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Realism, Modernism, and the Spectre of Trotsky – 2: Greenberg

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In the first part of this article I discussed Lukács and his theory of Realism. I now want to turn to Clement Greenberg, “the major theoretical figure of the late modern age and indeed that theoretician who more than any other can be credited as having invented the ideology of modernism full-blown and out of whole cloth”.¹ At his best, Greenberg deserved his reputation as a critic quite as much as Lukács for his clarity of description, refusal of jargon and, above all, focus on the materiality of the work of art.² The most productive phase in his career spanned the 20 years between his first major article, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) and the codification of his mature views in “Modernist Painting” (1960). But although there are continuities between these two essays, it would be wrong to treat them simply as different aspects of the same argument, or to imagine that the latter developed inevitably out of the former. In fact, the explanatory models on which they are based and the political conclusions to which they give rise are radically distinct, as might be expected from the fact that, after some encouragement from Dwight Macdonald, the first was submitted, to the “literary Trotskyist” journal *Partisan Review* and the latter commissioned, broadcast, and published by the Voice of America. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”—whatever its weaknesses—clarifies the origin and development of modernism in a way which transcends the reductionist rhetoric of “decadence” deployed by Lukács; “Modernist Painting”—for all its strengths—places another layer of mystification between us and understanding the issues involved.

Modernism and the Avant-Garde

In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” Greenberg tried to explain the central cultural contradiction within capitalism on the eve of the Second World War. This was characterised, on the one hand, by technically complex individual works of high art accessible only to a discerning minority (“avant-garde”); and on the other, by formulaic artefacts, mass produced to appeal within the known parameters of public taste (“kitsch”). He extended discussion of the first in another essay for *Partisan Review*, published in 1940, called “Towards a Newer Laocoon” and discussion of the second in an essay for *Commentary*, published in 1954 after his break with the Left, called “The Plight of Our Culture”, although many of the arguments in the latter hark back to his earlier Marxist work.³

When Greenberg uses the term “avant-garde”, he means not only modernism as a set of artistic practices, but also the attitudes associated with the artists and the social milieu which they inhabited. Greenberg dates the appearance of the avant-garde in Western culture from 1848, the same year which features so strongly in Lukács’s analysis, but for different reasons. For Greenberg, modernism is a hostile reaction to, not (as it is for Lukács) an unmediated expression of bourgeois cowardice and vulgarity. “It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe”. Greenberg argues that the revolutionary movements of the time allowed the avant-garde both to “isolate their concept of the ‘bourgeois’ in order to define what they were not” and gave them “the courage to assert themselves as aggressively as they did against the prevailing standards of society”. However,

although avant-garde artists shared with Marxists a revulsion at the bourgeoisie, this was mainly on aesthetic rather than socio-economic grounds; and they were as much removed from the working class movement as it was from the philistinism of the Moneybags. However, while they could remain aloof from the former, they could not entirely escape the latter. Having abandoned aristocratic patronage, “the avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed its money”:

No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of the society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.⁴

Indeed, so important was this for Greenberg that Boris Groys has claimed he was at this point more interested in this aspect of the avant-garde than any other:

Greenberg is not interested here in avant-garde art per se, or even in avant-garde artists as arts producers—rather he is interested in the figure of the arts consumer. The actual question that informs Greenberg’s essay is this one: who is supposed to be the consumer of avant-garde art? Or to put it in different terms: What constitutes the material, economic basis of avant-garde art, understood as part of the societal superstructure?⁵

The contradictory relationship of avant-garde artists with the bourgeoisie was unprecedented for an artistic movement, although, as Greenberg argued, it was to become increasingly the norm as the 19th century went on:

Romanticism was the last great tendency following directly from bourgeois society that was able to inspire and stimulate the profoundly responsible artist—the artist conscious of certain inflexible obligations to the standards of his craft. By 1848, Romanticism had exhausted. After that the impulse, although indeed it had to originate in bourgeois society, could only come in the guise of a denial of that society, as a turning away from it. It was not to be an about-face towards a new society, but an emigration to Bohemia which was to be art’s sanctuary from capitalism. It was to be the task of the avant-garde to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their justification.⁶

As Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock have emphasised, there is a difference between the avant-garde and particular forms of art which are associated with it. The avant-garde is not an “idea” or an “artistic development” but is “a novel form of culture produced in bourgeois society in the mid-nineteenth century and a novel force which advances and keeps culture at a high level”.⁷ This does not explain, however, “the emigration to Bohemia” involved shifting from representation to abstraction. The dominance of literature before 1848 led the other artistic forms—notably sculpture and painting—to try and imitate its effects, a process which reached its climax in Romanticism. One consequence was a concentration on subject matter at the expense, not so much of the form, but of the medium:

The romantic theory of art was that the artist feels something and passes it on this feeling—not the situation or thing which stimulated it—to his audience.... In practice this aesthetic encouraged that particularly widespread form of artistic dishonesty which consists in the attempt to escape the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another.

For Greenberg, therefore: “Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the specific art.”⁸

But Greenberg pointed out that where there is an “advance-guard” there is usually also a “rear-guard”. Industrial capitalism sucked the rural masses into the new urban centres of production, obliterating or making irrelevant the folk culture they had known in the countryside. What would replace it? “To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.” Kitch, as Greenberg describes it is “mechanical”, formulaic, relies on “vicarious experience” and “faked sensations”: “Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.” But there was nevertheless a connection between kitsch and the avant-garde: “The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends.” But there is a central difference: “If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch...imitates its effects.”⁹

The dangers of teleology are always present when dealing with Greenberg. Frances Stoner Saunders, for example, writes that “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” “set out the ideological rationale for accepting sponsorship from an enlightened patron” and “still stands as the definitive article of faith for the elitist, and anti-Marxist view of modernism”: “The really deep connection between Abstract Expressionism and the cultural Cold War can be found here.”¹⁰ If this were so, the essay is unlikely to have concluded as it famously did:

Here, as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture—as inevitably as one will appear, once we have socialism. Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.¹¹

In other words, rather than recommending that artists seek reconciliation with bourgeois patrons, Greenberg insists that only by crossing the divide between aesthetic and political rejection of capitalism—by the mutual embrace of avant-garde and vanguard, if you like—was there any possibility of defending what was of value in culture against the remorseless advance of kitsch. The strengths of his original position outlined here are fourfold.

