

# To See a Picture “as a Picture” First: Clement Greenberg and the Ambiguities of Modernism

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Clement Greenberg is a difficult figure for philosophers. He continues to be of great importance and influence among artists, critics, and collectors. As one art historian has put it, not everyone is sure he is worth discussing, but everyone discusses him.<sup>1</sup> In New York’s Museum of Modern Art paintings by artists that he championed dominate the rooms devoted to the 1940’s through ’60’s.<sup>2</sup> Despite this influence and importance, until recently Greenberg has been little discussed among philosophers of art. A search of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*—arguably the two major journals in the field—revealed only a handful of references.<sup>3</sup>

This may be a matter of style and avocation. Greenberg’s writing, especially in the early essays that made his name, is vividly polemical; but it is also under-argued. It has been said that his early essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch” is more important for its title and tone than for its actual arguments and content.<sup>4</sup> Greenberg’s style was a function both of his journalistic venues and of his motivations for writing. He wrote for personal and political reasons as much as out of philosophical and theoretical commitments. He loved modern art and championed it partly as an anti-Stalinist but nonetheless left-wing gesture. While his analysis of modernist painting in the celebrated essay of that name is Kantian in spirit and inspiration, Greenberg never claimed to be engaged in a careful exegesis or working out of Kantian philosophy. While Greenberg’s interpretation of Kant may be vulnerable philosophically, his application of Kantian themes to contemporary trends in art is inspired. Modernist art is said to be self-critical. Just as Kant used reason to draw attention to and probe the limits of reason, so too, Greenberg argues, does modernist painting use the technique of art to draw attention to its status as art. “Modernism used art to call attention to art,” as he put it.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore:

Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as *the only and necessary way*, and Modernism’s success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.<sup>6</sup> [Emphasis added.]

I would like to explore some implications of the prescription to see a picture first “as a picture.” Contemporary art criticism and philosophy of art seem to follow Greenberg’s ukase in some respects, and to disregard it in others. There are benefits and costs to abiding strictly by such instructions, as we will see.

## I

To begin with, what does it mean to see a picture “as a picture” first? One of the things Greenberg seemed to have in mind was the denial of illusionism. Instead of seeing a picture as the things it depicts, the proper way to view a painting is as a painted surface. Thus Greenberg is squarely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century formalist tradition with Clive Bell and Roger Fry. The move from a robustly realist style of representation through impressionism to purely abstract painting was seen as natural, inevitable, and good. I say

this in spite of Greenberg's avowals, both in a postscript to "Modernist Painting" and in later writings, that he was merely describing the trend and "internal logic" of contemporary art without necessarily endorsing it. As a current scholar of Greenberg's work notes, description and judgment are inseparable in his prose.<sup>7</sup> However it should be mentioned that, despite some of the more heated rhetorical passages in his writing, Greenberg did not condemn all contemporary representational painting. In a late interview he stressed that his reviews for the *Nation* and *Partisan Review* sometimes praised artists such as Edward Hopper and Arnold Friedman, and others whose work was far from abstract.

The denial of illusionism in painting has implications for the practices of art appreciation and indeed challenges certain conceptions of the phenomenology of art appreciation. A denial of illusionism means that the viewer can no longer think of the painted surface as a window that she looks through or a space into which she might step. Paintings by the Old Masters seem to invite both such responses. It seems possible to touch the highly realistic pearl jewelry, grab a hunk of bread from the table, and walk on the polished floors. But these are not likely responses to works by Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, for example. The illusion of space created by a modernist painter can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, "only with the eye" Greenberg wrote.<sup>8</sup> The abstract character of these works, the resultant emphasis on the flatness of the pictorial plane, and their large size, make certain responses impossible. One does not reach or walk into a Pollock or a Rothko; one is both surrounded by such works and kept at a distance.

