

Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism

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Post-Modernist Assumptions

The aim of this section is not to attempt to answer the difficult and fraught question “What is post-modernism?” It is rather to establish a range of post-modernist assumptions that will be used throughout this study to identify what can now be regarded as aspects of post-modernist thought in critical responses to American pop art during the sixties. Both these assumptions and their relevance to the critics under review will be discussed in a schematic manner so as not to pre-empt discussion in subsequent sections of this study.

“Post-modernist” responses to pop were prompted by those features that resisted accommodation within existing formalist or realist critical canons. The most prominent of these is anonymity, that is lack of “authorial presence” or a “centred sense of personal identity.”¹ This is evident in its depersonalized technique, minimal, if any, transformation of source material, and obscure or uninterpretable “message.” A further feature concerns the collapsing of distinctions between elite and mass cultural realms, evident in pop art’s indebtedness to the codes, subjects, and, in some instances, technical processes of mass communications. Finally, there is that of the representation of “culture” as opposed to “nature,” the province of realism, insofar as it concerns the simulation of pre-existing signs. Critics theorized these features along either sociological or philosophical lines. They viewed them as reflective of Western urban society in its post-war capitalist-consumerist phase or, alternatively, as eliminative of a world-view in the sense of an authoritative, totalizing system of thought.

The prime issue for this study is the relationship between these, in the main, sociological and philosophical theorizations of pop art and post-modernism. In constructing the post-modernist measure necessary to address this issue, three main categories of concepts of post-modernism require consideration: those formulated by critics featured in this study

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(relevant only in the case of Leo Steinberg); the sporadic formulations made in the field of American literary criticism either prior to or contemporaneous with the period under review; those constitutive of post-modernism in its circa mid- and post-mid-1970's incarnation. This is the form in which it would constitute a major cultural shift and develop, shortly thereafter, into a "world view."² In this particular incarnation, post-modernism refers to a diversely social and cultural phenomenon as well as assumes its present inter-disciplinary form, one described by John Rajchman as "a hybrid field of social theory, literary criticism, cultural studies and philosophy."³

Post-modernist features of critical responses to American pop art, those that fall under the broad headings of social theory and philosophy, conform most closely to three inter-related post-modernist models or, more accurately, groups of post-modernist models. First, the "philosophical post-modernism" that David Ray Griffin has seen as "inspired variously by pragmatism, physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida and other recent [presumably, post-structuralist] French thinkers." He has described this form as

deconstructive or eliminative post-modernism. It overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. While motivated in some cases by the ethical concern to forestall totalitarian systems, this type of post-modern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism. It could also be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying modern premises to their logical conclusions.⁴

Charles Jencks also regarded this deconstructive form of post-modernism as not constituting a break with modernism. He termed it "Late- or Neo-Modernism" to refer to an "exaggerated and incessantly revolutionary form of Modernism."⁵ Griffin's and Jencks's closely related understanding of deconstructive post-modernism invites identification with the avant-gardist model formulated by Andreas Huyssen. American post-modernism in its 1960's phase, he considered, was a revitalization of the legacy of "European avantgarde" movements and therefore of one branch of modernism. Huyssen's understanding of it in this manner was largely based on its "powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict" and thus on evidence of the "temporal imagination" that had been previously displayed by the "continental avantgarde," notably "dada and surrealism."⁶

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The *prime* theoretical influence on deconstructive post-modernism since circa the mid-seventies has been post-structuralism. Broadly defined, post-structuralism represents the collective term for the post-Marxist intellectual movement in the human sciences and philosophy that emerged during the second half of the sixties in Paris and included among its first-generation adherents Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser. A second generation, comprising Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, aligned post-structuralist theory with accounts of a new, post-war societal form. Despite the independence of their respective theoretical positions, post-structuralists were drawn together by, as Chris Weedon has suggested, shared “fundamental assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity.”⁷ These assumptions will be investigated more fully where relevant throughout this study.

Post-structuralist ideas, however, made no impact on either the critical reception of American pop art during the sixties or literary formulations of post-modernism in the same period. This situation can be explained, in part, by the fact that none of the initial post-structuralist texts (identified by Art Berman as Lacan’s *Ecrits* and Foucault’s *The Order of Things* [both 1966] and Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* [1967]) were translated until the seventies.⁸ Despite the immunity of American post-modernism in its sixties’ phase from French post-structuralist theory, the latter assumes an important reference point for this study. In this it is argued that the “silencing of language,” to the extent that it is largely theorized by phenomenology, and post-structuralism, especially in the form represented by Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentrism, are different responses as well as contributors to the critique of language and representation that had been conducted throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Despite America’s role in the naming of post-modernism, a role acknowledged by Lyotard in *The Post-modern Condition; a Report on Knowledge*,⁹ it was also in such deconstructive form influenced by French post-structuralist theory that post-modernism would “re-enter” America. This is evident in the post-modern writings of the Marxist and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson as well as those of the art critics associated with the magazine *October* – notably Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens, Hal Foster, and Douglas Crimp – which was launched in 1976.

In the course of theorizing pop art, American critics turned to philosophical sources that provided an alternative to post-structuralism’s subversion of worldviews: phenomenology in both its existential and epistemological forms; American philosophical pragmatism. Max Kozloff and

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Susan Sontag called upon the findings of phenomenology to justify “silent” art’s invalidation of the critic’s interpretive and evaluative roles and, in the case of Sontag, to account for art’s silencing of language. Phenomenology, in pursuit of either the foundations of knowledge (epistemological phenomenology) or the foundations of existence (existential phenomenology), undermines the authority of universal accounts and hence abstract schematizations of either knowledge or experience. Both forms of phenomenology are pivotal on the tenet of the intentionality of consciousness, that is, the objects of consciousness are structured by the perceiving mind. This represents a break with the strict subject-object dualism of Cartesianism and thus with a vision-generated “concept of knowledge which radically splits us away from the world and leads us to assume the detached superiority of the scientist in relation to an overt object of investigation.”¹⁰ Existential phenomenology, consistent with its recognition of man’s fundamental condition of situatedness in the world as well as the role of non-cognitive and non-rational factors (e.g., moods, sensations, and feelings) in intentional acts,¹¹ abolishes the further Cartesian dualism between body and mind.