First, unlike Lukács, Greenberg does not use a single style within a single discipline as a model for all contemporary artistic production. In 1944 he had declared that:

Poetry is lyric and “pure”; the serious novel has become either confessional or highly abstract, as with Joyce or Stein; architecture subordinates itself to function and the construction engineer; music has abandoned the programme. Let painting confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of colour and line, and not intrigue us by association with things we can experience more authentically elsewhere.¹²

And in this, at least, the later Greenberg was consistent with the earlier. In 1960 he began “Modernist Painting” with a declaration of the universal significance of modernism: “Modernism includes more than art and literature. By now it covers almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture.”¹³ Second, he shows that it did not emerge as a passive reflection of social change after 1848, but—at least in part—as a way of responding to these through transformations in the art forms themselves. Third, he does not reduce the rise of modernism (or its subsequent decline) to by-products of political events. Fourth, notwithstanding this properly Trotskyist concern for the internal dynamics of art, he is also able to relate modernism to specific class analysis of those sections of the bourgeoisie who consumed and the petty bourgeoisie who produced these works.

Parallels, Precursors, Influences

Similar accounts of the origins of the modern artist to that outlined by Greenberg were given, nearly 50 years later, by Raymond Williams and Peter Burger, without reference to him. Given the academic specialisation which means that literary critics are unlikely to be acquainted with the work of art critics, this was probably not plagiarism on their part, but it is indicative of how little Greenberg's work has been absorbed into the intellectual culture of the Left.¹⁴ Was Greenberg alone in arriving at his conclusions? Other writers had in fact generated individual components of his thesis, but not the overall synthesis.

One who identified the shift from representation to abstraction was Nikolai Tarabukin, whom we encountered in Part 1. His two major books of 1923, *From the Easel to the Machine* and *Towards a Theory of Painting*, contain a formal analysis of shifts in visual art which prefigure those of Greenberg. The latter could not, however, have been familiar with them, since they remained untranslated into English until the early 1980s and little was known of Tarabukin himself until the entire Constructivist scene was recreated by Christine Lodder in her classic work of 1983.¹⁵ Tarabukin not in the Marxist tradition at all, however broadly defined, although he did write in the Soviet Union during the revolutionary period. He argues that the significance of the French Impressionists (and Manet in particular) is that "their work was directed towards freeing painting from a content dependent on ideology or subject matter" to the extent that "the concentration on painterly content in a canvas was in reverse proportion to the presence of a subject matter." This is very like the early Greenberg, as is the insistence that this trend was also present in "other forms of contemporary artistic creativity" including poetry, theatre and music. What resembles the later Greenberg, however, is Tarabukin's awareness of the crisis of easel painting. For Tarabukin, the illusion of three-dimensionality is not overcome by emphasising the flatness of the canvas, but by abandoning the canvas altogether:

Painting was, and remains, a representational art and...it cannot escape from these limits of the representational. In traditional art the representation was its content. Ceasing to be representational, painting lost its inner meaning.

His argumentation for why this constituted a problem is, however, very weak, relying on an identification between representation (or more precisely, figuration) and "the aesthetic consciousness of a class or group" which no longer existed, because "when class and related divisions lose their foundation in all essential characteristics...the 'picture' as the typical form of visual art also loses its meaning as a social phenomenon."¹⁶ The answer was to move to the creation of actual objects with a real, rather than illusionary spatial dimension, which would have an external and utilitarian purpose: this is the point of the title of Tarabukin's book, *From the Easel to the Machine*. Trotsky wrote of the Formalists (although he is thinking here of Shklovsky and Jacobson) that: "Having declared form to be the essence of poetry, this school reduces its task to an analysis (essentially descriptive and semi-statistical) of the etymology and syntax of poems, to the counting of repetitive vowels and consonants, of syllables and epithets." While accepting that these methods were "necessary and useful" in so far as they retained a "subsidiary, serviceable and technical significance", Trotsky noted that the Formalists saw their own approach in more universal terms: "To them verbal art ends finally and fully with the word, and depictive art with colour."¹⁷

Two others whose views seem to have developed in parallel were key figures in the Frankfurt School and more concerned with the social. Greenberg's most recent biographer has claimed that he drew on "the anti-fascist Frankfurt school—Theodore Adorno, Georg Lukács,

Walter Benjamin”, but there is no evidence for this, nor does Greenberg ever directly refer to these authors.¹⁸ Nevertheless, here is Benjamin, writing earlier in the 1930s:

In point of fact, the theory of *l'art pour art* assumed decisive importance around 1852 at a time when the bourgeoisie sought to take its “cause” from the hands of the writers and poets. ... [Mallarme] furnishes evidence that the poet no longer undertakes to support any of the causes that are pursued by the class to which he belongs. To build a production on this basic renunciation of all manifest experiences of this class, causes specific and considerable difficulties. These difficulties turn this poetry into an esoteric poetry.¹⁹

This argument has obvious affinities with that developed by Benjamin’s fellow-German Marxist Theodor Adorno in the years of his American exile from Fascism. Two years after Greenberg’s article appeared, Adorno argued that the specifically musical component of mass culture was characterized by forms of standardization, which could at best display only pseudo-individualization: “Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individuation, for its part keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or ‘pre-digested.’” It is therefore impossible to use such forms to carry a radical social critique: “Those who ask for a song of social significance ask for it in a medium that deprives it of social significance.” Popular music acts as an emotional safety valve: “They [the audience] consume music in order to be able to weep.” But as Adorno concludes aphoristically: “One who weeps does not resist any more than one who marches.” The alternative for Adorno also lay in modernist work, although he tended to be more interested in its musical forms—such as that of Hindemith—than in the visual arts. His pessimism is, however, much greater than Greenberg’s; partly, one suspects, because of his total isolation from any organized political activity whatsoever.²⁰

If not the Russian Formalists or the Frankfurt School, what influences were acting upon Greenberg prior to the publication of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”? The first was the defence by Trotsky of the relative autonomy of art from politics. It was during the late 1930s that Trotsky returned to the question of cultural politics for the first time since the mid-1920s, as a relatively minor but nevertheless important aspect of his struggle to provide an alternative to Stalinism on every front. In a series of letters and contributions to the independent left journal *Partisan Review*, he tried, with little permanent success, to bring the editors closer to the fledgling Fourth International; but the ideas contained in these writings, and more importantly, in “Manifesto: For a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938)—written by himself and the Surrealist Andre Breton, and published under the name of the latter and the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera—were to provide a powerful attraction to artists and intellectuals repelled by the destructive influences of Stalinism on working class politics and Socialist Realism on the critical function of art. Trotskyism attracted, at different levels of organisational affiliation, artists as diverse as Breton and Rivera, the British composer Michael Tippett, and the American novelist James T. Farrell, whose critique of Socialist Realism in literature I cited in Part 1 of this article.²¹