It has been argued that Greenberg's anti-illusionist analysis of the differences between modernist art and the art which came before it, is false to art history. It overstates the degree of illusionism in works by the Old Masters. Like 20<sup>th</sup> century painters, but in different ways, they also found means to draw attention to the status of their paintings *as paintings*. Such means include the use of elaborate frames, internal references to other paintings in allusion and quotation, formal distortions, colour economy, surface shimmer, and extreme, at times otherworldly, beauty.<sup>9</sup> Indeed Greenberg's remarks on art history are sometimes at odds with his own avowals that modernism is a continuation of, rather than a break with the past, and his later claim that, originally, being modern was a means of living up to the past.<sup>10</sup>

## II

What, if anything, may be lost when we view a picture only and necessarily "as a picture" and accept that the primary function of modern art is self-criticism? An exclusive emphasis on the values of art *for art* threatens to overwhelm the other types of value that art can have. It is true that an artwork can be interesting and valuable for the way in which it draws attention to and pushes against the limits of its medium, be that medium paint on canvas or diatonic tonality. But modernist art that pushes against its limits can be valuable for other reasons. A consumer of art who is not primarily interested in the limits of a medium but in the other values that art can afford should not be dismissed as a philistine or supporter of kitsch.

Like the art out of which it developed, modernist art is capable of arousing deep emotional responses in those who engage with it. This is true of modernist visual artworks, architecture, musical compositions, and poems. Let me mention a few examples: Poetry by Sylvia Plath, e.e. cummings, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. The latter's "Funeral Blues" made the collection in which it appears, *Tell Me the Truth about Love*, an unlikely best seller after it was recited in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

Modernist music, including works that subvert diatonic tonality, have aroused a variety of profound emotional responses in listeners. Such works include Alban Berg's operas *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* and his Violin Concerto, Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time," Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," and Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. Finally, Maya Lin's starkly modernist Vietnam Veterans Memorial overcame initial opposition and is now one of the most admired works of memorial art of our time.

A possible objection arises. It might be countered that my list of examples is weighted rather heavily towards tragic themes, and that the thematic or propositional content of these works is what arouses strong responses. While I believe this objection to be misconceived, I cannot offer a full defense of my own view here. The question of what makes art moving, if it can be answered at all, cannot be answered in a few words. No one would argue, I hope, that *any* poem about death or any work of memorial art would necessarily arouse strong emotions. After all, there are memorial works in more traditional idioms that, I would argue, fail to arouse strong emotions, despite their thematic weightiness. It is enough for my purpose here that artists and writers working in a modernist idiom have been able to create works that are profoundly moving. The challenges of modernism have not been an insurmountable barrier either to artists who have wanted to engage with difficult themes, or to admirers of their work.

Earlier I mentioned Rothko. Viewers have experienced strong emotions—have indeed been moved to tears—upon encountering his paintings. James Elkins, an art historian who has investigated the phenomenon of people crying in front of paintings, estimates that the majority of viewers who have been moved to tears by twentieth century art have been so moved by Rothko's works.<sup>11</sup> Their minimalist and non-representational character has not hindered viewers from finding them profoundly meaningful. Why should this be so? The paintings in question are abstract and lack any obvious subject matter. They do not "tell a story," at least not in any straightforward sense. Rothko's works after about 1947 usually lack even descriptive titles and are distinguished from one another only by colour or number. Some viewers may know that the artist suffered from depression and committed suicide, and they may be moved by these facts about his life. However I would want to resist the idea that viewers who are moved by Rothko's paintings are responding simply to the facts of his biography. Knowledge of artists' lives may influence our response to their work, but it is surely not a necessary or sufficient condition of our being moved by it.

It is worth noting that at least some of the artists Greenberg admired did not necessarily share his interpretation of their work. They did not see themselves as engaged primarily in an internal critique of the medium of painting. For example, in a 1943 letter to the *New York Times* by Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, the artists wrote: "There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless."<sup>12</sup> Now, whatever "tragic and timeless" subject matter the painters had in mind, I see no reason to think that drawing attention to the limits of painting was foremost in their minds. Similarly, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth."<sup>13</sup> We see here a number of themes that Greenberg would later emphasize as crucial for modernist painting—simplicity, flatness, the denial of illusion and the importance of the picture plane. But notice the artists' ambitions for their work: They seek to express "complex" thoughts, make a clear impact on viewers and "reveal truth." Again, while they may have strived, as artists often have, to push against the limits of their chosen

medium, this is not the extent of their ambition. Their aspirations are larger and more interesting.

