Clement Greenberg in the 1930s: A New Perspective on His Criticism

By Susan Noyes Platt

> Kafka sees life as sealed off and governed by unknowable powers who permit us the liberty only to repeat ourselves until we succumb.
> Clement Greenberg (1946)

In Clement Greenberg's unsettling comment on Franz Kafka, he unwittingly described his own career as an art critic. Greenberg established his permanent criteria for significant art during the same months that the armies of Hitler were engulfing Europe. As he witnessed the disintegration of European civilization, he declared that abstract art, conceived in terms of a purified aesthetic appropriate to the medium in which it was made (i.e., in the case of painting, the art must be flat and concerned with surface), and characterized by unity, immediacy, and authority, was the only art which had a lasting value. This aesthetic, and its accompanying negative value judgments of art that was not in this category, has remained the cornerstone of his criticism to the present day.

For almost fifty years, through drastic social, political, and economic changes, and with the mounting opposition of artists, critics and historians,

Greenberg has continued to reiterate the importance of the autonomous aesthetic experience of abstract art above all others, and to denigrate art that he sees as engaging with lesser issues. His astonishing consistency, paired with a repetitive and assertive dogmatism, has created an aura of absolute verity about the proclamations that he makes concerning the nature of art. Almost hypnotically, the art world still uses his premises as a reference point, both positive and negative, for virtually every discussion on art and aesthetics in contemporary art.[1] Yet, in spite of Greenberg's obvious centrality to the mid twentieth-century dialogue on art, much confusion remains as to exactly how to place Greenberg's contribution in the history of twentieth-century art criticism.

To accurately assess Greenberg's contribution, he must be seen in the larger perspective of twentieth-century political and aesthetic history in Europe and America, rather than simply in the limited arena of the post World War II art world.[2] Greenberg wrote the two most seminal essays of his career as the entire fabric of European civilization was threatened by totalitarianism. Also directly affecting Greenberg was the type of art that was sponsored by the totalitarian governments of Hitler and Stalin and the threat such sponsorship posed to the avant-garde artists who opposed it. These apocalyptic confrontations, in both the political and aesthetic sphere, as well as the particular environment in New York, determined the nature of Greenberg's formulations. In this article I will examine Clement Greenberg's formative years in the late 1930s, his cultural heritage as a Jewish intellectual, and his first contacts with art, aesthetics and politics. My purpose in elucidating the political and cultural context of Greenberg's early work will be to explain why and how he chose the particular stance that he did as well as to suggest why he adhered so rigidly to the same position for five decades.

In his early essays, Greenberg drew eclectically and arbitrarily on political ideology, art, art theory, and critical practices, all filtered through his own cultural perspective. The combination of all these aspects led directly to the startling, dogmatic, dialectical argument in his influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), as well as to the aesthetic proclaimed in "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940). Taken together these two essays contain the core of his thinking. Their principles, generalities, values and language created for Greenberg the bedrock of his later art criticism.[3] They also forge an alliance between formalist methodologies and political metaphors that created a new type of dialogue about art after World War II.[4] Greenberg's activity later as an art critic was based on the transformation of the general principles of his early essays into a simplified and absolute norm, a norm that initially encompassed a new generation of artists in the 1940s, but was not flexible enough to respond to the issues raised by later developments in contemporary art. Despite its inadequacies, this norm and the terms and concepts that accompanied it have been the source of his astonishing influence.[5]

Clement Greenberg was born in 1909 in Bronx, New York, the oldest son of three brothers. His parents were Lithuanian Jews who had come

to the United States separately as children from Russia and Poland. While they were not orthodox in their religious practices, they did speak Yiddish at home. The family moved from the Bronx to Norfolk, Virginia in 1914, then to Brooklyn in 1920. Greenberg attended Syracuse University from 1926 to 1930, majoring in foreign languages. After college Greenberg worked sporadically for his father at variously successful business ventures in drygoods manufacturing. In 1934-1935 he married and had a son. At that time Greenberg obtained a few jobs as a translator for Knight Publications,[6] but from 1936 until 1942 he primarily supported himself by a job in the federal government with the Appraiser's Division of the United States Customs Division, the Department of Wines and Liquors, an intriguing parallel to his developing stance as an appraiser of culture. Unlike many other second generation Jews in the 1930s, he did not work for the Works Progress Administration, but rather obtained a more traditional and economically secure employment. His background places him between the working class roots of some Jewish intellectuals of this era and the Ivy League credentials of others.[7]

Greenberg's Jewish heritage shaped his responses to both art and politics. He emphasized the importance of that heritage by including an essay on Kafka, "The Jewishness of Kafka," in his *Art and Culture* collection of 1961, the book which, until recently, was the only collection of his published writings.[8] In the Kafka essay and elsewhere, Greenberg provides a fascinating perspective on his own work.[9] One of Greenberg's early reviews suggested that the tendency to conceptualize, to think abstractly, was a mode of self-protection for the Jew from the excruciating realities of the ghetto.[10] This inclination toward abstraction and the channelling of emotion into a logical framework was a central characteristic of Greenberg's own writings.