Trotsky reasserted his belief in artistic freedom, not only from dictation in terms of content, but from prescriptions as to form: “...a truly revolutionary party is neither able nor willing to take upon itself the task of ‘leading’ and even less of commanding art, either before or after the conquest of power.”²² Furthermore, as both this comment and his choice of collaborators suggest, modernism had a role to play. Indeed as he stated in a letter on art submitted to the founding conference of the Fourth International: “If the vanguard of the world proletariat finds its leadership, avant-garde art will find new perspectives and new hope.”²³ None of this meant that Trotsky was unconcerned with the political attitudes expressed by art: “It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so called “pure” art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction.”²⁴ The warning contained in these lines was not

headed. As the Second World War began, Phillip Rahv, editor of *Partisan Review* and the leading exponent of “literary Trotskyism” wrote: “If a sufficiently organic, active and broad revolutionary movement existed, it might assimilate the artist by opening to him its own avenue of experience; but in the absence of such a movement all he can do is utilise the possibilities of individual and group secession from, and protest against, the dominant values of our time.”²⁵ The second half of this sentence indicates the shift from Trotsky’s own position. Yet what form could “individual and group secession from the dominant values of the time” take?

The second influence on Greenberg, and the answer to Rahv’s question, came in the notion, first codified in the New York art scene during the 1930s, that modern art had been becoming increasingly “abstract” since the 1890s. As far as we know, the term “abstract expressionism” was first used in 1929 by Alfred J Barr, curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, to describe the work of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky. Barr was to generalise his definition in the influential programme he wrote for the MOMA exhibition of 1936, *Cubism and Abstract Art*. This charts the supposed development of “abstraction” from Manet and the Impressionists onwards as a movement, internal to the visual arts themselves, by which artists rejected as exhausted earlier attempts to represent the natural world:

The pictorial conquest of the external visual world had been completed and refined many times and in different ways during the previous half millennium. The more adventurous and original artists had grown bored with painting facts. By a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance.²⁶

Unfortunately, a number of the most important modernist schools had not abandoned painting the objective world; but Barr was not inclined to let this knowledge stand between him and his thesis: “...only (!) in Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Suprematism has subject matter any real importance...”²⁷ What is important at this stage in the argument is not Barr’s mistaken conception of how modern art has developed, but the fact that Greenberg had available to him simultaneously theories which justified artistic retreat from political engagement and explained that this was in fact the direction in which the visual arts were moving. Therefore, as Peter Wollen writes:

His dislike of subject matter in art reflects, first, a radical extension of the modernist rejection of academic realism to include every kind of representation; second, the vanguardist idea of a band of revolutionaries, united by purity of principle, transposed from the political reality of the hopelessly divided Trotskyist movement to an idealised avant-garde of abstract artists; third, and perhaps most significant, a deep distrust of the cultural preferences of ‘the masses’, whom Greenberg saw as easy prey for commercialised kitsch just as, in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, they had proved unable to resist political demagogy.²⁸

Or as Gabriel Josipovici observes: “In this story all art is seen as moving towards Abstract Expressionism, New York style, as inevitably history moves towards the dictatorship of the proletariat”²⁹ It might be more appropriate to say that, in this story all art is seen as moving towards Abstract Expressionism, New York style, *instead* of history moving towards the dictatorship of the proletariat, or perhaps in compensation for it failing to do so.

The Nature of “Eliotic Trotskyism”

Timothy Clark has described Greenberg as being an advocate of “Eliotic Trotskyism” in which the defence of the artistic values of the bourgeoisie in the period of its ascendancy are necessary for the continuation of culture as such: “They are the repository, as it were, of affect and

intelligence that once inhered in a complex form of life but do so no longer, they are the concrete form of intensity and self-consciousness, the only one left, and therefore the form to be preserved at all costs and somehow kept apart from the surrounding desolation.”³⁰ At first it did not lead to counter-revolutionary conclusions (any more than it did for Rahv), but as Alex Callinicos writes:

After 1945, all revolutionary hopes gone, the distinction [i.e. between “avant-garde” and “kitsch”] served to canonise a new form of *l’art pour art*, as, in a climate defined by the Cold War and the New York art market’s insatiable demand for Modernist works, Greenberg and another ex-Trotskyist critic, Harold Rosenberg, became the chief propagandists of Abstract Expressionism, whose products they interpreted as articulating the painter’s personal alienation from a world no longer amenable to change.³¹

The differences from Greenberg’s earlier positions can be seen most clearly in “Modernist Painting”. Here, Greenberg argues that before the Enlightenment, art functioned in a similar way to religion; indeed, it usually functioned as an extension of religion. With the triumph of rationalist consciousness much of religion’s explanatory role was removed and it was reduced to the level of entertainment and, as Greenberg has it, therapy. “The arts could save themselves from this levelling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained by any other kind of activity.” But the Enlightenment not only posed this problem, it also offered a solution. Beginning with the work of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, modernism declared itself as a self-critical tendency in Western culture:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. ... Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. ... 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. ... Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognisable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognisable objects can inhabit. ... To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its efforts to do this, and not so much—I repeat—to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract.³²

Eugene Lunn has argued that there were four features of modernism common to all art forms: “aesthetic self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness”; “simultaneity, juxtaposition, or ‘montage’”; “paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty”; and “‘dehumanisation’ and the demise of the integrated individual personality”.³³ Yet only the first features in Greenberg’s conception of modernism. The problems with this are more obvious in his discussions of literature than painting or the visual arts more generally: “Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* seem to be, above all...the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed.”³⁴ But as Orwell observed of Joyce:

Ulysses could not have been written by someone who was merely dabbling in word-patterns; it is the product of a special vision of life, the vision of a Catholic who has lost his faith. What Joyce is saying is “Here is life without God. Just look at it!” and his technical innovations, important though they are, are primarily to serve this purpose.”³⁵

Other critics, such as Colin McCabe, have further suggested that the content of certain chapters in the novel is specifically related to Irish politics: “The resonances and allusions of [the Aeolus section] indicate that the paralysis of Irish politics is a result of the illusions about class

antagonisms that were fostered by nationalist ideology.”³⁶

No piece of literature, even *Finnegan's Wake*, is completely devoid of content, if only because words carry associations that brush strokes do not; Greenberg's emphasis on “aesthetic self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness” in painting therefore has greater plausibility, particularly when he argues that it forms a barrier to the “reading in” of specific content where this does not exist:

