaust which, according to the editors, could be broadly defined as the misuse of the 'Enlightenment' values of scientism and rationality for the purpose of social engineering. On the strength of these editorial activities, Greenberg should be considered as a political as much as an art commentator. Consequently, there is a need to assess the possible importance of one for the other throughout this period of ideological realignment.

One of the possible reasons for Greenberg’s enduring association with formalist art criticism is the focus, in much of the scholarship, on his work from the 1960s, in particular the essay ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960–65). This essay is usually discussed as Greenberg’s unveiling of the ‘modernist paradigm’. Michael Fried, for example, has paraphrased this overshadowing phase of Greenberg’s modernism as: ‘at least partly in response to sociopolitical developments, but once under way its evolution is autonomous and in the long run even predetermined’. It has also enabled Annette Cox to assert that Greenberg actually purged all political references in his work by the mid-fifties, while privileging Abstract Expressionism as ‘a reflection of the prosperity, pragmatism, and positivism of American cultural life’. Pragmatism and positivism are largely apolitical concepts, in Cox’s account.

Most importantly, however, this essay has been reproduced in study texts as exemplary of formalist modernism. It appears, for example, in that section of Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison’s edited collection Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology, in which the editors equate his work with that of Clive Bell and Roger Fry. More recently, its argument has been described in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood’s Art in Theory 1900—1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas (1992) as typifying the ‘Modernist’ critical position in English-language scholarship in which, while the social and historical conditions of art production are not altogether ignored, they are, however, ‘relegated’. In other words, formal concerns maintained a priority over, and an autonomy from, external and political ones.

There have, however, been a few efforts to establish an ideological continuity between the ‘leftist’ Greenberg of the thirties and the seemingly politically detached Greenberg of the sixties. The most substantial comes from Tim Clark, who maintains that Greenberg’s Marxism of the late 1930s was an identity to which he never relinquished his claim, but reasserted when he republished ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ in his anthology Art and Culture (1961). Originally appearing in Partisan Review in 1939, that essay’s ‘mordant hostility to capitalism’, according to Clark, was still sounding, almost verbatim, in ‘Modernist Painting’ twenty years later. Clark concedes that the Marxism of ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ is quite largely implicit; it is stated on
17. Lasch, Agony, p. 308.

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occasion . . . but it remains to the reader to determine just how it works in the history and theory presented . . . .13 He nonetheless concludes that this: 'simply . . . was a Marxist culture – a hectic and shallow-rooted one . . . but one which deserved the name'.14

In defining the Marxist culture in the US at that time with which Greenberg was involved, however, Clark points to the work of American leftist intellectuals Dwight Macdonald and Edmund Wilson. Yet both Macdonald and Wilson were already highly critical of Marxism-Leninism, which was grounded in the belief in scientific progress as inevitably producing a communist utopia. Their views can be seen as typical of the anti-dialectical arguments observable in the bulk of material published in the American liberal/independent leftist press, of which Partisan Review is the best known representative, and which Commentary and Politics would also perpetuate throughout the 1940s. The ‘Marxist culture’ which Clark attempts to recuperate from the vagueness in Greenberg’s text was, then, not simply in a ‘moment of doubt’, but should be seen as a particular kind of revisionist Marxist culture, increasingly post-dialectical and increasingly concerned with the preservation of individual rights within democratic institutions. And this interest in the primacy of the individual, it will be argued, enabled this revisionist Marxism to assume the characteristics of what will be referred to here as the postwar liberalism which Greenberg would embrace.

What this suggests is that the transition which Greenberg’s thought underwent throughout this period – one which cannot be ascertained by focusing on those ‘key’ essays, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ (1938) and ‘Modernist Painting’ – followed the ideological reorientation of the Left of which he was a part. And if this is the case, what is also suggested is that the practices which Greenberg ascribed to the best of modernist painting were quintessentially political. Consequently, the formalist modernism with which he is credited, and which has shaped our reading of the criticism as well as the formal values of the art produced in the shadow of Greenberg’s essay, may need to be seen not as a deliberate departure from an overtly radical critical modernism in favour of elitist detachment.15 Contrary to what Harrison and Wood have suggested, it should be seen as part of the values and methodology of contemporary liberal ideology in which any residual radicalism from Greenberg’s socialist days, far from being lost, were in fact coopted within it.