In the two articles that Greenberg devoted specifically to Kafka, he transposed those issues into the character and content of the writing and compared them to the Orthodox Jewish experience:

> Kafka's fiction is composed of parables and cases and deals with the paradigm, the patterns or habits of individual existence, not its originality or unicity (sic)....
>
> Kafka's static, treadmill...world bears many resemblances to the one presented in the Halachic, the legal part of the post-Biblical Jewish religious tradition...the Law....But whereas Halacha arrests and systemizes life into case history for the sake of relating every jot and tittle of it to God,...Kafka with his Westernized sensibility, finds the world static...and experiences, not only alienation, but also its lack of drama, resolution, and history as a nightmare paralyzing us in the face of a doom that wells up out of its very orderliness.[11]

Greenberg's criticism bears a strange resemblance to this description. From the perspective of the Jewish tradition of the Halacha or Law, his rigid aesthetic stance, based on the reiteration of a few concrete aspects of an art work, assume the character of a new Halacha, a transposition of the Jewish heritage into the fabric of his thinking and writing. He can be seen

as the prophet of a new type of Messianic event. Such an absolute faith shielded him from that sense of meaninglessness and impending doom that was so prevalent in the 1940s and so prominent in Kafka.[12]

Greenberg selected a purified, abstract art as the law of his aesthetic. That choice related directly to the artists he first came in contact with just before World War II when he began to involve himself in the art world. In 1938-1939 he attended three lectures by Hans Hofmann and first met the group of writers centered around the *Partisan Review*.[13] These two events were fundamental to the development of his criticism and his aesthetic predilections.

At the time that Greenberg attended the Hofmann lectures (half of the complete series of six lectures Hofmann gave that winter), he had only a cursory knowledge of art and even less of modern art. Except for a single art class in high school at the Art Student's League, Greenberg had been entirely immersed in the study of literature and language.[14] Thus in approaching the Hofmann lectures, he was almost entirely unfamiliar with the principles that Hofmann presented. Greenberg has frequently acknowledged that these lectures were fundamental to his aesthetic ideas.[15] They apparently enabled Greenberg to make a rapid leap from a traditional view of art to a conception of the abstract principles governing modern art. Certainly Greenberg's inclination to think in terms of abstract ideas as well as his need for a reference point in understanding art increased the impact of Hofmann's ideas.

Hofmann's own interpretation of modernism came out of Paris and Germany before World War I. He began teaching American students in Germany in 1915. Coming to America with their support in 1930, he settled in New York the following year. He thus had little contact with the continuing European avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. After 1936 and particularly the large exhibition of "Cubism and Abstract Art" at the Museum of Modern Art, his lectures contained more examples from recent art, particularly Matisse, Miro and Mondrian. But he continued to discuss space in a way that exactly corresponded to the type of low relief/deep space, flat surface tension apparent in the work of Cézanne and the early Cubism of Braque and Picasso.

In the 1938-1939 lecture series Hofmann spoke of the dynamic of the picture plane. After almost twenty years of teaching American art students, he had an acute awareness of their particular academic perspective; all of his teaching was aimed at breaking through that limited understanding. He contrasted the concept of the plane to the traditional one-point perspective of earlier art. He spoke of the importance of the given reality of the surface on which the artist worked and the role of the medium. These two issues, planar surface, which Greenberg later simplified to flatness, and the important role of medium and surface, became the cornerstone of Greenberg's aesthetics.

But there is a crucial difference between Hofmann and Greenberg. Hofmann spoke of surface and flatness in terms of space. He demonstrated planar relationships (the famous "push and pull"). The surface was given,

but the artist created, by means of formal shapes, tension in it. This planar tension effected a sense of depth. It was a central issue in his teaching. Greenberg heard the lecture in which Hofmann stated:

> ...the real problem in planes creation is just this—to destroy this two dimensionality and recreate with three dimensionality this two dimensionality. In other words, there is a fundamental difference between flatness and flatness.
>
> There can be a flatness which is meaningless and there can be a flatness that is a highest experience of life—from infinite depth and up to the surface—restoring ultimately the two dimensionality. *This is what plastic creation means.* Otherwise it is decoration.
>
> ...Naturally we cannot create actual depth—we can only create the illusion of depth as opposed to movement on the surface. Many of the so-called abstract artists today are not clear about this.[16]

Hofmann's entire teaching hinged on this crucial issue: space was "something concrete," not just the surroundings of an image and not just two dimensional surface. Depth was necessary, and it was based on a relationship with the given space. For Greenberg, this subtle idea and distinction would ultimately become simply flatness and the simple two dimensional surface, a "premise" that Hofmann was carefully avoiding.

Hofmann linked spatial tensions to a conflict or struggle with the medium, a crucial point in lecture 2 of his 1938-1939 series:

> Nobody can make a hole in his picture to go into the picture and come out again. No—the depth is here and must be created with the understanding of the medium with which we create.... Richness, fullness, vitality—these are all things that must be experienced in a direct or indirect way...in the conflict with the medium with which I struggle. So when an artist works by heart he takes the nature of his medium as the basis for his creation.[17]

The idea of a struggle with the medium would also be fundamental to Greenberg.

Hofmann went on to explain the importance of purity, particularly with respect to color and color relationships. Another constant theme was unity of the picture plane. He accompanied his lectures with diagrams that demonstrated his theories. On the issue of abstraction, Hofmann felt it was not absolutely necessary in 1938-1939, but that abstract ways of thinking about the creation of a work of art were fundamental. (Hofmann himself did not begin to paint completely abstract works until the early 1940s.) Greenberg's focus on abstraction came from other sources initially. The first essay in which Greenberg fully embraced Hofmann's ideas on the importance of unity, purity, and formalism in art was "Towards a Newer Laocoon," which appeared in the *Partisan Review* of July-August 1940. Greenberg combined Hofmann's emphasis on the importance of purity in the use of the elements and medium of art with the idea of purity in terms of content:

> from the point of view of the artist engrossed in the problems of his medium...purism is the terminus of a salutary reaction against the mistakes of painting and sculpture in the past several centuries which were due to such a confusion [of the arts.][18]