I, who am considered an arch-“formalist”, used to indulge in ...talk about “content” myself. If I do not do so any longer it is because it came to me, dismayingly, some years ago that I could always assert the opposite of whatever it was I did say about “content” and not get found out; that I could say almost anything I pleased about “content” and sound plausible.”³⁷

If Greenberg is, in Clark's words, a “false friend” of modernism, then his point—that a painting which apparently is without objective content can be interpreted almost any way by different people—was also made by its genuine enemies, the Stalinist defenders of Socialist Realism, although to quite different ends. As Francis Klingender wrote in a symposium on revolutionary art published in 1935: “The development of modern art from impressionism to abstract art has, I submit, the following two-fold significance: in the first place it embodies the ever more frantic flight from content, i.e. from social reality, from all reality whatever, of the retrogressive capitalist class.” Klingender also makes the more subtle point that since the bourgeoisie were not going to buy art which presented them with this reality, artists turned to experimentation with technique and form as compensation, but: “Far from achieving the emancipation of art, the destruction of content necessarily also leads to the destruction of form—a climax epically symbolised in the white square painted on a white canvass of square shape by the suprematist Malevitch.”³⁸ Malevich was, of course, a supporter of the Russian Revolution who exhibited *White on White* at the 10th State Exhibition in Moscow during 1919, but why let an irrelevant detail like this get in the way of an argument?³⁹ More important is the case of Brecht, since, as we have already seen from his criticism of Lukács, he cannot be considered an opponent of modernism on principle. During the 1930s, however, and long before abstraction achieved its later dominance, we find him cautioning Communist artists against adopting its techniques:

I see that you have removed the motifs from your paintings. No recognisable objects appear there anymore...I must say that I wonder about it, and especially because you say that you are Communists...The poor man who lacks a kitchen chair does not lack colour and form. The wealthy man who has a beautiful old chair does not regard it as something to sit on, but as form and colour. We Communists see things differently than do the profiteers and their lackeys.⁴⁰

Brecht saw this indeterminacy of content as a reason to reject abstraction; Greenberg, the self-referentiality of abstract art as a reason to reject content: both, while ascribing different—opposing—value to abstract art, evidently share the same assessment of what it means—or fails to mean. If, as I have argued, however, Modernism is an ideology, then we require to demystify it, rather than merely to accept its terms while reversing its judgements.

In an essay written in 1967 Greenberg reprised his account of the origins of the avant-garde, but with a crucial absence. Greenberg noted that the avant-garde had arisen in response to “a threat and a challenge”:

The threat lay in the fact that the highest standards of art were being increasingly exposed to the attrition of a market no longer governed by the tastes of a cultivated elite. The challenge lay in the even more definite fact that high art was no longer able to maintain itself without innovation (or

renovation) of a kind more constant and more radical-seeming than had been necessary in the four hundred years before.⁴¹

Greenberg assumes that there is something called “aesthetic experience” which is produced by works of art and which has no relation to the external world outside of art. This was standard modernist position. Writing of the “aesthetic emotion” before the First World War, Clive Bell wrote that: “We have no other means of recognising a work of art than our feelings for it.”⁴² Greenberg prefers the term “judgement” to “feeling”, but the result is the same: “Because aesthetic judgements are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules, or precepts.”⁴³ The later Greenberg retained from his earlier work the view—and here there are affinities with Lukács—that the appropriateness of certain forms has a temporal dimension:

My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment.⁴⁴

The concept of “judgment” should theoretically allowed Greenberg to avoid the assumptions about the validity of certain types of artistic form characteristic of Lukács:

To hold that one kind of art is invariably superior or inferior to another is to judge before experiencing. The whole history of art is there to demonstrate the futility of rules of preference laid down beforehand—the impossibility of anticipating the outcome of aesthetic experience.⁴⁵

In practice, however, he became just as prescriptive. The most recent biography of Jackson Pollock notes how Greenberg treated Willem de Kooning: “Greenberg had come to de Kooning’s studio and, pointing at various pictures, announced, ‘You can’t do that, and you can’t do that.’” One is delighted to hear that de Kooning threw him out, “but”, as the authors note, “many artists were not so brave.”⁴⁶ Serge Guilbaut quotes a letter from Still to the curator of the “experimental” wing of the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York: “My contempt for the intelligence of the scribblers I have read is so complete that I cannot tolerate their imbecilities, particularly when they attempt to deal with my canvases. Men like Soby, Greenberg, Barr, etc...are to be categorically rejected.”⁴⁷ Reading these words, it is difficult to deny the charge, brought by Robert Storr against Greenberg and those who have followed him, that: “Among these academicians, theoretical name-dropping is the norm, coupled with an astonishing disinterest in and disregard for the stated intentions of the artists who fall victim to their attentions.”⁴⁸ For, even if we accept that one tendency within modernism has indeed been towards what we can refer to in shorthand as ‘abstraction’, there is more than one reason why this should be the case. One might be that artists were attempting to transcend their own historical moment. Boris Groys argues that the avant-garde had set themselves the following questions:

How could art continue under the permanent destruction of cultural tradition and the familiar world that is a characteristic condition of the modern age, with its technological, political and social revolutions? Or, to put it in different terms: How can art resist the destructiveness of progress? How does one make art that will escape permanent change – art that is atemporal, transhistorical?

This was written in relation to the Russian pre-revolutionary Constructivism, but the point is of more general application: one way of producing an “art for all time” might be to remove from it

any of the recognisable markers of history or contemporaneity.⁴⁹ This was one reason for embracing “abstraction”: what were the others?