Toward this end, the evolution of Greenberg’s modernism will be considered throughout the period in question, and in direct relation to the work of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who is widely acknowledged as one of the key ideologists to theorize the non-Communist Left’s transition to liberalism.16 A Harvard political historian, Schlesinger, unlike Greenberg, was too young to have been a thirties Marxist; he was imbued with the American pragmatic tradition of Dewey and James,17 and by the 1950s was an active member of the liberal political establishment as a speechwriter and adviser to Adlai Stevenson and later to John F. Kennedy.18 Yet in the previous decade, Schlesinger, unlike Bell or Boorstin, was a valued commentator on the future of socialism in the United States within the non-Communist Left. Indeed, he can even be seen as directly affiliated with Greenberg through organisational links, for Schlesinger, too, was a regular contributor to Partisan Review, and both he and Greenberg were members of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom in the early 1950s. The premisses of the ACCF, of which Greenberg was an executive from April 1952 to October 1953, were firstly, the reworking of 1930s liberalism, deemed by this group to be too soft on communism, and secondly, the discrediting of the notion of ideology, which
the ACCF perceived as anti-democratic. In fact, Greenberg and Schlesinger even fell out during the anti-communist witch-hunts, Greenberg being dissatisfied with Schlesinger’s reticence concerning the ACCF’s endorsement of the persecution of American communists. Yet this labelling of Schlesinger as part of the ‘left wing’ of the ACCF demonstrates not only how elastic the definition of leftism in the United States was at that time, but its increasing compatibility with developments in contemporary liberal ideology. For Schlesinger had only recently published his postwar liberal manifesto The Vital Centre (1949). Yet many of the ideas in it had already appeared in essay form in Partisan Review in the late 1940s, of which Greenberg would no doubt have been aware, even, we shall see, acquiring a vocabulary from Schlesinger’s work. This vocabulary, to which Schlesinger’s idea of ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ – a critical, irrational, pessimistic, and above all, cultural leveling of liberalism’s optimism in its prewar, progressivist manifestation – would shape Greenberg’s expectations for modern art as the embodiment of postwar liberal methodology in the shape of what Schlesinger referred to as the ‘new radicalism’. This new radicalism, to give a working definition, espoused an essentially positivist approach toward social engineering and economic and political planning; it was, in other words, pragmatic, piecemeal, and welcoming of scientific and technological advances, but without seeing these advances as necessarily moving toward social improvement. In short, while adhering to Enlightenment methodology, new radicalism was critical of Enlightenment optimism; it is this critical feature which can be seen as the crucial distinction between it and the postwar liberalism endorsed by the liberal ideologists untouched by the debates within the Left.

The use of the term positivism is, in this context, a loose one, often referring to logical empiricism – which, technically speaking, is not a positivist philosophy – and certainly to logical positivism. Yet both these terms embraced rationality and scientific method on a limited scale, as the least refutable means of gaining knowledge and determining action on the basis of it. These terms were used more or less interchangeably during the 1940s, their boundaries still being a matter of dispute. Yet both the Counter-Enlightenment and positivism, in at least Schlesinger and Greenberg’s understanding of them, can be seen to contradict any confidence in the idea that scientific advancement was inevitably for social good, an optimism which was believed to have guided, since the Enlightenment, capitalist and later socialist democracy. This idea, for a broad range of liberal and leftist intellectuals, extending from the dialecticism of the Frankfurt School to arch liberals such as Reinhold Niebuhr, was now disproved by the rise of totalitarianism. Consequently, it is no exaggeration to say that all inquiries from the Left on the future of socialism in the totalitarian age focused upon the moral credibility of the Enlightenment, and upon the Left’s shaken confidence in both rationality and the compatibility of scientific and social progress.

That the Enlightenment’s legacy of instrumental reason was already an issue for Greenberg while writing ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ is clear in the text. Noting that the ‘birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too – with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe’, these Enlightenment breakthroughs also begat both capitalism and Marxism in response to it. The collisions between them formed the ideological struggle which Greenberg at that time saw the avant-garde as habitually transcending, preferring what he called the ‘absolute’ – formal concerns – to ideology and its representation. For, with capitalism in decline, as witnessed by international economic depression, it was not the
responsibility of art to represent a socialist culture, but simply to preserve culture for the inevitable socialism which would issue from the collapse of capitalism; consequently, no formal programme was required of it.

