



Painting

Discussion of depiction has encountered painting in relation to material exemplification, and it should be clear at this point that material is not limited to painting and that material sampled interacts with depiction and combines as reference. What is not yet clear is why painting should enjoy such prominence as depiction and prestige in art. Or, put another way, why depiction especially needs painting? In addressing these questions, a number of preceding issues are drawn together and lead to an extended critique of some formalist art criticism. The chapter is somewhat longer for this, but sheds light on how versions of painting influence the study of recent art history, and so ushers in the second part of the study.

The proposed theory of depiction allows that two sampling schemes interact; depiction classifies its object, or alerts us to two-dimensional properties of the depicted object, the object classed in turn alerts us to other properties of the material used in depiction. One scheme deals in two-dimensionality the other in three. Where art is concerned, a premium is placed on the density or circumspection of meaning. The emphasis is upon depiction that resists ready and regular classing and pursues subtle and complex differences of scheme and object. Requirements of materials in art are thus for an optimum versatility in engaging and transforming schemes.¹³⁸ In one sense art establishes an innovative impetus, and materials must be open-ended for experiment. In another sense the requirements must ensure a stability or continuity of scheme. The objective after all, is to maintain circumspection of meaning rather than dissolve it. The requirement thus balances innovation against continuity.

¹³⁸ Clearly this resembles Goodman's symptom of *repleteness* of depictive syntax, although here divorced from a notational framework, but affirmed as a distinctive symptom for depiction as art. For repleteness see Goodman, 1976, pp. 225-232 and Goodman, 1984, pp. 135-138.

But versatility also arises through variety of object, through fictive and class terms. Where versions of object are no longer shared between schemes, but rather become native to them or scheme-dependent, materials are also drawn into a radical diversity. Not all schemes use the same qualities of paint in the same ways, its glazes or thinning agents, its thickening agents, viscosity and body, range of colour, drying times, permanence and finish, and related means of application, all variously allow some schemes and deny others. Not all paint or process thus find or make the same objects or for the same schemes. Pluralism is extended to materials and process in this way. Yet painting is confidently regarded as the principal material for depiction in art, is often taken as only a synonym for either or both. In what sense then does painting meet these diverse requirements yet remain one and the same practice?

Painting in this respect is more usefully contrasted with printing. The distinction firstly lies between the work of sole instance and the work of multiple instances.¹³⁹ The work that has only one instance obviously measures scheme or schemes against other works rather than instances, conforms or deviates in an infinite grading of ways. Such work might combine, size, location, surface and other properties that resist efficient print duplication. A print measures scheme *between instances* or as efficient duplication. But a painting or other work of sole instance must measure only *between works*, and so engages a wider, more versatile scheme.¹⁴⁰ Scheme is stretched by works of minimal instance to optimal diversity, stresses the subtle and vital nature of style and promotes more circumspect meaning. In this sense the work of sole instance is especially averse to realism and stricter derivation. This is not to say that painting is incapable of realism of course, or that prints are necessarily more realistic or of less value as art. Rather, it points only to the advantage of the work of sole instance in this respect, and to the acknowledged pre-eminence of painting over prints in art.

¹³⁹ This distinction is observed in part by Goodman in a more general discussion of forgery, as between the *autographic*, where identity is determined by history of production, and the *allographic*, where identity is determined by system of notation. See Goodman, 1976, pp. 113-122. But both painting and prints count as *autographic* on this score, and the distinction here is more narrowly between schemes for sole and multiple instances of a work.

¹⁴⁰ The painting that copies a painting clearly duplicates yet is not a print or instance of the copied painting. The painted copy remains tied to a scheme of sole instance for a work; is usually a dull, minor or irritating instance of the scheme and as such is generally disparaged. Forgeries trade on a confusion of identity. More distinct variation in 'copying' is a traditional source of inspiration.