Resemblance-Representation, Subject-Content

The early Greenberg wrote of “[Manet’s] insolent indifference to his subject, which in itself was often striking, and his flat colour modelling, were as revolutionary as Impressionist technique proper. Like the Impressionists he saw the problems of painting as first and foremost problems of the medium, and he called the spectator’s attention to this.”⁵⁰ Was “flatness” a retreat from content? These seem very much like a post-hoc rationalisation. Clark has argued that the flattening out of the canvas in Parisian painting during the second half of the nineteenth century expressed, at one level, populist notions of equality held by Manet and other painters: “It [i.e. the painting] was therefore made as plain, workmanlike, and emphatic as the painter could manage.”⁵¹ Yet as Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina once noted of Manet’s painting, *The Old Musician* (1862), there are at least two reasons why it does not have to be explained in terms of a turning towards issues associated with painting itself:

One is that the relatively unusual formal, technical and compositional characteristics of the work are evidence of Manet’s interest in remaking painting as a sphere of “autonomy”, but one where the “autonomy” represents an otherness critical of reality, a transformation of conventional artistic values by the painter, which does have a political function. The other...is that Manet’s work is one of several forms of representation of a wider social “consciousness of modernity”. In the second case, Manet would be seen, like Courbet, as a “realist”, combining critical reworkings of existing artistic conventions (both contemporary and those of past art) with the contingent signs and references of contemporary life.⁵²

The term “abstraction”, which seems so self-explanatory, is in fact nowhere near as simple as bourgeois common sense would have us believe; for, every painting which is described as such must be abstracted from something else. Peter Wollen noted of Greenberg’s position:

It led to a denial of any involvement of art with discursive thought and the figurative imagination, a denial that was in fact completely fictive and, in a sense, fraudulent. Abstract art itself was rooted in ideas about the world and even images of it. Mondrian, for instance, came to abstraction by way of theosophy, and his painting reflected a kind of mystic hermeticism. Others sought to discover a Neo-Platonic geometry in nature, reduced from the messiness of the contingent detail to the clarity of essential form.⁵³

Some of the issues involved had in fact already been discussed in 1937, shortly before Greenberg began his writing career, in a brilliant article by Meyer Schapiro, one of former’s contemporaries and a fellow Trotskyist,:

The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art...rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing on abstract art: that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws...These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what representation is. There is no passive, “photographic” representation in the sense described... All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand there is no “pure art”, uncontaminated by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of a hand, are shaped by experience and non-aesthetic concerns.⁵⁴

Shapiro is here drawing attention to two distinctions.

The first is between “representation” and “resemblance”. In everyday usage “represents” is taken to mean “something which stands in for something else”. In Greenberg’s hands, it appears to mean “something which resembles something else”. But representation can take place without resemblance. The Art and Language group (i.e. as far as this article is concerned, Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden) draw precisely this distinction: “Those features of a picture according to which we are able (under certain conditions) to see it as resembling a person or etc. compromise (under certain conditions) the descriptive content of the picture, although these features are in general neither necessary nor sufficient for descriptive or representational content.” They conclude: “We cannot infer realism from resemblance.”⁵⁵ As Frascina writes: “If representations are constructed from conventions, references, symbols and signifiers then the characteristics of a work of art work in which there is little evident concern with resemblance may still *represent* something or be symbolic.”⁵⁶

Many Abstract Expressionist paintings resemble nothing on earth, but represent—what? This was not a new problem in art. By its very nature music has always been the most “abstract” (or, as I would prefer to say, “non-resembling”) of mediums, even in the period when, according to Lukács, realism was dominant. Take Beethoven. As Adorno wrote: “If we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—not the echo of its slogans, the need to realise them, the cry for that totality in which reason and freedom are to have their warrant—we understand Beethoven no better than does the listener who cannot follow his pieces’ purely musical content, the inner history that happens to their themes.”⁵⁷ Greenberg was sure that art must embody nothing but the process of artistic production itself:

In the face of current events painting feels, apparently, that it must be epic poetry, it must be theatre, it must be an atomic bomb, it must be the rights of Man. But the greatest painter of our time, Matisse, preeminently demonstrated the sincerity and penetration that go with kind of greatness particular to twentieth century painting by saying that he wanted his art to be an armchair for the tired businessman.⁵⁸

What Matisse *actually* said was that he wanted painting to be “like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue”. As Brandon Taylor has pointed out, this does not mean what Greenberg implies: “Far from advocating a kind of tranquillizing principle for pictorial art”, Matisse was, I believe, investigating a certain sort of ‘working through’ of the experience of chaos, in the construction and perception of the pictorial surface in his paintings; and it is this far more rigorous and testing manner, and not his fabled ‘decorativeness’, that makes Matisse’s style interesting as a modernist exemplar.”⁵⁹

The second distinction is between “subject” and “content”. The early Greenberg was aware of the difference. As he wrote in “Towards A Newer Laocoon”: “Subject matter as distinguished from content: in the sense that every work of art must have content, but that the subject matter is something the artist does or does not have in mind when he is actually at work.”⁶⁰ David Caute once noted the confusion which exists in the minds of some critics (he was thinking of Susan Sontag) with regard to these terms:

The Anzin miner’s strike of 1884 is the subject of Zola’s novel *Germinal*; the content of the novel is what emerges through Zola’s literary treatment of the subject. It is not, therefore...a matter of choosing between form and content because every work of art, however “abstract”, however formalistic, has a content. Content always refers to the world (material, mental, associative or whatever) outside the work of art mediated and reshaped by artistic form. The fact is grasped once we cease to identify content with the mimetic representation of a subject or theme.⁶¹

Fredric Jameson has criticised precisely the fallacy “that works of art...are conceivable that have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the ‘serious’ issues of the day, indeed distracting from them...” If this is understood, then the supposedly “abstract” aspects of modernism take on a new meaning: “Modernism would then not so much be a way of avoiding social content...as rather of managing and containing it, secluding it out of sight in the very form itself, by means of specific techniques of framing and displacement which can be identified with some precision.”⁶²

Pollock’s work is central to this dispute over content. Phillip Leider noted in 1970: “Both abstraction and literalism look to Pollock for sanction; it is as if his work was the last achievement of whose status every serious artist is convinced.”⁶³ It therefore represents a test case which, if won, might challenge both the bourgeois assessment of modernist development and critical inversions of it. The artists who are conventionally grouped together under the heading of the Abstract Expressionists came under two sets of self-imposed pressures as the Second World War came to an end and the Cold War took its place. Both pointed away from figuration and resemblance; neither pointed away from content and representation.

