



Aesthetics and Philosophy of Arts

Explaining Modernism

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ABSTRACT: Modernism in the arts commenced during the second half of the 19th century and extended into most of the 20th. A significant feature of this period is that each type of art gave principal attention to dimensions of itself. This was a type of self-analysis. I consider those art forms consisting of an image on a flat two-dimensional surface. I give particular attention to painting, a familiar example of this type of image. Explanations of Modernism are philosophically relevant not only for aesthetics but also for epistemology. The reason is that an analysis of our perceptions as a result of seeing a painted image can contribute to philosophy's analysis of the process by which we obtain knowledge through perception. I argue that we should interpret Modernism as contributing to this investigation.

The gradual reduction in perceptual depth in late 19th century painting significantly influenced the approach to visual space in twentieth century art. The evolution began in the 1860's. It culminated approximately fifty years later. By then almost all perceived three-dimensionality had been eliminated. This was the minimal depth of complete abstraction.

Edouard Manet's "The Fifer" from 1866 is an example of the type of work which commenced this development. Kazimir Malevich's "Suprematist Composition" from 1914 exemplifies its final stage. Other paintings which participated in the progression were Paul Gauguin's "Self-Portrait"(1888), Paul Ce'zanne's "Mount Sainte Victoire"(1902), Henri Matisse's "The Green Line"(1905), and Georges Braque "Le Portugais"(1912).

My purpose is to contribute to the explanation of this evolution. Clement Greenberg proposed perhaps the most influential account. In contrast to previous commentaries ⁽¹⁾ we will see that not only is his interpretation of the reduction ambiguous, so his central concept "flatness". In addition to the inconsistencies resulting from these ambiguities, I will establish specific respects in which his account is mistaken. Then I will propose an explanation which is acceptable.

I. AN ILLUSION

The evolution can be understood with regard to a particular approach to painting. It attempts to simulate visual appearance. Let us call it "realism". It was prominent during the Italian Renaissance. An example is Raphael's "Saint Catherine" (1505). Typical of this

period, a principal feature of this work is the emphasis on bringing about the experience of seeing a high degree of depth.

However, we are looking at a surface which has only two-dimensions. Our perception of any degree of depth is an illusion. (2) I will attempt to establish that providing for the illusory perception of depth is an essential characteristic of painting.

This perception is not brought about by a three-dimensional space. Instead, it results from looking at representations of this kind of space. Thus we are seeing a certain type of sign. They are signs for depth. (3)

I will attempt to show that we should account for the progressive decrease in perceptual depth by interpreting the paintings as contributing to an investigation of arrangements of these signs. I will explain how this structural analysis brought about the reduction.

II. GREENBERG'S TWO INTERPRETATIONS: ESSENTIAL vs UNIQUE

Greenberg proposes that the reason for the gradual decrease is that it was the consequence of a particular type of analysis. (4) However, he gives two different interpretations of this investigation. They result in two accounts that are inconsistent.

Under one interpretation, the analysis consisted of the elimination of those features which were not necessary. Thus its purpose was to "establish" the "essence" of painting. (5)

Under the second interpretation, the attempt was to determine what was "unique" to painting. Its goal was to "entrench the medium more firmly in its area of competence". (6)

It is not possible for both of these interpretations of the analysis to be correct. The reason is the difference between a property being an essence and it being unique.

An essence is necessary and can be shared with other objects. Thus it is not distinguishing and is independent of any other object. It can be established by analyzing only the object itself. The purpose of this investigation is to determine whether it is possible for the object to exist and not to have a certain property. The elimination of inessential properties is the consequence.

In contrast, an analysis of the object itself cannot establish uniqueness. The reason is that a unique property does not belong to any other object. It differentiates the object from all others. Thus it is established only by investigating other objects. The goal is to determine whether they also have the property.

In order to ascertain which interpretation is correct, note Greenberg's point that the reduction in depth during late nineteenth and early twentieth century painting was the consequence of an investigation. As he accurately observes, it was of painting itself and thus a self-analysis. (7) It was not of other art forms. Thus it was not an investigation of uniqueness. It was of essence.

Therefore it follows from Greenberg's interpretation of the evolution as one of self-criticism that it is not possible for his account in terms of uniqueness to be correct. This is a principal respect in which his overall position is inconsistent. Consequently it will be the adequacy of his explanation in terms of essence which I will consider.

According to it, the essence the self-analysis attempted to establish was to be a "kind of experience" and "effect" that results from looking at a painting. (8) Greenberg argued that the examination eventually determined that this essence consists in "flatness and the delimitation of flatness". (9)

III. TWO KINDS OF FLATNESS

In order to establish the accuracy of Greenberg's proposed account in terms of essence, we must try to determine what he has in mind by "flatness". Once again his position is ambiguous. Sometimes he refers to flatness as the two-dimensional "surface" on which a painting occurs. (10) Elsewhere, he speaks of it as shallow perceptual depth. (11) Which of these interpretations is selected determines the extent to which Greenberg's account is acceptable.

