

## Traces of the Unrepresentable in the Modernist Discourse of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried

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### Abstract

The present essay aims to remap the modernist writing of Clement Greenberg and his successor Michael Fried from the late 1930s to the 1960s. For many years these two critics/theorists were considered leaders of the American modernist camp that promoted the purity of the medium and the total dependence of reading art on the primacy of perception. Attentive reading of the canonical texts they authored will surprisingly reveal that between the theoretical lines of their writings dwells an essential element that contradicts the absolute dominance of eyesight. Lying at the heart of the Greenbergian act is a metaphysical foundation that poses the question of the invisible as part of the inquiry into the "essence of the visible". As such the modernist debate will be revealed not only as a means for assembling a canon of works, but also as a means to formulating an experience of revelation in terms of the visual. Attentive reading of the writings of Clement Greenberg and the early Michael Fried, reveals a theoretical element or regulative idea that will be termed here "the unrepresentable".

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*Kafka cast his own history of the history-less  
Diaspora in legendary form. But it does not follow  
from this that the content of that form is legendary.  
In fact, it is hardly fiction.<sup>1</sup>*

### "Modernism" according to Greenberg

- [1] The concept of Modernism gained prominence concomitantly with the years of abstract American expressionism from its inception until its acme, i.e., from the 1940s to the 1960s. This specific period, however, is not a precondition for the validity of the concept since definitions of the borders of the period, the phenomenon and the concept from the eighteenth to the twentieth century change in accordance with the narrative and position presented by the writers. In any event, in a discourse on the history of art and in critical discourse in general, this concept was accorded added validity and prominence during Clement Greenberg's years of critical and theoretical activity. Francis Francina proposes a series of practices embodying the institutionalization of "Modernism" in the context of the artistic discourse of those years: accelerated trading in art, a rise in the status of museums, the reality and implications of the Cold War, the role of imperialist ideology in

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, "At the building of the Great Wall of China", in *Franz Kafka Today*, ed. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), 77-82, reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; IV Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52.

the formulation of the socio-cultural matrix in American culture, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

Greenberg's writing raises the importance of the independent dimension he ascribes to art: for him, art is a concept that cannot be defined hermetically; it is related to a state of purity and embodies an aspiration towards uniform and indivisible absoluteness.

Worthy art embodies a state of pure autonomy:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. ... Modernism used art to call attention to art.<sup>3</sup>

- [2] Modernism is therefore distinguished from other periods by one decisive characteristic: its commitment to a critical endeavor that sheds everything not deriving from that same aspiration towards the pure. The various artistic media at work in Modernism participate in its inherent drive, moving along a path of self-criticism. In this spirit, the most significant medium of the Modern Era is painting. The "origin" and nature of painting are its exclusive characteristics. The exclusive characteristics of painting are the subject of the act of painting, but they are also the motivator of the act. The painter, the artist, seeks the elemental condition of the painting, its flatness. He attempts to document or discover it, i.e., the essence of the completed painting is the exposure of a lost beginning (the flat canvas that came before the painting) which is sought by the artist. The nature of the painting exists as a decisive point and its essence is related to the point of purity. As pure essence it is static, unchanging, and the subject of recurring inquiries by artists. The painter will attempt to remove the excess masses from the pictorial essay on the way to seeking the pure form; this will surface at the moment the makeup adorning the face of aesthetics is removed, and at the moment the superfluous mannerisms of the traditional painting are cleared away, the "thing itself" will appear. The artistic object is bound up in a dimension of exposure; the moment the shackles of the simulacra of excess reality that inundates its essence like a superfluity are removed from it, it will become aesthetic; aesthetic practice aspires towards a state in which the final configuration is an image that is flat planes, and ridding it of the excess is removal of the effect on the way to revealing the "thing itself". Greenberg outlines a modus operandi for revealing the primal state, the essence, while engaging with the primary artistic medium, painting, its tools, the conditions of its creation, its materials. The more the foreign excess is removed from the medium, the more its uniqueness and exclusiveness will be revealed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in Greenbergian theory the painting becomes an epistemic tool, one that enables an investigation of the essence, a tool that is a prerequisite, albeit its sufficiency is uncertain, for the distinction of art from the

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Francina, "Introduction", in *Pollock and After – The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (first published in *Forum Lectures, Washington D.C.: Voice of America*, 1960), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; IV Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, 85-86.

objecthood characterizing quotidian things. This epistemic tool also determines the conceptual borders of art. The technical tools of representation are what rescue the representational object from the routine experience of quotidian objects. For Greenberg, to assume that immanent essence known as painting is an assumption that there is a clear frame that guards the border of art; the existence of art is conditional upon it being contained within a frame; in the absence of the ability to discern the (formal) content of the frame, art cannot exist. The frame will be established from within the medium, its tools, and its loss will be the loss of art that is conditional upon its distinguishability from objects outside the frame. In this context, art as painting is a restricted area that preserves a certain essence and the possibility of an existence separate from the effects and quotidian objects that have no place inside the frame. On the other side of Greenberg's aesthetic equation stands the beholder, who is meant to internalize or encounter the essence revealed before him. The autonomy of the medium projects onto the degree of the beholder being a no less complex entity, whose existence emerges as a reaction to the pure appearance of the aesthetic object as a state uncompromisingly revealed to the eye, and which the beholder cannot defile.

- [3] The formalistic writing of Greenberg, who took his first steps in the world of critique in the 1930s, should be viewed in its connection with the early essays of Alfred Barr, who emphasized the unique formal characteristics of a work of art. Barr proposed a particular model for the historical narrative of modern art that leaned on formal history. Greenberg took the baton from him and not only did he deepen Barr's proposal, he also enhanced its application to contemporary art.<sup>4</sup>
- [4] In his early essay in 1939 Greenberg, inspired by Marxism, explains the role of the avant-garde in blazing a trail to "culture" within the violent historical mass. According to Greenberg, the artist extols absoluteness as something lacking content or narrative (which are defined as excess), which is a state of nothingness that does not allow the eye to be diverted to what is perceived as inconsequential. Phrases like "art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" make all excess redundant. The objective of the arts is the abstract, the non-object; the avant-garde places itself in the position of The Creator since it has no need of external reference:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While Greenberg took his first steps in the 1930s, his later writing also reveals his relationship with Barr's formalism together with other writers that are a source of inspiration in his writing. See Frascina, "Introduction", 11. In this context see also Leja's arguments on reformulating the 1940s-1960s subjectivity model in relation to developments in the 1920s and 1930s: Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993). It would also be interesting to examine the connections and debts of Greenberg to Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

- [5] The work is endowed with the status of a self-sufficient object that cannot be compared or understood as something that is beyond itself, and yet Greenberg says, "The very values in the name of which he (the poet or artist) invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God... but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the 'abstract'".<sup>6</sup> This perception diverts attention from the quotidian to a different sphere that is manifested in engagement in the medium itself. The turning of art to an examination of its own technique and medium is brought to fruition in Greenberg's specific story of Modernism: "The very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated ... become the subject matter of art and literature ..., what we have here is the imitation of imitating".<sup>7</sup> To demonstrate the modernist model that Greenberg carves from history, while at the same time also structuring it, he lays out the history of art in a manner that leads him to conclusions on the uniqueness of Modernist art. The advantages of artists like Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Cézanne, Matisse and Paul Klee over Surrealism are that their source of inspiration is the medium itself. Following a lecture by Hans Hofmann, Greenberg wrote that "Surrealism in plastic art is a reactionary tendency which is attempting to restore 'outside' subject matter. The chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium."<sup>8</sup>
- [6] I would like to present a new reading of several of Greenberg's principal texts and attempt to identify, in what are perceived as the defining texts of a formalistic agenda, a more dialectical position wherein the concrete materialism, the viscosity of the work of art, is also bound up with an invisible component; in other words, a dialectical position whose visual and visible framework also expresses the impossibility of gridding or mapping that component; they express non-sight, a vision of antivision.<sup>9</sup> Much can be