I do not mean to imply that these (or any artists) invariably achieve their ambitions, or that artists' conceptions of their own work is necessarily insightful or always sincerely expressed. Artists are as prone to self-delusion and self-aggrandizement as anyone else. And it could hardly be denied that some artists regard other artists as their primary audience and are little concerned with how the general public receives their work. The composer Milton Babbitt's article "Who Cares If You Listen?" published in *High Fidelity* in 1958 is perhaps the most notorious expression of this attitude. Yet while an artist's stated intentions are surely not determinative of meaning, I think that philosophers cannot afford to ignore such intentions when they are known. The burden of argument falls on those who would claim that any knowledge of artists' intentions should be disregarded.

Like this anti-intentionalism, Greenberg's injunction to see a picture first "as a picture" is also closely tied to his aestheticism. In a late essay he wrote:

It also belongs to my definition of Modernism that the continuing effort to maintain standards and levels has brought about the widening recognition that art, that aesthetic experience no longer needs to be justified in other terms than its own, that art is an end in itself and that the aesthetic is an autonomous value. It could now be acknowledged that art doesn't have to teach, doesn't have to celebrate or glorify anybody or anything, doesn't have to advance causes; that it has become free to distance itself from religion, politics, and even morality. All it has to do is be good as art.<sup>14</sup>

Greenberg's commitment to aestheticism puts him in company with philosophers as different in other respects as Monroe Beardsley and Theodor Adorno. The idea that "the aesthetic" occupies its own sphere and can exist for its own sake originates in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (Writers more able than myself have investigated its source and traced its later history.)<sup>15</sup> Greenberg's writings both reflect the aestheticist approach to art, and reinforced that approach among artists, collectors, and other readers. No doubt that aestheticism is an important corrective to moralism about art (these days making a resurgence among analytic philosophers)<sup>16</sup> and even to the co-opting of art into propaganda (think of the Stalinist art that Greenberg dismissed as kitsch) and into advertising (arguably a greater concern today than it was even for Greenberg). But aestheticism has its costs as well. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in an essay published in 2003, argues that theorists of art in both the continental and analytic traditions have slighted the memorial and commemorative uses of art.<sup>17</sup> These thinkers are thus ill-equipped to understand the types of responses that audiences often have to such artworks. Given the importance and prevalence of memorial art, these are indeed significant omissions.

To sum up so far: To see a picture first "as a picture"—or more broadly to experience art first "as art"—has a variety of consequences. To experience an artwork strictly in relation to its medium and as succeeding or failing based on whether it shows the limits of that medium is restrictive. Artists want to do more and audiences demand more. While Greenberg was sometimes skeptical of the deeper meanings and symbolic aspirations that artists such as Rothko had for their work, he also disliked art that he regarded as trivial. For example he said of Andy Warhol: "I find his art sappy. The big screen portraits and all these things. Who cares about them?"<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that Greenberg held this view, despite it being arguably the case that Warhol's works subvert illusion and succeed in drawing attention to the limits of painting.

### III

The formalism and aestheticism that Greenberg championed would seem to be alive and well among philosophers and critics of art. But there is another strain in Greenberg's work that is less appreciated, and to elucidate it requires some context. The injunction to see a picture "as a picture" raises the question: What would it be to see a picture as something other than a picture? What could "stand in" for a picture and be seen instead of it? Illusionism—seeing a picture for the things it depicts or represents—is for most viewers an easily overcome temptation. A far stronger attraction is presented in the temptation to "solve" pictures. This entails seeing images as replete with hidden meanings and pictures as puzzles in need of resolution. Again, I refer to the work of James Elkins who has written eloquently on this topic.<sup>19</sup> He argues that contemporary art historians see pictures as in need of interpretation and explanation—as puzzles to be solved or codes to be broken—and that this attitude to artworks is relatively recent.

It is indeed a curious fact that art critics and historians today write far more about individual paintings than did their predecessors, and they write with a different orientation. While earlier art critics might have been content to write a paragraph or two about a picture, contemporary art historians compose entire articles, even entire volumes to them. For example, Vasari devotes about two pages to Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper"; Leo Steinberg's essay on the same picture published in *Art Quarterly* in 1973 runs to 113 pages. Certain paintings have attracted so much critical attention and interpretation, Elkins argues that their literature can no longer be mastered by a single scholar, judiciously discussed in a single volume, or effectively taught in a year long seminar. Philosophers may be aware of the large discussion around Velázquez's "Las Meniñas" because of the contribution by Michel Foucault. Other paintings that have inspired volumes of interpretation and commentary include da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," Raphael's "School of Athens" and Giorgione's "Tempest."