At this point Greenberg was still clinging to a dialectical conception of history in which the visual arts did not really have a role. Yet the inevitability of socialist culture was now being called into question by the emergence of totalitarianism, and Greenberg believed that academic, representational styles were being subsumed into what he saw as the service of the regimes of Germany, Italy and Russia. For, as he explained, kitsch required 'a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends'. Consequently, any established art could be kitsch, and the situation now demanded that the avant-garde keep ahead of it. By virtue of its spontaneous formal innovation, and its lack of any systematic, foreseeable progression, it would be able to resist appropriation as kitsch, and thus would perform an essentially political, but not an ideological function.

Greenberg's efforts to distance himself from ideology, with its scientific socialist associations, would accelerate in the early 1940s. By 1942, he publicly disavowed scientific socialism, and within two years - around the same time he would help launch Commentary - he would begin to use modernism as a political critique of the Enlightenment and ideology, and rely on positivism to do so. For example, in the essay 'Abstract Art' of 1944 for The Nation, he no longer described abstract art as transcending ideological struggle. Instead he described it historically, as within a broader cultural 'counter-revolution' to the Enlightenment dating back to the 1870s, when the latter was already showing evidence of rampant imperialism and exploitation. This 'counter-revolution' - what he was soon to describe as the 'Counter-Enlightenment' - accompanied the emergence of what he called a 'positivistic world-view'. For Greenberg, the modernist counter-revolution was, like his understanding of positivism, the realization:

that the earth could no longer afford to Western man, or his economy, indefinite space in which to expand; that verified facts were the only certainties: that each of the activities of culture could be exercised with assurance only within its own province and only when that province had been strictly defined. The age of specialization and of limited intellectual and spiritual objectives sets in . . .

Yet, of all possible types of modernist practices, it was abstraction which best exemplified modern art's ongoing assessment of the limits of rationality and its practical applications. Freed from the object, abstract art could exhaust the possibilities of its media on its own terms, on a limited, experimental basis. And this practice, which Greenberg referred to as a positivist practice, now informed 'the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time', and had reached its fullest and most innovative form in the hands of the Cubists. They, however, had had a failure of nerve, retreating to the represented object after having achieved their wholly abstract canvases in 1911–1912. Consequently, modernism's failure to sustain a critique of the Enlightenment meant that a successor to the Cubists, and the critique they had abandoned, had yet to be found.

At this time Greenberg was still publicly identifying himself as a socialist, and would do so until 1946. Consequently, given his retreat from it in 1947, it is useful to consider Schlesinger's contribution to the Partisan Review symposium 'The Future of Socialism' in March of that year with an eye to its influence on Greenberg's essay 'The Present Prospects of American Painting.
and Sculpture’, which would be published in October in the British magazine Horizon. For this symposium brought Schlesinger’s perspectives together with those of four seasoned leftists – former Marxist Sidney Hook, former communist Granville Hicks, British independent socialist George Orwell, and Left Oppositionist and former Trotskyist Victor Serge – to consider how socialism should be redefined in order to have any credibility in the totalitarian era.  

Yet Orwell’s description of the socialist in the postwar period as a doctor ‘treating an all but hopeless case’ captured the mood of the symposium, the contributors unanimously supporting the protection of democratic institutions as the basis for a post-Marxian socialism, accommodating leftist values within them.

It was here that Schlesinger first introduced the concept of ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ as an ideology which could appeal to both liberals and leftists by grounding it in the critical faculties of the individual. Yet, keen to present the ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ as foremost a means of dissent, Schlesinger took care to distinguish its support for democracy from that of ‘the official liberalism of the Enlightenment’ on the strength of its permission of individual critical awareness. Arguing that if 1930s liberalism had been grounded in science, bourgeois complacency, and a belief in progress (.), tolerance, free inquiry, and technology, operating in the framework of human perfectibility, he also insisted that the cautionary work of ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ thinkers such as Freud, Kierkegaard, Sorel, Nietzsche should have forewarned its proponents of ‘practical men’ like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini; such men had used the technological benefits issuing from the thinking of the Age of Reason for the exploitation of the masses rather than for the social good which had been foreseen by American pragmatists of the previous decade, such as Dewey. With the confidence in the inevitability of social progress now undermined, political decision-making should be left to politicians, with artists and intellectuals restricting their activities to the provision of the critical awareness and ethical conscience which would protect democracy from revolution:

Someone must serve as the custodian of honesty and clarity in a turbulent and stricken society. Someone must restore a serious sense of the value of facts, the integrity of reason, of devotion to truth ... As capitalism crumbles through the world, we know that any path which can preserve peace and freedom is narrow and hazardous ... One false step may plunge the world into atomic war or deliver it into totalitarian darkness ... when no one provides intellectual leadership within the frame of gradualism, then the professional revolutionist will fill the vacuum ...  