The first was to find adequate means of registering the period they were living through in their art. Looking back from the 1960s, Greenberg noted of the period immediately before the Second World War: “Abstract art was the main issue among the artists I knew then; radical politics was on many people’s minds but for them Social Realism was as dead as the American Scene” The combination of what he calls “abstraction” and radical politics did not last: “Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in art in those years; someday it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism’, which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism’, turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.”⁶⁴ As Peter Wollen notes: “This version of events may explain Greenberg’s trajectory, but it does not convincingly account for Pollock’s”.⁶⁵ In David Craven’s reworking of Greenberg: “Someday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out *for some* as Trotskyism—although for others it began and ended with anarchism, non-aligned socialism, or social democracy—turned, *for a few*, into a McCarthyist assault on art, this purging art for life’s sake of most leftist impulses, and thereby cleared the way, unjustifiably, for the formalist modernism that was to follow.”⁶⁶ The Abstract Expressionists themselves gradually dropped their overt left-wing positions but, as Craven suggests, only very few (like Rothko and Gottlieb) going as far as Greenberg in joining the Committee for Cultural Freedom. The principle exception was Ad Reinert, who denounced his erstwhile colleagues (and Greenberg) for their embrace of the market, and participated in the March on Washington for Black Civil Rights in August 1963. When Rothko committed suicide in his studio in 1970, some of his friends felt that it was because he could no longer live the contradiction between the “opposition to bourgeois materialism” which his work contained and the success which it had achieved in precisely these terms.⁶⁷

The War had involved a slaughter unparalleled in human history, climaxing in the Holocaust and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How could the enormity of these events, and the possibility that an even greater wave of destruction might follow be conveyed? Ironically, it was Dwight MacDonald, Greenberg’s old collaborator who wrote: “Naturalism is no longer adequate, either aesthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horror.”⁶⁸ This was also the view of at least some of the artists themselves. Gottlieb wrote in 1943:

In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of colour and form seem irrelevant...That these feelings [of terror and fear] are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact and to us any art that glosses over or evades these feelings is superficial and meaningless. That is why we insist on subject matter, a subject matter that embraces these feelings and permits them to be expressed.⁶⁹

Pollock himself was unambiguous on the question. In an interview in 1950 he said:

It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Every age finds its own technique...method is, it seems to me, a natural growth out of a need, and from the need the modern artist has of expressing the world about him.⁷⁰

Others argued that their work involved a more direct political dimension yet. Interviewed by Dorothy Gees Seckler in 1962, Barnett Newman claimed that: “The central issue in painting is the subject–matter.” He then outlined what he thought lay behind his paintings:

Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. The answer still goes.⁷¹

The second pressure on the Abstract Expressionists was to prevent their art from being used for purposes alien to their original intentions. Why would some artists have been unwilling to make explicit the political content of their work? In 1931 Walter Benjamin wrote a letter in which he commented on the attitude a committed writer should take to his work, faced with the prospect that it might be used in unintended ways by the class enemy: “Should he not...denature them, like ethyl alcohol, and make them definitively and reliably unusable for the counter–revolution at the risk that no one will be able to use them?”⁷² Although none of the Abstract Expressionists would have known Benjamin’s name, let alone his work, during the late 1940s, the strategy he outlined was the one which some of them, at least, pursued as the Cold War intensified. Serge Guilbaut writes that:

Rothko tried to purge his art of any sign that could convey a precise image, for fear of being assimilated by society. Still went so far as to refuse at various times to exhibit his paintings publicly because of he was afraid critics would deform or obliterate the content embedded in his abstract forms.⁷³

In fact, the danger would not come from critics misrepresenting the content of his work but from critics–of whom Greenberg was in the vanguard–misrepresenting his work as having no content.

Realism and Modernism in the Mirror of Postmodernism

I began Part 1 of this article by warning that realism and modernism were not necessarily what the theorists of Realism and Modernism say they are, and have tried to show that how this applies to the theories of Lukács and Greenberg. Their work contains insights, but ultimately they misrepresent their subjects. By focussing too narrowly on an aspect (totality, self–referentiality) that was the dominant characteristic for a limited historical period, they transform what were only moments in the development of realism and modernism into definitions and measures of artistic value. How then should we assess the respective claims realism and modernism? Implausible as it sounds, a useful way of approaching the issue is to start from more recent claims about postmodernism.

The reason that I have side-stepped postmodernism until now is quite simple; as Ben Davis writes: “These days, the conviction that it provides any serious guide to the present appears to have unceremoniously evaporated, consigned to the bin of historical curiosities alongside other now-inexplicable obsessions of a previous era, like *Seinfeld* or the Atkins diet.”⁷⁴ What can be

salvaged from the wreckage, if only as foil which enables us to ‘think against’, is the notion that postmodernity represented a period in capitalist development, and postmodernism the culture associated with it—a position associated most strongly with Fredric Jameson.

Jameson argued that postmodernism is “a historical rather than a merely stylistic” conception, and stressed “the distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available” and his own, which sees it the latest in a series of “cultural logics” that have accompanied what, following Ernest Mandel, he calls the “three fundamental moments in capitalism”: “These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital.” The respective “cultural logics” are realism, modernism and postmodernism.⁷⁵ He therefore retains the element of periodization characteristic of Lukács, but identifies realism and modernism as “cultural logics” corresponding respectively to the market and imperialist stages in the development of capitalism, rather than indices of totality or fragmentation in the bourgeois world-view. Jameson’s argument is free from both the moralism with which Lukács judged modernism and the narrowness with which Greenberg defined it, but is misleading in different ways, with regard to postmodernism as both a historical period and a period style.

In one respect Jameson’s periodization of capitalist “moments” and their “cultural logics” is considerably clearer than that of Mandel himself, who focusses far more on the changing nature of technology across the different stages. However, Jameson misrepresents Mandel in two respects. First, the latter identifies four periods in the history of capitalism, down to the early 1970s, not three, each characterised by different forms of technology.⁷⁶ Second, Mandel regarded the period which Jameson sees as starting in the post-war years as definitively ending with the crisis which opened in 1974-5, rather than, as Jameson does, continuing into the present.⁷⁷ In which case postmodernism could more plausibly be seen as the “cultural logic” of neoliberal, rather than multinational capital. But the very notion of distinct stages of capitalist development is more problematic than Jameson supposes. Karl Polanyi long ago demonstrated that the state was involved in ensuring the functioning of society at a time when the free market was supposed to arbitrate in all things.⁷⁸ Nor has concentration and centralisation of capital characteristic of imperialism ceased. In other words, one period (“market capitalism”) is largely illusory and the other (“imperialism”), though real enough, has not yet come to an end; but if the different periods in the history of capitalism are not so completely distinct from each other as Jameson claims, then this surely casts some doubt on the “cultural logics” with which they are supposed to correspond. Clark claims that the “purposes, problems and objects” of modernism and postmodernism are the same and both have the same ambiguous relationship with “bourgeois industrial society.”⁷⁹ Consequently, as this identity suggests, what tends to be regarded as postmodernist art is little more than a form of late modernism in a period of—perhaps temporary—qualitative decline.⁸⁰

