THE TRANSHISTORICAL IMAGE

Philosophizing Art and its History

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CHAPTER 1

Formalism, art history and effective historical difference

The rise of formalist approaches to the understanding of art is clearly bound up with the desire to ratify modernist tendencies. However, the link with modernity goes deeper still, reaching, in fact, to its very origins in the culture and society of Enlightenment Europe. For an Enlightenment thinker such as Kant, there is a universal standpoint from which constants in human experience and history can be grasped and clearly articulated. Formalist historians, aestheticians and critics take themselves to have found such a standpoint. They feel able to offer a narrative that overcomes those – such as Vasari's – which centre upon naïve notions of organic growth and decay. More than this, they adopt the analytic means characteristic of Kantian thought, that is the resolution of a specific domain of experience into those categories and structures that are inherent to it.

Of course, in postmodern times this strategy has been found to be problematic. In this chapter, therefore, I will address the limits and scope of formalism by critically examining the theories of Bell, Wörringer and Greenberg – major exemplars of formalism's basic varieties. I shall be concerned, in particular, to identify their misunderstandings of the relation between form, history and aesthetic value.

1

The first variety to be considered is aesthetic formalism. This holds that what separates art from other modes of artifice is the possession of formal qualities – pertaining to the structure of appearance – that provoke a distinctive aesthetic emotion in both creator and viewer. The origins of this approach are to be found in Kant's aesthetic theory. Specifically, he argues that aesthetic judgements are sufficiently characterized by four characteristics. I shall focus on the two of these that are most important. The first is disinterestedness – 'the faculty of estimating an object of

delight or aversion apart from any interest'.[1] In order to experience such pleasure or displeasure, it is not presupposed that we know what kind of thing the object of our pleasure is; neither are we concerned with broader questions of its practical significance. The reason for this is that our pleasure is provoked simply by structural relations in the way the object appears to the senses. Kant describes these relations as 'the form of *finality* in an object, so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*'.[2] What this amounts to is a perceptual exploration of such things as shape, line, mass, density and texture in relation to both one another and the object's phenomenal fabric as a whole.

Kant's position in relation to art is actually an extremely complex one, which goes beyond formalism. The formalist account of aesthetic judgement just outlined, indeed, is one which he links primarily to the appreciation of nature. However, Kant's nineteenth-century successors – such as Pater and Whistler – apply it to art, and this approach comes to define the dominant tendency in twentieth-century aesthetic formalism.

One of its most emphatic exponents is Clive Bell, in his book *Art* (1914). Bell's key concept is that of *significant form*, which he defines as 'a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that move me aesthetically'.[3] In such responses, a form is enjoyed for its own sake as an 'end in itself'.

This experience presupposes only two basic capacities. The first is sheer aesthetic sensitivity; the second, a knowledge of form and colour and three-dimensional space. Questions such as what a form represents or what practical significance it has are entirely secondary. As Bell puts it, 'a realistic form may be as significant as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.'[4] Hence Bell is led to the conclusion that 'to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation.'[5]

Now in these remarks Bell is clearly asserting the autonomy of art, by linking it sometimes to the criteria of disinterestedness and formal finality by which Kant defines aesthetic judgement. However, we will

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 50.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[3] Clive Bell, *Art*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1914, p. 12.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[5] *Ibid.*

recall that Kant links the aesthetic to the appreciation of nature. With what justification, then, does Bell transfer it to art? The answer to this question is complex and requires consideration of that neglected chapter in Bell's book entitled 'The Metaphysical Hypothesis'. Here the author allows that whilst the 'material beauty' of nature can move us, it does not do so in the same way as the beauty of significant form in art – or at least not unless we, in effect, see it as art.

Art's primacy in this respect is bound up with its metaphysical and religious significance. On these questions, Bell is markedly less confident than he is in relation to aesthetic emotion. Matters come to a head when he attempts to speculatively explain the grounds of our enjoyment of form as 'an end in itself', that is, why significant form *is* significant. Consider the following passage:

> if an object considered as an end in itself moves us more profoundly . . . than the same object considered as a means to human interests . . . we can only suppose that when we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired from keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognizing its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm.[6]

On these terms, aesthetic emotion is 'the echo of some more ultimate harmony',[7] that which 'lies behind the appearance of all things'.[8] The artist's treatment of form, therefore, is one which purifies and frees it from mundane associations, in a way that goes beyond mere natural beauty.

