

## CRITICISM AND MEDIA

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### Summary

Modern Art and Literature, as well as mass culture and mass media, as we label them now, have a common historical origin in European and American 19th century. However, there has been a mainstream of criticism prone to underestimate their relations as well as to oppose the arts and mass-media. Turning any resistance to the advance of industrialization and mass communications into the shibboleth of the aesthetic's sphere autonomy was the trademark of the rich heritage of modernism. In contrast, a minority tradition celebrated technological developments and stressed avant-garde praxis as an alternative to high formalist experimental art. Since 1960, transformations in art and society turned problematic the formerly useful Comparative Literature and Anthropology distinction of high and low Culture. This dumping has not been entirely beneficial from a theoretical point of view, because the

antifoundationalism of contemporary postmodern and culturalist positions doesn't bridge the gap between culture and politics, and fall prey to blind particularisms and populist pluralisms unable to take into account both tradition and innovation.

When they had to face media explosion and the accelerated multiplication of reproductive technologies, critics, literary minded or not, created a catalog of perspectives whose pendulum swung until very recently between militant rejection and hopeful integration. One after the other, from competing positions -though not always as opposed as their advocates liked to think- they seemed to share a fascination with the supposed omnipresence of mass culture that forced them into total rejection or unconditional surrender.

One should not rush to reduce such a confrontation only to a modernist plan. Its postmodern detractors respected the logic that put against each another the high and the low, art and commodities, the aesthetic and the day-to-day or the unimaginative, without obtaining anything more substantial than a mere reversal of the terms in dispute. In the past two decades, as the face of post modernity showed the visible scars of its exhaustion, a retrospective glance has brought out a primordial suspicion, that the discussion of the literary (and the arts) from a comparative perspective as fitting in a frame that opposes avant-gardism and cultural industry lacks the historical and empirical foundation that was attributed to it in the yesteryear.

### **1. Media, Modernism and the Social Conditions of Art: A Diagnosis by Meyer Schapiro**

A first verification, that critics like Walter Benjamin and Meyer Schapiro knew how to anticipate, holds that even in the beginnings of modern art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was already contaminated by the vernacular and the entertainment industry. The argument goes further to say that both modernism and mass culture come from a common historical moment in Europe immediately after the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848. Even a critic with impeccable modernist credentials like Clement Greenberg attributed the two concepts to that shared milieu, even as he denies any positive interdependence between the two. Nevertheless, he made it sufficiently clear that the aesthetic priority of modernism was inversely proportional to the social priority of the incipient leisure and entertainment industry whose expansion, he thought, threatened the creative freedom of the artists. In this aspect the first appeared as an effect of –and defense against– the second. The distrust of the vanguard siren calls experienced by Georg Lukács was justified in an aesthetic theory that made that particular historical moment the point of change par excellence. Everyone seemed to owe a lot to Karl Marx's classic analysis of 1848 that was unfolded in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.

We owe one of the first clearly articulated formulations of the prevailing links between art and consumer mass-society to Schapiro. He referred to them in *The Social Bases of Art*, a 1936 essay about impressionist painting where he argued that the modernist claims of autonomy and the apparent distance or *detachment* of an artistic Bohemia with respect to the ruling classes showed both a false character. It was enough to acknowledge the themes of impressionist paintings and the fiction of Zola and Maupassant (the informal society and the spontaneity of the breakfasts, picnics, regattas, vacations, theater, circus, horse races, music hall) to testify to the displacement

