

The Anti-Self: Modernism Turned Inside-Out

Although modern art may appear as a nonsensical, over-simplistic, primitive style, a complex depth lies underneath its two-dimensional form. To call a work of art “modern” is to recognize that it is fundamentally self-reflexive, that it throws its artificial status in the viewer’s face and challenges the viewer’s criteria for artistic pleasure. Clement Greenberg matter-of-factly states a rather bold claim about the prevalence of Modernism: “It [Modernism] includes almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture.”¹ Greenberg subverts the critique that Modernism is trivial by declaring it plays a vital role in cultural identity. While José Ortega y Gasset and Clement Greenberg suggest that modern art is a radical anti-realistic style that realizes itself through dehumanizing and self-deprecating means, they differ in their identifications of Modernism’s sociopolitical nature.

Modernism is a global experimental movement that occurred roughly from the mid-19th through the mid-20th centuries, marking a period in which various humanitarian disciplines such as fine art, literature, and philosophy reacted against Realism. Modern artists rebelled against traditional styles by defamiliarizing the world and making the ordinary strange, thereby separating art from reality. Modern art aimed to shock people out of their routine, mechanical lives that creaked along with the gears of capitalism and to see a new objective reality. By emphasizing form over content and signifiers over that which is signified, modern art is fragmented, hostile towards emotion, and culturally pessimistic.²

¹ Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” *New Ideas in Art Education; a Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock, E.P. Dutton, 1973, 66.

² Felski, Rita. “Modernism Lecture.”

At its core, modern art attempts to teach its viewers not how to *see* but how to *look*—it poses as an optical challenge in the sense that it does not beg to be actively engaged with, but rather stands to be actively observed. To be able to honestly experience modern art, all relational ties must be cut between the artwork and the viewer. Modern art should be sanitized of humanity so that it can be objectively appreciated for its aesthetic value. Ortega emphasizes the importance of modern art’s radical ability to strip an idea naked and quarantine it from reality: “We [modern artists] give three-dimensional being to mere patterns, we objectify the subjective, we ‘worldify’ the immanent... In foregoing to emulate reality the painting becomes what it authentically is: an image, an unreality.”³ In order for art to be dehumanized and estranged from emotion, it must untie itself from reality and entrench itself in its own artistry. Art must be confident in its own physical limitations, flaunting its flatness and shattering reality into abstraction. Ultimately, Modernism is a revolutionary movement in which art reclaims its identity as Art.

Ortega and Greenberg both refer to the idea that “pure art” is art that exploits the formalistic quality that distinguishes it from any other object or experience. Ortega emphasizes the cleansing of human elements with which romantic and naturalistic images are contaminated.⁴ “Pure art” should have the capacity to temporarily suspend the viewer’s life and thereby make them hyperaware of their beholding a work of art. Greenberg’s idea of “pure art” states that modern art is self-defining by means of self-criticism.⁵ In other words, modern art subverts its flatness, which is misconceived as its vulnerability, by exaggerating it to the point of absurdity. Therefore, art can only be “pure” insofar as it stays within its own material bounds.

³ Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Dehumanization of Art: and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2019, 35-36.

⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵ Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” *New Ideas in Art Education; a Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock, E.P. Dutton, 1973, 68.

Modern art's self-critical tenor and self-containment is not so much self-restricting as it is self-affirming. Modern art thrives off of flashing its blatant irony and sarcasm in the public's eyes. It is through self-flagellation that modern art can understand itself better and can therefore rise above itself: "The new art ridicules art itself... Thanks to this suicidal gesture art continues to be art, its self-negation miraculously bringing about its preservation and triumph... Being an artist means ceasing to take seriously that very serious person we are when we are not an artist."⁶ Modern art is the punchline of its own joke. It is a snake that eats its own tail, sustaining itself through self-derision. Infusing art with a vital, innovative youthfulness, modern art is beautiful because it is shamelessly itself.

However, modern art is not merely a record of its own self-destruction with its guts hanging on the canvas. It also has the effect of warping our temporal and spatial world as we know it, splintering our reality into a new, perplexing one. Just as the canvas is comfortable with being vulnerable, viewers are also expected to take a leap of faith: "Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, can travel through, only with the eye."⁷ Unhooked from our memories that could once be summoned by realistic art, viewers are alienated in a stylized and de-realized realm, desperately grasping in the dark for any associations that will rope them back into a familiar reality.

Although Ortega and Greenberg agree that Modernism attacks the heart of Realism, there is a tension between the extent to which they perceive Modernism as a historically emancipated movement. For Ortega, history is a pendulum that ricochets between binaries, "stressing the

⁶ Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Dehumanization of Art: and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2019, 44-45.

⁷ Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *New Ideas in Art Education; a Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock, E.P. Dutton, 1973, 73.

masculine qualities in some epochs and the feminine in others, or exalting now a youthful deportment and then again maturity and old age.”⁸ Modernism is rational, unsentimental, robust, and aggressively masculine. Realism did not gradually give birth to Modernism, but rather Modernism had to violently tear itself away from the oppressively traditional past in order to bring itself into existence. Not only does Ortega see Modernism as revolutionarily divorcing itself from Realism, but he also identifies a pulsing political vein between the two: “Through its mere presence, the art of the young compels the average citizen to realize that he is just this—the average citizen, a creature incapable of receiving the sacrament of art, blind and deaf to pure beauty.”⁹ Whereas Realism triumphed as a democratic art, modern art was disdainfully aristocratic and undemocratic, stretching the gap between the uncultured masses and the refined elite. Ortega diagnoses modern art with a divisive social and political agenda that explains its widespread “antipopular[ity].”¹⁰

Meanwhile, Greenberg declaws modern art by situating it in a linearly progressive historical context, making it more palatable for public taste. He argues that although modern art rejects realistic art, the two styles are still somewhat related to each other: “And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling of anterior tradition, but it also means its continuation.”¹¹ Though Modernism bears no superficial resemblance to Realism, it is to a certain extent still encoded in Modernism’s DNA, and to paint Modernism as a self-starting movement is to deny its biology. Greenberg goes on to debunk the myth that art can ever truly be “‘liberated’ from norms of

⁸ Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Dehumanization of Art: and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2019, 48.

⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹¹ Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” *New Ideas in Art Education; a Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock, E.P. Dutton, 1973, 75.

practice or taste” because “art is, among many other things, continuity.”¹² Rejecting Realism in itself is a form of modern inspiration, and rebelling against it is a vehicle for modern progression.

Modern art is keen on emotional abandonment, but how do modern artists and viewers alike reconcile the weight of emotions connoted by different colors? Is it humanly possible to look at *The Starry Night* and not even feel an inkling of melancholy? Modern art walks a fine line between wanting to dehumanize art and wanting to transcend humanity. And if modern art has the potential to transport viewers into an alternative reality, what is preventing the observational viewer from becoming consumed by enchantment into an inebriated and hypnotized state, much like the modern artist’s abhorred intoxicated sentimentalist? Ortega and Greenberg attempt to dampen the aura of anxiety that clouds modern art, but it remains shrouded in skepticism because viewers desire to have their hands held and to be told where to go, while modern art is precariously unguided.

Bibliography

¹² Ibid, 77.

Felski, Rita. "Modernism Lecture."

Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Dehumanization of Art: and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *New Ideas in Art Education; a Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock, E.P. Dutton, 1973.