Given this correlation of the aesthetic and metaphysical *per se*, it is hardly surprising that Bell goes on to claim that artistic change is closely tied to changes in religious sensibility. As he puts it, 'we shall expect to find that ages in which the creation of significant form is checked are ages in which the sense of reality is dim, and that these ages are ages of spiritual poverty'.[9] Broadly speaking, Bell identifies two dominant tendencies in the history of art; the first is vital and authentic and represents the intense religious spirit of Byzantium; the other is secular and naturalistic and derives from the excesses of imperial Rome.

This leads Bell to reverse a major judgement of the art-historical tradition. Rather than see the high Renaissance as a standard of excellence by which other epochs must be judged, he sees it instead as a kind of decadence. In his words, 'the art of the fifteenth century was further

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 69. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 71. [8] *Ibid.*, p. 69. [9] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

from grace than that of the Giottesque painters of the fourteenth. And the whole output of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is immeasurably inferior to the great Byzantine and Romanesque production of the eleventh and twelfth.'[10] He even goes so far as to claim that no more than one in a hundred of the artworks produced between 1450 and 1850 can be properly described as art!

Now given such statements as these, it is hardly surprising that when Bell's theory is cited in contemporary discussion it is usually as the object of wholly negative criticism or even ridicule. I would like, however, to subject his theory to a more positive line of criticism. First, in arguing that the aesthetic value of artistic form, and, indeed, the dynamics of artistic change are connected to metaphysical and religious sensibility, Bell is in effect acknowledging art's relative autonomy. In this respect one might return to the contrast between nature and art. It may be, for example, that Kant was right to construe our aesthetic response to nature as one which is wholly autonomous – centring on a form's capacity to stimulate our perceptual faculties. However, whilst our aesthetic response to art may involve such stimulation it *must* involve something more – in order to do justice to the fact that artistic form is the product of conscious human activity. Bell's metaphysical hypothesis is an attempt to come to terms with this. His aesthetic emotion in art is autonomous from responses to objects in their everyday practical significance, for it engages with deeper intuitions concerning the place of self-consciousness in the universe.

The problem is, however, that Bell does not adequately explain this relation between the aesthetic and the metaphysical. This leaves him open to the putative objection that, in his theory, aesthetic emotion and spiritual intensity amount to the same thing. The objects or situations that provoke them may be different, but the emotional state of ultimate exaltation is the same in both. The objection is, however, not well founded. For whilst aesthetic and metaphysical responses may be grounded on some common truth, it could be the case that the aesthetic articulation of this has some dimension of significance that metaphysical thought alone does not. Bell himself points us tentatively in this direction, to his claim that 'significant form conveys to us an emotion felt by its creator'.[11] This means, of course, that in art we are not simply responding to some truth embodied in the work, but also to the artist's personal way of articulating this. Unfortunately, whilst Bell presents such a position in outline, he fails to develop it in any depth or with any clarity.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 154. [11] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Considerations of this sort also apply to Bell's account of artistic change. In holding that the production of significant form and eras of spiritual intensity are historically correlated, he is, in effect, affirming the relative autonomy of artistic change. But again he fails to explain the nature of this correlation. This, of course, is not a decisive problem. For it may be that some account could, in principle, be offered. Such an account would search out parallels between the notions of authenticity and integrity in both the aesthetic sense, and the more general religious or moral meanings of the terms. It would involve a kind of philosophically evaluative iconology.

Here, however, a qualification must be made. An account of the sort just described would have to be mediated by a dimension of which Bell is putatively dismissive – contemptuous even. It is that of *effective historical difference*. One aspect of it is touched on by the significance of personal artistic style noted earlier. Bell allows that in responding to an artwork we are responding to a personal expression; but what he does not think through is that a sense of what is distinctive to a particular artist's style – the very basis of its aesthetic value – *logically presupposes* a context of comparison and contrast in order for it to emerge and be recognized.

