

LECTURE

“Greenberg in the 1930s”

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My analysis of Clement Greenberg's emergence as a critic at the very end of the decade of the 1930s is based on the last chapter of my book *Art and Politics in the 1930s*. In that book I am demonstrating that during the course of the 1930s there was a deep commitment among many critics to interpreting and supporting a socially engaged art. Greenberg, at the very end of the decade, and as a beginning critic, redefined the character of contemporary criticism with constructs that forecast the direction of criticism after World War II.

Greenberg's first major article as a commentator on culture was published in the fall of 1939 exactly simultaneously with the outbreak of World War II. During the previous six months momentous changes had occurred in the political environment. The fall of Barcelona and Madrid meant the end of the Popular Front government in Spain, a cause for which many intellectuals in Europe and the United States had fought and died. In March of 1939 Hitler took over Czechoslovakia, in violation of the Munich Pact of the previous fall, and in August, most devastating news of all to radical political intellectuals, Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact. The particular convergence of the loss of the causes in which many intellectuals had invested years of their lives and the emergence of Greenberg as a neophyte critic is significant.

With the widespread disillusionment of the year 1939, other writers were trying to come to grips with the undermining of their beliefs. Meanwhile, Greenberg, apparently unencumbered by disillusionment, wrote his now famous polemic, titled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In it Greenberg was clearly endeavoring to position himself as the new authoritative voice of the relationship between culture and society, a voice that declared that there was an irrevocable chasm between avant-garde art, defined as abstract modernism, and kitsch, more clearly defined as an imitation of the authentic culture of the avant-garde based on the debased and ignorant tastes of the masses.

It is in his utter dismissal of the masses as that Greenberg most totally sets himself apart from the critical arguments that had developed during the earlier years of the decades. Numerous critics, from various political positions, had argued thoughtfully for years on the way in which culture could be part of the day to day life of the people, the ways in which it could arouse people, and the ways in which intellectuals could identify with ordinary people. Greenberg's argument set up a hierarchical and judgmental schema that entirely departed from concern for the role of the artist in society and instead placed the artist on a pedestal inaccessible and even in hostile opposition to society. Greenberg had first published as a peripheral part of the intellectual left only a few months earlier in the winter of 1939 with a short literary review of a new English translation of a novel by Bertolt Brecht. How he moved from this brief review to his major discourse on culture, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in only a few months, is a fascinating tale. Both of these

articles appeared in The Partisan Review characterized then and now as a "Trotskyite" magazine.

As a result Greenberg has been positioned as a leftist, or a Marxist-Trotskyite in his earliest work. A close look at Greenberg's early writing and its relationship to that of the editors of the Partisan Review suggests that his political affiliation with Trotskyism was mainly driven by opportunism in order to gain access to the pages of the Partisan Review. My presentation examined Greenberg's position in relationship to the other Partisan Review editors, as well as Trotsky himself, in order to demonstrate that Greenberg circumvented complex and subtle critical arguments exploring the relationship of art and politics, in favor of a simple contrast between two forms of art "avant-garde" and "kitsch." Furthermore, and also in contradiction to other critical arguments, he accompanied those terms with a value judgment that avant-garde was good and kitsch was bad. That stark contrast corresponded well with the moment of the outbreak of World War II. Good and bad were obvious, at that time. Totalitarianism which exploited the delusions of the masses was bad; democracy linked to freedom was good. Avant-garde was the art of democracy, hence of freedom, and kitsch the art of the fascists, therefore of repression. The reasons for Greenberg's longevity as a critic had to do with the fact that the terms of the critical argument that he presented would become the determining issues after World War II during the Cold War. His simplistic, elitist, and exclusionary polarity became the primary construct in art criticism for many years, and a decade -long tradition of advocating a socially engaged art was obliterated.

Discussion:

How political was Greenberg? Irving Sandler asked Susan Platt whether the advocacy of modernism could itself be considered a political position. Platt answered that she felt that it could be in some cases, Alfred Barr for example, but in the case of Greenberg she felt that it was a situation of personal ambition that motivated him, rather than fervent political beliefs. As far as evidence is available, he abhorred and distanced himself from Communist politics. Sandler then suggested that internationally there was support for modernism at this time. Terry Smith, Australian art historian and author of *Making the Modern*, pointed out that there was a strong international tradition that included Australian critics, American critics and British critics that saw modernism as simply an escapist position. Brad Collins, author of a recent article on Greenberg brought up the role of George L.K. Morris, as a critic at the Partisan Review and Platt stated that she felt that Greenberg stole a lot of his ideas from Morris.

Katy Deepwell, British critic of the *Women's Art Magazine* in London, spoke of the widespread position of Popular Frontism in England, and agreed that Greenberg's criticism "circumvented" the Popular Front stance but that his popularity in England was based on the continuity between Greenberg's position and Roger Fry's formalism. At this point Paul Mattick, philosopher at Adelphi University, whose father published a magazine in the thirties called *Living Marxism*, stated vociferously that to separate personal ambition and the political left was a false dichotomy, and that moreover, Greenberg was active on the left. According to Mattick, Greenberg knew everyone and was seen frequently at meetings. Mattick further claimed that Greenberg knew Theodor

Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School who were in New York. The idea of Greenberg as active on the left was also supported, after the session, by Ellen Landau, author of a major study of Jackson Pollock. Based on her unpublished interviews with Krasner, she stated that Krasner and Greenberg had gone to Trotskyite meetings together.

In this age of postmodernism we no longer need a single answer to the question of Greenberg's "leftism" in the thirties. But we can at least continue to ask questions about Greenberg's position as he was writing "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Was he active on the left, was he an opportunist, did he care about real world politics or simply the politics of his own career? An even more interesting question is why do some contemporary Marxists want so much to see Greenberg as an involved Marxist in the thirties?? So they can, as Brad Collins suggested after the session, set him up as a "straw man in order to show him as a philistine in the forties"? Ultimately we can still look, though, at Greenberg's article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," as a stance that completely rejected the critically engaged discourse of the activist thirties in favor of a model of the artist withdrawn from society.

Returning to Irving Sandler's original question as to whether that is a political position in itself, it could be seen as that and certainly was seen as that in the forties and fifties, but it was certainly a vastly different political position than was the model for thirties cultural politics. Most important of all however, is the fact that the Greenberg session generated vociferous discussion of important ideas, something that is much needed among critics.