Schlesinger did not broach the problem of how, if artists and intellectuals were to protect socialist values from the beleaguered capitalist system and the threat of totalitarianism, their warnings could be translated into defensive action. Yet, in spite of this omission, we can see Greenberg acquiring the muscularity of Schlesinger’s tone, and even his lexicon, in his essay ‘The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture’, which suggests that Greenberg too was willing to overlook this crucial question concerning the future of radical political practice. For in this essay the convergence between Greenberg’s ‘leftist’ positivism and Schlesinger’s new radical thinking becomes clear. Focusing on Jackson Pollock as the sole genius of American painting at that time, the artist had, in Greenberg’s assessment, achieved that accolade through his ‘positivist’ world view. The epitome of the ‘modern man’, his art resonated rationality in the face of a post-Holocaust, Atomic Age condition of irrationality, hysteria, and denial. Yet Pollock’s was a particular kind of
rationality, mediated by a Nietzschean conception of subjectively grounded will, which enabled him to respond to this situation from a position of individual awareness, tempered by rational control. Such ‘modern men’—‘men of the world’, as Greenberg described them, who were ‘not too much amazed by experience, not too much at loss in the face of current events, [and] not at all overpowered by their own feelings’—were to infuse their courage and insight into public consciousness. For him, Pollock’s modernism—he had achieved his first classic ‘drip’ painting that year—was not a self-contained process of formal reduction, but an individual, yet consciously restrained response to the current political situation which entrusted practical action to professional politicians.

The political aspect of this subjectively grounded rationality was clarified in Greenberg’s essay of the following year, ‘The Decline of Cubism’, in which it now acquired overtly anti-Marxist overtones. For if in ‘Abstract Art’ he had only claimed a connection between abstraction and social critique, he now recast this relationship as a clear association between Cubism and Marxism in particular, for the purpose of renouncing them both. Noting that while the quality of the merely decorative, ideology-free School of Paris painters such as Matisse were unaffected by the Occupation, Greenberg argued that Cubist art, a product of Enlightenment thought, was rapidly degenerating:

At first glance we realize that we are faced with the debacle of the age of ‘experiment’, of the [. . .] Cubist mission and its hope, coincident with that of Marxism and the whole matured tradition of the Enlightenment, of humanising the world. In the plastic arts, Cubism, and nothing else, is the age of ‘experiment’ [. . .] and the main factor in the recent decline of art in Europe is the disorientation of the Cubist style [. . .].

For Cubism had embodied the ‘optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism’ which should have been the prelude to communist utopia. Yet two world wars and the emergence of totalitarianism had destroyed this confidence that, through scientific advancement, ‘the world would inevitably go on improving . . . there was no risk of getting anything inferior or more dangerous than what one already had’. The ideological premiss ascribed to Cubism having collapsed, what was needed, in his assessment, was a modernism which could combine individual experience with Cubism’s rationality. Again, he found this combination in the work of Jackson Pollock, and now in Arshile Gorky’s, too. Referring to Gorky and Pollock’s reliance on Cubist space as a rational framework for their gestural innovations, Greenberg noted that while Cubism ‘was still important for the formation of new art’, these subsequent ‘humanist’ interventions formed what Schlesinger had recently called a ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ critique of the optimism of the Enlightenment.

But this was not without paradox. For if Pollock and Gorky’s art can be read as an ideological metaphor—combining Cubism’s Marxism with the individual agency of free gesture—this gesture was still contained within the Cubist grid, and thus within the rationalism of the Enlightenment itself. Consequently, as far as the logic of Greenberg’s argument is concerned, gestural abstraction’s critique of Cubism, like the new radicalism’s critique of Marxism, can be seen as strengthening Enlightenment values and, by analogy, the institutions representing them, rather than undermining them by pushing past Cubism’s formal barriers. What Greenberg ascribed to Pollock and Gorky’s innovations were, in essence, piecemeal additions to as opposed to a revolutionizing of the modernist tradition which Cubism represented.