Similar considerations hold in relation to the notions of significant form and artistic change. As Bell himself admits, not all forms in the visual arts are significant. But to assert 'x is significant' entails that it has a richness of meaning which other works do not, that is, it only counts as significant insofar as it differs in specifiable respects from other works. Likewise, one can only judge what is distinctive about an epoch of artistic change on the basis of comparison with other epochs.

Now this context of contrast and comparison is not founded on some merely abstract or intuitive notion of difference. Rather, a work's formal and/or epochal value only emerges insofar as it is seen to innovate or refine in relation to traditions already established in the handling of the medium. This is why I have used the term *effective historical difference* both here and earlier. Not all differences between one form or another are relevant to appraising aesthetic or epochal significance. To make the appropriate judgements involves – whether one is consciously aware of it or not – the deployment of considerable historical knowledge concerning all aspects of art and its history.

Let me now summarize this section. Aesthetic formalism in its most rigidly Kantian sense, posits the aesthetic as a distinctive autonomous mode of experience. Bell implicitly notes the limits of this view insofar as he shows that aesthetic responses to art also involve metaphysical

considerations. The aesthetic experience of art and artistic change in general, in other words, is only relatively autonomous. Bell, however, does not understand the full scope of this. In particular he fails to see that any judgement concerning aesthetic value or artistic change necessarily involves reference to the dimension of effective historical difference.

II

The next variety of formalism I shall consider can be described as *psychological formalism*. It centres on the notion of *Kunstwollen*. The origins of this notion are most clearly found in the 'play-drive' of Schiller's aesthetics; and, in an important but less direct sense, the aesthetic theory of Schopenhauer. It was, however, Alois Riegl who first explicitly deployed the concept of *Kunstwollen*. Since I will address Riegl at length in the next chapter, here I shall, accordingly, focus on the way it is articulated by his important follower – Wilheim Wörringer.

The major statement of Wörringer's basic position is to be found in his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1980). He states a debt to Kant's notion that experience is structured a priori by categories. As he puts it,

> For only in so far as it appeals to . . . categories, to . . . elementary aesthetic feelings, which are common to all men even if variously developed, does the character of necessity and inner regularity adhere to the artistic object, and it is this character alone which justifies us in making a work of art the subject of aesthetic-scientific investigation.[12]

Wörringer's categories are not those specifically employed in Kant's epistemology, neither do they bear affinity to concepts employed in Kant's aesthetic theory. The point of general contact is that, like Kant, Wörringer sees the aesthetic feeling as one wherein the subject is 'at home' with this world. However, he construes this 'at homeness' in terms that are very different from Kant. For him, the *Kunstwollen* – or art-drive, as I shall term it – is a basic instinctual response to two different sets of material and spiritual conditions. Hence, whilst being a basic general category, it has two component aspects, one or other of which will preponderate according to the nature of the circumstances which provoke it.

The first aspect is, according to Wörringer, primal in both chronological and existential senses. It arises when primitive man attempts to come to terms with that bewildering, apparently disconnected plethora

[12] Wilheim Wörringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. M. Bullock, New York, International Universities Press, 1980, pp. 30–1.

of objects, phenomena and spatiotemporal relations that are the area in which the human condition is played out. It is, in essence, an *urge to abstraction*.

Matters are made complex by the fact that it too has dual (albeit complementary) aspects. The first of these is well described in Wörringer as follows:

> The primal artistic impulse has nothing to do with the rendering of nature. It seeks after pure abstraction as the only possibility of repose within the confusion and obscurity of the world-picture, and creates out of itself, with instinctive necessity, geometric abstraction. It is the consummate expression, and the only expression of which man can conceive, of emancipation from all the contingency and temporality of the world-picture.[13]

Wörringer's point here is that geometric abstraction strives towards the enduring world of the inorganic and crystalline. It presents a rigid order of necessity that is positively counterposed to the world. It provides a point of rest or stasis for the troubled spirit.