In post-structuralist theory, the break with Cartesian subjectivity brings about the “death” of man and, thus, the elimination of one of the “ingredients necessary for a worldview.”¹² This is argued on the grounds that the subject is constituted in language and hence from “without.” Phenomenology, by way of contrast, with its commitment to the first-person standpoint, and in this sense commitment also to Cartesianism, revises the Cartesian “rational subject” Modification of this subject along phenomenological lines, central to which is the abolition of distinctions between both subject and object and mind and body, entails the recognition of man’s situation as “embodied agents in a natural and social world” whose “propositional knowledge of the world is grounded in our dealings with it.”¹³

Existential phenomenology, specifically in its Heideggerian form, has been seen by Patricia Waugh as responsible for a form of deconstructive post-modernism concerned with a counter-Enlightenment “critique of grand narratives and subversion of the purely rational.” She has termed this critique “late modern Romanticism” because of the relationship between its mode of being and knowing – one that places emphasis on “situatedness in a world which pre-exists us (and which cannot be conceptualised through an overlay of rationalism)” – and a strain of Enlightenment critique that takes place in “Romantic writing.” It is one that opposes the Enlightenment’s “Cartesian separation of subject and object as a rationalising consciousness shaping an inert material object.”¹⁴ Waugh’s under-

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standing that post-modernism, in both its American and European forms, drew from “a theoretical or philosophical tradition” that was constituted, in part, by the “post-phenomenological critiques” of Heidegger and Derrida,¹⁵ confirms in some measure the findings of this study: post-structuralist post-modernism and the phenomenological form identified with the silencing of language derive from as well as contribute to the same broadly defined critique of language and representation.

Waugh’s counter-Enlightenment post-modernist model, with its potential for modifying Heidegger’s idea of “situatedness in the world” to allow for an accent on “bodily experience,”¹⁶ has particular relevance to Sontag’s association of her call for sensory recuperation with the existential phenomenological experience of both art and modern life. This mission was necessitated, in part, by the “sensory anesthesia” brought about by “bureaucratic rationalization” in the modern period.¹⁷ Sontag thus implied criticism of the “progressive” ethos of modernity, which is heir to Enlightenment thinkers’ claim for “a strong necessary linkage between the growth of science, rationality, and universal human freedom.”¹⁸

Pragmatism, America’s contribution to Western philosophy, was initiated in the late nineteenth century by Charles Peirce and brought to prominence by William James in the early part of the twentieth century. Further notable American exponents include John Dewey, whose particular importance to this study lies in his application of pragmatist principles to aesthetic theory, and Richard Rorty, whose mature pragmatist writings, dating from 1972,¹⁹ spearheaded a re-invigoration of this prominent tradition in American philosophy. Pragmatism rejects the epistemological claims of both transcendental and empiricist variants of traditional philosophy; for the pragmatist, “a meaningful world emerges through man’s behavioral rapport with that which gives itself in experience.”²⁰ William James gave a distinctive, if contentious, inflection to the practical orientation of pragmatism in his definition of truth as “only the expedient in our way of thinking”²¹ (i.e., “what has fruitful consequences”²²). Pragmatism and phenomenology converge at the point of the intentional mind-world relation²³ as well as understanding that knowledge or meaning is consequential to this relation. Unlike post-structuralism, these philosophies revise rather than eliminate the rational subject of Cartesianism: the “autonomous, self-determined” subject that is “endowed with the capability of a truth-bearing (because truth-creating) introspection.”²⁴

Barbara Rose turned to pragmatism in an attempt to formulate a critical system that was capable of accommodating pop, minimal and the “anti-formal” trends that followed, art that could only be negatively appraised

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by the prevailing theory of art criticism: Greenbergian formalism. Lawrence Alloway also called upon pragmatism to justify the abolition of fixed and absolute aesthetic standards – those that, as in the previously cited case of Greenbergian formalism, were predicated on the foundational beliefs of traditional idealist philosophy – in his proposed non-hierarchical organization of cultural forms: the “fine art-pop art continuum.” This same inclusive theory of culture would assume the theoretical basis of his subsequent interpretation of the iconography of American pop art.

Griffin’s definition of “*deconstructive or eliminative post modernism*” encompassed its, in some instances, “ethical” motivation that he argued was directed towards refusing formation of “totalitarian systems.”²⁵ The clearest reference to this issue on the part of critics featured in this study was made in Barbara Rose’s alignment of Clement Greenberg’s “judgmental criticism” – its evaluative criteria predicated on the foundational or logocentric beliefs of idealist philosophy – with maintenance of the social and economic interests of the ruling capitalist system. She saw this situation as facilitated by the media’s potential for ideological cooption and, importantly, the media context of Greenberg’s judgmental criticism. Rose’s engagement in both social and political reform followed on from her pragmatist-directed critique of the evaluative criteria of Greenbergian formalism, its application in her view appropriate *only* in the case of “color-abstraction.” It also followed on from her understanding that art informed by pragmatist principles delegitimizes the critic in his capacity of arbiter of merit. As exemplified by pop and minimalism, this same art played out an adversarial role. It refused to conform to “a defined specialized mode or medium judged by preordained canons” and thus to serve the “middle class” as either decoration or financial asset – in Rose’s view, the dual role of Greenberg-championed “color-abstraction.”²⁶

Rose’s critique on pragmatist grounds of the capitalist commandeering of Greenbergian formalism complies with a further pragmatist model: “prophetic pragmatism.” Cornel West coined this term to signal the alignment of the “tradition of pragmatism” in American thought with a method of “cultural criticism” centred on the issue of power. West explained that the “political motivation” of pragmatism’s “human inquiry into truth and knowledge” resided in its focus on “the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge” as opposed to that of traditional philosophy on the “search for foundations and quest for certainty.” Its “political substance” lay in transference of “the prerogatives of philosophers,” such as “rational deliberation,” to the populace. Central to the concerns of

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“prophetic pragmatism,” and thus to Rose’s critique of Greenbergian formalism, especially as it concerned the interaction between its judgmental nature and its media context, was opposition to “power structures that lack public accountability,” those that threaten the “precious ideals of individuality and democracy.”²⁷

The second post-modernist model, a variation on the deconstructive one just described, has been formulated in recent sociological writings. David Lyon has explained this as one in which “the culture of post-modernism is taken to be evidence of linked social shifts, referred to as postmodernity.”²⁸ Lyon conceived of post-modernism as a category comprising “cultural and intellectual phenomena” and as identified with three key characteristics: (i) the renunciation of “‘foundationalism’ . . . in the philosophy of science” and, as an extension of this, questioning of the Enlightenment’s central obligations; (ii) ensuing breakdown “of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion” as well as shift in focus from the “universal” to the “local”; (iii) the replacement of the various forms of “word” (for example, the spoken and the visual or “printed”) by “image,” notably the “TV screen.” The first two characteristics are, clearly, compatible with a post-structuralist conception of deconstructive post-modernism. Lyon’s subsequent discussion indicated that he viewed post-modernist thought as presaged by the “intellectual phenomena” of, among others, Nietzsche and Heidegger and as constituted by that of “new luminaries”: the post-structuralists Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard.