In developing the idea of purity, Greenberg also borrowed from a conservative theorist, Irving Babbitt, whose book *A New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), Greenberg cited. Babbitt, in turn, relied on the ideas of an eighteenth-century writer, Gotthold Lessing. Babbitt favored formal classicism and opposed Romanticism as impure because of its narrative elements. Romanticism was also a regression for Greenberg. In Greenberg's article, the turning point in the purification of the medium was Courbet, in whose painting "flatness" explicitly emerged. Thus Greenberg arrived at the avant-garde ghetto of purity:

> ...the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art....
>
> The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums.[19]

The peculiar territorial note to this remark may well have been a subconscious parallel to the European losses of territorial integrity in the spring of 1939. As Greenberg wrote his theory of pure art, Paris was surrendering to the Nazis, the perpetrators of the idea of racial purity.

In "Towards A Newer Laocoon," Greenberg defined purified art in terms of Hofmann's formalist aesthetic, explaining what was specifically happening in purified painting. He elaborated on the denial of perspective space and the importance of the "square" of canvas and its "actual surface." He tackled the Hofmann concepts of planar complexity, but subtly transformed them into a progressive development from a type of struggle between volume and plane into a "further stage" in which the "realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface."

The culmination of this development appeared, according to Greenberg, in the work of the recent "abstract purism" of the Dutch, Germans, English and Americans. These artists were contrasted on the one hand to the "orthodox surrealists" who "turned back to the confusion of literature with painting," and, on the other hand, the "mock surrealists" like Miro, Klee, and Arp, "whose work, despite its apparent intention only contributed to the further deployment of abstract painting pure and simple." Greenberg suggested that these artists intended to be expressive but "so inexorable was the logic of the development that in the end their work constituted but another step towards abstract art." Greenberg added here to his sequence of avant-gardism, purism, and abstraction, a deterministic "imperative."[20]

Greenberg directly reflected, in the examples cited above of specific artists, not simply Hofmann's preferences, but also the environment of the *Partisan Review*, the magazine for which he was writing. George L.K. Morris, an editor and backer of the *Partisan Review*, was their official art critic as well as an abstract artist and leader of the large group known as the American Abstract Artists. Morris's reviews of abstract art in the *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1943 stand out, amidst the political complexity of the rest of the magazine, as an Olympian statement of an ideal. In addition to an interview with Jean Helion, reviews of the English abstract artist Ben Nicholson and French artists such as Jean Arp, Hans Hartung and Joan Miro, Morris wrote "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting" and the "Relations of Painting and Sculpture."[21] Greenberg cited this review in one of his own reviews, although the article does not at all correspond to Greenberg's own theory of medium purity.[22] Morris wrote with a sophisticated formal vocabulary; he emphasized the "decisive properties" of the medium and he introduced Greenberg to the abstract artists working from 1939-1943. Greenberg was not aware in 1940 that Morris based his writing on principles developed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell in the teens and twenties. Nor was he aware of the full scope of twentieth-century art. This lack of perspective led him to cling to Hofmann's emphasis on Cubism as well as Morris's formalist advocacy of abstraction with the ardent belief of a new disciple who had received a revelation. That revelation remained his credo throughout his career.

At one point in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Greenberg linked the early stages of the avant-garde to "opposition to bourgeois society," an act of "self-preservation...responsible to...only the values of art."[23] Here he was utilizing Leon Trotsky's analysis of the role of art in a revolutionary society. Greenberg simply transformed the aesthetics of purism into a radical act of social revolution. Under the pressure of the era in which Greenberg was writing, abstraction became the radical painting which, inherently inseparable from radical politics, was the last hope for the survival of culture.[24]

The underpinning for this position appears in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Its main focus was the linkage of aesthetics and politics. It was the direct result of Greenberg's contact, in 1938-1939, with Dwight Macdonald, an editor at the *Partisan Review*. When Greenberg met Macdonald, his contact with politics, apart from the generally socialistic orientation in which he had grown up, was almost as slight as his contact with visual art.[25] His interests had been intellectual rather than activist. As in the case of formalism, Greenberg engaged with radical politics in the cultural sphere when it was already an acknowledged, serious influence on American intellectuals. In fact, by the late 1930s, the political/cultural nexus had reached a peak of tension and complexity.

The linkage of radical art and radical politics began early in America. It existed already in the teens, in the Greenwich Village activities of Floyd Dell, John Reed, Randolph Bourne, and others.[26] By the time Greenberg joined the influential intellectual group around the *Partisan Review* in late 1938, it had already gone through several stages of Marxism. *Partisan*

Review writers included Meyer Schapiro, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, and Harold Rosenberg, as well as Philip Rahv and William Phillips, the original founders, and Dwight Macdonald, Frederick Dupee and George Morris, who helped reorganize the magazine in late 1937. They made a brave anti-Communist stand in late 1937, after the news from Russia of the Moscow purges and the persecution of the intellectuals reached America. In lieu of Stalin and Communism, the editors embraced a more traditional Marxist-socialism that called for workers' revolutions to overturn the ruling class. They also actively sought a solution to the dilemma of creating culture in a revolutionary society. They turned to gleanings from early Marxist writings, and to Leon Trotsky.[27] Trotsky's ideas about the role of the intellectual, and the current status of revolutionary art, appeared in the *Partisan Review* in two articles in the summer and fall of 1938. Trotsky claimed that the masses did not create revolutionary ideas, but were led by the cultural sphere. That sphere maintained its separate activity yet provided the central inspiration for revolution, because "the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art." At the same time, Trotsky was opposed to purism: "It is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art."[28]