The second aspect of the urge to abstraction is rather more sophisticated. It is a drive to lift material objects out of their bewildering spatial surroundings, to grasp them in terms of their 'closed material individuality'.[14] The means of this are through representation – but only in terms of, as it were, the minimum unit of pictorial or sculptural representation, that is, the figure delineated within the single plane. For Wörringer, to delineate in these terms answers a need to isolate and enclose the object – to affirm, in effect, its essential objectivity. In so doing, the artist is able 'to make it as far as possible independent both of the ambient external world and the subject – the spectator – who desires to enjoy in it not the cognate-organic but the necessity and regularity in which . . . he can rest'.[15]

The urge to abstraction, then, is the primal art-drive. Through geometric abstraction and planimetric simplicity, the artist and viewer encounter a rigid order of form that frees them from the perceptual vertigo of the spatiotemporal continuum. However, as a society advances and comes to terms with its environment, this yearning for rigid order is transformed. The art-drive is provoked by a new set of circumstances. In Wörringer's words,

> Anxiety diminishes, confidence grows, and now, for the first time, the outer world begins to live and it receives all its life from man, who now anthropomorphises all

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 64. [14] The phrase is taken by Wörringer from Riegl.
[15] Wörringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, p. 64.

its inner essence, all its inner forces. This sensation of oneself-in-things naturally sharpens the feeling for the inexpressibly beautiful content of organic form, the paths of an artistic naturalism.[16]

Now, it is crucial to note that the artistic naturalism referred to here is not mere imitation or 'truth to life' *per se*. Rather the pleasure taken in these is an outcome of the art-impulse's instinctive celebration of the new-found identity with the world of organic form. Naturalistic art stemming from this source embodies the second aspect of the basic art-drive, namely the *urge to empathy*.

Given, then, the art-drive, with its dual aspects – abstraction and empathy – Wörringer sees the history of art as determined by the interplay of the two aspects. Broadly speaking, the tendency to stylization and abstraction preponderates in societies dominated by monotheistic religions of transcendence (such as Christianity), or in peoples whose 'innate structure' predisposes them towards it. Wörringer is unclear as to what is entailed by this latter point, but is confident enough to offer numerous examples of societies or peoples where the urge to abstraction is dominant – such as Byzantine art, or the medieval art and architecture of northern Europe. Likewise he is confident enough to link the urge to empathy with the art of antiquity and the classical tradition.

Interestingly, however, he does not (as in traditional approaches) privilege classicism. Rather, he asserts that the high estimation in which classicism is now held is due to the fact that contemporary values are founded on the urge to empathy, that is, that same aspect of the art-drive which determines classicism itself. A cautionary awareness of this fact, indeed, should make us very wary of evaluating the art of the other periods in absolute terms. As Wörringer puts it,

Every stylistic phase represents, for the humanity that created it out of its psychic needs, the goal of its volition and hence the maximum degree of perfection. What seems to us a strange and extreme distortion is not the fault of insufficient ability, but the consequence of differently directed volition.[17]

This completes my exposition of Wörringer's basic position. Like Bell's theory, it is highly vulnerable to destructive criticism. Again, however, I shall propose a more positive line of critique.

First, given the two different urges to abstraction and empathy, why does Wörringer see them as aspects of a common basic art-drive? The answer is: because they both hinge on 'self-alienation', that is, a loss

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8. [17] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

of self. The case of abstraction, for example, involves 'an urge to seek deliverance from the fortuitousness of humanity as a whole, from the seeming arbitrariness of organic existence in general, in the contemplation of something necessary and irrefragable'.[18]

> The urge to empathy, in contrast, involves a kind of flow into the object – We feel, as it were, our individuality flow into fixed boundaries, in contrast to the boundless differentiation of the individual consciousness . . . This affirmation of our individual need for activity represents simultaneously a curtailment of its illimitable potentialities.[19]

On these terms, then, abstraction involves a loss of particularity in our sense of self, whereas empathy involves a loss of generality. Wörringer is here, in effect, bridging the gap (which we noted in Bell's theory) between art and the metaphysical. He is doing it by claiming that in the art-impulse, consciousness enjoys a transformed *ontological* structure. In this he is right, but to describe the transformation as a 'self-alienation' is somewhat misleading.

As I have argued elsewhere,[20] through the creation and reception of art we discern essential structures of consciousness reflected in the work. It enables us to enjoy a recognition of self that is at once highly particular and also highly general. Every element in the visual fabric of the artwork stands in a necessary relation to all the rest. Indeed, those individually contingent moments in the creative process are internally related *vis-à-vis* the finished artwork. The existence of the particular artwork entails the existence of a unique personal history – namely that of its creator. However, the creator's experience is presented in a symbolic form that is accessible to other human beings. In the necessary order of the artwork's structure, the audience finds the echo of its own existential problems and specific ways of articulating (and thence dealing with) these.