This conclusion would mean that in one form or another modernism has been first the most significant then the dominant cultural form since 1848. Can we then say at least that realism occupies a similar role beforehand? This too is dubious, for the reason given—astonishingly enough—by Jameson himself, in a passage where, quite contrary to his earlier arguments about “cultural logics” he writes that realism and modernism “whether considered to be concepts or categories, are drawn from two unrelated systems”: “Modernism is an aesthetic category and realism is an epistemological one; the truth claim of the latter is irreconcilable with the formal dynamic of the former.”⁸¹ And in so far as realism is an aesthetic category, it is, as Tom McCarthy has written, “a literary convention—no more, no less”:

As such it's as laden with artifice as any other literary convention. ... A paradox emerges: that the twentieth-century avant-garde often paints a far more *realistic* picture of experience than nineteenth-century realists ever did.⁸²

One can go further: in epistemological terms, modernism in general may be more “realistic” than what is usually regarded as realism. As Brecht wrote in opposition to Lukács:

Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents...We shall take care not to describe one particular, historical form of novel of a particular epoch as realistic—say that of Balzac or Tolstoy—and thereby erect merely formal, literary criteria for realism. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists.⁸³

This was also the position taken by Trotsky in discussing the nature of realism: “In th[e] large philosophical sense and not in the narrow sense of a literary school, one may say with certainty that the new art will be realistic.” And again: “This means a realistic monism, in the sense of a philosophy of life, and not a ‘realism’ in the sense of the traditional arsenal of literary schools.” Why is this necessary? Because “the new artist will need all the methods and processes evolved in the past, as well as a few supplementary ones, in order to grasp the new life.”⁸⁴

In the third and final part of this article I want to retrace our steps to 1848 once again and attempt to explain the emergence of modernism, building on what is genuinely insightful in the work of Lukács and Greenberg, but situating it at a deeper level of societal change than either of them. For this we will require to draw on Trotsky’s own work and above all, his theory of uneven and combined development.

References

- ¹ Fredrick Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 169.
- ² See, for example, the brilliant discussions of Fernand Leger in [1954], “Master Leger,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, *Affirmations and Refusals Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, edited by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), and of collage in [1958], “The Pasted-Paper Revolution,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with A Vengeance, 1957-1969*, edited by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 1993).
- ³ It may even have been partly written in that period: the reproduction of an early draft of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” facing the title page in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, edited by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), contains phrases which later appeared in “The Plight of Our Culture”.
- ⁴ Greenberg Clement [1939], “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 7, 10-11.
- ⁵ Boris Groys, “Clement Greenberg: An Engineer of Art,” in *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016), 102-103.
- ⁶ Clement Greenberg [1940], “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 28.
- ⁷ Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, [1981], “Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed,” in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 153.
- ⁸ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 26, 32.
- ⁹ Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” 12, 17.
- ¹⁰ Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 258-259.
- ¹¹ Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” 22.
- ¹² Clement Greenberg [1944], “Abstract Art,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 203. This was the basis of his rejection of Surrealism—it was figurative, and no matter how bizarre the juxtapositions involved in Surrealist painting, it was consequently a literary form; see “Surrealist Painting,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 229-231.
- ¹³ Clement Greenberg [1960], “Modernist Painting,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 85.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) and Raymond Williams [1987/9], “When Was Modernism?,” in *The Politics of Modernism*, edited by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1996).

- ¹⁵ See Christine Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 103-105, 263, for virtually all that is known about Tarabukin and his work.
- ¹⁶ Nikolai M. Tarabukin, "From the Easel to the Machine," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (London: Harper and Row, 1982), 135, 137, 139-140, 141.
- ¹⁷ Leon D. Trotsky [1923], *Literature and Revolution* (London: Bookmarks, 1991), 192-193.
- ¹⁸ Florence Rubenfield, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 56.
- ¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, [1938], "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 106.
- ²⁰ See Theodor W. Adorno with the assistance of George Simpson [1941], "On Popular Music," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Psychology Press, 1990), 308, 312, 313, 314; and more generally, Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer [1944], "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 1986). It is worth pointing out that even the musical forms supported by Adorno were not above appropriation by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which organized a successful European music festival in 1954 in which composers like Alban Berg, dedicated to "atonal dedecaphonic" composition, were exclusively featured. See Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, 222-223.
- ²¹ For Breton, see Pierre Taminiaux, "Breton and Trotsky: The Revolutionary Memory of Surrealism," *Yale French Studies* 109 (2006); for Rivera, see Mike Gonzalez, "Diego Rivera: the Man Who Painted Walls," *International Socialism*, second series, 38 (spring 1988), 78; for Tippet, see Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: a History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-1938* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), 296; and for Farrell, see Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 82-85, 249-263 and *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).
- ²² Leon D. Trotsky [1938], "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, edited by Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970) 114.
- ²³ Leon D. Trotsky [1938], "Revolutionary Art and the Fourth International," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937-1938]*, edited by Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 351.
- ²⁴ Leon D. Trotsky [1938], "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, 120.
- ²⁵ Phillip Rahv, "This Quarter: Twilight of the Thirties," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 4 (summer 1939), 15.
- ²⁶ Alfred J. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 11.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 16.
- ²⁸ Peter Wollen, "The Triumph of American Painting," in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), 101.
- ²⁹ Gabriel Josipovici, *What Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 179.
- ³⁰ Timothy J. Clark [1982], "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," in *Pollock and after: The Critical Debate*, edited by Francis Frascina (London: Harper and Row, 1985), 54. See also 50.
- ³¹ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 154.
- ³² Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 85-88.
- ³³ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (London: Verso, 1985), 34-37.
- ³⁴ Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," 10.
- ³⁵ George Orwell [1940], "Inside the Whale," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 1, *an Age Like This, 1929-1940*, edited by Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 557.
- ³⁶ Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1978), 140.
- ³⁷ Clement Greenberg [1967], "Complaints of an Art Critic," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 270. Orwell too noted the same tendency among literary critics to use words which were "almost completely lacking in meaning": "When one critic writes, "The outstanding features of Mr X's work is its living quality," while another writes, "The immediately striking thing about Mr X's work is its peculiar deadness," the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words *dead* and *living*, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way." See [1947], "Politics and the English Language," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 4, *in Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, edited by Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 161-162.
- ³⁸ Francis D. Klingender, "Content and Form in Art," in Herbert Read, Francis D. Klingender, Eric Gill, Albert L. Lloyd and Alick West, *Five on Revolutionary Art*, edited by Betty Rea (London: Martin Wishart, 1935), 43. This is a relatively sophisticated version of the argument; for a sadly more typical version, see Anthony Blunt, "Art under Capitalism and Socialism," in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, edited by Cecil Day Lewis (London: Frederick Muller, 1937).