Greenberg’s debt to Schlesinger’s work would extend into the 1950s, and
reflect the increasing liberalization of whatever leftist interests Schlesinger may have demonstrated in his essay for 'The Future of Socialism'. The changes in Schlesinger’s views from 1947 were soon to become evident in his book of 1949, The Vital Centre that, with subsequent editions appearing in 1950, 1962, 1970, and again in 1988, demonstrates its importance as liberal manifesto. Of most interest for this argument was the development of his notion of the Counter-Enlightenment as now overtly reinforcing, instead of critically challenging, liberal democracy. Rather than warning the polity of the dangers of totalitarian ideology, the responsibility of ‘creative individuals’ – artists and intellectuals – was now to accommodate individuals to liberal democratic institutions as well to protect them from developing a mass mentality by creating a ‘genuine cultural pluralism’. Yet this new role was determined by the Left’s reconciliation with liberal democracy:

The democratic left today has committed itself to the limited state – European socialists, retreating precipitately from the abyss of totalitarianism, as well as American New Dealers, advancing cautiously out of the jungle of private enterprise . . . Somewhere between the abyss and the jungle the new radicalism will work out a sensible economic policy. There will certainly be changes in the structure of the economy. But these changes will be brought about in a way which will not disrupt the fabric of custom, law and mutual confidence upon which personal rights depend, nor will they liquidate the basis of future resistance. The transition must be piecemeal. It must be parliamentary. It must respect civil liberties and due process of law. Only in this way can it preserve free society.38

There was, however, another side to the creative individual’s responsibilities, and to his or her protecting ‘free society’. As mediators between the public and the state, Schlesinger also assigned them the task of turning conflict into a ‘source of creativity’, and in this way alleviating discontent and safeguarding democracy from any real opposition.39

Schlesinger did not, however, specify the artistic practices which would do this best. Yet if the parallels between the overall function of the artist which he described and Greenberg’s gestural abstractionist as ‘modern man’ had been clear enough, Greenberg himself was, in the next few years, to doubt the appropriateness of gestural painting toward this end. For, as the 1950s wore on, the logic of his own argument regarding the relationship between modernism and kitsch eventually compelled him to reject gestural abstraction as it, in his assessment, was degenerating into kitsch in the hands of second-generation practitioners.40 This decline, he argued, was due to the Cubist orientation of gestural painting, an orientation which prohibited any progression beyond it. Thus, in the essay ‘American-Type Painting’ (1955), while praising Pollock and de Kooning for their mastery, and in Pollock’s case, for the expansion of the Cubist tradition, Greenberg noted that both remained late Cubists through their inability to free themselves from the grid.41 Even worse, Pollock’s retreat to, and Franz Kline’s current devotion to, the black and white canvas was a return to Cubism’s reliance on value contrast as the basis of its structure. These capitulations, in Greenberg’s assessment, not only betrayed Abstract Expressionism’s claim to radical innovation, they also subscribed to the most ‘conservative and even reactionary’ aspects of Cubist painting, the classicism of chiaroscuro, and the rationality which imbued both classicism and the grid.42

What Greenberg needed, then, was a new avant-garde practice which could fulfill modernism’s aesthetic resistance to kitsch, yet also remain in accordance with Schlesinger’s new radicalism.43 And it was his replacement of gestural abstraction with the post-cubist colour field painting of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still that demonstrated his efforts toward this end.
For, having a European pedigree all its own – he could trace colour field technique back to Monet and late Turner – Greenberg’s subsequent essays could expand upon the suitability of colour field painting as modernism’s freshest resistance to ‘a society bent in principle on rationalising everything’; yet such painting also conformed to a set of aesthetic principles which, he argued, would bring contemporary modernism back into step with the ‘infra-logic’ spanning the history of modernist art. For if Western art since the sixteenth century was characterised by alternations between the painterly and the non-painterly, as Greenberg asserted seven years later in ‘After Abstract Expressionism’ (1962), and if gesture painting had terminated in mannerism or ‘homeless representation’ – the application of painterly technique to representational ends, evidenced by the ‘narrowness’ of Jasper Johns’ and the stylistic netherworld of neither abstraction nor representation of Diebenkorn and de Kooning – colour field painting not only provided a way out of these essentially late Cubist practices, it shouldered the Counter-Enlightenment’s primary task. Greenberg argued that the ‘aim of the self-criticism [of modernist art], which is entirely empirical and not at all an affair of theory, is to determine the irreducible working essence of art and the separate arts’. This, to him, was both flatness and its delimitation. Yet crucially, these empirical features were explored on an individual basis. The great strength of colour field painting, and all subsequent Counter-Enlightenment modernisms, would be their resistance to imitation:

Inspiration alone belongs altogether to the individual; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by any one. Inspiration remains the only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or imitated.