Now the point to gather from this is not simply the inappropriateness of the term *self-alienation*, it is also the fact that the relation between abstraction and empathy is much closer than Wörringer is prepared to admit. The aesthetic experience of art *per se* involves features which he assigns to abstraction and empathy in isolation from one another. Any aesthetic experience of art, in other words, involves elements of both abstraction and empathy. This is because – irrespective of style or subject matter – the artwork is a symbolic formation that is accessible to the senses. Of its essence, it heightens our feeling of what is particular to

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4. [19] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[20] In my *Art and Embodiment*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

our own existence, and what is generally significant about human beings or Being *as such*.

It may be that some ways of treating material (e.g. geometric abstraction) will tend more towards the emphasis of universality or timelessness and other more 'naturalistic' styles will involve more affirmation of the particular; but these are, at the very best, mere tendencies. Think, for example, of Mondrian's austere quasi-Platonic de Stijl abstractions in contrast to the worldly exuberance of op art. Again, even within Mondrian's own *œuvre* think of the difference between the de Stijl works, and the zaniness of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. At the other extreme, Moreau's *œuvre* and the products of other symbolist painters have an almost obsessive naturalistic attention to detail, but only to achieve a kind of sensory overload which intimates a transcendent, more abstract reality. In all these cases, historical and cultural contexts change the aesthetic significance and value of a stylistic trait.

Wörringer, then, has a sophisticated ontology of the art-drive, which marks out its opposite poles. In practice, however, these putative oppositions overlap, and the nature of the relation between them can only be determined at the level of the particular work, rather than at that level of style at which Wörringer primarily operates. This means, of course, that our understanding of the art-drive must be mediated by the same sense of effective historical difference that I mentioned in the course of my critique of Bell and also previously. Similar considerations also apply, as I shall now show, in the case of Clement Greenberg.

III

Greenberg (along with Wölfflin, amongst others) represents what I shall call the tradition of *stylistic formalism*. This puts an emphasis on the link between style and virtual structure, and the way in which this relation is the basis of historical changes driven by factors internal to art itself. Greenberg's theory of art is at once made accessible and yet complex by the fact that it has been substantially formulated in the context of a single problem – namely the definition and ratification of modernist art.

The basic tenets of Greenberg's position can be stated as follows. In the nineteenth century art found itself under threat of assimilation into mere entertainment. In response, each art form had to demonstrate 'through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar to itself'.[21] The arts

[21] Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', included in *Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology*, ed. F. Frascina and C. Harrison, London, Harper and Row, 1982, pp. 5–10. This reference p. 5.

had to undertake (according to Greenberg) a task of self-critique and articulation analogous to that performed by Kant, in relation to reason itself. The upshot of this Kantian 'infra-logic' was that 'the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium'.[22] In the case of painting, this unique element turned out to be flatness. As Greenberg puts it,

> Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art. The enclosing shape of the support was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm or means shared with sculpture as well as the theater. Flatness, two dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.[23]

Now one presumes that what Greenberg is talking about here is *virtual* flatness. For, after all, no painted surface is literally flat; or at least not to the same degree as a photograph or print. Painting is essentially a medium whose foundation is the *appearance* of two-dimensionality.

In making a claim of this sort, Greenberg is not positing modernist painting as a revolutionary break with tradition. Far from it. According to him, the success of all painting consists in the 'dialectical tension' between virtual flatness and illusionistic content. The work of an Old Master declares content before it declares flatness, whereas a modernist work affirms flatness before we are made aware of content. Modernist painting, in other words, affirms the essence of the medium by reversing the order of perceptual engagement with the two key elements involved.

A more substantial point of continuity with traditional painting centres on a common response to the encroachment of sculpture. In divesting itself of three-dimensional sculptural space, modernist work allies itself with an important tendency, established as early Venetian colourism of the sixteenth century, and continued, with different inflections, even through David and Ingres.