Lyon construed post-modernity as a marked social change, one heralded by either the arrival of a new societal form or the inauguration of a new phase of capitalism. Whatever the case, prior methods “of social analysis and political practice” have lost their authority. Two concerns were identified by Lyon as having particular relevance: the conspicuousness of “new information and communication technologies,” including their facilitation of “globalization”; consumerism and its succession of “production” as the hub of the capitalist system.²⁹ In reference to the first, Lyon provided a simple, yet graphic, illustration of his claim for a correspondence between the deconstructive characters of post-modernism (the cultural) and post-modernity (the social).

The global culture facilitated by the spread of electronic technologies . . . does much to relativize once-dominant Western ideas, while the same technologies also enable us to mix-and-match musical tastes or to channel-hop with the TV remote. The forsaking of foundationalism in science and the erosion of hierarchies of knowledge and opinion seem much less surprising or arcane in this light.³⁰

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Zygmunt Bauman's sociological writings illustrate the second "crucial" issue in post-modern society: the centrality of capitalist-consumerism. The major thesis of these is that reproduction of the capitalist system in its consumerist phase is achieved by "individual freedom" in the form of "consumer freedom." At this time, it no longer requires the "traditional mechanisms" of its "modern phase" (when "work in the form of wage labour" was central), such "as *consensus-aimed political legitimation, ideological domination, uniformity of norms promoted by cultural hegemony.*" Instead:

Once consumer choice has been entrenched as the point in which systemic reproduction, social integration and individual life-world are co-ordinated and harmonized – cultural variety, heterogeneity of styles and differentiation of belief systems have become conditions of its success.³¹

Lyon's and Bauman's shared perception of the deconstructive workings of mass communications and capitalist-consumerism and thus deconstructive character of post-modernity was borne out by Alloway's and Rosenberg's respective analyses of pop. Alloway regarded pop as a mirror of the spectrum of visual communications as well as representative of a constitutive channel (painting). His case centred on pop art's use of pre-existing signs disseminated by the mass media in the post-war period as well as the role played by these signs in the constitution of an illusory, man-made world. Alloway's focus on mass communications, however, was distinguished by the patent recognition that this key characteristic of post-war society could not be viewed independently from another: capitalist-consumerism. In this regard, pop art's representation of the "general field of visual communications" was that also of the experience of the spectator-consumer who was "free to move in a society defined by symbols."³² To the extent that this visual field was heterogeneous (a feature that was mirrored in the multiple sources of pop art imagery), it was an expression of the diverse interests of its varied audience. More specifically, it was an expression of consumer-freedom in the sense understood by Bauman: the freedom that was "geared to the market"³³ (and therefore exercised at the level of consumer choice); the freedom that was crucial for the reproduction of the capitalist system in its consumerist phase.

Consistent with both Alloway and Lyon, Rosenberg viewed the workings of mass communications and capitalist-consumerism as symbiotically linked. He noted that under the impact of mechanical reproduction in its technologically advanced post-war form "the distinction between original and copy" had narrowed with the result that art had become part of the

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“media system.” This meant that it had been “brought into conformity with the total mechanism of production and distribution” and was subject, therefore, to the same “promotion and marketing techniques” as any other commodity within this system.³⁴ The result, or, in Rosenberg’s mind, potential result, of this situation was one in which energy was deflected from creation of the work of art to that of the artist’s “alter ego” (or brand-name). In the extreme case of Warhol, this resulted in the “de-definition” of art (i.e., the narrowing of distinctions between art and other commodities in the capitalist system) to the stage where all that remained of art was “the fiction of the artist.”³⁵

Rosenberg’s understanding that Warhol’s commodified art was an outcome of capitalist-consumerism has particular relevance to Zygmunt Bauman’s arguments. The institutional support commanded by Warhol’s art was explained by Rosenberg in terms that relate to Bauman’s observation that in the absence of the authority of “universally binding standards,” those that are without relevance in the consumerist phase of capitalism, “cultural authorities” opt for the only alternative: turning themselves in “market forces.”³⁶

Leo Steinberg’s conception of the “flatbed” picture plane characteristic of sixties’ painting provided the closest support for Lyon’s claim of a correlation between the “deconstructive” character of post-modernism and that of the social transformation known as post-modernity. Symbolic of any surface on which information is recorded, the “flatbed” picture plane emerged in response to a “new order of experience”: the mediate world created by mass communications in their advanced post-war form and, thus, role of “key simulation machines.”³⁷ He termed this picture plane “post-Modernist” because of its decisive rupture with that of modernist painting, as theorized by Greenberg in the 1965 version of “Modernist Painting.”³⁸ By the terms of Steinberg’s argument, however, it represented an equally convincing break with the picture plane of traditional painting (in this, nullifying, or, at least, discrediting Greenberg’s distinction between the two). As distinct from the “flatbed” picture plane of “post-Modernist” painting, one indicative of a fundamental shift in the major theme of art from nature to culture, both imply an order of experience that was consistent with man’s first-hand optical knowledge of the organic and presumably objective world.