of the individualist autonomy ideals of the first liberal bourgeoisie towards forms of semiprivate consumption. The refuge of the middle classes in the new urban leisure 'paradises' was in concert with the loss of their political power under the new authoritarian Second Empire. Schapiro's conclusions showed with midday clarity the social determinations of the isolation ideals of the avant-garde. However, Schapiro himself would substantially modify his analysis the following year. *The Nature of Abstract Art* (1937) had considerations very similar in appearance, but which calmed the waters with a possible justification of the modernists' praxis. Before, he had held that the artist reacted to the social conditions under which he produced. This explains that he felt obligated to challenge the individualistic fickleness of those who served a market sustained by the ruling class, while they boasted about their supposed independence. Now the textual reasoning seemed to follow along the same coordinates. All art and literature, including the most abstract and experimental, was subject to its production conditions. Such a declaration caused a double effect that, seen in the context of the discussions of the decade of the 1930s determined by the aesthetics of the Popular Front, would end up having far reaching consequences. On one side, this declaration was against the autonomous illusions of those who defended abstract art in formalist terms. On the other side, it responded to the critique of the communists, who saw such art as the clearest manifestation of the artist enclosed in his ivory tower. Opposing positions that, in Schapiro's opinion, shared a common false assumption: the isolation of the abstraction from society, the article broke with the opposition between idealist formalism and socialist realism. But in being equidistant from both, a real Pandora's Box would be opened, because if abstract art, like any other art, was subject to the social conditions of its time, then it could transcend the opposition between culture and politics. Formal experimentation suddenly became a synonym of the radicalized will of the artist.

## **2. Towards Literary Formalism: Partisan Review**

The critics who were reunited in the Partisan Review –an icon of the American liberal intelligentsia from the time of the Great Depression– were the first to deduce the strict consequences of Schapiro's displacement. At that time, the Moscow Trials were under way, with the purge of Stalin old colleagues (Kamenev, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek, Bukharin). It was a definitive alarm for the liberal intellectuals who had never felt comfortable with the antifascist Popular Front initiative. The subsequent Soviet invasion of Finland and its no-aggression pact with Hitler would do nothing more than confirm the growing displeasure with the communist aesthetic and politics.

Even before these last two events, the Partisan Review intellectuals felt isolated as much from the ideological line of the Communist Party as from the middle classes. In these conditions, it is not surprising that they embraced an avant-garde that irritated both sides equally. Modern literature, argued the new editorial line in the hands of Williams Phillips and Philip Rahv, should be free from all political interference. The rejection of political analysis in favor of a formalist literary criticism resulted in the abandonment of proletarian literature and its devaluation as mere ideological propaganda. However, the pulling back from concrete politics was justified by a supposed transcendence, an ascensional movement from the mundane towards a community of critics and writers whose pureness of thought seemed to put itself before the most worldly interests of the common citizens. The growing alienation of the

intellectuals from their social role of yesteryear now constituted, in their own eyes, the sum of their radicalization. The seed of a 'cultural revolution', out of sight of the social development that threatened to go in another direction, adopted its eminently American form, which would prevail in the hegemonic modernism of the following two decades. It is ironic that it would coincide with the recuperation of the respectful European tradition of formal innovation. Further it would appeal to the arguments of those who, like Schapiro, showed unsurpassably that the artists of the old continent had gone through a similar process in the preceding century.

### **3. Mass Culture and its Discontents: Clement Greenberg**

Towards the end of the 1930s, most of the liberal New York intellectuals reached a consensus that proletarian literature, far from beginning a new era, was stuck in the irresolute contradictions of its biggest distributor: the bureaucracy of the Soviet regime. From there the pendulum would swing towards a bourgeois culture that would have to be rescued from itself. The program of complete rupture from Depression-era politics would be carried out in an exemplary manner by the critique of Clement Greenberg and would lay the foundations for modernism until the beginning of the 1960s.

Avant-garde and Kitsch, opposed as well as united by Greenberg in the title of his most famous essay, were converted into the indications of a bourgeoisie that had lost its identity. Kitsch in particular entailed a massified pseudo-culture that, in its instantaneous assimilation, its conformity with the everyday, and its denial of difficulty, would threaten the cultural standards that the same class had forged in its heroic period. The remedy, the only possible reaction to such a state of things was the Avant-Garde, that soon after would be referred to by its more general, but also more explicit name, Modernism. Greenberg's program was transparent: he made the mass culture of media his privileged target, a new enemy and new entity bound to be appropriated as propaganda by the totalitarian regimes of left and right. In this way he promoted a slightly autistic but definitely elitist solution to the vexed problem of political engagement: in fighting with art against mass culture, the artists could still believe that they were fighting against those very regimes. That they did it with the tools and ideals of an aristocracy of clerics that they had rejected in the past revealed that the program had a deeply conservative core. As time went by, the red flags and black shirts would give up their place to the grey uniformity of advanced capitalism.

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