Greenberg would have read these articles about the time he met Dwight Macdonald in late 1938. In his own writing, however, he ignored the fact that Trotsky was opposed to purism and aestheticism in art, and adopted the model of art he learned from Hofmann and Morris as the only acceptable radical art. For Greenberg, new to the art world, abstraction and purity appeared to be sufficiently radical tools in the cultural struggle. His basic theoretical accomplishment was to change the idea of the artist as a subconscious participant in the revolution working in a separate sphere, into the notion that abstract art, through its struggle with the medium and pursuit of purity can function as the emblem of the revolution. That was how Greenberg himself turned "Trotskyism...into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come," as he proclaimed with the hindsight of the 1950s.[29]

Shortly afterwards, Greenberg published a short study of Bertolt Brecht, establishing his Marxist credentials.[30] He was in Europe from April to June of 1939, a tense time to travel there. He interviewed Ignazio Silone in exile in Zurich who was an important figure to the *Partisan Review*. An anti-Stalinist, he balanced art and politics, ideas and reality.[31] Greenberg's interview appeared in the *Partisan Review* in the fall of 1939, in the same issue with Greenberg's first major article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." The published interview provided several constructs Greenberg used in his own article. Silone spoke of a "third front," which would be politically independent, and to which writers would belong: "The third front, existing as yet only in an ideal state, must be kept pure as an ideal. And for that too, courage was required." He opposed the *ersatz*, conservative solutions of Fascism, asserting that socialism was crucial to "a regime of real freedom."

He then went on to oppose the role that writers played under Stalinism, saying that they "risk nothing." Finally, he spoke of the work of art as "beautiful, quite apart from the intentions of the artist."[32] Silone's language— "courage," "idealism," "risk," "beauty"—easily found its way into Greenberg's youthful aesthetic and political vocabulary.

Where his short article on Bertold Brecht had opened the door of *Partisan Review* for him by its display—however shortlived—of the correct political credentials, Greenberg's second article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" established him as an influential critic. As a theoretical statement it picked up on Silone's ideas about the importance of an absolute or ideal realm of art. Greenberg linked that ideal realm to Hofmann's aesthetic of "spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors."[33]

Greenberg contrasted such pure art, specified by sweeping general examples, to "kitsch," the term he adopted to describe mass culture. Mass culture, in Greenberg's definition, was mechanically reproduced, and "draws its life blood" from real culture. Greenberg equated this type of mass culture with resentment of avant-garde culture, and to the type of realism supported by fascism:

> Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness or the blood's health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.[34]

Greenberg saw these regimes as responding to mass taste and utilizing that taste as an effective tool of propaganda. Greenberg was more elitist than either Trotsky or Silone, for he utterly disdained the mass taste of the worker: "There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch."[35] Thus, Greenberg expanded his category of kitsch, adding folk art to realism and to mass produced imitations of the avant-garde. Greenberg derived his notion of the nature of working class taste, or kitsch from an article by Dwight Macdonald on Soviet Cinema, in which Macdonald connected the decline of avant-garde Soviet Cinema with the government's desire to use film as understandable propaganda directed to the working class. The Soviet Government supported popular style, in some cases basing it on Hollywood movies, in order to communicate the Government's socialist message to a large public.[36]

Greenberg generalized mass culture, folk art, and realism into a single negative. In viewing realism as a regression to an easy art, Greenberg adopted the model of Hofmann, who regarded realism (and surrealism, especially as used by Dali) as less modern than art that utilized abstract formal principles. Abstraction became the radical alternative to realism (and

by extension mass culture) that would preserve the revolution, if not bring it about. The obvious contradiction that the working class didn't like abstraction, that it was in fact an elite art, and that it required the support of the powerful class that was supposed to be overthrown, did not trouble Greenberg.

In his fundamentally elitist definition and privileging of a realm of culture, Greenberg borrowed more from T.S. Eliot than Trotsky and Silone.[37] In the 1930s, Eliot pursued a "reactionary" direction: he converted to Catholicism, and was considered a fascist. But Eliot's dicta for writing, and his model of the development of art echoed in Greenberg's work. Indeed, it fit seamlessly together with his other intellectual frameworks.

Eliot, in his 1923 essay "The Function of Criticism," spoke of the "problem of order." He regarded the critic's responsibility to be the making of order, that is, providing a system as a context for individual works of art: "There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position." The idea of an issue larger than art itself, which Eliot at one point said "may provisionally be called truth," dominated individual artists.[38]

Eliot offered a more hierarchial model of art than Trotsky. For Trotsky, the artist led the uninformed masses to revolution by reason of his intellectual superiority. For Eliot, the artist followed a higher concept, which had nothing to do with the masses. For Greenberg, the issue of art was this independent ideal. By focusing on this great abstract absolute—seemingly fortuitously represented by abstract art—the artist attempted to realize, Greenberg justified a privileged realm of art and artist. This led to a narrow view of culture (and indirectly of politics). It precluded engagement with political or social change. In fact, it encouraged maintenance of the established system, the ideological status quo. Indeed, art had no social necessity in this view.