The first type of flatness is perhaps an essence of painting. (12) However contrary to what Greenberg sometimes suggests, we should not take the two-dimensional surface to be the subject of the analysis.

One reason is that it had been known long before the nineteenth century that a painting occurs on a surface. No investigation was needed to establish its necessity. Therefore this type of flatness cannot explain either the self-analysis or the gradual reduction in perceptual depth. (13)

Perhaps more significantly and as Greenberg correctly observes, "the first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness". (14) What it eliminates, though, is not the surface itself. Rather, it is the perception of its two-dimensionality. (15)

The reason is that commencing with the initial application of a medium, there is a perceived chromatic contrast. (16) This results in the perception of segments on different planes and thus of a third dimension, slight though it may be.

Therefore, it is not possible for oil on a canvas to provide for a perception of the first type of flatness. In this fundamental respect painting is incapable of establishing it. Furthermore, flatness in the sense of "surface" cannot be the type of essence Greenberg described as an "experience" or "effect".

The flatness of shallow depth, on the other hand, is an effect. I will show that while it is not an essence of painting, it is an instance of one that is an experience of painting: the illusory perception of depth. (17)

IV. AN ESSENCE OF PAINTING

The thesis that oil or other similar medium on a surface is necessary (though not sufficient) for there to be a painting was commonly accepted during the fifty year period we are considering. This interpretation, then, circumscribed the evolution. Therefore an explanation of the evolution must include it.

We noted that seeing paint on a surface results in our perceiving a chromatic contrast thereby creating an illusory perception of depth. Since the presence of such a medium is necessary for there to be a painting, resulting in this type of perception is a necessary and thus essential property of painting. (18)

It can be of various levels of perceived depth, from the high degree of realism (e.g. "Saint Catherine") to the minimal degree of complete abstraction (e.g. "Suprematist Composition"). Thus Greenberg's flatness in the sense of "shallow depth" is only an example of this type of perception. It is not identical to it. To think otherwise is to mistake "a special case for a necessity". (19) This type of flatness, then, is not an essence of painting.

Neither of Greenberg's types of flatness, then, was the subject of the evolution's self-analysis. (20) Furthermore, during the investigation the degree of perceived depth was diminished. An acceptable explanation of the development must account for why one of painting's essences was reduced.

Therefore the goal of the self-analysis was not to establish an essence. (21) Instead, I am proposing, its purpose was to investigate it. I will explain why the analysis being of this type accounts for the reduction of depth. Furthermore, I will show that this interpretation explains the delimitation of minimal depth. (22)

V. AN EXPLANATION

We noted that as realism exemplifies, painting contributes to the illusory perception of depth through the use of signs . Employing this central point, my explanation of the evolution of this perceived depth is: The evolution included a structural analysis of the signs that result in the illusory perception of depth.

Painting was engaged in an analysis of itself during this development. A principal essence of painting is bringing about the illusory perception of depth. This is the reason that the analysis included an investigation of this dimension. (23)

The reason the analysis was structural is that by the 1860's when the evolution commenced it was commonly recognized that the relationship between sensation and perception is not isomorphic. Instead, it was argued that perception is the product of a cognitive process. (24) Thus there was a need to understand the conceptual component of the illusory perception of depth. (25) This requires a description of the structure it employs. It follows from my thesis that paintings which participated in the gradual reduction of perceptual depth contributed to this epistemological investigation. (26)

Note that the above thesis correctly identifies both the evolution's type of self-analysis as well as an essence of painting. Equally important, it accounts for the reduction of this essence and thus for Greenberg's second type of flatness.

The reason is that the explanation employs structural linguistics' interpretation of the investigation of structure. (27) There are two notable features of this type of investigation. One is that it attempts to establish and thereby examine the limits of acceptability. The other is that consequently the investigation's progression is towards these parameters. (28)

Thus my explanation correctly implies that late nineteenth and early twentieth century painting investigated the limits of acceptability. Furthermore analogous to structural linguistics' type of analysis, the investigation proceeded from the more acceptable to the least acceptable.

It was the illusory perception of depth that was being investigated. Thus it provided a criterion of acceptability. At the stage in painting's history beginning with Manet, the limits of perceptual depth which had been examined the least were those approaching the smallest

degree. The analysis progressed, then, toward imagery with a minimum amount of depth. This accounts for why the evolution was a gradual reduction. (29) The result was the second type of flatness and its delimitation. Therefore my explanation accurately predicts that the final stage of the examination includes the minimal perceptual depth of complete abstraction.