The third post-modernist model relevant to this study concerns the perception of a distinct and self-contained phase of American post-modernism during the sixties. The most comprehensive case was advanced by Andreas Huyssen, who described post-modernism in its 1960’s American

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manifestation as “avantgardist” after its revitalization of the “European avantgarde” in the direction of “the Duchamp-Cage-Warhol axis.” American post-modernism’s orientation towards the future, decisive break with the past and “crisis and generational conflict” he construed as strikingly similar to the “imagination” demonstrated previously by the “continental avantgarde.” This “imagination,” however, was enacted against a specifically American historical backdrop characterized by various platforms of protest, including those either directly relevant or tangential to critical responses to pop that are among those discussed in this study: “the anti-war movement and the counter-culture.”³⁹

Andreas Huyssen’s account of an avantgardist phase of American post-modernism during the sixties differed in a number of respects to the post-modernist consciousness generated by critical responses to pop art during this period.⁴⁰ Measured by these, Huyssen’s account simplified individual contributions to the American post-modernist character. Huyssen limited Sontag’s post-modernism, for example, to “camp and a new sensibility” whereas, equally, it could be identified with the further post-modernist expressions of “genital enlightenment” and “literature of silence,” which he attributed to Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan respectively. To the same degree Huyssen was guilty of distorting the character of American post-modernism during the 1960s. “The technological optimism of segments of the 1920s avantgarde” – which he identified as characteristic of “early post-modernism” and as evidence of its “continuity with the international tradition of the modern”⁴¹ – was only partly true of critics featured in this study. More commonly, this attitude sat alongside one critical of modern technological society and its products. This was certainly the case with Rose who, on the one hand, expressed keen admiration for the authentic forms of popular expression that resulted from the interaction of art and technology, as in the prime example of “rock music,” but, on the other, expressed wariness of the media because of its potential for ideological annexation.⁴² A similar ambiguity marked Sontag’s response to technology. On the one hand, she conceived of exemplary art in the present period as that which derives spontaneously and in abundance from “science and technology.”⁴³ On the other, Sontag was scathing of the role played by the technological reproduction of language in both the devaluation of language and intensification of its mediate state.⁴⁴ Alloway’s seemingly uncritical and unqualified enthusiasm for mass communications in their sophisticated post-war form was outwardly an endorsement of the progressive ethos of modernity, the abandonment of which was regarded by Huyssen as a defining quality of post-modernism.⁴⁵ This recognition,

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nonetheless, must be tempered by the realization that Alloway's approval of mass communications was in no small measure due to their crucial role in facilitating man's adaptation to his ever-transforming urban environment and therefore efficacy in mitigating the darker aspects of modernity's emphatic forward momentum.⁴⁶

In a further example of his misrepresentation of the character of American post-modernism, Huyssen failed to acknowledge the existence of both phenomenological and pragmatist currents in American post-modernism of the 1960s and, thus, their role in providing deconstructive alternatives to post-structuralism. It is argued in this study that phenomenology represented the major theoretical source of Sontag's, and to a lesser degree, Kozloff's inquiry into the silencing of language. Huyssen's failure to acknowledge this aspect of American post-modernism of the 1960s was tied to his failure also to discuss in any detail the "literature of silence," despite his recognition that it represented one avenue of post-modernism explored by American critics during the 1960s.⁴⁷ A number of other flaws in Huyssen's account follow, including its non-observance of those aspects of 1960's American post-modernism that presaged or, alternatively, represented a parallel to later post-modernist phases. Prominent among these is the relationship between the "literature of silence" and post-structuralism. This was despite his claim that both are closely linked with the modern.⁴⁸ A further example concerns Harold Rosenberg's conception of pop as an outcome of the post-modern condition or, alternatively, of the modern condition in its distinctive post-war phase. His negative assessment of pop on these grounds resulted from the evidence it presented of the dissolution of "self" by totalitarian forces at work in post-war society.⁴⁹ Rosenberg's critique of pop and, through this, that of the post-modern condition, bears some relation to the critical reactions to post-modernity that Charles Jencks has seen as belonging to a stage in the formulation of concepts of post-modernism that has extended from 1980 to the present.⁵⁰ It can be related in particular to critiques, such as that conducted by Jean Baudrillard, that are heir to the critical stance adopted by Marxist cultural theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, notably Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. These theorists were unanimous in their rejection of the thesis responsible for modernity's emphasis on "progress" as well as of the role envisaged for science (in the guise of technology) in the realization of its aims. They saw it as a continuation of Enlightenment thinkers' claims for the interrelationship "between the growth of science, rationality, and universal human freedom."⁵¹

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However, unlike the bleak view of social control presented, for example, by either Jean Baudrillard or Herbert Marcuse,⁵² Rosenberg considered that totalitarian forces were opposable; salvation lay within the individual and concerned an existentialist-directed choice between a life lived in terms of “second-hand values,” “the official ones of a given time or place,” and a life lived in terms of “genuine values,” those that must be “earned . . . in the joys and agonies of immediate personal experience.”⁵³ Rosenberg’s understanding that the “citizenry in action”⁵⁴ could bring about social reform was broadly consistent with Andreas Huyssen’s description of the heady mission of the “historical avantgarde” as that of changing “life,” “society,” and the “world” – the “overload of responsibilities” on which it foundered. Forging a closer link between Rosenberg’s existentialist social reform and the mission of the historical avantgarde, Huyssen considered that the latter “lived on in France through the 1950s and 1960s embodied in the figure of [the existentialist philosopher and personal friend of Rosenberg⁵⁵] Jean Paul Sartre.”⁵⁶ Rosenberg’s view that totalitarianism could be defeated at the level of individual resistance and in the existentialist manner of the individual’s realization of “his own true self,”⁵⁷ adds weight to Huyssen’s argument concerning the adversarial social role and thus avantgardist character of American post-modernism during the sixties. Equally, however, it can be identified with prophetic pragmatism’s critique and resistance of any semblance of subjection, the ethical motivation for which was conservation of the cherished principles “of creative democracy and individuality.”⁵⁸

In other respects, however, the findings of this study support Huyssen’s avantgardist model of post-modernism, including its immediate stimulus in American historical factors. Those most relevant to this study concern the counter-culture and its program of liberation. For example, Susan Sontag’s contribution to the “sex avantgardes”⁵⁹ and, by the terms of Huyssen’s argument, American post-modernism in the 1960s, rested on the distinctive sexual inflection she gave to her call for recuperation of the senses. The assault on rationality that the restoration of sensory experience necessarily incurred was largely justified by existential phenomenology’s elimination of the mind-body duality of Cartesianism. A more marked example of Sontag’s contribution to the “sex avantgardes” took place in her review of Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*, in which she linked the subjects of “eroticism” and “liberty.” Alluding to the liberationist and reformatory aims of the American counter-culture as well as to the provincialism that it can be argued was a requisite condition of its existence, Sontag considered that only now in America were these subjects commanding the “serious” contemplation that they have long enjoyed in France.⁶⁰ Son-