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<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (first published in *Partisan Review*, 1939), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; I Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9, n. 2. Greenberg's stance on Surrealism was more complex than we tend to think; he wrote about the relationship between the New York School and Surrealism in his "L'art américain du XXe siècle" (1946). See also a brief presentation of this subject in Leja, *Reframing*, 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> The significance of my reading is found for example in the lack of explanation as to why Greenberg was drawn to artists who grappled with "the appearance of the unrepresentable". An analysis of his writings reveals the insufficiency of the standard critical readings, as if Greenberg is committed solely to the blank materialism of the strictly formalist approach. Greenberg's art critical theories have had a massive impact on art historians, such as James Ackerman, who followed his approach, and Leo Steinberg who opposed it, and on curators such as William Rubin and other participants in the modernist and post-modernist art critics and historians debate. If the traditional perception of American art criticism contrasts between the Apollonian Greenberg and the Dionysian Harold Rosenberg, and in due course there appeared the project of Rosalind Krauss and the October group that countered the radical opticality and materialism of Greenberg, this article seeks to expose an ignored dialectics that can be found at the heart of Greenberg and his followers.

learned about this component from Greenberg's attempt to distinguish between an object that in his view functions as kitsch and one worthy of being called art. Surprisingly, it transpires that in his opinion a work of art must set out conditions for the appearance of a miraculous component that is related to blindness no less than sight. We shall see later that Greenberg's above-mentioned puristic demand is an attempt to diminish the value of elements that will divert the eye from the appearance of the unrepresentable: the painting's most basic material, its essence, seemingly undergo reduction to metaphor. I shall ultimately argue that the curtains of material that are parallel to the picture's plane as an expression of flatness, planes defined by Greenberg as slamming into one another, mark the opacity of (the painting's) language, opacity that attests to a revelation related to the sublime of the *terribilità*, in Greenberg's own words. As we shall see, this concept also permeates Michael Fried's critical writing of the 1960s.

[7] In his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), Greenberg writes that one of the most contemptible things about kitsch is the erasure of the distinction "between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere".<sup>10</sup> To illustrate the cost of this erasure he gives a hypothetical example of the ignorant peasant standing before two paintings, one by Picasso and the other by Repin. In the first there is an analytical/modernistic representation of the figure of a woman, while in the second is a figurative description of a battle. This comparison is interesting since it reflects the Greenbergian insight that the aesthetic experience is bound up with a miraculous event. In Picasso's work the simple peasant discovers signs of the icons he remembers from his village, whereas when he looks at Repin's work he is introduced to a completely unfamiliar technique. The very fact that he is not familiar with this technique causes him to prefer Repin's work because of the sense of vitality and miraculousness it evokes.<sup>11</sup> The images in Repin's painting are located on the continuum between life and art without interrupting it; this is realism evoking a sense of the miraculous, in which "identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator".<sup>12</sup> Repin's work is connected with kitsch since it heightens reality without deviating from the self-evident, whereas Picasso's attests to experience inherent in the worthy aesthetic experience. "The recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic"<sup>13</sup> are not immediately attainable (as with Repin) but rather indirectly, through the encounter with the plastic qualities of the work. The works call for a sort of attention (from the beholder) that Greenberg calls "reflected effect". Repin's work embraces all these without constituting a reason for their appearance; it offers the beholder a synthetic experience.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 15.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg speaks of the miraculous and the sympathetic in *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

By contrast, Greenberg subscribes to a synthetic experience wherein introduction to the representation is not digested, it is not introduction to the miraculous per se but acknowledgement that the work of art sets out conditions for the appearance of something; the power of the work is that it charts the path for the appearance of presence. Clearly, here the appearance is effect, but it is still signified as a type of absolute, primordial component. Elsewhere Greenberg's text does not directly argue for the appearance of the invisible (appearance that never becomes a static presence), but rather identifies an element of antivision in his very demand to "overpower the medium", to expose while overcoming the purity; the Greenbergian demand to maximize the plastic quality is the other aspect of the aspiration to minimize disturbances that will corrupt the appearance of the unrepresentable.

- [8] When discussing the purpose of any aesthetic medium in going beyond its purest position, Greenberg suggests that:

[P]ure plastic art [strives, N.G.] for the minimum ... the painting and the statue are machines to produce the emotion of "plastic sight". The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count. Emphasize the medium and its difficulties, and at once the purely plastic, the proper, values of visual art come to the fore. Overpower the medium to the point where all sense of its resistance disappears, and the adventitious uses of art become more important.<sup>15</sup>

- [9] The above quotation connects between purity, set as a source of the aspiration of any artistic medium, including painting and sculpture, and the need to overpower this purity, overpower the medium. Overpowering the medium is deviating from it, it is what will enable the appearance of the unrepresentable, of wonderment at the appearance of the image. The other side of the equation is the power of the medium:

The history of the avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to "hole through" it for realistic perspectival space. The motto of the Renaissance artist, *Ars est artem celare*, is exchanged for *Ars est artem demonstrare*.<sup>16</sup>

- [10] In "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), Greenberg presents "the emotion of plastic sight", the experience of beholding, not only as being introduced to the action, not as the inward movement of the beholder towards what is signified beyond the canvas, but as wonderment at what is supposed to appear in the painting. The realistic perspectival space he criticizes is the space of the illusion, in the sense of illusory imitation; Greenberg rejects this movement of the eye because it does not enable the appearance of the unrepresentable.

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<sup>15</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (first published in *Partisan Review*, July-August, 1940), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; I Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

- [11] The "reflected effect" that Greenberg connects with the "emotion of plastic sight", in his text, enables the encounter with the presence of the unrepresentable, before which one can only stand in wonder. Two principal strategies are combined in this encounter: the impinging of the flat planes on the picture's surface to create all-over flatness as an expression of a metaphysical event, and the creation of an optical illusion connected with impenetrability, which in turn constitutes a precondition for the appearance of the unrepresentable.
- [12] We shall first address the act of beholding. Greenberg describes the beholding experience as an event that takes place in time and thus unfurls the appearance of the unrepresentable. The surface of the picture slowly becomes shallow, the various possible layers are blocked by each other, their illusionism takes on a material quality, they converge into material reality, into the most concrete material sphere, into the surface of the canvas itself; they become transparent to each other and skip from the space of illusion to the concreteness of the support. Any attempt to preserve a state of reference will dissipate on this support, each shape will dissolve on its surface. This will then facilitate the occurrence that we perceive as one of metaphysical validity: "In a further stage," he writes, "realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface."<sup>17</sup>
- [13] But Greenberg does not relinquish illusion entirely. He suggests, for instance, that the action of planes in a painting is an attempt at slamming one illusion onto another, an attempt that does not create an image that is Renaissance trompe l'oeil; that the conjoining of planes with one another on the closest surface creates "an optical illusion, not a realistic one",<sup>18</sup> and that this illusion is meant to embody the impenetrability of the surface.
- [14] The emergence of impenetrability is not a product of a religious search per se in the soul of the artist-believer, but rather one of praxis, of discovering the pictorial technique as a subject and theme on the road to appearance. This engagement with the technical leads to a situation of flattening which becomes clear in terms of impenetrability. It is impossible to penetrate the religious depth of the signified there. Modernist painting sheds the excess, the realistic illusion, in order to enter the cul-de-sac. Thus the size of the New York School's works is presented as a constraint imposed upon them because they turn their back on the illusion of depth: "The flattening surfaces of their canvases compelled them to move along the picture plane laterally and seek in its sheer physical size the space necessary for the telling of their kind of pictorial story."<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon", 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting" (first published in *Partisan Review*, Spring 1955), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; III Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 226.