³⁹ Incidentally, if the very nature of modernism allows it to do no more than express the alienation inherent under capitalism, then why did it go on in Russia to do precisely the opposite? Should we not have expected Russian artists to have abandoned modernism for the apparently more suitable methods of realism?

⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht [1935/9], "On Non-Objective Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism*, 143-144. I quote Brecht as he makes this point with some intellectual force. It is, alas, subsequently made all too often by Stalinist *apparatchniks* for whom abstraction was simply one more example of the seemingly never-ending decline into decadence of the bourgeoisie after 1848. A particularly splendid piece of gibberish along these lines is the following from 1947: "...the principle reasons for the gulf between contemporary art and the people, for the extreme decline and degradation of contemporary bourgeois art, is its reactionary content, that is, its militant hostility to popular ideas, and its decadent form—the result of having cut itself off from life. Within art this is reflected in the rejection of realism, which is the sole basis of genuine artistic creation, without which an integral work of art is impossible..." etc., etc., and so on, and so forth. See Vladimir Kemenov [1947], "Aspects of Two Cultures," in *Theories of Modern Art*, edited by Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), 491. For Greenberg's comments on this nonsense, on its first appearance, see [1948], "Irrelevance versus Irresponsibility," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 233-235.

⁴¹ Clement Greenberg [1967], "Where is the Avant-Garde?," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 259-260.

⁴² Clive Bell [1914], *Art*, edited by J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

⁴³ Clement Greenberg, "Complaints of an Art Critic," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 265.

⁴⁴ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 35.

⁴⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Abstract and Representational," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, 188.

⁴⁶ Stephen Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 702. For other examples of Greenberg's "influence" see, Rubenfield, *Clement Greenberg*, 264-267.

⁴⁷ Clifford Still to Betty Parsons, March 20, 1948, quoted in Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," 160.

⁴⁸ Robert Storr, "No Joy in Mudville: Greenberg's Modernism Then and Now," in *Modern Art and Popular Culture*, edited by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 180.

⁴⁹ Boris Groys, 'Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich', in *In the Flow*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 29-30.

⁵¹ Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 13. See also Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 57, where flatness is described as "an analogue of the "popular"—something therefore conceived as plain, workmanlike, and emphatic".

⁵² Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina, "Modern Practices of Art and Modernity," in Francis Frascina, Nigel Blake, Briony Fer, Tamar Garb and Charles Harrison, *Modernity And Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 85.

⁵³ Wollen, "The Triumph of American Painting," 104.

⁵⁴ Meyer Shapiro [1937], "The Nature of Abstract Art," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), 195-196. For Schapiro's Trotskyism see Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 210-217. There is a moving personal memoir of his life and work in Marshall Berman [1996], "Meyer Shapiro: the Presence of the Subject," in *Adventures in Marxism* (London: Verso, 1999).

⁵⁵ Art and Language, "Portrait of V. I. Lenin," in *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, edited by Charles Harrison and Fred Orton (London: Harper and Row, 1984), 148, 167. The title of this essay is reference to the series of paintings by Art and Language called "Portraits of V. I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock".

⁵⁶ Frascina, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 9.

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno [1962], *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 62.

⁵⁸ Clement Greenberg [1947], "Review of the Exhibitions of the Jane Street Group and Rufino Tamayo," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 133-134.

⁵⁹ Brandon Taylor, *Modernism, Post-Modernism, Realism* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987), 27.

⁶⁰ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 28.

⁶¹ David Caute, *The Illusion* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), 151.

⁶² Fredrick Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 201-202.

⁶³ Phillip Leider, "Literalism and Abstraction: Frank Stella's Retrospective at the Modern," *Artforum*, vol. 8, no. 8 (August 1970), 44.

⁶⁴ Clement Greenberg [1957], "New York Painting Only Yesterday," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 19 note 2.

⁶⁵ Wollen, "The Triumph of American Painting," 87.

⁶⁶ David Craven, "The Disappropriation of Abstract Impressionism," *Art History*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1985), 510. Critics of Greenberg seem incapable of quoting this particular sentence without rewriting it. Wollen version reads: "As

Trotskyism turned into art for art's sake, it thereby cleared the way, ingloriously, for the activities of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom." See "The Triumph of American Painting," 100.

⁶⁷ Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, 276-278.

⁶⁸ Dwight MacDonald, "Looking at the War," in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: World Publishing, 1963), 180.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Charles Harrison [1974], "Abstract Expressionism," in *Concepts of Modern Art*, edited by Nicos Stangos (Revised and enlarged edition, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 192.

⁷⁰ Jackson Pollock [1950], "Interview with William Wright," in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, edited by Paul Wood and Charles Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 575-576.

⁷¹ Dorothy Gees Seckler, "Frontiers of Space," *Art in America*, vol. 50, no. 2 (summer 1962), 86, 87.

⁷² Benjamin to Scholem, April 17, 1931, in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 232-233.

⁷³ Serge Guilbaut [1980], "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center'," in *Pollock and After*, 160.

⁷⁴ Ben Davis, "The Semi-Post-Postmodern Condition," in *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2013), 157.

⁷⁵ Fredrick Jameson [1984], "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 45-46, 35-36.

⁷⁶ See Ernest Mandel [1972], *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975), 120-121.

⁷⁷ See Mike Davis, "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism," *New Left Review* I/151 (May/June 1985), 107-108.

⁷⁸ Karl Polanyi, [1944], *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

⁷⁹ Timothy J. Clark, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review*, II/2 (March/April 2000), 90. For Clark both are constituent of "the spectacle" as a "logic and an instrumentation inherent in the commodity economy". Ibid and 88-91 more generally. The notion of "the spectacle" is derived from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, the text which more than any other provided the theoretical basis for the Situationalist International to which Clark once belonged.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 12-25, 154-162. On the specific question of how the modernist device of Collage has been wrongly claimed for postmodernism, see Taylor, *Modernism, Post-Modernism, Realism*, 53-65.

⁸¹ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 124; see also "The Existence of Italy", in *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1990), 155-177.

⁸² Tom McCarthy [2014], "Get Real, or What Jellyfish Have to Tell Us About Literature," in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2017), 59, 62.

⁸³ Bertolt Brecht [1938], "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 81-82.

⁸⁴ Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 264-265.