A print usually confines versatility to schemes of strict or efficient duplication, measures them both against instances of a given work and works as other instances of scheme, easing the task of each. Depictive scheme is more efficient for more instances to a given work and so scheme, allows work more widespread use and derivation. Again, this is not to say that a print of a unicorn is more realistic than a painting of one, obviously, but that depictive scheme for the print is more streamlined for dedication to duplication, delivers the same facts or fictions for every instance and grants work and scheme a stricter derivation. Interestingly, where prints are often more prized as art, is where qualities of material or process allow greater variation to a given number, impression or edition of work, as in etchings, engravings, wood or lino cuts, for example. On the other hand, advances in photography, lithography or graphics software allow duplication in new and more flexible ways but cannot equal or obviate the options available to the work of sole instance. Duplication in terms of impressive densities of tone screen or pixels still imposes a scheme for duplication, still extends instances for a work; tightens scheme and derivation.

But the virtues of conformity and sheer quantity have their uses, indeed realisms. They not only ensure facts for a world, but also may sample and express their prominence in this. This is really to say only that the printed depiction often enjoys the same prestige as the printed word, but allows at least to more accurately point to the source of this authority or 'aura': to material exemplification.¹⁴¹ Photographs in particular are taken to be more realistic or authentic as depictions for being in this way a stricter form of print, and whether the depicting surface is the glossy or textured card of a family snapshot, or the crude tone screens used for newspapers and pamphlets, such qualities often come to exemplify a conformity and integrity to given schemes that prompt faith in further and familiar objects.

On the other hand photography's profusion of applications and efficiency in duplication sometimes makes for resistance to appreciation as art. The artistic purist

¹⁴¹ 'Aura' here alludes of course, to Walter Benjamin's famous use of the term. See Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, Frankfurt, 1955. But the point here is that the print has an 'aura' of its own, rather than merely being denied that of the work of sole instance. Benjamin's general anxiety about the status and prospects of the work of sole instance, and of art in general, rests upon a mistaken understanding of the distinction between sole and multiple instances for works, of depiction and art.

may find it the strictest and so most unrewarding of prints. And while the photographer of even a black and white photograph is free to select a theme or object, an angle or aspect, to choose a lens length, filter supplement, field of focus, speed of film and shutter, to develop and fix the print with a variety of chemicals, crop the print to a variety of shapes, to a variety of surfaces, still, the purist may feel stymied. For even where the edition is limited to one, the scheme conforms to a print. The steps taken, options exercised remain an insidious array of conditions for duplication and scheme preservation. But in truth, such objections do not so much hold for photography, but for art more generally. The work of sole instance must also comply with some schemes, in order to experiment with others. For this reason art's experiments fall into traditions, their objects into genres, their schemes soon rest upon standard techniques. And in this painting is reinforced in its prominence, entrenched as a preference through its history. Painting thus does not necessarily escape its schemes any more easily than photography, the difference is rather that schemes here rest upon optimal conditions for versatility and permutation, and that duplication is always secondary to this.

This is not to deny exceptions or grey areas to the distinction, to radical versions of mono-print, photo-release and photo-collage for example, but only to show that it holds for an easy majority of cases and explains a number of interesting aspects to the respective practices. Nor is it to ignore that painting is hardly the sole instance of a work of sole instance. Drawings (including pencils, lead and coloured, pastels, crayons, chalks, charcoal and inks) collages, mosaics, tapestries and stained glass equally or occasionally qualify but do not enjoy the same prominence or prestige as painting. The distinction within works of sole instance firstly depends upon degree of consolidation or entrenchment, as indicated. Painting maintains a momentum or preference in versatility not simply by theme or object, but scale, mobility, speed or time, materials and cost. Less competitive versions such as mosaics, tapestries and stained glass must be content with more specialised roles. The distinction secondly may paradoxically, depend upon scheme. Scheme need not always start from materials; some features of scheme or style influence how materials are taken, rather than the converse. The distinction between painting and drawing, for example, holds for most older or traditional works, as between preliminary sketch and finished work. Period and other styles determine this application. But in some more

recent work, where drawing is pursued exclusively, or freely combined with painting and collage, distinction between sketch and finished work clearly does not apply. Or rather, does not apply in the same way. In fact the scheme now addresses rather than is addressed by the distinction, and where effective, the relation of painting to other materials and schemes is maintained as the object of the scheme, rather than its means or materials. In such cases, drawing is effectively treated as 'painting'.