Now I do not propose to analyze the historical veracity of Greenberg's argument; rather, I shall review some of the conceptual issues raised by his claims. First let me reiterate his central point in a little more detail. The look or appearance of flatness is essential to painting. Painting is a medium that is able to project the illusion – be it representational or simply an optical effect – of three dimensions. But why should such a property matter to human beings? Why should we be interested in the relation between a two-dimensional space and its contents *per se*? At one point Greenberg suggests that 'the only consistency which counts in art

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 5. [23] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

is aesthetic consistency, which shows itself only in results and never in methods or means'.[24]

Unfortunately, whilst on these terms aesthetic value is crucial to painting, Greenberg does not offer a credible explanation of the link between virtual flatness and aesthetic value. As I have argued elsewhere, his problems here are due to him wishing to be at once a Kantian aesthetic formalist and (ironically enough, by dint of the quasi-Kantian 'infralogic' that he assigns to modernist art) a stylistic formalist as well.[25]

Two problems must be dealt with, then. First the question of why flatness and its relation to content is significant, and second the question of how that significance links up to aesthetic value. I shall address these in turn.

A clue to the solution of the former problem is to be found in a line of thought that runs through Riegl, Hildebrand and Wörringer. It consists of the insight that by rendering illusion within the flat confines of a plane, the object of illusion is thence detached from its continuity with other objects in space and becomes more intelligible *vis-à-vis* its individual being. Now I am not interested in the substance of this claim so much as the direction in which it is pointing us – namely that of perception itself.

Suppose, in this respect, we restate Greenberg's point about the key dialectical tension between flatness and its contents, as a tension between *figure and ground*. This restatement covers Greenberg's point, but has some further crucial ramifications. For as embodied subjects, we do not passively register the data of perception; rather, our engagement with them is determined by body orientation. This means that our perceptual relation to things is determined by the co-ordination of the sensor motor capacities as a unified field. At the heart of this co-ordination is the relation between that which is immediately accessible to perception and manipulation by the body, and that which is beyond the scope of such immediate appropriation.

Now the structure of figure–ground in painting is a relation that exemplifies this relation in both real and symbolic terms. As Greenberg observes, 'The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configurations of a Mondrian still suggest a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension.'[26]

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[25] In my 'Greenberg's Kant and the Problem of Modernist Painting', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1985. I have since revised my interpretation of Greenberg's approach to flatness.

[26] Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 8.

Hence, any, as it were, visual disturbance within the picture plane serves to arrest our pictorial interest, and to relegate the planar ground to the status of site or matrix or zone of at least optical emergence. Our basic bodily orientation towards the world is thus directly duplicated in specifically visual terms.

However, we also know that the painting is a painting. This means that we recognize its space as one that is symbolic and thence not continuous with the real network of spatiotemporal relations which our body inhabits. It has rather the status of an image, or a symbolic extension of perception. Such a status in no way degrades pictorial space – in fact the opposite is the case. For whilst the figure–ground relation structures immediate perception, it is always shaped by the symbolic projection of alternative possibilities or perceptual engagement with the world. In focusing on an object before us, for example, the way we characterize it or use it is determined by both past acquaintance with things of that kind and new possibilities of use for them. To put this more generally, each intentional act in the perceptual process is subtended or directed by a latent existential space, which situates the act in a schema of past encounters and alternative futures. The tension between figure and ground in painting, therefore, is not only a real event in immediate perception, but also one which *qua* pictorial thematises this latent dimension – this symbolic space of alternative possibilities.

I am arguing, then, that in effect Greenberg lays the foundations of an artistic category in the strongest sense. One cannot make any logical sense of painting without the figure–ground relation, and it is indeed a structure that reflects a functionally necessary feature of perception itself. Contemporary intellectual fashion attempts to reduce art and meanings to issues of function, power and gender, but the reason why a medium such as painting is able to sustain and express its complex meanings so effectively is because it reflects self-consciousness's own structures with a directness that eludes purely verbal description. It is this fact which explains the particular fascination that visual mimesis recurrently holds for the human species.

