

CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

A Gallatin Interdisciplinary Seminar
K20.1081
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The objective of this course is to familiarize students with the major thinking in art theory during the last one hundred-plus years. This course follows the rise, drift and decay of Modernism as it mutated into a condition called Postmodernism. This is a course in cultural history with specific emphasis on images—modern painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, film, and postmodern art—video, performance, site-specific work, “women’s art,” TV and popular images in slick publications. Most lectures include visual presentations and are designed to engage students interested in the arts, social sciences and humanities within a social context. It asks the question: Is Postmodernism the reverse side of Modernism or is it a [w]hol[ly] new mint?

BACKGROUND

The history of Modernism has shifted and turned often. Modernism today is re-evaluated through theories of interpretation that see its evolution from Classicism to Romanticism. Contrary to popular thought, Modernism’s growth (c1850-1960) is contradictory. Simply speaking, early Modernist art focused on realism in the late 19th Century. Generally, it began in France; the major French early modernists artists were Gustav Courbet (1819-1877) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883). The Enlightenment forged a belief in science and, in time, artists directed their attention to common people and places. This movement was in direct conflict with the formulaic art of Romanticism; the academies, which tended to depict religious subjects, royalty, their estates, and history painting. This was

prevalent in the salons of Europe and the United States from the 17th century.

Modernism was described by the late art historian, Meyer Schapiro, as “freedom of the spirit.” In contrast, Sigmund Freud, a consummate Modernist, seems to stand at the ends of the traditions of Classicism and Romanticism. His assertion that history can claim truth preceded that of the art critic Clement Greenberg. Postmodernity looks for interpretations, not truth.

Modernism in art freed subject matter from these elitist traditions. Eventually the paint marks unchained themselves from chiaroscuro. Note the broken brush marks and varied color in Impressionist painting. Furthermore, Modernism in the 19th and early 20th centuries held a promise that with its advances in science, medicine, technology and art, the world would be a better place. Nowhere were this vitality and optimism better illustrated than in the work of the Russian Avant-garde--the abstract movements that were contemporary with the Russian Revolution. Machine-age modernism with skyscrapers, machine-inspired abstract motifs (the Chrysler building) c. 1920-1940 in the United States was another manifestation of this optimism.

As Stalin and Hitler came to power, modernist art in Italy, Germany and Russia was suppressed. Stalinist and Nazi art replaced the avant-garde with figurative art depicting propagandist power of the state. In response, a young writer, Clement Greenberg, postulated in 1939 that in late capitalist society-- people would be urbanites rather than rural dwellers (this certainly seems so today)-- a sophisticated (abstract) art, based on the intellect rather than, dictatorial power, folk, or emotional experiences, would best serve modernist society.

Greenberg promoted a “begat” or chain theory of Modernism with Cubism at its core. He believed that all anyone need do to appreciate art is understand the principles of design. Consequently, a commonality of human experiences would occur and an idealized socialist society would follow. Modernist art started with people-centered realism and “ended” (if indeed it ended) with abstraction. Greenberg, aware of the art under Stalin and Hitler, and wary that realist/contextual art with obvious narratives, could serve as propagandist tools, insisted that only “abstract art flows into the ocean.”

Modernist artists pushed their art stylistically toward a seemingly never-ending newness--avant-garde--particularly after photography and cinema joined in the mix. One can argue that Modernism terminated with the synthesis of the reductionist work of the likes of late Minimalists like Donald Judd and Ellsworth Kelly in the 1970-'80s. Subsequently, the postmodern artist broke the chain, and realizing that appropriating/ borrowing, stealing or being influenced has always been the stock in trade of art, looked to history, not with the reverence of traditionalists, but as a grab-bag commodity and spectacle ("stainless steals") to use as their hearts desired.

Therefore, discussions about postmodern—post structuralist, deconstruction and feminist theory can more easily be explicated against the Eurocentric historicist background promoted by Greenberg from the late 19th Century through the 1960s. "Greenbergian Modernism," as it has come to be called, noted that each subsequent generation of artists sought to "push the envelope" to further abstract or synthesize form. No doubt, little more synthesis can be created after one-color paintings.

The ingredients for a shift from Modernism to Postmodernism began with the Dadaists, an "anti-art" movement that, after WWI, ridiculed European civilization with their anti-nationalism, irreverence, jests and sexual innuendos. The optimism of Modernism was all but destroyed after WWII especially after the realization of the Nazi death camps. A paradigm shift then occurred during the civil rights movement, the women's movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. Multi-culturalism became ubiquitous. French Postmodern thinkers—Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, et al. added multiple interpretive discourses on almost everything.

The readings, slides, films and discussions in this course are mostly about images. It begins with investigating the formality of Modernism, and then moves on to multiple discussions about avant-garde and kitsch ending with considering meaning-centered art rather than form-centered art. Images as seen in paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, television and advertisements are supplemented by the ideas, first proffered by the Dadaists, and later with performance--idea or conceptual art, gender referents in fine art, photography, film T.V. and advertising. Thereafter, post structuralist analysis and deconstruction allow us to find meaning or

meaninglessness by using the paradigm of an onion—as we peel away layers we go through near endless discoveries.

I try not to define art by categories and hierarchies. As a *relativist* I avoid classifying knowledge and I offer few answers but many questions. My model is Michel Foucault who sought “...a new way of connecting things both to the eye and to discourse.” While I tend to see the world through a postmodern lense, unlike some postmodernists, I don’t sweepingly condemn modernists, and unlike some modernists, I don’t despise what the detractors of postmodernism call “Frog speak,” decrying everyone from Claude Levi-Strauss: “The wise man doesn’t give the right answers, he poses the right questions, “ to Jean Beaudrillard who sees systems made-up of “models of a real without origin or reality.”

READINGS, ETC.

1/Instructor’s Pamphlet: Various Essays by Clement Greenberg, and many of Greenberg’s critics

2/Instructor’s Pamphlet--*The Case of the Baffled Radical*, by Harold Rosenberg.

3/*Camera Lucida*, by Roland Barthes

4/Instructor’s Pamphlet: Essays on Rosenberg and Barthes by Jerome Klinkowitz

5/Instructor’s Pamphlet: essays by Victor Burgin

6/*Vertigo*: a film By Alfred Hitchcock

7/Instructor’s Pamphlet: essays on Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, including Laura Mulvey’s “visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” and others

8/Film:*Modern Time*,s by Charles Chaplin.

9/Film:*Brazil*, by Terry Gilliam.

10/ Video: One or two episodes of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*

11/Instructor’s Pamphlet: Essays by Patricia Mellencamp (on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, and *I Love Lucy*), and Judith Williamson—“Woman Is an Island: Femininity and Colonization.”

OPTION: 12&13/ Ceci n’est pas une pipe *This Is Not a Pipe* by Michel Foucault and

"This is not Kate Moss" - An exploration into the viewing of cyberpornography by Bela Chatterjee,

Requirements include active class discussions, six essays, with some visual/written /oral presentations. All papers are reviewed, corrected and may require rewriting in a more definitive form. An initial grade of any combination of “+ or V or -“ must be re-written. A final grade can be augmented by active class participation.

LATE PAPERS WILL BE PENALIZED. Any and all late papers will downgraded by 2 points for each week late, to the minimum of a “D.” ALL PAPERS MUST BE SUBMITTED BEFORE A GRADE CAN BE RECORDED.