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tag's equation of sexual expression with human freedom conformed, no doubt, to the "genital enlightenment" that Huyssen identified as part of the literary critic Leslie Fiedler's contribution to post-modernism in its 1960's, specifically American, phase.⁶¹

Barbara Rose's call for the abolition of "judgmental criticism," especially in the form of Greenbergian formalism, on the grounds of its relationship to capitalist hegemony, complied with a further characteristic of avantgardism that Huyssen identified in early post-modernism: a subversive assault on "the 'institution art.'" Huyssen, as he acknowledged, used this term in the sense defined by Peter Bürger in *The Theory of the Avantgarde* to refer "to the ways in which art's role in society is perceived and defined . . . [and] to ways in which art is produced, marketed, distributed and consumed." In reference to Bürger's argument, Huyssen claimed that the "historical avantgarde's" subversion of both "cultural institutions" and conventional representative methods could only take place in a "society" in which élite art provided vital support for "a cultural establishment and its claims to aesthetic knowledge."⁶² Its example, in Huyssen's opinion, served to inspire American post-modernism in the sixties, at a time when high art had become institutionalized, even if the art domesticated in this manner was "modernism," the traditional function of which was to repel institutionalization.

Rose's and Huyssen's respective arguments, however, focused on different aspects of the so-called institutionalization of art. That of Rose was directed towards the institutionalization of Greenbergian formalism. Huyssen made clear reference to Abstract Expressionism in his claim that the rebellion of the 1960s was in response to the type of modernism that had become both constituent "of the liberal-conservative consensus" and "propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anti-communism."⁶³ Within this scheme, pop assumed an adversarial role. Huyssen acknowledged the "cooption [of the "pop avantgarde"] through commodification," in this confirming the case outlined by Rosenberg in "D. M. Z. Vanguardism."⁶⁴ He considered, nonetheless, that it "retained a certain cutting edge in its proximity to the 1960s culture of confrontation." Rose expressed a similar view in the sixties in her account of pop as guided by a pragmatist aesthetic and, on these grounds, as disruptive of the social, economic, and "psychological" fabric of post-war America.⁶⁵ During this same period, however, Rosenberg regarded pop art's capitulation to the economic dictates of capitalism and the avantgarde's subversion of either this or any other prevailing system as mutually exclusive acts. He stated without equivocation that from the time of pop "no influential American art

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movement has been either overtly or tacitly hostile to the 'majority culture.'"66

Huysen speculated that the "temporal imagination" of American post-modernism in its sixties' phase, though displayed previously by the "continental avantgarde," responded in the first instance to a specific "historical constellation." Given that he identified one aspect of this "temporal imagination" as "a powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers,"67 his argument was pre-figured in a further aspect of Rose's "post-modernist" theorization of pop. Rose had argued for an ideological and aesthetic polarity in sixties' art between "color-abstraction," on the one hand, and pop and minimal art, on the other. Whereas "color-abstraction," underpinned by an idealist philosophy and thus indicative of traditional values of Western culture, was representative of Europe (the past), pop and minimal art, underpinned by pragmatism, "the only uniquely American contribution to philosophic inquiry," was representative instead of American culture (the future).68 Rose's analysis of pop and minimal art, while complying with Huysen's loosely defined "temporal imagination," tallied more closely with certain of the "fundamental historical processes" that Cornel West in recent time has cited as implicated in the linked advent of post-modernity and "prophetic pragmatism": "the end of the European Age (1492-1945)" and "the emergence of the United States as the world power."69

A number of the post-modernist concepts that were labelled "post-modernist" as well as formulated in the field of American literary criticism either prior to or during the period under review are relevant to the post-modernist consciousness generated by pop. They will be discussed, where relevant, throughout the study. However, the American literary academic Ihab Hassan's writings on post-modernism, taken in their entirety, combine all of the features of deconstructive post-modernism that this study has identified as characteristic of American post-modernism in the sixties. Many of these were present as early as 1971 in the post-modernist model he outlined in "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography." This had been published prior to Hassan's exposure to post-structuralism (or at least reference to it in his post-modernist writings), prior to the escalation of "post-modernism" into a worldview, and prior to the greater identification of its dominant deconstructive form with post-structuralism. Hassan's 1971 account of deconstructive post-modernism demands some attention, given not only its correspondence to a number of aspects of the critical reception of American pop art examined in this study but also its proximity to the temporal and cultural parameters of this study.

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In his 1971 formulation, Hassan conceived of post-modernism as a transformation in modernism, one discerned by viewing the latter in retrospect.⁷⁰ He defined it in a diffuse, encyclopaedic fashion and listed its deconstructive characteristics in a series of "Post-modernist Notes," which had been prompted by "Modernist Rubrics." Under the rubric of "Antinomianism," for example, Hassan cited the post-modernist characteristics of "Counter Cultures, political and otherwise" and "Counter Western 'ways' or metaphysics," as represented by "Zen, Buddhism, Hinduism." Included in Hassan's response to "Experimentalism" was "open, discontinuous, improvisational, indeterminate, or aleatory structures" as well as "intermedia, the fusion of forms, the confusion of realms."⁷¹ In accord with the cross-disciplinary approach that Charles Jencks considered a stimulus to the broadly conceived post-modernist movement,⁷² Hassan applied his post-modernist model beyond literature to encompass non-verbal forms of language. Under the modernist rubric of "Dehumanization," and clearly with Warhol's art in mind, he included "abstraction taken to the limit and coming back as New Concreteness: the found object, the signed Brillo box or soup can."⁷³

Consistent with his initial use of the term "post-modernism" in the previous year,⁷⁴ Hassan classified "languages of silence" as among the themes of "Post-modernist criticism." In a "chronology" of post-modernist criticism, he placed his own writings on "languages of silence" in the company of those of George Steiner and Susan Sontag.⁷⁵ This association was made again in "Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence" (1977-8), in which Hassan described Steiner and Sontag, along with himself, as expounders of the condition of silence.⁷⁶

In his 1971 account of post-modernism, Hassan forged a connection between the philosophers Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Sartre, who have investigated "the disease of verbal systems" and writers from a later period, such as John Cage, Norman O. Brown, and Elie Wiesel, who "have listened intently to the sounds of silence in art or politics, sex, morality, or religion."⁷⁷ With the exception of Wiesel, Hassan thus cited key sources of Susan Sontag's justification for silent art or, alternatively, silent art's silencing of the critic. By linking the philosophers Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Sartre with the "languages of silence," Hassan confirmed this study's finding that the theorization of "silent" language on the part of American literary and, and in the case of Max Kozloff, art critics during the sixties was part of the broader critique of language that had been conducted primarily in the field of philosophy and throughout the twentieth century.