Socialism, then, was a mere dusting on Greenberg's vocabulary, designed to give him access to the politicized pages of the *Partisan Review*.[39] He also adopted the magazine's embattled tone, its call-to-arms chic. The *Partisan Review* regarded itself as preserving and identifying the only authentic radical culture of the late 1930s. It thought of itself as the only hope for the future of culture. Greenberg aggressively asserted, in true *Partisan Review* style: "Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened."[40] Fundamental to the year 1939 was a sense of combat and confrontation—struggle between opposing forces. Greenberg's dogmatic certainty and generalization of polarities reflect anxiety about the future of culture, and by implication of humanity, during the bleak hours immediately before and just after the start of World War II. It was a time when hundreds of European artists faced a choice of exile or death. The *Zeitgeist* did not allow for petty quibbling and precious subtleties. Ultimately, Greenberg's formulation of an artistic/political avant-garde, with a shallow link to socialism, sought—for all its conservative aspects—to create an atmosphere of hope. He in effect attempted to save high culture from social catastrophe. Ironically, it could only be saved if it voluntarily went into the ghetto of abstraction. In fact, this aesthetic ghetto was established by a world at war, with limited patience for high art, and with the time and energy only for an obvious realism and an even more obvious kitsch.

Greenberg did not actually work as an art critic—as opposed to a theoretician of culture—until 1941, when he began to write for the *Nation* in two inches of space at the end of the magazine. After a brief stint in the military in the Spring and Summer of 1943, he became a regular reviewer. His criticism of the early and mid forties continues to utilize the instruments of aesthetic critical taste he developed from 1938-40. This remained the case even as he was confronted by the increasingly varied styles of the artworld itself. To his frustration and surprise, Greenberg discovered that much art—particularly Surrealism—did not correspond to his aesthetic, and thought it irrelevant.

While, at the end of "Towards a Newer Laocoon," he had written that he did not know which way art would develop, in his first exhibition review he was in fact dogmatic about what was "necessary" in art: "Shows of the works of three great, or once great abstract painters held in New York recently afforded an opportunity to consider the present condition of our most advanced painting... It is my opinion that the fate of our particular tradition of art depends upon that into which abstract art develops."[41] This statement initiated the strategy of prediction—in effect an attempt to predetermine significance—Greenberg avoided in his earlier essay. By 1944 Greenberg wrote, emphatically, that "the most ambitious and effective pictorial art of these times is abstract or goes in that direction." He justified his statement with a passing dialectical allusion to history. By 1946 Greenberg declared, with assurance, that "Gorky, Hare, Roszak, Tobey, MacIver, Price and even Motherwell have to be taken seriously, whether for good or bad...they are among the relatively few people upon whom the fate of American art depends."[42] This little ghetto of abstract artists, with their supposed avant-garde idealism, had nothing less than the fate of art in their hands. The presumably only hope of culture in the dark forties was a delusion of abstract grandeur.

Greenberg developed the metaphor of the artist struggling to avoid surrendering in a fight, a theme readymade for war time: "How arduous is the career of the abstract painter, how difficult it is to sustain his freshness and growth... When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator."[43] For Greenberg's aesthetic of theoretically autonomous abstract art, the wartime struggle was transformed into—reduced to—that between artist and medium, rather than Nazi and Jew, or socialist and bourgeois.

At the same time, he was confronted—surrounded—by Surrealism. Initially he thought it represented "the world on the point of dissolution" (1942). This telling metaphor suggests the reason for his uneasiness with the style.[44] In 1944 he was "worried" about such artists as Dali, Blume, Tchelitchew, Berman, Tanguy, among others: "The extreme eclecticism now prevailing in art is unhealthy and it should be counteracted, even at

the risk of dogmatism and intolerance."[45] Finally, he wrote a long essay opposing Surrealism, referring to it contemptuously as "vicarious wish fulfillment."[46]

Shortly after his attack on Surrealism he reviewed an exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery. He declared that "Jackson Pollock and William Baziotes...[were] among the six or seven best young painters we possess.... Baziotes is unadulterated talent...deflected by nothing extraneous to painting." Greenberg said that if Motherwell, "Only let himself stop watching himself, let him stop thinking....Let him forget his personal 'subject matter'....But he has already done enough to make it no exaggeration to say the future of American painting depends on what he, Baziotes, Pollock and only a comparatively few others do from now on."[47] The Abstract Expressionists, interpreted strictly in terms of their articulation of surface seemed the proof-in-the-pudding of Greenberg's aesthetic. Lauded as the critic who discovered the Abstract Expressionists, Greenberg in fact did no more than interpret them in the voice he had created for himself, editing out their extensive interest in symbolism and content. He in effect castrated them for the sake of his limp aestheticism.

Through his simplification of Abstract Expressionism Greenberg perpetuated his 1939-1940 polarized, generalized aesthetic of abstraction, surface, flatness, and purity. He spoke of the "dangerous and exciting abstract," "ambitious" and "serious." The terms of his dialectic of art changed slightly, but his grand distinction between avant-garde and kitsch persisted. Greenberg now set the difficulties of avant-garde art over against the facile and the decorative, "merely pleasing" and "naturalistic."[48] In the forties Greenberg began to speak of taste as the deciding factor in the polarized art situation. Good taste, rather than good politics, became the key issue.[49] In spite of his embellishment of his criticism with fresh metaphors and adjectives, it continued to deal—redundantly—with the same issues. He continued to support the same post-Cubist aesthetic he preferred in his early essays.

In the late 1940s, Greenberg made a grand aesthetic stand in several long *Partisan Review* articles.[50] Now a powerful intellectual force in New York, after writing for many years in the *Nation*, he aroused strong objections to his criticism. The first attack came from his former colleague at *Partisan Review*, George L.K. Morris. He found Greenberg a disgrace to the profession:

> So deftly and inaccurately are the appraisals contrived that one suspects the thesis of having been the starting point—especially as several names that do not follow the pattern get left off the lists entirely. The field of contemporary art is given the semblance of a tournament. Umpire Greenberg charts the last rounds.[51]

Morris's skepticism, and his sense of Greenberg as a manipulator of reputations, seemed, at the time, to be related to his apparent conservatism as a critic. In fact, Morris forecasts what became some of the terms of objection to Greenberg which became universal in the fifties and sixties.