impenetrability does not mean a barrier between the work and the truth, or a conceptual brick wall splitting between the truth there and the appearance in the present, but that facets exist within the surface that leave the depth solely as an allusion. This is the basis for reading Pollock's work when Greenberg explains the latter's engagement with his all over style in which the surface of the picture is uniformly covered; through repetition of the same motif he claims that the motivation for this is a desire to attain a dense and decorative immediacy. Covering the entire surface does not create unidimensional uniformity and hermeticity, as one might think, but the possibility "to control the oscillation between an emphatic physical surface and the suggestion of depth beneath it as lucidly and tensely and evenly as Picasso and Braque had controlled a somewhere similar movement with the open facets and pointillist flecks of color of their 1909-1913 Cubist pictures".<sup>20</sup> "American-Type Painting", as Greenberg calls the New York School, is bound up with impenetrability that reveals gaps. The gaps are revealed in the wake of the Kantian traces in Greenberg's writing, traces that are not only revealed in the enlightened narrative of the discipline being committed to self-criticism on the way to revealing and refining the subject, but also in the actual perception of the sublime. Although this determination will no doubt astonish some, in Greenberg's essay, written in 1955, we can read a teleological presentation in which representation shifts towards a state of awesome splendor, or a quality of tremendous force that is perceived in terms of revelation or appearance. De Kooning is presented by Greenberg as an artist who discovers control through abstract painting, which is a symptom of his being part of Modernist tradition; in his work he is related to Picasso through his mixing of color with the outline and framing of a shallow space. According to Greenberg, like Picasso, de Kooning "hankers after *terribilità*",<sup>21</sup> but the relationship between flatness, impenetrability and the sublime must be clarified particularly. The sublime is embodied in the unresolvable conflict between it and its subject, it is linked to the moment when interpretation seemingly falls silent, it is mapped in the invisible field between the subject of the representation, the act of representation and the representation itself. Greenberg's discussion of flat planes enables us to understand that impenetrability is the expression of the same unrepresentable space in which flatness moves and vanishes just before it appears. In the following I shall attempt to clarify the meaning of this space.

[15] Greenberg comes down on the side of the existence of a vital dynamism in the plane. He declares that the intention is not to arrive at visual stagnation by the reduction of color in the painting to the hermetic rectangle of the surface, but rather as a better means for the appearance of the unrepresentable. From the Greenbergian perception we can learn

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<sup>20</sup> Greenberg, "American-Type Painting", 225.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

that aesthetic production is intended to indicate "the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space".<sup>22</sup> He writes:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane ... does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks ... is still a kind of illusion.<sup>23</sup>

[16] In other words, in Greenberg's hands flatness does not serve as a point revealed as the core once the illusion is removed, but rather functions itself as an expression of appearance. This appearance is, of course, of a condition of absence. Whereas the (non-Modernist) art of painting is perceived in its entirety, first and foremost as content, the term "Modernist painting" is a picture before it is content, flatness appears before it is content. Modernism is typified by the understanding that the exhibit is first and foremost a picture, it is the only way to the "success of self-criticism". On the face of it Greenberg proposes an expression of the transcendental logic of flattening. The painting seemingly begins from the exposed canvas, from the support, the plane format; the support is seemingly the ontological starting point of the pictorial practice. The artist attempts to represent flatness on the canvas, the apparent object, he searches for it like a blind man trying to present what he cannot see; within the canvas support he seeks flatness, the visible, for flatness is the visible support. Flatness as an object, like the invisible given the artist seeks, is also the crutch he leans on when trying to isolate flatness. The attempt to isolate flatness and bring it to the canvas confirms that the flatness of the canvas is like the flatness that is sought, the flatness of the support is the flatness long past. The flatness of the support is the flatness of flatness, the flatness sought is conditional upon the flatness of the support, i.e., Greenberg seemingly proposes the transcendental logic of "flatness as flatness". However, a reading of some of Greenberg's texts, as will be shown in the following, reveals a further hypothesis that provides a different horizon in which different flatnesses function as curtains on the surface in which an unrepresentable element lays hidden. Greenberg speaks of unique objects produced in a vital connection with the concept of the aesthetic experience, experience which is a significant tool and prerequisite for inducing representation, object and concept. If the appearance of the canvas is flat, then flatness is the condition for the possibility of the painting; when the painter paints flatness he is in fact inventing it; when he turns his eye from the flatness of the canvas to the support of the painting, or conversely when he shifts from the flatness he wants to paint as a model towards the copy on the canvas he is painting (i.e., he in any case jumps from the object of his observation), a field of invisibility is opened that must be crossed in order to paint. This space, the gap that is a non-site of non-sight, i.e., an invisible place, is the place to which "the trait-not-yet-

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<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", 87.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 90.

traced withdraws".<sup>24</sup> This trait is a vestige of the object the artist seeks to represent and it is the raw material that will later appear as an image whose incubation space is, as aforementioned, invisible. The space of flatness that exists between and within the painting's different surfaces therefore outlines the unrepresentable as a definitive element of modern painting.

[17] In this context the painting serves Greenberg as a kind of frame, as a question enabling the creation of a conceptual structure that explains the conditions of the appearance, the absence of the image, and the linguistic framework that can explain the experience of wonderment vis-à-vis the emergence of the image within the field. Greenberg sets himself the objective of describing the course of pictorial history as it emerges from a series of works and artists that doubtlessly function in his words as a canon that outlines points of reference enabling a discussion of painting. The basic premise is that the art of painting that functions as a preferred medium in "Modernist time" produces sculpture as its absolute Other, and only by persistent negation of what is perceived as its being can it prepare or create its own autonomy. Sculpture plays a structural role in Greenberg's discourse on Modernism. Painting needs sculpture dialectically; it must exclude it despite being dependent on it for its very definition. Greenberg's formalistic mission is to formulate the limits of the discourse and propose the scaffolding for the conceptual structure that leans on aesthetic distinctions, or, as de Duve would say, on aesthetical judgments,<sup>25</sup> on the way to signifying the "painting" as a conceptual framework for formulating the impossibility of the appearance of the image on the one hand, and wonder at its very oxymoronic appearance on the other.