In a separate section within his 1971 account of post-modernism, Hassan described a common modernist and post-modernist response to

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“Dehumanization” as the disappearance of the “old Realism” and its increasing replacement by “illusionism” in art as well as life. By this he meant either the replacement or obscuring of objective reality by a mediate, illusory, and man-made world. Reinforcing the claims of both the “social” critics and the post-modernist theorist David Lyon about the deconstructive character of mass communications in their post-war phase and hence of post-modernity, Hassan noted the media’s contribution “to this process in Postmodern society.” It was alluded to once again in his “post-modernist” response to the modernist rubric of “Technologism,” as it concerned “boundless dispersal by media.”

The demise of the “old Realism,” in Hassan’s opinion, necessitated “revision of the Self.” In post-modernism, this revision included that associated with “phenomenology (Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty)” as well as “*nouveau roman*” as represented by “Sarraute, Butor, Robbe-Grillet.”⁷⁸ Hassan’s claim has particular relevance to Sontag’s linkage of “silent” language with a phenomenological view of human consciousness; Robbe-Grillet’s theorization of *nouveau roman* and Roland Barthes’s theorization of Robbe-Grillet’s contribution to *nouveau roman* were both prime mediatory sources of phenomenology for Sontag’s theorization of silent art’s silencing of the critic.

Hassan’s understanding of “Realism” in “art” was consistent with the mimetic belief that reality “resided in the objective external world” and that art could reflect “this objective form.”⁷⁹ As with his understanding of “Realism” in “life,” it implied an identification with the Cartesian subject: the “subjective self reflecting on an objective world exterior to it.”⁸⁰ Hassan implied that from a post-modernist perspective the end of the “objective” world or, at least, difficulty in gaining access to it meant the end also of the authority of Cartesianism, both its “spectatorial and intellectualist”⁸¹ epistemology and conception of the “self.” In Hassan’s estimation, phenomenology would provide a more appropriate and more plausible explanation of human consciousness at a time in which the objective world was being replaced, or increasingly disguised, by the mediate one created by the media. Phenomenology, pivotal on the tenet of intentionality of consciousness and thus on the abandonment of the subject-object dualism of Cartesianism, espouses the view that the world cannot be known as it is. Instead, “the object [of consciousness] is always restructured by the perceiving mind.”⁸²

Sontag’s rejection of the realist paradigm, it will be argued, was also predicated on a phenomenological view of human consciousness. This position was implicit in her justification for the need to silence the critic and,

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by these means, relieve him of his interpretive role. The continuance of this role, she considered, was particularly inappropriate in the face of art such as pop that, as evidenced by the “uninterpretable” nature of its literal imagery, was prompted “by a flight from interpretation.” Sontag blamed Western critics’ persistence in interpreting art on the continuing influence of “the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation,”⁸³ the central assumption of which was that art could and should mirror the outer world in its “objective” form.⁸⁴

Unlike the deconstructive post-modernism revealed in both Rose’s and Alloway’s critical reception of pop during the sixties, pragmatism assumed only a minor place in Hassan’s 1971 formulation. Its inclusion at all rested on a fleeting reference to Morse Peckham’s conception of art as “a disjunctive category, established by convention” as well as “not a category of perceptual fields, but of role-playing.”⁸⁵ Hassan acknowledged the source of these observations as Peckham’s *Man’s Rage for Chaos*, a prime influence on Barbara Rose’s pragmatist interpretation of pop and minimal art. The minor place assigned to pragmatism in Hassan’s post-modernist writings at this stage continued in those produced throughout the seventies. A further if equally rare mention of it is made in the “margins” of “Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence” (1977). Hassan then identified William James, the pioneering pragmatist philosopher and contemporary of Nietzsche, as sympathetic to the tenets of (deconstructive) post-modernism. In the same essay, as indicated by his inclusion of major first- and second-generation post-structuralists in a lengthy list of descendants of “French Nietzsche,”⁸⁶ he accorded post-structuralism a prominent position in his deconstructive post-modernist model (far more so than pragmatism at this stage).

In Hassan’s publications on post-modernism from a decade later, however, pragmatism took centre stage. The major pragmatist influence was William James, especially his concept of a “pluralistic universe.”⁸⁷ In “Prospects in Retrospect” (1987), the concluding essay of *The Post-modern Turn* (1987), Hassan defined pragmatic pluralism as “no philosophical system” but, rather, as “the very condition of our existence in the world.” As Hassan noted: “so long as two minds seek to apprehend that universe, no overwhelming force or sweet seduction, no theory whatever, will reduce it to one.”⁸⁸

In a publication from the same year, and in implicit defence of his by now clear favouring of the pragmatist argument for elimination of a worldview,⁸⁹ Hassan sought support in the form of Yves Bonnefoy, who succeeded Roland Barthes at the Collège de France, to indicate a turn in the “deconstructive mood” in France, the home of post-structuralism. Bonnefoy,

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he noted, called in his initial “address of 1981 . . . for a re-turn to being or presence,” one that alluded to a realignment of “language” with “human relations” and, as construed by Hassan, a suggestion “of pragmatism.”