Let me briefly indicate some of the critical literature on this last painting, Giorgione's "Tempest," by way of illustration. Painted around 1510, the image inspired only two brief mentions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by Marcantonio Michiel, the Venetian collector and connoisseur. He refers to the painting as "a little landscape on canvas with [a] storm [and a] gypsy and [a] soldier" and "another picture of a gypsy and a shepherd in a landscape with a bridge."<sup>20</sup> Today the painting has been the subject of at least three book-length studies, and over 150 essays and notices. The "tidal wave" of opinion on the painting took off in 1895 when a commentator argued that it represented a scene in the epic poem the *Thebaid* by Statius. Another argued that the image came from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Others were convinced that the baby is Paris and that the man is the shepherd who found him. Or perhaps the baby is Moses, and the woman is the Pharaoh's daughter, as another commentator has argued? Perhaps the man is St. Theodore, the protector of Venice, who has rescued the woman from the dragon he slew after being commanded to do so by Christ? Other interpreters have argued that the figures do not represent specific figures, but are rather allegorical. One commentator argues that the painting symbolizes the theme that "harmony is discord resolved." The painting has also been seen as a mystic duality, with the man representing the active force and the woman representing the passive, inert factor. On another account, the man represents "Fortitude" and the woman "Charity" in a landscape dominated by "Fortune". Salvatore Settis, a relatively recent and widely read commentator on the painting, argues in a book-length study that the "hidden subject" of the painting is Adam and Eve outside the Garden of Eden. Since Settis' book was published in 1978 there have been at least twenty more interpretations of the painting.<sup>21</sup>

It is not only the Old Masters that we are invited to consider in this way. I recently came across another illustration of the modern tendency to see pictures as puzzles. This was in an advertising blurb for a new book by Jon Thompson published by Thames & Hudson called, *How to Read a Modern Painting: Understanding and Enjoying the Modern Masters*. It reads:

This vibrant and informative trip through one of art history's most exciting periods analyses more than 200 works of modern art, describing each artist's use of media and symbolism and thereby helping readers to unlock each painting's meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Note already implicit in the book's title is the conviction that a painting is something to be "read" (like a verbal text) and that successful "reading" is necessary for understanding and enjoyment. Notice also that every painting under consideration is assumed to have a "meaning" that is locked up and can be discovered only with analytic tools.

It goes without saying that all of the commentators I have been discussing present evidence—sometimes very compelling evidence—in favour of their puzzle-solving interpretations. All can point to aspects of the painting to support their specific readings. A few even bolster their arguments with x-ray images of the works in question. However even on the most generously pluralistic accounts of interpretation, certain interpretations will be false, if only on the grounds that two contradictory interpretations cannot both be correct. It is not clear whether there can be any principled way to choose among such a proliferation of interpretations such as those that have grown up around Giorgione's "Tempest." Perhaps a more interesting question to ask is, why so many different interpretations? How did we get to this point?

The commentators I have been discussing have surely violated the injunction to see a picture "as a picture" first. The painting has instead become a puzzle, an enigma, a riddle. Well, someone might ask, what of it? What, if anything, is lost when we see pictures as puzzles? I would argue that several things may be lost, or at least overlooked. First, we risk losing touch with the very thing that Greenberg pressed us to notice and admire: The skill involved in the production of artworks and the abilities required to create art that challenges its medium. Second, certain paintings—those which do not lend themselves readily to extended exegesis—become somehow less worthy of our attention. They are not seen to be as interesting as works that are more readily and voluminously open to interpretation. Elkins invokes both of these problems when he writes:

We are inescapably attracted to pictures that appear as puzzles, and unaccountably uninterested in clear meanings and manifest solutions. The discipline [art history] thrives on the pleasures of problems well solved, and it languishes in the face of the good, the common, the merely true, the skillful, and above all, the image that refuses to present itself as a puzzle.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, attention to the "hidden" meaning of a picture and the attempts to solve the puzzle it embodies can actually become a way of *avoiding* certain types of engagement with art. Puzzle-solving is a cognitive activity; emotional responses do not help us resolve enigmas. If anything, such responses may be a hindrance. Again, certain types of artworks, including memorial and commemorative works, are not conducive to the "puzzle" treatment. Works of memorial art need to be clear to be effective. Elkins contends that the verbal interpretations—the words—we offer in place of paintings are a

symptom of our anxiety about pictures and the power they have over us. After all, one of the things that people do when they are anxious is to talk a lot.