[18] Painting as a conceptual framework that patches within it concepts like flatness, impenetrability and unrepresentable space, is discussed by Greenberg by means of estranging painting from sculpture whose specific concreteness is liable to be perceived literally, as opposed to the optical materiality of painting. According to Greenberg, the estrangement of sculpture does not mean relinquishment of the illusion in painting, but rather the uniqueness of one specific illusion of the type he perceives as a clearly optical illusion. This illusion that enables movement "can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye".<sup>26</sup> This sentence is significant since it explains the importance of optics and because it declares that the aesthetic experience means the possibility of ocular movement along the breadth of the support, perhaps towards flatness.

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<sup>24</sup> On this "spread of invisibility" in the context of and discrete from transcendental logic, see: Robert Vallier, "Blindness and Invisibility: The Ruins of Self-Portraiture (Derrida's Re-reading of Merleau-Ponty)", in *Écart & différence: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, ed. M.C. Dillon (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1997), 194.

<sup>25</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between The Lines*, B. Holmes (trans.), (Paris: Édition Dis Voir, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", 90.

[19] American painting of the 1940s and 50s offered "space in depth", space that became "a matter more of trompe l'oeil illusion". According to Greenberg this is not a space of greater (deeper) withdrawal, but "it did become more tangible, more a thing of immediate perception and less one of reading".<sup>27</sup> In the same context he remarks that in the June 1948 issue of *Partisan Review*, George L. K. Morris accused him of giving preference to "behind-the-frame painting".<sup>28</sup> According to him, artists like Hofmann, Pollock and Gorky offer pictures that stay behind their frames far deeper than Mondrian or Picasso's post-1913 works. In Greenberg's narrative the 1950s were years in which abstract impressionist paintings "cry out for a more coherent illusion of three-dimensional space, and to the extent that it did this it cried out for representation".<sup>29</sup> In my opinion, the behind-the-frame concept he proposed in 1962 as a point in favor summarizes the leitmotif of Greenbergian theory. The understanding of impenetrability or flatness as material predicates par excellence is but partial. Although the aesthetic issue is not representation of a concrete given, neither is it a dead end of reduction towards the rectangular embodiment of the material in the form of the support per se. The Modernist narrative that leaves out anything that might be construed as excess or exaggerated is what creates the conditions for the possibility of the appearance of the unrepresentable. The aesthetic endeavor creates the appearance of the latter as a kind of testimony to the wonderment at there being an image at all.<sup>30</sup> Essentialist logic is therefore revealed as supplemental logic, everything is revealed, as a supplement for the unrepresentable turns all the aesthetic tools and pictorial measures into makeup, highlighting its features. I disagree with the position that Greenberg proposes, to place flattening as the formal focus of the painting, as if it were insignificant and apparently channeled towards revealing the absence of immediate content, whatever it may be. At the heart of the Greenbergian move stands a metaphysical project that poses the question of the invisible, or invisibility as a central question, as part of tracing the "essence of the visible". The aesthetic experience is therefore one of revelation in visual terms.<sup>31</sup> This stance emerges from Greenberg's perception of the painting as a law, its ultimate metaphor. According to Greenberg, Judaism expresses a religion of law that was given as a revelation, and as such Judaism is outside history, and he writes: "Their law protects the exiled Jews not only from the profane, but from history – Gentile history".<sup>32</sup> The

<sup>27</sup> Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" (first published in *Art International*, October 1962), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; IV Modernism with a Vengeance*, 1957-1969, 124.

<sup>28</sup> The intention behind this term is to an in-depth illusion that penetrates, so to speak, beneath the painting's surface and behind its frame, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Irad Kimchi in a conversation with Naomi Siman-Tov, see: "Outside History" [Mihutz La-Historia], *Hamidrasha* 3 (May 2000), 182 (Hebrew).

<sup>31</sup> And see *ibid.*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg, "At the Building of the Great Wall of China", 48.

religion of the Jew living in exile is one lacking the sacred, the holy place is absent, an absentee which in turn reinforces the validity of the law. He writes: "Jewish law ... has come into being discontinuously. The Law... must remain forever incomplete and vulnerable".<sup>33</sup> According to Kimchi, Greenberg perceives secularization as relinquishment of the loss bound up in the law, relinquishment of the absence of the sacred, of existence outside history. The analogy is that, like Judaism, the avant-garde is a movement of law.<sup>34</sup> As opposed to the above-mentioned "secular" perception, I view Greenberg as arguing for the technical and ethical commitment of those active in the aesthetic field not to accept this absence as a working hypothesis, and occupation with the law as a sort of praxis forever bound up in grieving, but to accept the onus of delineating the borders of the inherent absence in order to enable the appearance of the unrepresentable. Here I see a connection between Clement Greenberg's writings and Lyotard's discussion of the sublime. Outlining the absence is part of the practice of expressing the impossibility of presenting and an attempt to create the conditions for the appearance, an action harnessed to the tradition of the sublime.

[20] It often seems that the above-mentioned commitment is not reserved solely for painting. According to Greenberg, modern poetry is pure and abstract, and both it and the plastic arts are not interested in quotidian material, but concentrate "on the effort to create poetry and on the 'moments' themselves of poetic conversion". "Moments of poetic conversion" may be interpreted as moments in which there is an appearance of the absolute within the space of the artistic endeavor, whereas here preoccupation with the medium is read as a path that outlines the conditions for the appearance of the unrepresentable. In its materiality, its body, it embodies the conditions for the possibility of the appearance of the unrepresentable, that which is related to the "true culture" of avant-garde as opposed to kitsch.<sup>35</sup> The moment of poetic conversion marks the appearance of the unrepresentable, it is connected with the sublime which, as Lyotard explains, cannot be acculturated by the recurrence of *techne*. It constitutes a kind of disturbance in which the artist's practice is an inevitable appearance, the beholders become the addressees in search of the un beholdable. In other words, Lyotard is cautious about mentioning the name of what appears, or alternatively, the appearance of the name, but he does mention the wondrous quasi-revelation of a different reality – a separate world; through what can be imperfect, distorted and ugly, the different steps in the work embody "the shock effect"<sup>36</sup> in a sublime creation. This is the effect of wonderment that we encountered earlier when faced with the appearance of the image.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kimchi, "Outside History" [Mihutz La-Historia], 195, 196.

<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 13.

<sup>36</sup> Jean François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (first published in *Artforum* 22:8, April 1984), reprinted in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 203.