Finally, while versions of painting are tied to various schemes, not all painting amounts to such schemes, not all schemes are only for painting. What stops drawing, collage, mosaics, tapestries, stained glass and so on being taken as just versions of painting or vice versa, is also consolidation of schemes. All establish ranges or constraints of versatility. What counts as painting amongst works of sole instance, is a matter of dominance and range of schemes. They as much define painting as painting defines them. So painting has prominence and preference in art, but neither guarantees its effectiveness nor impedes the effectiveness of other materials, but rather dictates competition.

Painting's practices are necessarily partial or partisan, and painting needs conflicting versions to sustain circumspection in art. The partiality of practices finds a ready ally in criticism, particularly for contemporary work. An impartial critic is not simply a figment in the dreams of unlucky artists, but a critic hardly worthy of the name. An impartial criticism is merely to confine remarks to a consensus, or an exercise in tact. The point is rather to contest the merit of a work by appealing to extension of reference, to object or world depicted, to means and style. Sooner or later however style involves a version of history. The critic is drawn into a trade-off, between extolling the deserving and distinctive work and admitting it to an impressive yet grateful tradition. The transition is essentially from saying how a good a work is, to saying what kind of work it is, and the critic may be drawn into revising styles and history in order to effect a reconciliation or to arguing for an underlying principle to painting (although painting here might just as well be depiction or art) as the basis of such revision. The contest is thus shuffled from criticism to history. The critic tends to find the historian too long-sighted in matters of style to accurately discriminate in such cases; the historian tends to suspect the critic too short sighted to be entirely reliable.

But the argument is really about where the conflict falls, rather than if there simply ought to be one. Controversy abounds in art history, the boundaries of Classicism and Romanticism, or Romanticism and Realism, or Realism and Impressionism continue to fuel reappraisals. Some styles it seems are rarely settled, and are only to be settled by appeals to others. Art history cannot do without criticism, and theories of painting, depiction and art find their favourites. In the second half of the twentieth century the most prominent controversy surrounds the definition and extent of Modernism as a period style, elsewhere as just a movement or trend. Often criticism and history are indistinguishable in writing on such a recent period, since the assessment of works goes hand in hand with the development of a generally accepted stylistic framework. A feature of some of the most influential criticism of the period has been its appeal to the nature of painting in revising this framework and promoting works. The arguments advanced are sometimes glossed as formalism, since they appeal to intrinsic properties of painting, and sometimes as historicism, since they appeal to a manifest progression in art history. It is instructive to look to some notable examples to see how criticism and history settle differences and urge versions of painting.

Foremost amongst such formalists is Clement Greenberg, an early champion of Abstract Expressionism and an influential curator as well as critic throughout the nineteen sixties. Greenberg's position evolved during the late thirties writing for the left wing journal *Partisan Review*, and drew on the work of earlier formalists such as Alfred J. Barr, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, but is distinctive for its acute focus upon depiction and painting, its attempt to reduce depiction to matters of naked material and technique and strident ranking of works, as 'the best' or 'most progressive'.¹⁴² The account offered here draws largely on a later essay, *Modernist Painting*, which

¹⁴² Two key essays are Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in *Partisan Review*, vol. vi No 5 Fall 1939 pp. 34-39, reprinted in Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Boston, 1961 and Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' in *Partisan Review*, vol. vii No 4. July-August, 1940, pp. 296-310, reprinted in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume One: Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, Chicago/London, 1986, pp. 23-38. Greenberg's view of depiction is notable for the shift from Alfred Barr's mere 'representation' (sharply criticised by Meyer Shapiro in 'The Nature of Abstract Art' in *Marxist Quarterly*, vol. 1 No 1 January 1937 pp. 77-98) to one of 'illusion' with particular emphasis upon perspective. In this respect, it precedes and is consonant with Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. Indeed, in a later publication, includes a footnote to *Art and Illusion* in support of arguments. See Greenberg, 1961, p. 76.