Two other traditional criteria of acceptability were employed during much of the investigation. One was that the composition must be unified. The other was that a painting should to some extent be realistic. A notable feature of the evolution was that not only were some of the limits of the criterion of perceptual depth investigated, so were those of compositional unity (30) and realism. In fact, this last criterion can be used to mark more precisely the point at which the evolution culminated in complete abstraction.

The reason is that Cubism was the stage in the development which closely preceded the final state. Picasso's and Braque's works constitute an investigation of the limits of minimal realism. (31) These parameters can be interpreted as approaching the boundaries of minimal perceptual depth. Consequently complete abstraction developed after the results of Picasso's and Braque's analysis were used to abandon the criterion of realism and thereby cross its parameters. (32)

We noted two dimensions which were significant during the evolution: an analysis of the structure of the representation of perceived three-dimensional space and the examination of the limits of acceptability. Leo Steinberg correctly maintains that during other periods as well artists have been interested in these dimensions. (33) Thus they alone are not what distinguish the development. What separates it from the other periods are the particular limits to whose examination it gave principal attention: those of minimal perceptual depth.

My explanation, therefore, accounts for the evolution which culminated in this kind of perception. However unlike Greenberg's, the explanation neither takes this shallow depth to be one of painting's essences nor the development to be establishing an essence. Instead, the account finds minimal depth to be a consequence of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' analysis of the structure of the signs by which painting provides for (34) one of its essences, the illusory perception of depth. (35)

Notes

(1) For example those by Evy-Alain Bois, T.J. Clark, Thierry de Duve, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss, as well as the essays in *Les Cahiers du Musée d'Art Moderne*, no. 45-46, automne/hiver.

(2) "a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension", Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", 90-2. See also Michael Fried's "Shape as Form", p. 404.

(3) Perhaps more accurately, they are also spoken of as "depth cues". See, for example, Julian Hochberg, "Pictorial Functions and Perceptual Structures", *The Perception of Pictures*, Hagen, M.A. ed., 53-3.

(4) "Modernist Painting" and "After Abstract Expressionism", p.30.

(5) "Modernist Painting"(60), 89-2&3. "After Abstract Expressionism"(62), 30-2. Fried

speaks of this interpretation as "Greenberg's reductionist and essentialist concept of the modernist enterprise". "How Modernism Works", 68-3. Yves Alain-Bois takes the interpretation to imply that painting was engaged in an "ontological project" which was a "search for its own essence". *Formless*, 25-1.

(6) "Modernist Painting", 85-2-89-1.

(7) "The use of methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself", "Modernist Painting", 85-2. Analogously, Michael Fried takes the development of painting since Manet to show "an increasing preoccupation with problems and issues intrinsic to painting itself". T. J. Clark states that painting during this period is "certainly that art which insists on its medium" and even goes so far as to describe it as "self-obsessed". See Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 16-2-17-1; Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", 59-2, and "Arguments about Modernism", 82-2.

(8) "Modernist Painting", 86-1&2.

(9) "After Abstract Expressionism"(62), 30-2.

(10) "Modernist Painting" 86-4(6-2), 87-2(6-3), 88-1(7-3).

(11) "Collage"(59), *Art and Culture*, 71-3-74-1, 75-3, 77-2; "Modernist Painting", 89-1. Do Fried and Clark equivocate between these two interpretations?

(12) From the thesis that flatness in the sense of surface is necessary for painting, Greenberg makes the invalid inference that it is sufficient: "a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture - though not necessarily as a *successful* one." While failing to discern Greenberg's logical error, Michael Fried correctly responds that a better description of the bare canvas is that it is "not conceivably" a painting. See Greenberg's "After Abstract Expressionism", *Art International*, vol. VI, no. 8, October 25, 1962, p.30-2; and Fried's "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum*, June, 1967, fn. 4. See Thierry de Duve's discussion of this disagreement between Greenberg and Fried in "Les silences de la doctrine" in *Clement Greenberg entre les lignes* (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1996), p. 70-2f.

(13) Thus there are two dimensions of the evolution which we are claiming that an explanation must account for and that our explanation does account for: the evolution's self-analysis and the gradual reduction in depth.

(14) "Modernist Painting", 90-2.

(15) Rosalind Krauss gives an insightful reading of this type of perception in "On Frontality", *Artforum*, May, 1968, pp. 40-46.

(16) That is, either a difference in colors or in shades of a color.