Guided in part by the ideas of Richard Rorty, the most prominent member of the pragmatist movement in its reinvigorated contemporary phase, Hassan considered that pragmatism’s “commitment to *beliefs in action* [i.e., those arising from man’s behavioral interaction with the world] *rather than ironies of theory* . . . [invested it] with a moral and social concern that textualism” lacked. Pragmatism was further described as “intimate with all the uncertainties of our post-modern condition without quiescence, sterility, or abdication of judgment.” Moreover, it offered “genuine possibilities of thought and action” in its avoidance of “the extremes of philosophic skepticism and ideological dogmatism,” characteristics that, he noted, “Michael Polanyi believed, once joined to usher political totalitarianism in Continental Europe.”⁹⁰

Hassan’s by now patent disenchantment with post-structuralism rested on two main factors. One of these, Hassan’s negative reference to “philosophic skepticism,” was presumably directed at post-structuralism’s delegitimizing activity. Art Berman has pointed out that a common supposition of post-structuralist theorists arose from their questioning of Ferdinand de Saussure’s clear distinction between signifiers and signifieds. They argued, instead, “that the chain of signifiers cannot yield irreducible signifieds.” “What any signifier signifies . . . cannot be divulged except by using more words, more signifiers” with the result that language points to itself and “the idea of a knowable reality independent of language is rejected.”⁹¹ The second factor concerns Hassan’s criticism of “textualism” on the grounds of its absence of “a moral and social concern.” This can be construed as criticism of the “aesthetic” nature of post-structuralist critical activity that, as explained by Terry Eagleton, conceives of the “work” as a “text” and therefore not as “a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings” but rather “as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning.”⁹² This narrow view of both the nature and the scope of post-structuralist critical activity, one that ignores the application of post-structuralist findings on language to a broad cultural critique,⁹³ complies with that of Andreas Huyssen. Distinguishing post-structuralist activity from avantgardism, Huyssen noted that it purports to comment on nothing other than “language games, . . . epistemology and the aesthetic.”⁹⁴

The ethical motivation that Hassan ascribed to pragmatism, if only cursorily indicated, invites identification with Cornel West’s “prophetic” vari-

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ant. Pragmatism's focus on human agency in the production of knowledge and truth is transferred in prophetic pragmatism to a critique of the alignment of forms of knowledge and oppressive social practices. Cornel West saw Foucault's post-structuralism and prophetic pragmatism as bound by a common foe: "forms of subjection . . . economic exploitation, state repression, and bureaucratic domination." Unlike the commentary and refusals of Foucault's post-structuralism, however, in which the centred subject has been banished, those of prophetic pragmatism are directed by the precious principles "of creative democracy and individuality."⁹⁵ Almost twenty years before pragmatism's capacity for cultural critique would become a feature, if understated feature, of Hassan's deconstructive post-modernism, it was one of Barbara Rose's. This concerned her pragmatist theorization of pop and minimal art, including its adversarial social role, as well as her pragmatist-directed critique of the judgmental function of Greenbergian formalism on the grounds that this rendered it vulnerable to cooption by the prevailing capitalist system.

At the very time that the uniquely American philosophy of pragmatism – in both its pluralistic and culturally critical forms – held centre stage in his theorization of deconstructive post-modernism, Hassan confirmed Andreas Huyssen's identification of the specifically American "historical" backdrop against which post-modernism of the 1960s was enacted.⁹⁶ Huyssen saw this as characterized by a "protest culture" whose appellation "counter-culture" projected "an image of an avantgarde leading the way to an alternative kind of society."⁹⁷ In "Prospects in Retrospect," Hassan noted in a similar fashion that post-modernism may well have been invigorated by, if not derived from, the "liberationist and countercultural" impulses that characterized America in the sixties. Justifying both this claim as well as that concerning the recent shift in deconstruction, and hence in deconstructive post-modernism, away from post-structuralism to pragmatism, Hassan pointed out that the American variant of post-modernism revealed it to be "utopian" and "positive" and "not only delegitimizing" as asserted by French (presumably post-structuralist) critics in recent times.⁹⁸

In "Pluralism in Post-modern Perspective" (1986), Hassan listed decanonization as among the eleven features that defined post-modernism's "cultural field." Consciously aligning "decanonization" with Lyotard's "delegitimation' of the mastercodes in society," Hassan considered that "this applies to all canons, all conventions of authority."⁹⁹ The critics featured in this study, however, did not engage in the indiscriminate decanonization (or "ultra-avantgardism"¹⁰⁰) described by Hassan. Instead, they carried out a subversion of critical canons that, in the face of the evidence

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presented by pop and, in some arguments, by further examples of “anonymous” contemporary art, could no longer compel conviction. Two canons, in particular, met this fate: Clement Greenberg’s formalist theory of art, the prevailing critical mode and account of modernist art during the sixties; Realism and allied mimetic theories of representation.

Regardless of whether designated “social” or “philosophical,” all of the “art” critics featured in this study challenged the premises of Greenberg’s modernist and formalist canon or, in some instances, comparable canons. Three main aspects of Greenberg’s canon were targeted for criticism. First, its essentialism. In “Modernist Painting” (1961), Greenberg defined the “essence of modernism” as “the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself . . . in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.” This led to the elimination “from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.” In painting, this meant stressing the inescapable “flatness of the surface” because only flatness belonged exclusively to “pictorial art.” The “self-critical” tendency of modernism, Greenberg saw as an “exacerbation” of that of the philosophy of the Enlightenment figure Immanuel Kant – “the first real modernist”¹⁰¹ – who had distinguished between the various spheres of knowledge: “aesthetic judgement,” “practical reason (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge).”¹⁰²

The “social” critics, without exception, argued for the irrelevance of a credo of “purified categories” (and even more for its theoretical justification in German epistemology from the eighteenth century and thus pre-industrial times) during a period when boundaries between both disciplines and cultural realms had been dissolved. This, it was argued, was a consequence of the deconstructive workings of mass communications and capitalist-consumerism: the defining and symbiotic features of post-war societal form and thus of post-modernity. Leo Steinberg’s argument concerning the “flatbed” picture plane, the characteristic picture plane of sixties’ art that had emerged in response to the “new order of experience” effected by the mass media, was predicated on precisely this case.¹⁰³ For Alloway, evidence presented in pop of signs that were common to both this movement in art and popular culture substantiated his functionalist and non-essentialist view that art, including pop art, was a form of visual communication “not different in kind from other forms of visual communication.”¹⁰⁴ Harold Rosenberg’s argument was founded on art’s reproduction by the media and subsequent absorption into the “media system” with the result that distinctions between art and other cultural forms were nar-

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rowed. Somewhat pejoratively, however, it focused on art's "deformation and loss of identity," one that was consistent with its survival at the junctures of mass media, craft and "applied sciences."¹⁰⁵