summarises many of these concerns.¹⁴³ Greenberg's argument is firstly for the identity of a Modernist period. He sketches a kind of intellectual crisis arising from the enlightenment, in which excessive rationality threatens the status of religion and art. The rigours of Kantian philosophy supposedly offer art the means of redemption, through a delimiting of its field of inquiry, to something like immediate experience, presentation or appearance.¹⁴⁴ But the essay skirts further philosophy and at best the argument is that within the period, art's branches begin to dedicate themselves to constricting their respective fields.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art¹⁴⁵.

Painting therefore scrutinises its role as depiction. Realistic and illusionistic approaches are gradually rejected as 'dissembling' or concealing the true nature of painting (and depiction). Exactly which medium realism and illusion are to belong to remains unclear, or why these properties should then be considered alien to painting, or what is to be depicted without them, is not pursued. For Greenberg it is enough that painting from Manet onwards rejects the vivid illusion of three-dimensional space and advances on 'the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental to the processes by which pictorial art criticised and defined itself under Modernism'¹⁴⁶. Of course depiction is not limited to painting, even in art, so strictly speaking, mere flatness will not suffice as a unique property of painting, and any material or support is never just flat. But the history essentially

¹⁴³ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in *Art and Literature* No 4, Spring, 1965, pp. 193-201, reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism*, London, Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, (eds.), 1982, pp. 5-10 and Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume Four: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* Chicago/London, 1993, pp. 85-93. Page numbers herein refer to the reprinting in *Modern Art and Modernism*.

¹⁴⁴ Kant's position is more commonly regarded as Transcendental Idealism, Formal, or Critical Idealism. In this light it is a curious regression for one of professed Marxist leanings, but explains glossing of such criticism as formalism. Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* is notable for the priority it assigns to natural beauty, the distinction with the sublime and the function of pleasure. These matters are surprisingly given scant attention by Greenberg and the historicist impetus he assigns to self-awareness or self-criticism, suggests far more of a Hegelian orientation, a point noted in Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella*. Cambridge, Mass. 1965, reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism*, London, 1982, pp. 115-121, (see especially p.118.)

¹⁴⁵ Greenberg, 1965, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6

establishes a premise from which abstract painting is seen to excel in flatness, or to achieve the latest and best in flatness

There are four objections to be registered. An initial objection must surely run that three-dimensional space was not eliminated quite so easily, in fact cannot be eliminated without severely limiting the notion of depiction. Manet's paintings for example typically contain people and objects while forgoing standard perspectives and settings, but this hardly eliminates the depiction of three-dimensions. Nor can the argument be loosened to one of Modernism's elimination of 'the kind of space that recognisable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit' while retaining these same or even distantly related objects¹⁴⁷. To depict a three-dimensional object quite simply *is* to depict a three-dimensional space, no matter which perspective or projection scheme is adopted. Arguments for a distinct realm of the pictorial, or an illusion of an otherworldly space, in so far as they are coherent, fail for the same reason¹⁴⁸. That is, to imagine walking, or simply looking around such a space is to be guided by such worldly activities as walking and looking.

A second objection is that if painting is glossed as the principal means of depiction in art, then depiction itself is weakly grasped. For depiction in Modernist painting is characterised by 'flatness', even when recognising that more accurately the concept ought to be two-dimensionality.¹⁴⁹ Flatness quite simply is a property of three-dimensionality. Flatness characterises a certain painted surface perhaps, that of a van Eyck or an Ingres for example, with their smooth finish, but is not a property of depiction or two-dimensionality. The confusion on Greenberg's part over two-dimensionality generates further errors in the characterisation of the picture plane as merely the surface of a painting, or the area of depiction¹⁵⁰. The basis for a stylistic analysis of abstraction is thus seriously skewed from the start. Beyond this lies an objection to notions of a self-contained 'visual experience' and the idea that 'visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience' or that Modernist painting ought to translate its objects into 'strictly optical, two-