Other critics with more complex criteria of significance recognized the Abstract Expressionists,[52] but Greenberg got all the credit. In the 1950s, the New York art world lionized him and his aesthetic. The domination of his simplistic dialectical formalism, based on a facile antithesis of good and bad, avant-garde and kitsch, acceptable and unacceptable, in or out, reflects the naiveté of the New York art world at the time. It especially indicates the absence of a tradition of sophisticated art criticism and discussion of art. It also suited the Cold War era, when good and bad seemed easily differentiated.

But even as abstract painters—products of Hofmann's teaching and Greenberg's preaching—began to dominate the New York art world in the late 1940s and 1950s, the banned aesthetic of realism, decorative art, narrative art, and even mass culture itself developed vigorously, proliferating until it could no longer be ignored nor matter-of-factly dismissed as trivial and irrelevant. By the 1970s, Greenberg's clear dialectic of good and bad taste dissolved in a new environment of ambiguity and pluralism.

Greenberg's tragedy was his inability to modify his ideas on art to respond to changing circumstances. He rigidly adhered to an aesthetic of abstraction, defined in terms of flatness and purity. He had quickly latched onto those ideas, borrowed from Hofmann, and promoted by Morris. For Greenberg, they became a security blanket against the threatened obliteration of all culture. That sense of threat remains alive in Greenberg's writing to this day. Perhaps if he had allowed himself a more difficult, sustained struggle with his own medium of art criticism his thinking would have had more depth. But in the desperate atmosphere of the late thirties, extended theoretical explorations were not permitted. Decisions, including art decisions, had to be made quickly. Greenberg needed the certainty of a fixed point of reference. Carefully dissected, the conservativism of his criticism—in the original sense of that term—becomes evident. It was the result of his Jewish heritage, described by Greenberg himself as emphasizing logic, abstraction, and the belief in an absolute. Greenberg brought these predispositions to bear on an early twentieth-century version of aesthetic significance, clothing it in a forceful style of writing, and giving it a political flair.

His repetitive, increasingly mechanical dialectic of art contrasts sharply with his subtle analysis of literature, especially in the first ten years of his career. He never settled for an absolute norm in his analysis of Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, and the Victorian novel.[53] His literary criticism is at times more daring and durable, and subtle than his art criticism. Although he adopted, particularly in his later writing, some of the same notions, such as medium purity, he did not use them as uncompromisingly. The dogmatism of his art criticism, his whole program of formalism in visual art seems, in retrospect, Kafkaesque. It reflects Greenberg's fear of impending doom. This fear forced him to maintain an absolute—religious—belief in a utopian sphere of aesthetic activity, in order to avoid surrender to despair.

> Kafka sees life as sealed off and governed by unknowable powers who permit us the liberty only to repeat ourselves until we succumb.[54]
>
> Clement Greenberg (1946)

Notes

[1]The bibliography on Clement Greenberg is extensive. The best overview and bibliography of his criticism is Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg, Art Critic*, (Madison, 1979). See also Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. i. *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1940*, and vol. ii. *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1986). Page numbers and titles from these anthologies are identified as "reprint."

[2]Recently some aspects of Greenberg's career have begun to be examined from a political perspective. One excellent example is Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (September 1981): 305-327.

[3]Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 5-22, and "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 4 (July-August 1940), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 23-38.

[4]While other writers posited alliances between art and politics, Greenberg's particular version has been the most influential, primarily because of his dogmatic consistency. For a general survey of some aspects of the thirties' alliance of art and politics see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago, 1983), chap. 1.

[5]The concept of what constitutes an avant-garde has been the focus of major reconsideration in theoretical studies in the last twenty years. A reference to Greenberg's early essays is usually included. See for example Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 80-81, for an astute analysis. See also, for a seminal redefinition of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1984) and, for the next generation of theory, where some of Greenberg's long usage still resonates, Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986). Huyssen also makes a valuable parallel between Greenberg and the theory of Theodor Adorno, p. 9.

[6]Greenberg's first translation was of the report by the World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, *The Brown Network, The Activities of the Nazis in Foreign Countries* (New York, 1936). The book focused on political infiltration and activities such as the kidnapping of Berthold Jacob. Anti-semitism was discussed only occasionally. His second translation, in collaboration with Emma Ashton and Jay Dratler, was Manfred Schneider, *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist as a Man* (New York, 1936). The employment was with the publisher of these works. The first book introduced Greenberg to urgent contemporary political issues, the other to art history.

[7]Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston, 1962, 1965) exemplifies the working class branch. The Ivy League background of writers such as Lionel Trilling and Sidney Hook is discussed in, for example, Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill, 1987), pp. 33-47 and pp. 50-52. Another excellent source is Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison, 1986). On the Ivy League credentials of several of the editors, see, pp. 100, 101.