I do not know if Greenberg ever commented on Giorgione's "Tempest" or on the voluminous critical literature that has grown up around it. But I hardly think he would have approved. He was suspicious of attempts to link value in art with levels of signification. Already in 1954 he wrote:

More and less in art do not depend on how many varieties of significance are present, but on the intensity and depth of such significances, be they few or many, as are present. And we cannot tell, before the event—before the experience of it—whether the addition or subtraction of conceptual meaning, or of any other given factor, will increase or diminish the aesthetic meaning of a work of art. That *The Divine Comedy* has an allegorical and anagogical meaning, as well as a literal one, does not necessarily make it a more effective work of literature than the *Iliad*, in which we really discern no more than a literal meaning.<sup>24</sup>

For Greenberg the crucial question about any work of art was not "what does it mean?" but "is it any good?" Part of seeing a picture "as a picture" first is letting art exist for its own sake. If all art has to do is "be good as art" (as Greenberg believed) then this implies that all art has to *be* art. Although the temptation to see a picture as a puzzle may be overwhelming in the end, for whatever reason, we might do better to follow Greenberg and see pictures, if not only as pictures, then as pictures first. They might even turn out to be less puzzling (and less anxious-making) as a result.

However there is another question about works of art to consider: Along with "what does it mean?" and "is it any good?" we sometimes want to know "what do we get out of it?" I have suggested that a strict adherence to Greenberg's formalism and aestheticism might hinder attempts to answer (or even ask) this question. Yet his demand that we treat pictures as pictures first surely puts us farther toward an answer than certain other approaches, approaches that he would likely have disdained.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Reeve, "Balls and Strikes." Review of *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg* by Alice Goldfarb Marquis (Lund Humphries, 2007) in *London Review of Books*, 5 April 2007, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Gopnik, "The Power Critic," *The New Yorker*, March 16, 1998, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> This may be changing. See for example: Diarumuid Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:2 (Spring 2007), pp. 217-28.

<sup>4</sup> Gopnik, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 3. This essay has been reprinted many times. I used the version posted at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>, accessed on April 20, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Melville, "Kant After Greenberg," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:1 (Winter 1998), p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 5.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Steinberg made such a criticism of Greenberg.

<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," in *Late Writings* ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/>. Accessed on May 8, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/>

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," 31.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: M.H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics" in *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* ed. Michael Fischer (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), pp. 135-158; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I) & (II)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951), pp. 496-527 and 13 (1952), pp. 17-46; Nicholas Wolterstorff "Why Philosophy of Art Cannot Handle Kissing, Touching, and Crying," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61:1 (Winter 2003), pp.17-27.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Berys Gaut, "The ethical criticism of art" in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection.*, edd. Jerrold Levinson, 182-203 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Matthew Kieran, "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54:4 (Autumn 1996), pp. 337-51.

<sup>17</sup> Wolterstorff, "Why Philosophy of Art Cannot Handle Kissing, Touching, and Crying."

<sup>18</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernism or Barbarism: An Interview with Karlheinz Lüdeking," *Late Writings*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> See James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999). I have relied heavily on this work.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Elkins, *Puzzles*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> I have relied here on the discussion in Elkins, *Puzzles*, 130-35.

<sup>22</sup> Advertisement in *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 13 2007, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Elkins, *Puzzles*, 259.

<sup>24</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and so Forth," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> This paper was written as a keynote address to the Emma Lake Conference, *What's Left of Modernism?—Greenberg, Kant, and Contemporary Aesthetics*, June 1-3, 2007. I am grateful to the organizers, Will Buschert and Eric Dayton, for inviting me, to all of the conference participants for questions and comments, and also to two anonymous reviewers for this journal.