¹⁴⁷ Greenberg, 1965, p.8.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 6-7.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p.8. Greenberg repeats this error in the analysis of cubist collage in terms of maintaining a 'picture plane' as the supporting surface. See Greenberg, 1961, pp. 70-83. The picture plane is dealt with more accurately here in Chapter Three, concerning the issue of depth.

dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art'¹⁵¹. But the visual cannot be entirely isolated from other senses, anymore than the pictorial can be isolated from its material support. There is no realm of the exclusively visual, no absolute autonomy for a practice of depiction and painting. Similarly, an appeal to a Kantian disinterested mind, like that to Ruskin's innocent eye, rests upon a vacuum.

The historical perspective prompts a third objection. There is for example, the confusing claim that the neo-classicist David sought to counter the flattening effect of Rococo painting by the introduction of 'sculptural' values, while at the same time insisting that this arose as part of a general trend in Western painting to 'suppress and dispel the sculptural'¹⁵². David supposedly subordinated colour to tone for this reason, yet in the very next line we are told that the strength of his pictures lies in their colour! Ingres, we are told also subordinates colour to tone, or to 'sculptural' values, and yet his pictures 'were among the flattest, least sculptural done in the West by a sophisticated artist since the fourteenth century'¹⁵³. Just what 'flattest' can mean in this context is puzzling, for literally, flatness is a three-dimensional and hence sculptural property, while taken as a gloss for two-dimensionality, flattest can only mean that Ingres' pictures relinquish depiction for pattern or design, notations or diagrams. Neither is a plausible much less compelling interpretation.

Definition of a Modernist period is weakened not only by attenuation of the trend to as far back as the sixteenth century, but also by a vacillation within it, concerning the reductive nature of this self-critical turn and the resultant flatness or two-dimensionality. This is the fourth objection. On the one hand Modernism in painting is not so very different from the preceding four hundred years, in its efforts to reject 'sculptural' values, and on the other, the resulting two-dimensionality cannot be absolute or 'utter'¹⁵⁴. But if two-dimensionality is not absolute or utter, against what is a self-critical purification to be measured? Or, if painting does not pursue a purity of means, does not continue to eliminate extrinsic properties, then there is no point in appealing to its one true nature, no self-critical turn, no Modernism as a consequence. Judgements of what is best or most progressive in

¹⁵¹ Greenberg, 1965, p .8.

¹⁵² Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 8

painting fail unless committed to the essential and absolute in painting. A true Kantian might, of course, grasp the experience offered as a 'Form of Finality', but Greenberg equivocates, perhaps sensing that such idealism cannot drive the history of painting very far.¹⁵⁵ The aim of the history is the acceptance and importance of abstraction for painting, but it is difficult to make an historical case for a version of painting when the version is unclear.

Confusion over an essential flatness is only compounded by closer stylistic analysis. The treatment of Cubism crucially suffers from an approach unable to accurately relate the picture plane to object, to appreciate distinctions between perspectival and projective schemes, and that resorts to notions of illusion to explain differences in treatment of depth.¹⁵⁶ It leads to nonsensical claims of illusions 'in front of the picture plane, (for a picture) or of three-dimensionality, or depth 'minimized', without then allowing revision of object to scheme, or that object is scheme-dependent or that abstraction actually entails object and so depth to scheme.¹⁵⁷ Then there is claim for a distinction between illusion and representation, taken as depth without object or object without connotation, and following this indifference to object and vacuity to depth, the reluctant though hardly surprising conclusion that mere decoration ensues from 'abstract literalness'.¹⁵⁸

The lack of rigour to such analysis is hardly confined to Greenberg of course, is typical of early advocacy for abstraction. But the feeble grasp of Cubism and depiction also dilates the style, allows it to sprawl into Analytical and Synthetic phases and for Greenberg, eventually embraces all but favoured features of Abstract Expressionism, in an amorphous notion of 'Late Cubism'. But where Cubism becomes the necessary step to abstraction, abstraction is then also haunted by decoration, the decorous or 'tasteful'. The essay 'American-Type Painting' illustrates