(17) Like Greenberg, I am proposing an "ahistorically essentialist" interpretation. This is in contrast to Michael Fried's professed Wittgensteinian approach. See his *Manet's Modernism, or The face of Painting in the 1860's*(96), "Introduction: Manet before Impressionism", fn. 62; *Art and Objecthood*(98), "An introduction to My Art Criticism", 33-2; "Art and Objecthood", fn.4, *Artforum*, June, 1967; "Shape as Form", *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*, Henry Geldzahler, ed.(E.P. Dutton, 1969), fn. 11 (p. 422) [N6535.N5.G4]; "How Modernism Works", *Critical Inquiry*, September, 1982, vol. 9, pp. 217-234.

(18) Greenberg concurs that a necessary property of painting is bringing about the perception of depth. "Modernist Painting", 90-2. Fried agrees as well.[And thus is his essentialistic?] See "Shape as Form", 404-3. Significantly, neither sees the consequences of this point for explaining the evolution or for ascertaining the subject of the self-analysis.

(19) Leo Steinberg also makes this criticism of Greenberg's position but in terms of a different respect(*What is it?*). See "Other Criteria", 77-1.

(20) Is it evident that this conclusion follows?

(21) Is it evident that this conclusion follows?

(22) Greenberg, as well, takes the evolution to be one of reduction.["Modernist Painting", 86-3; "'American-Type' Painting", *Art and Culture*, 209-2.f]. However contrary to him, the reduction was *of* an essence, not *to* it.

(23) Johnathan Crary correctly takes the investigation to be one in which "Vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge." *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 70.

(24) Malcolm Turvey discusses the view(?) that there was an "epistemological transformation in the early nineteenth century in which visual perception is newly conceptualized as the *product* of an observer's subjective mental and physiological capabilities." "Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye", p. 30. An example of this interpretation of perception is Helmholtz's thesis that.....

(?)Krauss finds Duchamp to give a similar interpretation of perception: "visuality on Duchamp's terms is understood as a condition of intellect".(Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 111-1.)

(25) Manifestations of the concern about the lack of this understanding may be what T.J. Clark describes as an "unsureness as to the nature of representation in art". More particularly, both Clark and Yves-Alain Bois take Cézanne's work to exemplify a "doubt about vision's own capacity to give us access to depth". Similarly, Rosalind Krauss finds this concern(?) in Picasso's Cubism. See Clark *The Painting of Modern Life*, 10-3 and 12-1; Bois, "Cézanne: Words and Deeds", *October*, sg/98, 34-3; and Krauss, "The Cubist Epoch", *Artforum*, 2/71, 33-3; and "The Motivation of the Sign", P&B Symposium(92), 270-2.

(26) Interestingly, my thesis implies that the evolution was analogous to minimalism in Hal Foster's following respect: "Its analysis tends toward the epistemological more than the ontological, for it focuses on the perceptual conditions and conventional limits of art, not on its formal essence or categorical being"."The Crux of Minimalism", *Individuals*, Howard Singerman, ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 163-4. *Is Foster's last phrase inconsistent with my interpretation?*

(27) Thus Greenberg is correct that the purpose of the analysis was empirical. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism", 30-2.

(28) Thus contrary to Paul Vitz, the progression did not consist of the type of "analytical

reductionism" he finds exemplified in late 19th century science. Vitz also mistakenly takes Greenberg's type of reduction to be of this type. See his "Visual Science and Modernist Art: Historical Parallels", Nodine, C. and Fisher, D. eds. *Perception and Pictorial Representation* (Praeger Publishing, 1979).

(29) Analogously Krauss describes the evolution as the "logic" of "an ever more abstract and abstracting opticality" whose history "goes from impressionism to neoimpressionism to fauvism to cubism to abstraction". *The Optical Unconscious*, 13-3. Malcolm Turvey borrowing from Crary interprets the development as "the logic of a 'relentless abstraction of the visual' from the referential world", "Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye", *October*, winter/1998, p. 30.

(30) Leo Steinberg provides an insightful discussion of this concept in "The Philosophical Brothel", *October*, spring, 1988.

(31) Pierre Daix reports Picasso as stating that during the latter stages of Cubism "we pushed painting the furthest"(P&B Symposium, 259-4).

(32) For an insightful analysis of this dimension of Cubism, see "Discussion" in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, pp. 251-259. In referring to the "Cubist investigation of pictorial space"(258-1), Benjamin Buchloh correctly claims that "Cubism necessitates the abandonment of representation"(256); he speaks of the "historical break that Cubism produces"(257-6).

(33) See *Other Criteria*, 68-2-77-2. Steinberg may have this type of point in mind in 76-2.

(34) I must become clear the exact respect in which painting "provides for" the illusory perception of depth.

(35) Earlier versions of this paper was presented to the faculty of the University of Sofia, Bulgaria, the American Society for Aesthetics (Eastern Division Meeting), and the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy (aesthetics section). I am grateful for the many helpful comments, particularly those of Alexander Gongov, Maria Dimitrova, and Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith.