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Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/468386
Accessed: 03/06/2009 19:57

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Necessity of "Formalism"

Clement Greenberg

There is the common notion of Modernism as something hectic, heated. Thus Irving Howe lists among the "formal or literary attributes of modernism" the fact that "Perversity—Which Is to Say: Surprise, Excitement, Shock, Terror, Affront—Becomes a Dominant Motif" (Introduction to a collection of essays by various hands called *The Idea of the Modern* [New York, 1967]). A related notion is that Modernism can be understood as an extreme version of Romanticism. But a long look at Modernism doesn't bear out either notion as a covering one.

Modernism is as specific a historical phenomenon as Romanticism was, but it doesn't represent nearly so specific an attitude, position, or outlook. Modernism may continue certain aspects of Romanticism, but it also reacts against Romanticism in general—just as in reviving certain aspects of Classicism it reacts against Classicism in general. In the context of what is signified by terms like Romanticism and Classicism when they are used *unhistorically*, Modernism as a whole distinguishes itself by its inclusiveness, its openness, and also its indeterminateness. It embraces the conventional polarities of literary and art history; or rather it abandons them (and in doing so exposes their limited usefulness). Modernism defines itself in the long run not as a "movement," much less a program, but rather as a kind of bias or tropism: towards esthetic value, esthetic value as such and as an ultimate. The specificity of Modernism lies in its being so heightened a tropism in this regard.

This more conscious, this almost exacerbated concern with esthetic value emerges in the mid-19th century in response to an emergency. The emergency is perceived in a growing relaxation of esthetic standards at the top of Western society, and in the threat this offers to the serious practice of art and literature. The Modernist response to this emergency becomes effective because it takes place in actual production rather than in discourse; in fact, it is more conscious in the practice of art than it is in discourse or criticism. This response begins to make a break with many well-tried conventions and habits, ostensibly a
radical break. But for the most part is remains only ostensibly a break and only ostensibly radical. Actually, it’s a "dialectical" turn that works to maintain or restore continuity: a most essential continuity: continuity with the highest esthetic standards of the past. It’s not particular past styles, manners, or modes that are to be maintained or restored, but standards, levels of quality. And these levels are to be preserved in the same way in which they were achieved in the first place: by constant renewal and innovation.

The emergency has proved to be a lasting one, and Modernism a lasting response to it. And so far it has been a more or less successful response. The higher standards of the past have been maintained in production, which does not have to mean that the best of the past has been matched in quality in a point-for-point way; it suffices that the best of Modernist production attains a similar qualitative level.

The Modernist preoccupation with esthetic value or quality as an ultimate is not new in itself. What makes it new is its explicitness, its self-consciousness, and its intensity. This self-consciousness and intensity (together with the 19th century’s increasing rationality in fitting means to ends) could not but lead to a much closer and larger concern with the nature of the medium in each art, and hence with "technique." This was also a questioning concern, and because it got acted on in practice by artists, poets, novelists, and composers, not by pedants, it could not but become an "artisanal" concern too (which does not mean the same thing as a "mechanical" concern—or at least the best of Modernism has shown that it does not mean the same thing). And it’s this, the artisanal concern and emphasis of Modernism that has proved to be its covering emphasis, its enduring and also its saving one—the one that again and again brings Modernism back to itself.

Its artisanal emphasis is what more than anything else makes for the hard-headed, sober, "cold" side of Modernism. It’s also part of what makes it react against Romanticism. An eventual tendency of Romanticism was to take medium and artisanry too much for granted and to consider them as more or less transparent or routine. I won’t say that this was a decisive factor in the deterioration of standards, but it was a symptom of that deterioration. It was not just the soft-headedness of Romanticism popularized and in decline that provoked the hard-headed reaction of the first Modernists; it was also a certain un-professionalism.

I don’t for a moment contend that Modernism is exclusively an affair of hard-headedness and artisanal sobriety. I started out by saying that it distinguishes itself by its openness and inclusiveness of temper and attitude. And I set out to correct, not demolish, what I
feel is too one-sided a view. Yet this view almost invites demolition when it comes to Modernist painting and sculpture (and maybe to Modernist music too). For these exhibit Modernism as almost crucially a concern in the first place with medium and exploratory technique, and a very workman-like concern. Manet and the Impressionists were paragons of hard-headed professionalism; so was Cézanne in his way, and so were Seurat and Bonnard and Vuillard; so were the Fauves—if ever there was a cool practitioner, it was Matisse. Cubist was overwhelmingly artisanal in its emphasis. And this emphasis remains a dominant one, under all the journalistic rhetoric, in Abstract Expressionism and art informel. Of course, Apollonian temperaments may produce Dionysian works, and Dionysian temperaments Apollonian works. Nor does artisanal hard-headedness exclude passion; it may even invite and provoke it. And of course, there were notable Modernist artists like Gauguin and Van Gogh and Soutine who were anything but soberly artisanal in outlook; but even they occupied themselves with questions of “technique” to an extent and with a consciousness that were uniquely Modernist.

Artisanal concerns force themselves more evidently on a painter or sculptor than on a writer, and it would be hard to make my point about the artisanal, the “formalist” emphasis of Modernism nearly so plausible in the case of literature. For reasons not to be gone into here, the medium of words demands to be taken more for granted than any other in which art is practiced. This holds even in verse, which may help explain why what is Modernist and what is not cannot be discriminated as easily in the poetry of the last hundred years as in the painting . . . .

It remains that Modernism in art, if not in literature, has stood or fallen so far by its “formalism.” Not that Modernist art is co-terminous with “formalism.” And not that “formalism” hasn’t lent itself to a lot of empty, bad art. But so far every attack on the “formalist” aspect of Modernist painting and sculpture has worked out as an attack on Modernism itself because every such attack developed into an attack at the same time on superior artistic standards. The recent past of Modernist art demonstrates this ever so clearly. Duchamp’s and Dada’s was the first outright assault on “formalism,” that came from within the avant-garde, or what was nominally the avant-garde, and it stated itself immediately in a lowering of aspirations. The evidence is there in the only place where artistic evidence can be there: in the actual productions of Duchamp and most of the Dadaists. The same evidence continues to be there in the neo-Dadaism of the last ten years, in its works, in the inferior
quality of these works. From which it has to be concluded that if Modernism remains a necessary condition of the best art of our time, as it has been of the best art of the hundred years previous, then "formalism," apparently, remains a necessary condition too, which is the sole and sufficient justification of either Modernism or "formalism."

And if "formalism" derives from the hard-headed, "cold" side of Modernism, then this must be its essential, defining side, at least in the case of painting and sculpture. That's the way it looks right now—and looks more than ever right now. The question is whether it will keep on looking that way in the future: that is, whether Modernism will continue to stand or fall by its "cold" side and by its "formalism." Modernism has been a failing thing in literature these past twenty years and more; it's not yet a failing thing in painting or sculpture, but I can imagine its turning into that in another decade (even in sculpture, which seems to have a brighter future before it than painting does). If so, this may come about in the same way that it has come about, as it seems to me, in literature: through the porousness of Modernism's "hot" side, the enthusiastic and hectic side, which is the one that middlebrows have found it easier all along to infiltrate.

There have, of course, to be deeper, larger factors in all this than the ambiguous difference between Modernism's "hot" and "cold" sides. If Modernism's "hot" side has become a liability in these past years, this is a symptom, not a cause; the cause, or causes, have to be sought outside Modernism and outside art or literature.

Postscriptum

Art is, art gets experienced, for its own sake, which is what Modernism recognized in identifying esthetic value as an ultimate value. But this doesn't mean that art or the esthetic is a supreme value or end of life. The neglect of this distinction by the original art-for-art's-sakers—most of whom were not Modernists anyhow—compromised a valid perception.

Post-Postscriptum

My harping on the artisanal and "formalist" emphasis of Modernism opens the way to all kinds of misunderstanding, as I know from tiresome experience. Quality, esthetic value orginates in inspiration, vision, "content," not in "form." This is an unsatisfactory way of
putting it, but for the time being there seems to be no better one available. Yet “form” not only opens the way to inspiration; it can also act as means to it; and technical preoccupations, when searching enough and compelled enough, can generate or discover “content.” When a work of art or literature succeeds, when it moves us enough, it does so \textit{ipso facto} by the “content” which it conveys; yet that “content” cannot be separated from its “form”—no more in Dante’s than Mallarmé’s case, no more in Goya’s than in Mondrian’s, no more in Verdi’s than in Schoenberg’s. It embarrasses me to have to repeat this, but I feel I can count here on the illiteracy of enough of my readers in the matter of what can and what can’t be legitimately put in words about works of art.

\textit{New York, New York}