¹⁵⁵ In Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-69*, Chicago/London, 1993. pp. 93-94, a lengthy footnote to the version of the essay insists that he no more than describes 'the very best' in Modernism, does not necessarily approve of it, and that flatness and self-criticism are not sufficient condition for such excellence, indeed are no more than 'illusions'. But if purity in self-criticism and flatness are no more than illusions of excellence, then the explanation itself is dealt a fatal blow. It does not then explain 'the very best' but only offers necessary conditions, and offers no accuracy in this, but only 'illusions'. Also, for a concise account of The Form of Finality, and Kant's aesthetic generally, see Mary A. McCloskey, *Kant's Aesthetic*, London, 1987.

¹⁵⁶ Greenberg, 1961, pp. 70-83.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 75, p.77.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 80.

this stylistic over-reach.¹⁵⁹ It details advances made by the Abstract Expressionists, but can only explain the striking large scale of works as an extension to flatness, relations of shape, line and colour presumably extended simply by size or number.¹⁶⁰ Yet such works are rarely conspicuous for simply more shapes, lines or colours, indeed, more often display to the contrary.

Greenberg allowed a narrowed tonal range for works, although this is then inconsistent with the claim for flatness and greater scale.¹⁶¹ The tonal range ought strictly to be widened, if greater scale is to extend flatness. He submitted extremely uniform compositions or ‘fields’ and lack of finish as other features of the style. But fields are as much native to Mirō’s *Constellations* of the forties, or Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean* series of 1914-16, and lack of finish to Mirō’s heterogeneous materials of the thirties or to most of Picasso or Matisse. Neither is quite stylistically accurate, both are hardly more so. And where lack of finish might more usefully be related to greater scale, or fields to resulting finish, Greenberg is indifferent, instead shores up a loose analysis with the ad hoc alternative of Late Cubism, to which de Kooning or Gorky’s drawing and tonalities are attributed, as are Still’s facture or finish, as well as Gottlieb and Motherwell’s less field-like compositions.

Late Cubism only conflates Synthetic Cubism with the work of Mondrian, Malevich, Mirō and Klee, is as easily lumped together as French or European tastes; is then as vague and indiscriminate as the style of abstraction under discussion and indeed as the name ‘American-Type Painting’ suggests. Abstraction suffers. The style is rightly sensed to be a sterile exercise when confined to an end in-itself. Greenberg’s apprehension registers in the essay ‘Abstract, Representational and so forth’ but can no more remedy the problem than revise flatness and depiction.¹⁶² Stylistically, the problem is abstraction is sold short by flatness. It never quite delivers the meaning advocates intuitively find in works, that rewards attention to such works. Claiming that abstraction eliminates the object, rather than properly abstracting the object, only cancels the very basis of depiction. Hence the prospect is rapidly one of a dead end, of the vacuous or merely decorative. Greenberg’s is

¹⁵⁹ Greenberg, 1961, pp.208-229.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 219.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p. 220.

¹⁶² Ibid. pp. 133-138.

scarcely the only, much less best account of Abstract Expressionism, but his stylistics demonstrates the problem for abstraction based upon painting as depiction.¹⁶³ An historical impetus is set in train from without, but a stylistic paucity resists from within. Negotiating this dilemma largely measures the course and influence of such criticism, and is briefly traced here not through successive and competing canons of abstract painting and their advocates, but through attempts to reconcile a version strict enough to allow progression in flatness, but relaxed enough to avoid completion.

A remedy to this reductionism was proposed by Michael Fried, also an eminent critic and curator, and associate of Greenberg. Fried argued that the essence sought by the Modernist need not be:

the irreducible essence of *all* painting, but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him (the critic) that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and pre-modernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question¹⁶⁴.

Or, stated more baldly, that 'the essence of painting is not something irreducible'¹⁶⁵. But of course essence quite simply *is* what is irreducible. An essence that is yet reducible is by definition not an essence. Nor does it help to appeal to an essence of some version of painting, if that version is then to be 'compared' with others, for this is just a long way around to claiming the same essence for all painting.¹⁶⁶ Fried's

¹⁶³ It should also be noted that advocates of abstraction at this time are not necessarily committed to such idealism or wayward notions of the picture plane. Michel Seuphor for example, charts the course of abstraction in painting with a great deal more historical and stylistic accuracy, but offers less comprehensive appeal to a theory of painting. See for example, Seuphor, *A Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, (Paris, 1957) London, 1958, and Seuphor, *Abstract Painting*, New York, 1964.

¹⁶⁴ Fried, 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings (1966)' in *New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940-1970*, New York, 1969, p.422. This text is quoted in Fried's 'How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark' in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina (ed.), London, 1985, pp. 65-79. For cited text see p. 69 of the reprinting.

¹⁶⁵ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock (ed.) New York, 1968, pp. 123-124. This text is also quoted in Fried, 'How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark' *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina (ed.) London, 1985, pp. 65-79.

¹⁶⁶ The view purportedly derives from Wittgenstein, presumably in relation to rules for games or for family-like trees of relations. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953, item 67 p32^e. In which case, Fried fatally confuses membership with essence. More correctly, Wittgenstein's view runs that while each member, like fibres constituting a thread, overlaps for some of the length of the thread, yet their overlapping or membership does not 'run through the whole thread' or *is not reducible* to an essence for the thread. Nor does the essence or identity of

formulation points starkly to the difficulties that arise for critical assessment of works under a radically reductive view of painting. The basis of any comparison must be shared qualities, but while one might usefully compare for example a Pollock with other abstraction, on what basis might one compare a Pollock with a still life or landscape, an Ingres or Delacroix, a Vermeer or Michelangelo? Implicit in the formalist aesthetic is the insistence, as Fried indicates, on the commensurability of all painting – Modernist and pre-Modernist, (or modernist and pre-modernist) but stripped of all stylistic differences, the comparison comes to nothing, because reductionism stops at nothing.

The example of another formalist critic and curator, William Rubin, in *Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition*, shows how this reductive tendency firstly strips down works of the past in order to accommodate a comparison with more recent abstraction.¹⁶⁷ Rubin considers the late work of Monet as a precedent for ‘the big scintillating picture’, and Impressionism in general as a development toward an ‘all-over’ style, which Pollock carries forward in his famous dripped paintings. Those Impressionist paintings displaying the most all-over technique, or the evenest distribution of dabbings, are deemed ‘the most advanced’ and conversely, Pollock’s paintings are seen as inheriting something of Impressionism’s cosmopolitan attachment to the casual and accidental.¹⁶⁸ But this is really a sleight of hand. Pollock cannot inherit the attitude without inheriting the same all-overness, differences in the all-overness amount to differences in attitude as well. Commensurate all-overness cannot take from one, only to give to the other. Like flatness, all-overness strands itself in its own reductionism. A more extreme example arises in Frank Stella’s *Working Space*.¹⁶⁹ Stella, a prominent painter of abstractions and friend of Fried, looked for ways in which abstraction might equal the emotional impact of pre-Modernist works such as Caravaggio’s *David and*

any single member or fibre constitute the essence of the thread. Neither essence nor reduction is sanctioned by these views.

¹⁶⁷ William Rubin ‘Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition’ (part I), *Artforum*, Feb-May 1967, pp. 14-21, (part II), *Artforum*, June-July, 1967, pp. 28-37.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 29-30.

¹⁶⁹ Stella, *Working Space*, Cambridge, Mass. 1980. It should also be noted that while Stella, Rubin, Fried and Judd all propose versions of Modernism, they also argue for important differences in a Modernist canon from that of Greenberg. For detailed analysis of the differences between Greenberg and later canons of abstraction see Thierry de Duve, ‘The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas’ in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-64*, Serge Guilbaut (ed.) Cambridge, Mass./London, 1990 pp. 244-310.