Whilst acknowledging that this quality was not exclusive to colour field painting – both Newman and Mondrian, for example, possessed it – works such as Newman’s were distinguished by the sophistication of their conception which frustrated imitators. This was not a claim which gesture painting could make, as he confirmed two years later in “The ‘Crisis’ of Abstract Art”. Looking back to gesture painting’s Cubist innovations as ‘the great and original achievement of the first generation’, he lamented that ‘this achievement degenerated into a blatant formula . . . in the hands of those who came later’.

Yet the politics of Greenberg’s repeated condemnation of Cubism and its progeny as both reactionary and susceptible to kitsch, of his claims for post-Cubist modernism as the inheritor of a larger, and distinctly Western modernist project, and above all, the importance of its practice by uniquely inspired individuals, were most clear in ‘Modernist Painting’. This is unsurprising, given that this text was originally written in 1960 as a lecture for the Voice of America. Consequently, Greenberg would have been particularly attentive to its political slant. In this essay he redefined modernism from a system of successive formal innovations to a piecemeal, experimental practice. Yet the latter was just as far-reaching, and equally selective, in what it embraced. Its methodology originated with the Enlightenment, and its values of colour and flatness as opposed to sculpture and design were already evident, in Greenberg’s assessment, in David and Ingres’ most successful portraits. Yet this tendency of Western civilization to ‘question its own foundations’ did not have any subversive motive. Rather, the ‘essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of 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’.
Yet contemporary modernism was not simply a rescucitation of Enlightenment culture which, for the past two decades, Greenberg and his peers had considered compromised by the misuse of its own methodology; rather, it was a science in its own right. With limited objectives, this modernism was now a rational investigation as to the nature and contingencies of painting’s own medium by tinkering with size, texture, and scale on a spontaneous and non-programmatic basis. Greenberg explained:

The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of, but is not the same thing as, the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticized from the outside, the way criticism in its accepted sense does; Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticised.51

As the critique of Enlightenment practices through no less than the Enlightenment’s own means, Greenberg’s modernism tried to maintain Enlightenment methodology. Yet, importantly, Greenberg stressed that this critique was done on an individual basis. Consequently, his modernism could embrace a plurality of styles, which situated it comfortably within postwar liberal theory. For the creative individual was, in Schlesinger’s account, the factor determining the success or failure of Western democracy in the totalitarian age, its ability to support a plurality of individual initiatives and views against the inevitable massification which would overtake a nation lacking vitality, enterprise and independent thought. Yet the differentiation of the political from the cultural sphere which we have seen in Schlesinger’s work ensured that radical critique would not translate into radical practice, and this distinction served a similar function in ‘Modernist Painting’.

Paul Crowther has already shown how Greenberg misinterpreted Kant’s critical method at the expense of its logic in order to accommodate the notion of the inspired individual.52 And, while Crowther was concerned with Greenberg’s use of philosophy, his analysis also provides support for this essay’s argument concerning how Greenberg reconciled an essentially empirical account of contemporary modernist art practice with postwar liberal theory. For, put simply, Greenberg’s notion of aesthetic value remained grounded in inspiration, which is, as Crowther puts it, ‘an intellectual response, which makes our response to it interested, as opposed to Kant’s disinterestedness’.53 Yet, as a ‘new radical’, we can see that it was ideologically necessary for Greenberg to do so. By eliding ‘disinterested’, empirical modernist practices with individual insight, he could maintain that originally radical project he had assigned modernist artists in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’. Consequently, Clark is right to see a certain continuity in Greenberg’s political outlook between 1939 and 1965. For modernist artists, in Greenberg’s paradigm, still had the responsibility of keeping culture moving ahead of kitsch. But they were no longer, however, waiting for the inevitable collapse of capitalism, and can even be construed as propagating postwar liberalism by embodying its methodology in their own practices. Now a science in its own right – and ensconced within its own discipline – contemporary modernism had wilfully, in Greenberg’s assessment, broken its alliance with socialism. In its interests and in its practices, the only revolutions it engaged with were within its own borders:

I want to repeat that Modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations... it happens to convert theoretical possibilities into empirical ones, in doing which it tests many theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and actual experience of art. In this respect alone can Modernism be considered subversive.54
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**Footnotes**

7 Review: The Essential Legacy of Clement Greenberg from the Era of Stalin and Hitler
Reviewed Work(s):
*Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Art Criticism* by John O'Brian; Clement Greenberg
Paul Hart
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