Explaining the significance of virtual flatness in these expanded terms, of course, takes us beyond Greenberg. Flatness may be a necessary condition in the definition of painting, but what gives it real significance is the way in which content emerges from it. This is even true of minimalist works, or colour field abstraction by the likes of Rothko or Newman. For here, the viewer becomes, in effect, the figure who defines him- or herself against a ground provided by the colour field. Oddly enough,

when painting reaches its flattest form, it begins – by incorporating the viewer – to encroach upon the three-dimensional space of sculpture.

However, let us at least allow Greenberg his point that in general, modernist works tend towards flatness in a way that previous works do not. On the basis of my analysis, this suggests that modernist painting is an idiom that overtly declares art's origins in the basic structure of self-consciousness itself. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee quality in art.

We are thus returned to the question of aesthetic value. In this respect let us first consider the painting in its concrete particularity, as a sensible item. What is of prime aesthetic interest here is the way in which the work addresses the senses. However, this is not (as Greenberg tends to read it) simply a case of some unanalyzable act of intuitive judgement. Psychologically, it may have this intuitive character, but logically speaking, there *must* be more to it than this. Or even if – like Bell – we specify such things as unity, balance and harmony *vis-à-vis* such things as shape, mass and texture, these tell us little. Such terms only have use-value on the basis of specific context, of contrast and comparison. These involve issues of formal and technical innovation and refinement in relation to tradition. Broader social and existential questions pertaining to the validity of worldviews and styles can also be invoked. All these factors, however, can be socially and historically variable. Consider, for example, the significance of a hard-edged plastic emphasis in an artist's style. In a painter such as Poussin this may engage us in terms of the stability and rigorous order of its view of things. In an artist such as de Chirico, in contrast, such qualities may tend to subvert our sense of rational order by exaggerating them to a dreamlike – and hence unreal – degree.

The point I am making, then, is that in logical terms, Greenberg's formalist notion of aesthetic value – despite him linking it to the ahistorical account of essence of the medium – is not sustainable. Like Bell and Wörringer, he fails to take account of what I have called effective historical difference.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter I noted how formalist approaches to art history share something of Kant's epistemological orientation in seeking out the basic categories which structure specific areas of experience. By focusing on Bell, Wörringer and Greenberg, I have sought to identify three different ways in which this formalist project has been undertaken in relation to art history. Bell and other aesthetic formalists affirm the category of autonomy by grounding art in the relation between

significant form and aesthetic emotion. However, as I emphasized, Bell himself allows that this category is not absolute, in particular it is mediated by an obscure relation to metaphysics. In Wörringer this relation is somewhat clarified by the introduction of a new category – the art-drive. Psychological formalism traces art's origins in the desire of self-consciousness to see itself reflected in the material world. Again, I argued that this view is deficient in certain respects, and then moved on to consider Greenberg as representative of a formalism – which seeks to account for the essence of art/artistic change in terms of transformations of the medium's properties. Following up Greenberg's emphasis on virtual flatness, I attempted to deepen it by linking it to the figure–ground structure in perception; and I also offered a critique of his approach to aesthetic value.

Let me end with the following observations. The three varieties of formalism outlined are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, whilst each of the writers whom I have considered emphasizes one variety, elements of the other two are also present to greater or lesser degrees in each of them. This is hardly surprising, for in my progression of argument, I have also tried to show how the categories of autonomy, art-drive and virtual flatness mediate one another, that is, whilst not being identical, one cannot give a full explanation of them individually without invoking the others. The formal categories of art form a constellation of elements.

The other major point to be made concerns the formalist project itself. There *are* constants in human experience. If there were not, no communication between humans would be possible. However, the fundamental categories of experience in general, and of its specific varieties, are not absolutely timeless and immutable. As the human organism endures, its essential cognitive capacities are deployed with crucial differences of emphasis. Art shows this. According to different sociohistorical circumstances, art undergoes mediation in respect of its autonomy and the impulse to create, which underlies it. Likewise, the significance of the figure–ground relation will change on the basis of different pressures brought to bear on the individual artist from both within and outside the art world.

Formalist approaches, then, identify significant categories but are extremely restricted in their scope. They fail, in particular, to negotiate the dimension of effective historical difference. This being said, it might be objected that whatever the limitations of formalism in relation to 'high' art, it might still be viable in relation to less elevated art forms, such as ornament. I shall now consider this possibility in relation to Alois Riegl's theory of vegetal ornament.