Goliath, or Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*. But again the equation rests upon a fundamental inconsistency and misconception. What abstraction reduces in depicted objects cannot then be appealed to in the same way or for the same things. While abstraction unquestionably makes an emotional impact in many cases, it cannot expect to make the same or equal to that of more concrete depiction. It is a futile exercise and in truth need make no such impact to still be effective.

Reduction and ranking are hardly to be denied of course, are necessary but not sufficient steps to effective reference. The problem lies where flatness is accepted as the absolute abstraction of depiction to painting. Then ranking with all and any depiction follows as valid. Formalist judgements thus tend to the unqualified, 'the best', 'the most advanced', 'major' 'minor' even 'the provincial' as opposed to the 'cosmopolitan' or 'sophisticated', all insist upon a ruthless ranking on one fixed and final measure of painting.¹⁷⁰ But the more partisan the critic or critique, the more pronounced the limitations. Both Greenberg and Fried notoriously disparage Dada and Surrealism and work influenced by these movements as retrograde, or superficial 'avant-gardism' that fails to engage with what 'really matters'¹⁷¹. It is in effect dismissed as false or poor Modernism. Yet while no one would deny that much art at any time is mediocre, one must surely admit to a variety of styles. What separates the formalist's 'advanced taste' from the avant-gardist's 'pseudoquestions' is less a question of excellence, than sensitivity and styles¹⁷². The inability of Greenberg or Fried to appreciate such work points not to its lack of merit but their flawed grasp of depiction and painting, their failure as historians.

The formalist cannot remedy flaws in the advocacy of abstraction by simply ruling out alternatives. The problem is only more starkly framed. On the one hand

¹⁷⁰ The formalist obsession with ranking at the expense of stylistic distinction is pressed to the point of parody in the early critical writings of Donald Judd, where a juvenile 'ten best' approach to assessment is given full rein. See for example the opening paragraph and comic footnotes to Judd, 'Barnett Newman' *Studio International* Feb 1970 pp. 67-69, also reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London, 1982, pp. 129-132.

¹⁷¹ Michael Fried 'How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark' in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina (editor) London, 1985, pp. 72-73. See also Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties' in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4 'Modernism with a Vengeance' 1957 - 1969*: Chicago/London, 1993 pp. 292-303 and Greenberg, 'Counter Avant-Garde' in *Art International*, 15 May 1971, pp. 16-19.

¹⁷² The terms in inverted commas here are drawn from Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4 'Modernism with a Vengeance' 1957 - 1969*, Chicago/London, 1993 pp. 292-303.

abstraction is the most progressive or best in painting, and on the other it permits only versions, has no limits. But the formalist cannot have it both ways, if abstraction is better because it is reductive of all painting, or absolutely, then reduction permits only one right version. Or, if reduction permits many right versions, is not absolute, then it cannot be better or more progressive than variation within more concrete depiction. The argument here in fact mirrors the earlier rejection of a single realism. There it was argued that not all aspects of realism are compatible or combinable in a master version of depiction, a full and final realism, here it is argued that not all painting practices necessarily strip one another away to reveal only the absolute material, its basis as depiction.

Ironically, it is the success of abstraction, the sheer variety it engenders that ultimately renders the formalist's arguments ineffective, grants abstraction ample means to rank and style without appealing extravagantly for measure. But a stylistics based on flatness is then quickly exposed as inadequate – flatness now has too many versions for comfort, means too little in describing so many stylistic features, is in any case discredited by such narrow historicism. The dissolution inevitably calls into question Modernism. The whole reason for the period, after all, lay in the acceptance of abstraction as a progression of self-analysis. If painting has no one right version of flatness or two-dimensionality, there is no one right version of abstraction, no basis for a single progression. But then what is one to make of Modernism, indeed of depiction, painting and abstraction? Obviously a reappraisal applies to all, is due to all. Preceding chapters on depiction and related issues and initial discussion here of painting have laid the groundwork. In the second part of this study a history of painting in the second half of the twentieth century proceeds from the issues of abstraction and Modernism. But before embarking on this, a summary of the theoretical issues covered and the contribution made so far follow in the final chapter to part one.