- [21] The accepted argument in the theoretical discourse is that Greenberg's writing in the 1940s persistently presents the material element, "anti-illusionist flatness", as a response to the question of what constitutes a (proper) painting. Greenberg promotes tactility and the dominance of flatness as the principal parameter for judging/reading a painting. By contrast, in Greenberg's later writing he proposes optical elements that preserve fragments of illusion. This is the basis of Yve-Alain Bois' explanation for Greenberg's rejection of Frank Stella, whose works from the late 1950s and early 1960s apparently constitute a faithful illustration of Greenberg's earlier credo of reducing the illusory depth of the painting.<sup>37</sup>
- [22] This approach is based on the argument that the status of illusion changes in the course of Greenberg's later writing, and moreover it presumes a polarity between radical flatness and optical illusion. As we have seen, however, a common and significant conceptual axis is evident in Greenberg's writings. In both "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940) traces of the vision of antivision or the emotion of "plastic sight" can be identified, which in "American-Type Painting" (1955) converge into the notion of slamming planes and the concept of *terrabilità*, culminating in "Modernist Painting" (1960), in a description of the logic of flatness that establishes the invisible within it. In these writings one can trace the conceptual axis that intersects Greenberg's writing and which I term the unrepresentable. Even in the first stage of Greenberg's writing that emphasizes tactility, as well as in the later stage that places greater emphasis on optical illusion, Greenberg writes from an epistemic commitment to the unrepresentable. In other words, flatness and optical illusion alike contain a dimension of exposure and of creating conditions for the appearance of the unrepresentable, and both indicate a path for the appearance of the conditions for appearance (of the unrepresentable).
- [23] Like Lyotard, Greenberg presumes an indeterminate situation at the heart of the representation mechanism in the Modern Era, and this indetermination is expressed throughout Modernism in Manet and Cézanne in repeated attempts to call into question the particular rules that were formulated throughout the history of art. The preoccupation with the pictorial tool, Lyotard explains, does not aim to examine the functionality of line/frame/support and so forth, but rather to answer the question "What is a painting?" Cézanne's pictorial practice strives to reveal the basic components that shape our perceptions and, moreover, modern painting is measured by its ability "to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible". The attempt to demarcate individual figures in the field of artistic practice, attempts to define groups in a formalistic manner

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<sup>37</sup> For Bois' observations, see: Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limits of Almost", in *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 15-17.

that isolates particulars according to the facial features of the object, are destined to collapse against the basic wish "to bear witness to the indeterminate".<sup>38</sup>

[24] Corresponding with the Greenbergian move of defining (pictorial) Modernism as an impulse that drives aesthetic practice towards a basic essence – flatness – the avant-gardist presents the impossibility of representation, the impossibility of documenting sensory data, and "inscribes the occurrence of sensory now as what cannot be presented and which remains to be presented in the decline of great representational painting".<sup>39</sup> "The sublime, no doubt, has been and continues to be a reaction against the matter-of-fact positivism and the calculated realism that governs the former, as writers on art such as Stendhal, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Apollinaire and Breton all emphasize".<sup>40</sup>

[25] In 1981 a symposium was held under the aegis of *Critical Inquiry* that revolved around "The Politics of Interpretation", and accorded an important place to interpretation of Clement Greenberg's thought, especially in the exchange between two central figures in American visual discourse, Michael Fried and T.J. Clark.<sup>41</sup> Clark indicates two central texts in Greenberg's writing, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a Newer Laocoon", which articulate the critical and theoretical consciousness of their author. He harnesses the Greenbergian move that engages in the dominance of the medium as an expression of an act of negation to an historical and even political reading of Modernism. The medium, in Clark's view, is "the site of negation and estrangement".<sup>42</sup> The narrative of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" presumes a period wherein the bourgeoisie as the ruling class clung to the culture and art that were part of its assets. Aesthetic activity investigated and elucidated the class experience, its premises and demands. In contrast with avant-garde art, according to Clark, kitsch is the sign of a bourgeoisie attempting to invent the loss of its identity, "it is an art and culture of instant assimilation, of abject reconciliation to the everyday, of avoidance of difficulty, pretence to indifference, equality before the image of capital".<sup>43</sup> Rather than leaning on familiar representational models like a centered composition or a concept that places talent as a relevant frame of reference, Modernism creates practices of negation that emerge from a meticulous examination of the method, the material and the image, the decomposition of perspective space alongside exposure of the disparity between mechanisms of presentation; practices of negation create

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<sup>38</sup> Lyotard, *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, 206-207.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>41</sup> T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" (first published in *Critical Inquiry* 9:1, September 1982, 139-156), reprinted in *Pollock and After – The Critical Debate*, 47-63. The original issue of *Critical Inquiry* was entitled *The Politics of Interpretation*, based on a symposium of the same name organized by journal, and held at the University of Chicago's Center for Continuing Education, October 30<sup>th</sup> – November 1<sup>st</sup> 1981.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

discord between different aspects of representation and the visible they are supposed to represent. In effect, for Clark, any inversion of classical renaissance representation participates in practices of negation.<sup>44</sup>

[26] According to Clark the most fundamental fact attending the Greenbergian narrative is, of course, "flatness", which in Clark's hands becomes representative of a range of not necessarily formal properties that attend the entire modernist historical move as he perceives it in the Greenbergian version of the history of modern art between 1860 and 1918. According to this approach, flatness is not deciphered as a refinement of conventions; it is not a movement towards the core of the medium as a formal aesthetic concept, but a shift towards that which is outside the above inward movement. Consequently, Clark can argue, for example, that flatness can be understood in terms of the "popular" by means of the abundant images reproduced from reality. Formal flatness becomes fettered by the material shackles of modernity in addition to its validity as the embodiment of our ability to recognize things as real, to become acquainted with the truth of seeing.<sup>45</sup> Flatness is also a sort of buffer, a means of blocking the bourgeois movement that skips with ease from the painting to a detached space of fantasy; flatness is the detachment of the movement from the world towards that which is beyond life, that which cannot be articulated in language. Clark's version of flatness is denial of the bourgeois fantasy of a state of unrestricted freedom that is enabled by means of the transparency of art. Thus, the flat support, the material register emphasized by preoccupation with the technical, ceases to represent an empirical argument; flatness is a tool, a medium, a support that conveys meanings and content. The refusal to assimilate is an expression of the practices of negation that estranges and opens empty spaces as material facts that refuse the establishment of a phantasmic continuum and endless continuity; flatness is a practice of negation.<sup>46</sup> The meaning of Modernism is to be found in pushing the medium beyond its possible limits, processing it to the point at which it decomposes and becomes unprocessed and reinvented material; this is a practice of negation. "Negation," says Clark, "is the sign inside art of this wider decomposition: it is an attempt to *capture* the lack of consistent and repeatable meanings in the culture – to capture the lack and make it over into form."<sup>47</sup> In response to the criticism leveled against him, Clark clarifies that the negation position behind which he stands does not mean that a nihilistic impulse is hiding behind modernistic practice; namely an argument whereby in every aesthetic act considered modernist is planted a destructive self-serving virus. Rather, he proposes to view Modernism's perpetual analysis of its materials and tools by examining the mechanism of

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<sup>44</sup> Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", 55.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 59.

representation and the modes of its engagement in various aspects of experience as a practice of negation.<sup>48</sup>

[27] It can therefore be said that an analytical argument creeps into Clark's social/historical reading that is connected with the notion of the unrepresentable with which we began. Clark claims that practices of negation also mean the perpetual appearance of vacuity, which in his interpretation functions as a recurring message in Modernism, a target it unflinchingly hits. Vacuity is manifested in the infinite ambiguousness arising from the permanent existence of "an Other which is comfortably ineffable, a vacuity, a vagueness, a mere mysticism of sight".<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that in his characterization, Clark, who is supposedly proficient in accurate social reading, deviates toward our initial proposition of viewing Greenberg as representative of a trend that considers the existence of the absent as an inherent part of the discourse and reality of the (artistic) object towards a state of epiphany. He quotes critic F.R. Leavis on poet T.S. Eliot's "effort to express formlessness itself as form", citing two lines to which this applies, "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion".<sup>50</sup> This is an almost exemplary illustration of my argument regarding the appearance of the image as a state towards which the modernist approach turns, striving by investigating the medium to allow the appearance of the unrepresentable.

[28] Michael Fried rejects Clark's thesis outright, and claims that his contention that Modernism proposes practices of negation is simply erroneous. He does not dispute the fact that there are, as he says, moments in Modernism in which negation appears in the form of relinquishing or rejecting other possibilities. He speaks out against the approach whereby negation guides modernistic practice, or what Clark proposes, according to him: a move whereby art is negation. Fried, as if demonstrating a classical oedipal complex, condemns Greenberg as someone who holds an essentialist and reductive position, as does Clark, who, according to Fried, attempts to found Modernism on negation.<sup>51</sup> On the focus of aesthetic practice, Fried presents the artist's need to determine at what stage his artistic work is worthy of being perceived as a finished aesthetic object that possesses linkage to past art and is aptly present in the present with an eye to the future on the continuum of tradition.

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<sup>48</sup> T.J. Clark, "Argument about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried" (first published in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W.T.J. Mitchell, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, 239-243), reprinted in *Pollock and After – The Critical Debate*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", 59-60.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, n. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T.J. Clark" (first published in *Critical Inquiry* 9:1, September 1982, 217-234), reprinted in *Pollock and After – The Critical Debate*, 66, 68. It is important to note that Fried is referring to texts from the 1960s, whereas Clark refers to the earlier Greenberg, from the 1930s and 40s.

- [29] In his book, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*,<sup>52</sup> Thierry de Duve engages in an analysis of three different Greenbergs that shift between various dichotomies: avant-garde/kitsch, critic/theoretician, Marxist/Hegelian. De Duve's basic premise is that there are no descriptions or historical reviews underlying Clement Greenberg's works that are not matters of judgment; the dominance of aesthetic judgment draws its validity from the experience of the person beholding the work, that is to say, there is something that leaves its mark on the experience and it is that which is judged. De Duve deciphers Greenberg's medium as that which embodies a (material) state of "opacity" and reads it through a sort of communication model; the work is created with an eye to the past, but addresses the future. De Duve, who lends credence to the Kantian sentiment of dis-sentiment, argues for the necessity of this process for recognition of the existence of the work to be created in us.<sup>53</sup>
- [30] In his discussion of Greenberg, de Duve dwells on the first seminar the latter gave, in which he proposed a broad understanding of the concept of aesthetic experience.<sup>54</sup> The possibility of perceiving everything on an aesthetic level enables it to be experienced as an artistic object. The general point of departure here makes it possible to argue that aesthetic experience is characterized by a distancing from one's self, a reflective distance; a distance that is indicated by the transition proposed by de Duve from perceiving art as a proper name, art that is dictated for example by the specificity of the medium, to art as a general term, as proposed by Duchamp.<sup>55</sup> Melville's interpretation of Greenberg's proposal as it is presented in this section of de Duve's book, is actually deciphered in Michael Fried's terms as "theatricality", namely the proposal to view aesthetic experience as a type of experience that can be termed the "experience of experience" and nullifies, according to Melville, Greenberg's first requisite, i.e., it leads to a situation whereby we no longer need a singular object in order to create the aesthetic experience. On the other hand, I believe that the argument regarding the importance of the "experience of experience" does not undermine the status of the specific object as generating this understanding. The experience created from understanding art or a specific object, even when it is the product of an immediate experience between beholder and art, does not converge exclusively into this understanding, but certainly projects it time and again. That is to say, recognition of the "experience of experience" joins all the specific parameters that are revealed in every act of beholding and specific analysis of a work of art.

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<sup>52</sup> De Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*.

<sup>53</sup> See Stephen Melville, "Kant after Greenberg – Essay Review", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:1 (Winter 1998), 70.

<sup>54</sup> De Duve in *Kant After Duchamp*, here according to Melville in *ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 71 for Melville's criticism.

[31] "Art", says de Duve quoting Clark, "wants to address someone", but that someone is absent. His reading of Clark enlists the impulse of negation within the modernist medium which the latter identifies in order to pose a question: "Why would Modernism have its medium be *absence* of some sort?" The medium stands for that which is not present, the absent addressee. But whereas for Clark the medium is primarily an expression of the site of a social class struggle, for de Duve it is also the site that marks the work's reference to or orientation with the historical legacy of the artistic object (à la Michael Fried).<sup>56</sup> Clark's mistake with regard to this communication formula lies in his positioning of the modernist medium's primary addressee: the bourgeoisie, as de Duve explains: "In aesthetics matters, address cannot be collective but instead touches individuals living through singular experiences and establishing a fragile and contradictory pact with themselves, founded on the sentiment of dissent".<sup>57</sup> Clark and Fried position two different addressees in the de Duvian formula. For Clark the perception of the medium as the site of the addressee positions the bourgeoisie who do not heed him as the addressee, whereas for Fried the addressees are the artists of the past; for one it is a social class, and for the other a specialist class.<sup>58</sup>

### **Flickering of the unrepresentable in the early writings of Michael Fried**

[32] Michael Fried frequently wrote about the same artists as Greenberg, continuing a Greenbergian tradition of describing the history of the modernist object in terms of evolution towards abstraction.<sup>59</sup> Greenberg, in whose footsteps Fried continues, is the author of "Modernist Painting" and of additional later texts from the 1960s that enable an intra-history of art reading. According to Clark, both Greenberg and Fried share the "priority-of-perception thesis", a term expressing the close reading of a work of art that exclusively, ahistorically discusses the object.<sup>60</sup>

[33] In his writings from the 1960s, Michael Fried proposes a visual and ideological history of abstract American painting, whose primary characteristic is the tendency of the medium to subject itself to self-criticism, i.e., to impose on itself a commitment to criticism that attempts to refine its distinct essence as a medium. The medium is the conductor that enables a discussion of different genres. According to Fried, following Greenberg, the modernist move proposes that any medium, and by implication any aesthetic genre, has

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<sup>56</sup> De Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*, 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>59</sup> He writes as follows: "The history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Henri Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality... in favor of an increasing preoccupation with problems intrinsic to painting itself". Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum & Harvard University, 1965), reprinted in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, "Argument About Modernism", 85.

to examine itself further and further to the point wherein it can formulate the most basic of its premises, to distinguish itself absolutely from other genres with which it is affiliated, as well as from those that are clearly different from it.

[34] Positioning the criterion of the medium's self-analysis, its attempt to completely set itself apart, fundamentally presumes the approach according to which no compromise between genres is possible, i.e., there is an absolute difference between one genre and another, and one medium cannot cross over into another, i.e., any medium, any genre can be defined in terms of Wittgenstein's language games, and there can be no skipping, as it were, between one game and another.<sup>61</sup> The limitation of this kind of interpretation is that although there can be no skipping from one language game to another, and it is art that must discover the gaps, the friction, or the inconsistencies between different groups of objects, in Greenberg's and Fried's theory painting still functions as a sort of meta-medium, or meta-discourse, and the discourse of the painting is read there as an art discourse, and as such advances one medium over others. Nonetheless, the understanding that these are different games enables us to understand the moral implications implied by purism of the medium. It consequently transpires that positioning self-criticism at the heart of the modernist debate has ethical implications, i.e., the moral/ethical anchor is not provided due to an inherent linkage between art and life, but because the medium subjects itself to perpetual criticism. The echoes of the Greenbergian stance here are no coincidence. Fried might be considered the most notable successor to Greenberg, who positioned flatness as the most significant paradigmatic characteristic of modernist painting.

[35] Both Greenberg and Fried hold that flatness and emphasizing the surface are an essential predicate for the definition of modernist painting. In the narrative proposed by Fried, he writes that modernist art finished what 19<sup>th</sup>-century society began: divorcing itself from the culture, the concerns, aims and ideals of the society in which it is embedded.<sup>62</sup> Like Greenberg he proposes a teleological move towards the abstract. Fried, however, more so than Greenberg, neutralizes materialism in favor of illusionism, i.e., he leads a move of a critical and formal emptying of art in favor of outlining the attributes of the absent. In this sense, and not only because of it, he is a significant successor of the positioning or presencing and outlining the conditions for the possibility of the appearance of the unrepresentable. One could say that whereas for Greenberg, with reference to Newman's works for example, the question in which the painting engages is the painting, i.e., outlining the conditions for the possibility of the appearance of the unrepresentable, with Fried the pictorial mechanism shifts to a modus of this premise, that extra-cultural

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<sup>61</sup> "The formal critic of modernist painting, then, is also a moral critic: not because all art is at bottom a criticism of life, but because modernist painting is at least a criticism of itself". Fried, *Three American Painters*, 217.

<sup>62</sup> Fried, *Three American Painters*, 217.

yearning, as it were, to escape from the representation, resulting in a state of debate on optical illusion as a space where Fried's moment of grace, "presentness", appears.

[36] In his discussion on the works of Frank Stella, Fried claims that the beholder of a modernist work does not experience it as a fully literal form, as a coherent and concrete entity, but as a kind of dynamic movement that constructs his view in a changing manner; the eye moves from one part of the composition to another, the different segments are the wholeness of the painting and not their total and material existence. In other words, compositions can be seen as composed of separate segments, compositions that contradict the concept of the single, binding appearance. According to Fried, the work presents illusionism by means of these transitions from one segment to another; this dynamic frames the beholder's view but also preserves the hierarchal primacy of the visual regime, and optics are a necessary condition for the work and for deciphering the color or formal dynamic that takes place on the canvas. The importance of perceiving the work as a fragmentary whole that maintains necessary relationships between the different components is not only a formal property. The limits of the work, says Fried, are not the physical limits of its support; the physical limits themselves are tangible as an entity, but in fact it is the movement of one segment after another, i.e., there is a continuity between what is perceived as "outside" and what is perceived as "inside", the material burden is conditioned within the inside. The dynamic presented is supposed to lead us, to paradoxically assemble us, for the optical activation of the surface will ultimately reveal that one shape encounters another and together they will lead "into the heart of the canvas, taking the beholder with it".<sup>63</sup> From this we learn that Stella's literalness "does not belong to the support at all" but to "the individual shapes themselves". Modernist works promote an optical experience between shapes and not the material support.<sup>64</sup>

[37] Neutralizing the concrete dimension commonly attributed to the literal is connected to neutralization of the material as a valid substance; this is the reverse side of or the explanation for neutralizing the importance of the support concept. The negation of substantivity and the presence of the support combine into a concept of visual illusiveness. Instead of concrete materiality Fried proposes a series of adjectives like "indeterminate" or "ambiguous" that elucidate his search for this allusive element, and his description of the works accords importance to gaps and to the complex relationships between the different images and between them and the support in which they are framed. This enables characterization of Frank Stella's later works, after his stripe paintings, as a collection of colorful configurations that the eye can reveal from the illusionistic space, and consequently literalism is not a property of the medium but of the

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (first published in *Artforum* 5, November 1966, 18-27), reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, 92.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

shapes themselves. Thus, Stella's work is situated on the modernist axis, and literalism itself, says Fried, becomes illusive.<sup>65</sup>

- [38] Fried employs formalistic description as a tool to reveal the (illusive) optical truth, which is conditioned by the eye, by its power and action, and at the same time claims that formalistic description negates the existentialist position as it is proposed by writers like Harold Rosenberg or Thomas Hess. Fried's assertion that it is impossible to determine which of the visual configurations seen in the work is superior results, in effect, in a reading based on a model that renders the entire act of observation contingent. Perhaps even more acutely, the act of seeing that serves as the principal conductor towards the formalistic debate about the configurations on the canvas, creates in Fried a feeling that the work embodies that of which nothing can be said, or alternatively that which cannot be presented, for it ultimately becomes embodied in the eye of the beholder as something that is absent: the feeling is that none of the shapes "is sufficiently privileged to make one feel that it, at any rate, is really there. There is, one might say, no *it* at all".<sup>66</sup>
- [39] On the linkage between the optical and the absent one can learn from Fried's discussion of Pollock's works. Although Fried analyzes particular examples, such as *Cut-Out* and *Out of the Web*, one can learn from them about the prevailing perceptions in the discourse of the time. *Cut-Out* is a work in which some of the canvas has been cut out and then recombined into the support as a kind of blind canvas, a segment within the colorful mass. The attempt to decipher this aesthetic act presents a model of the limited ability to acknowledge, the necessity of assuming a place where eyesight ends, i.e., to acknowledge the role of the painting to repeatedly indicate its inability to represent the unrepresentable. The discussion of this work illustrates the way in which the figure on and within the canvas support is neutralized from every dimension of presence and takes the form of absence; it has no linkage as an object in the world or as a shape whose validity is merely morphological; it functions as absence within the visual field. This absence is what typifies, what indicates the optical in the context of the discussion on Pollock. Optical reading, therefore, implies the primacy of eyesight, and this primacy is embodied in the absence emerging from the all-embracing space Pollock draws. The other aspect of this visual primacy is the neutralizing of touch; the dominance of the visual nullifies the existence of the body as a valid concept or material in the visual discourse. The figure is the absence, it is invisible, and it is the expression of our inability. In other words, it functions as absence in the visual field, but by the same token it outlines the limitations of the visual apparatus at our disposal. Consequently, the figure expresses the inherent mutilation that composes and decomposes the retina.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>66</sup> Emphasis in the original. See, Fried, "Shape as Form", 94.

<sup>67</sup> He writes: "The result is that the figure is not seen ... in fact it is not seen as the presence of anything – but rather as the absence, over a particular area, of the visual field. This enhances, I

[40] The optical history outlined in modernist theory ascribes the exploration and development of the synthesis of configuration and opticality that emerged in Pollock's stain paintings from 1951 to Morris Louis. He, too, develops figuration that is unrestricted or conditioned by the drawing function of the line, and with him, too, it is difficult to determine the gap between image and background. The image/background are presented as mutual conditions, one conditioned by the other and vice versa, and Louis, too, proposes an optical work addressed to eyesight alone. The difference lies in the integrative appearance of Louis' images. The discussion about the image in his works is one of the sites where Fried's perception flickers very clearly; what is seemingly presented as a morphological property reveals the epistemological foundations of his approach. It seems "as if the image were thrown onto the latter [the ground/canvas, N.G.] from a slide projector".<sup>68</sup> The slide projector provides a clear metaphor for the momentary appearance, which flickers from a place "where we don't see", in Fried's words; the aesthetic arrangement is what enables the appearance of that which the work cannot represent, the unrepresentable that is projected onto perception, presents itself and vanishes. This is a moment of epiphany.

[41] The impression one gains is that Fried's language positions the unrepresentable as a kind of nothingness, a site of absence on the second pole of existence. This nothingness is polarized with something, with being thrown in the world, to employ Heideggerian terminology. Greenberg's and Fried's critical surrender to the optical runs counter to the perception of the beholding experience or that of the beholder as an "intentional fabric" that is connected with the body, in line with Ponty's position. The emphasis of the eye is likened to a Sartrean proposition to regard "consciousness" as existing "beyond freedom". Ponty, by contrast, proposes viewing the focus of acting in the world through the body, a proposal attesting to the emergence of limitedness or blocking our modes of acting in the world, for the body is bound by blocking and collision, thus meaning is constituted from a linkage to the tactile, the sensory. Greenberg's and Fried's focus on the optical can actually be linked to the Heideggerian position that analyzes things by employing a terminology of gazing at things, whereas Ponty proposes focusing the discourse through the actions of the body as a site of activity and of producing happenings and meanings in the world that transfer the discourse to the world of action. In other words, for Fried the body does not exist as a site, it is absent, an excess of

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think, the force of the word 'optical' .... Figuration is achieved in terms of eyesight alone, and not in terms that imply even the possibility of verification by touch. The figure is something we *don't* see – it is, literally, *where* we don't see ... we do see. More than anything, it is like a kind of blind spot, or defect in or visual apparatus; it is like part of our retina that is destroyed or for some reason is not registering the visual field over a certain area. .... In the end, the relation between the field and the figure is simply not spatial at all", Fried, *Three American Painters*, 227-228. It is worthwhile comparing the figure that appears in Fried with Lyotard's discussion on the figure in his book, Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse/Figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 227

tactile space that has to be omitted on the way to the metaphysical fusion between beholder and beheld.

- [42] The relevant space for a debate on the aesthetic experience, in Fried's opinion, is "a space addressed exclusively to eyesight", and he refers to *Phénoménologie de la perception* as the source upon which he bases himself in his discussion on the issue of space.<sup>69</sup> According to Fried a good work is one that addresses itself wholly to eyesight. Although the painting exists both as a tactile and visible object, the experience to which the modernist painting addresses itself, for example Newman's paintings, is a purely visual illusion. "In a painting such as *Cathedra* the eye explores the colored field not by entering a traditional illusionistic space full of conventional clues to the tactility of objects or their relations to one another in tactile space, but by perceiving nuances, fluctuations, and properties of color alone, which together create the different but closely related illusion of space addressed exclusively to eyesight – an illusion which tactile metaphors may help to describe."<sup>70</sup> Consequently, tactility remains a metaphor to describe the indescribable experience in available terms; the pure visual experience cannot be quantified and acts against the materialization of the image, it attempts to signify the absence in order to indicate the condition within which the representation acts. In other words, any attempt to represent is destined to find itself in the limbo of inability. The narrative emerging in Newman's works, for example in the way the tactile space is limited or contained within an illusive space – an optical space – concatenates with Noland's works that are loaded with perceptual intensiveness, and with Olitski's work that is aimed at the pleasure of sight as it is embodied in his works. In other words, Noland's and Olitski's works expose the space in Newman's works as the appearance of optical space through the interpretations they accord to it in their own space.
- [43] The encounter between the beholder and the work is saturated with illusionism. The encounter does not evoke in the beholder experiences associated with the actual reality in which he exists; paradoxically, it resembles an encounter with an image, a photograph or film. The kind of understanding obtained by the beholder when he attempts to decipher the pictorial signifier, like the color in Olitski's work, "is not unlike the shock of recognition we might feel suddenly meeting in the flesh someone previously seen only in news photographs or in the movies".<sup>71</sup> It is an encounter with outside content, with a signified in whose light every pictorial signifier is nothing more than an illusion. The Other signifier has the advantage of quality and intensity, it is "more real", and the painting joins the continuum of signifiers on the way to getting to know it. Consequently, the

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<sup>69</sup> Fried, *Three American Painters*, 264, n. 26.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 246

beholding experience, or the encounter with this signifier, is an experience of shock that corresponds with what Fried would later term "presentness".

[44] Although Fried speaks of a momentary experience, filtering through his words there is always an assertion regarding the perceptual act being such that occurs in time. At times it seems that Fried's perceptual debate deviates from the act itself of beholding to a state wherein perception, as pure perception, generates the entire happening; it is pure perception that produces the painting. At others it seems that perception is an action attributed to the beholder and that the painting is produced under his gaze. Clearly, this perception, a kind of perception to itself, is a mechanism that acts towards the creation of the work as it will be perceived, and is also that which will construct the beholder's awareness. In this context a further component emerges in Fried's hermeneutic act; perception, the action of the eye, is the only thing that can enter "into the alien, impersonal, yet incomprehensibly moving life",<sup>72</sup> of the pictorial signifier. The image is the product of the perceptual imperative, the image appears and is not described, the image is the nature of the outside and the ultimate figuration is a response to "impersonal forces" embodied in the deductive structure of the painting.

[45] In conclusion, if we attempt to summarize Fried's principal views we shall see that in the first stage his writing proposes channeling the materiality and support to a reading that views them as signifiers of illusionism that I read as an expression of the conceptual act of examining the conditions of possibility for the appearance of the unrepresentable. Renaissance illusionism can now be understood as one of the motivators for the shunting aside of eyesight, and modernist flatness is perceived as a catalyst for epistemological questions concerning the matter of representation and not as a literally represented object. Illusionism is replaced by optical illusion, i.e., associated with the purely visual and not narrative or traditional illusionism. The movement of the beholder's eye discovers that literalism is merely a catalyst to stimulate an optical experience; the beholder encounters an element or space that exists between the shapes, and not the material support itself. From a reading of Stella's works, literalism is revealed as an illusion, as a property of shape and not of medium. At the same time it also emerges that optical truth is connected to the multiple possible configurations in the work; the inability to determine a preferred configuration attests to a gap or an absence, a crack in the heart of representation as a necessary condition for appearance. The figure in Pollock's works, for example, is read as an image that expresses absence in the visual field. What is signified in Pollock as absence and limited eyesight is revealed in Morris Louis and his generation as a flickering, a momentary appearance, almost, one might say, as the embodiment of the representation, of the appearance of the happening; the unrepresentable is thrown into the perception. The space of debate is a perceptual space, exclusively of eyesight.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 248.

The beholder's encounter is not a material experience of acceptance between entities, but an encounter with an image. The primacy of eyesight is connected with the positioning of "pure perception", which seemingly turns the artist into a relay station of absolute perception; the image is the expression of an impersonal perception imperative.<sup>73</sup>

[46] The significant status of the unrepresentable as it emerges from its being the regulator of the visual act and simultaneously its addressee, by creating the conditions for its appearance and by outlining the absence within the medium, offers a possibility for reading an ethical model in the art discourse of the 1940s and 50s; works of art and criticism can be read with a linkage that exists between the object/subject relationship and the I/Other relationship. This examination will enable an inquiry of the distinctness and meaning of each of the concepts and of their projection onto the perception of the subject.

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<sup>73</sup> Fried's "opticality" can also be understood as a strategy to rationalize what for Greenberg was a way of emptying the medium in order to make it visible in its pure potentiality. Fried finds the criteria for self-reflection of the medium in the strategies of staging the way in which an artwork addresses or does not address the spectator. Thus Fried's "art-as-procedure"-Formalism is more than simply a reshaping of Greenberg's thought.