[8]Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), pp. 266-273. The book has a subtle art historical order in terms of the artists discussed, indicating Greenberg's leanings at that time. On Greenberg's liaison with art historians in his later career see the insightful articles by Barbara Reise, "Greenberg and the group: a retrospective view," *Studio International*, vol. 175, no. 900 (May, 1968), pp. 254-257 and

vol. 175, no. 901 (June, 1968), pp. 314-315. Kuspit (cited n. 1), pp. 21-22, makes the important point that Greenberg heavily revised his essays when they were published in *Art and Culture* into an "oracular" style. This type of revision is strongly in evidence in the case of the Kafka essay, which first appeared as "The Jewishness of Franz Kafka: Some Sources of His Particular Vision," *Commentary*, vol. 19 (April, 1955), pp. 320-324. At that time it generated some discussion; see F.R. Leavis, "How Good is Kafka," *Commentary*, vol. 19 (June, 1955), pp. 595-596 and Greenberg's reply, ibid., pp. 595-596; F.R. Leavis,"A Critical Exchange," *Commentary*, vol. 19 (August, 1955), pp. 178-179. Leavis complained about Greenberg's unfounded assertions as well as his separation of art and life which "would lead to a doctrine of aestheticism and Pure Art Value. ...[which] no one seriously interested in literature has ever readily held." Curiously, unlike the other revisions, Greenberg does not acknowledge these in *Art and Culture*.

[9]He stated in fact that "I believe that a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write." "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews." *Contemporary Jewish Record*, vol. vii, no. 1 (February 1944), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 177.)

[10]"The Jewish Dickens: review of *The World of Sholom Aleichem* by Maurice Samuel," *The Nation*, 16 October 1943, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, pp. 156-157.

[11]"Introduction to 'The Great Wall of China' by Franz Kafka," *Commentary*, vol. 2, no. 4 (October, 1946), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. ii, pp. 101-102.

[12]Greenberg returned to the theme of the Halacha in the 1955 article on Kafka that he included in *Art and Culture*. There he stated, more obviously and somewhat more negatively, the role it played in Jewish secular culture, with its "petty concerns, its parochial absorption in the here and now and its conformism. Routine, prudence, sobriety are enjoined for their own sake, as ends in themselves and for the sake purely of security...The emancipated Jew longs for history more deeply and at the same time more immediately than the Orthodox Jew." (*Art and Culture*, [cited n. 8], p. 269.) The concern for the "Halachic sensibility" in the work of Kafka, according to Greenberg, made it "difficult to charge their matter with dramatic movement." Likewise, Greenberg was unable to significantly modify or alter his original ideas, to display any movement or development in his own thinking. Last, Greenberg suggested that Kafka "wanted more than anything else to be an artist, a writer of fiction not of oracles." This too can apply to Greenberg, who was a writer of oracles.

[13]The literature on the *Partisan Review* is extensive. See for example, James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (London, 1968), chap. 4-8 and more recently Cooney (cited n. 7).

[14]Clement Greenberg to Susan Platt, June 1, 1984, San Francisco. In this conversation, Greenberg also stated that he had read Sheldon Cheney's book on modern art [probably *The Story of Modern Art*, New York, 1941] around this time, also reinforcing the idea that he was not at all versed in modern art. Greenberg has also stated that he understood little about art at this time. See "The Late Thirties in New York," *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), p. 230.

[15]Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," reprinted (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 9, note; "Review of an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann...." reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 2, p. 18; "The Late Thirties in New York," (cited, n. 8), p. 230. See also "Hans Hofmann," *ibid.*, pp. 189-196.

[16]Transcription by Lenita Manry, "Hans Hofmann Lectures, Winter 1938-1939," Lecture 1, p. 5, Lenita Manry Papers, Microfilm Roll 151, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[17]Hofmann (cited n. 16), pp. 4, 6.

[18]"Towards a Newer Laocoon," (cited, n. 1), vol. 1, p. 23.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 32.

[20]*Ibid.*, pp. 35-38. Greenberg's determinism has already been widely discussed and will not be treated here. See Kuspit (cited n. 1), chap 2.

[21]George L.K. Morris, "Modernism, in England," book review of *Circle*, "*Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (December 1937), pp. 69-70; "Art Chronicle: Hans Arp" *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 2 (January 1938), p. 32-33, "Miro and the Spanish Civil War," *Partisan Review*, vol. 4 no. 3 (February 1938), pp. 32-33; "Interview with Jean Helion," *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 5 (April 1938), pp. 33-40; "Art Chronicle: Recent Tendencies in Europe," *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 5 (Fall, 1939), pp. 31-33; "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," *Partisan Review*," vol. 8. no. 5 (December 1941), pp. 403-417; "Relations of Painting and Sculpture," *Partisan Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January-February 1943), pp. 63-71. For a helpful comparison of Morris and Greenberg see Melinda Lorenz, *George L.K. Morris, Artist and Critic* (Ann Arbor, 1982), pp. 95-103.

[22]Greenberg, "Review of the Exhibition 'American Sculpture of Our Time,'" *The Nation*, January 23, 1943, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 140.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 28.

[24]Two poignant examples of the apocalyptic atmosphere of those years and the *Partisan Review*'s concern are an article of January-February 1941 (immediately following Morris's "Art Chronicle") titled "What Has Become of Them? A Checklist of European Artists, Writers and Musicians." *Partisan Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (January-February 1941), pp. 59-62. Photographs labelled as "the only photographs ever taken of murals by Joan Miro. ...According to reports, the walls of the house were knocked out when the Germans recently converted it into a stable. Thus, Miro's only mural work has presumably been destroyed." Miro's photograph appeared in *Partisan Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (May-June 1941), inside front cover. The photograph was by Suzy Frelingheusen, another member of the Abstract American Artists. Gilbert (cited n. 13), p. 194 also discusses some of the activities of the *Partisan Review* to save the writers and artists.

[25]Cooney (cited n. 7), p. 21 treats the role of socialism for the young Jewish intellectual. See also Alfred Kazin, (cited n. 7).

[26]Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York, 1961) and Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, *Socialism and American Life*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1952) offer comprehensive accounts of socialism, communism and Marxism in America. See also Gilbert (cited n. 17).

[27]William Phillips, "The Esthetic of the Founding Fathers," *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 4 (March 1938), pp. 11-21.

[28]Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton, "Manifesto: Toward a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review*, vol. v, no. 4 (Fall 1938), pp. 51, 52. Although signed by Andre Breton and Diego Rivera, the article is by Trotsky and Breton; see Herschel Chipp,

ed. *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 457, n. 1. See also Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics In Our Epoch," *Partisan Review*, vol. v, no. 3 (August 1938), pp. 3-10.

[29]"The Late Thirties," (cited n. 8), p. 230.

[30]"The Beggar's Opera—After Marx: Review of A Penny for the Poor by Bertolt Brecht." *Partisan Review*, vol. 4 no. 4 (Winter 1939), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, pp. 3-4. A Marxist interpretation is briefly alluded to in certain class references, almost unavoidable in Brecht, but the bulk of the article is not Marxist. Greenberg had thought about Brecht since the early thirties (ibid., p. xx)

[31]Cooney (cited., n. 7), pp. 148-149.

[32]"An Interview with Ignazio Silone," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1939), pp. 23, 26, 28. According to the introductory note, the interview was written by Silone based on Greenberg's notes.

[33]"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," (cited n. 3), p. 9.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 18,19.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 17.

[36]Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Society and Its Cinema," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter, 1939), pp. 80-95. Greenberg made several direct references to ideas in the article in his own essay. The term "kitsch" appears to be Greenberg's own choice of terminology for the mass culture. Since he knew German, it is probable that he simply knew the word and its meaning, "trash, sappy stuff."
Van Wyck Brooks (New York, 1948).

[37]Clement Greenberg to Susan Platt (cited n. 14). In this conversation he stated emphatically (speaking as he writes) that Eliot was the principle inspiration for his criticism. Greenberg did not acknowledge his debt to Eliot until he included an article by him in *Art and Culture*.

[38]T.S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (London 1933), pp. 12-13, 22.

[39]Two analysis of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," that point out its weaknesses as an ideological document, are in Cooney (cited, n. 7), pp. 211-212 and Andrew Higgins, "Clement Greenberg and the Idea of the Avant-Garde," *Studio International* 182 (October 1971), pp. 144-147. Greenberg's contact with Macdonald, a highly politicized writer, would have required him to engage in political stances. Macdonald's sponsorship of Greenberg provided the budding writer with his rapidly developing position within the magazine. His closeness to Macdonald is suggested by their collaboration on "Ten Propositions on the War," *Partisan Review*, vol. 8, no. 4 (July-August 1941), pp. 271-278.

[40]"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1 p. 11.

[41]"Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miro, Fernand Leger, and Wassily Kandinsky," *The Nation*, April 19, 1941, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 62.

[42]"Review of the Pepsi-Cola Annual; the Exhibition 'Fourteen Americans'; and the Exhibition 'Advancing American Art'," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 2, p. 113.

[43]"Miro, Leger, Kandinsky," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 63-64.

[44]"Walter Quirt," *The Nation,* 7 March 1942, p. 294 (Not included in reprint).

[45]"A New Installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a Review of the Exhibition 'Art in Progress' " *The Nation,* 10 June 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 213.

[46]"Surrealist Painting," *The Nation* 19 August 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 231. Piri Halasz, "Art Criticism (and Art History) in New York: The 1940s vs. the 1980s; Part Three: Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine,* vol. 57 (April 1983), pp. 80-89, discusses Greenberg's writings on Surrealism, taking issue with the idea that Greenberg opposed it.

[47]"Review of Exhibitions of William Baziotes and Robert Motherwell," *The Nation,* 11, November 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 239, 240, 241. The challenges raised by Pollock's work for Greenberg's criticism are material for a separate study. See for example, "Review of Exhibitions of Marc Chagall, Lyonel Feininger, and Jackson Pollock," *Ibid.,* pp. 165-166.

[48]Reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 211, 131, 153, 287. For one study of Greenberg's later criticism see Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor, 1980), chap. 3-4. Foster also makes a helpful comparison between Greenberg and Walter Pater, pp. 20-21.

[49]Kuspit (cited n. 1), chap. 6 amusingly discussed this issue at length.

[50]"The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 1 (January 1948) reprint (cited n. 1), pp. 192-196. "The Decline of Cubism," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 3 (March 1948), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II pp. 211-215. "The Crises of the Easel Picture," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 4 (April 15, 1948,) reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 221-225. "Irrelevance and Irresponsibility," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 5 (May 15, 1948), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 573-579; for other *Partisan Review* articles see Kuspit (cited n. 1), p. 207.

[51]"On Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review,* June 1948, p. 682.

[52]The criticism of James Johnson Sweeney stands out as more subtle and sophisticated, than Greenberg's in its engagement with elements other than form. See for example James Johnson Sweeney, "Art Chronicle," *Partisan Review,* vol. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1945), pp. 240-242 and "An Interview with Jacques Lipchitz," *Partisan Review,* vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1945), pp. 83-89.

[53]The best example of the subtlety of his arguments about literature is the essay "Bertold Brecht's Poetry," *Partisan Review,* vol, 8, no. 2 (March-April 1941), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 49-62. Also published in *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), pp. 252-265; and "A Victorian Novel," *Partisan Review,* vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1944) reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 193-198. Also published in *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), pp. 245-251. The inclusion of these early, lengthy essays, much less revised than those on art, suggests that Greenberg felt they were among his best works.

[54]"Introduction to 'The Great Wall of China' by Franz Kafka," (cited n. 11), p. 101.