The second aspect of Greenberg's canon to be subjected to criticism was its underlying cultural assumptions. These were responsible for his conception of the endeavour of the avant-garde: preservation of cultural standards and association of the highest of these with "purity of medium." Moreover, they were implicit in all of Greenberg's writings on modernist and hence formalist art, including those such as "Modernist Painting" that were outwardly unconcerned with cultural theory. Greenberg's cultural position was initially stated and found its clearest expression in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). This combined a critique of capitalist culture and concern for the survival of "genuine culture" under capitalism with a stance on both avantgarde art and its broader cultural role. Greenberg had arrived at his position by conflating an art-for-art's sake philosophy and Trotskyist ideas, those related to the belief that the absolute freedom of art was the first condition of its "objective enriching of culture."¹⁰⁶

Reflecting on the situation at hand, Greenberg saw the avant-garde's survival and, therefore, that of "living culture," as under threat on two counts: the rapidly shrinking class of the "rich and cultivated," the avant-garde's necessary social base and source of income; the emergence of mass culture (the rear-garde), simultaneous to that of the avant-garde and its commodities that he termed kitsch. Kitsch, an academicized form of avant-garde or "genuine" culture, arose to meet the demands of a universally literate (literacy, in this new situation, was no longer the "exclusive concomitant of refined tastes") and industrialized society. Its inferiority was conditioned by industrial capitalism's related demands of mass intelligibility and appeal and profitability, the same profitability that Greenberg considered "a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself."¹⁰⁷

The rejection of Greenberg's conception of an oppositional as well as hierarchical relationship between mass and high culture by critics featured in this study took one of two forms. First, disagreement with Greenberg's negative appraisal of the products of mass culture. Lawrence Alloway, as a case in point, strongly objected to Greenberg's perception of kitsch – Greenberg's uniformly discriminatory term for the various forms of mass culture – as "academic" in the sense of taken from the "debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture."¹⁰⁸ Alloway perceived the mass arts, instead, as marked by "topicality and a rapid rate of change,"¹⁰⁹ qualities that he regarded were consistent with their status as products of technologically oriented "industrial civilization." In accord with his focus on

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art's "human use," Alloway deflected attention from the question of "quality" in the mass arts to that of their crucial and vital role – one determined by their "topicality" – in facilitating man's adaptation to his ever-changing environment.

Barbara Rose, in an analysis of the state of culture since 1950 and in a spirit as positive as Alloway's, distinguished authentic manifestations of popular expression such as "intermedia," those that are wholly "natural, spontaneous, and unselfconscious," from "alienated *kitsch*" and its mere mimicry of "elitist styles."¹¹⁰ She reserved the pejorative term "*kitsch*" for those forms of mass art that exhibited the parasitic dependence on high art that Greenberg had previously described in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."¹¹¹ Authentic popular expression, by way of contrast, was marked by a vitality; in terms of the contemporary situation and in the supreme example of "rock music" it was one that was unequalled by art (including music) produced in the "elite" sphere.¹¹² In this understanding, she departed from Greenberg who saw *kitsch*, and thus mass art in total, as providing "something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor [and thus vitality]," only in "accidental and isolated instances."¹¹³

A further aspect of Rose's analysis of the cultural situation since 1950 indicates the second ground for disagreement with Greenberg's cultural theory: the "death" of the avant-garde. In Rose's opinion, the avant-garde's disappearance coincided with "the economic dissociation of art from society which defines the situation of the avant-garde."¹¹⁴ Harold Rosenberg disputed the notion of "vanguardism" on identical grounds. In the case of pop art, evidence for his argument resided in its commodified character (one that blurred distinctions between *élite* and mass art) as well as in its public and institutional "success." The acknowledged reference point for Rosenberg's argument, however, was Renato Poggioli's account of the alienation of the artist from majority culture, as outlined in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968).

The third aspect of Greenberg's modernist canon to attract censure was the fixed and absolute nature of its evaluative criteria. These were predicated on the foundationalist beliefs of idealist philosophy and, in the form they would assume in "Modernist Painting" (1960), concerned the linkage of "quality" in art in the modern period with "purity of medium." Criticism of Greenberg's evaluative criteria on the part of critics featured in this study was conducted in the terms of the deconstructive philosophies of either pragmatism or phenomenology. Pragmatism rejects the accounts of "meaning" arrived at by both idealist and empiricist philosophies. Instead, it holds that it comes "to be in man's behavioral rapport with that which

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gives itself in experience.”¹¹⁵ Barbara Rose interpreted John Cage’s understanding of art in this pragmatist sense as “a certain kind of *activity*” rather than “a defined specialized mode or medium judged by preordained canons.”¹¹⁶ In Rose’s view, art illustrative of the pragmatist aesthetic, such as pop and minimal art, could not be judged by a changeless standard of quality,¹¹⁷ namely that espoused by Greenbergian formalism and reigning theory of art.

Pragmatism, as previously indicated, was the philosophical attitude governing Lawrence Alloway’s formulation of the “fine art-pop art continuum”: the inclusive theory of both art and culture that Alloway developed in Britain in the late 1950s and that in the next decade served as the theoretical basis of his interpretation of American pop art. The “fine art-pop art continuum” was an attempt to provide an unprejudiced account of the nature of artistic production under industrial capitalism in its post-war and hence technologically advanced and consumerist form. Alloway’s formulation of this theory took place prior to that of Greenberg’s modernist canon, at least in the refined and definitive form it would assume in “Modernist Painting.” His conscious target was the “two-culture” theory responsible for the hierarchical organization of mass and high art, especially as outlined by Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939). The inflexible nature of the evaluative criteria of this latter source – their formalist nature at this stage directed by an art-for-art’s sake philosophy – was unable to accommodate transformations in the societal form and, for this reason, in art responsive to that form.

A further conscious target of Alloway’s critique of traditional aesthetics comprised the “eternal truths”¹¹⁸ that informed the British art theorist Herbert Read’s account of art in the machine age. As indicated in *Art and Industry* (1933), Read’s view of machine art was progressive to the extent that he believed that traditional ideals of beauty had little place in the machine age when the processes of production were entirely different. Ultimately, however, Read measured the art of the machine by traditional humanist values, those stemming from the belief that “the artist’s power and knowledge are implicitly or explicitly analogous to God’s.”¹¹⁹ Read could therefore claim that the worth of machine art was directly proportionate to the “sensibility and genius” of its designer.¹²⁰

Max Kozloff’s objection to the evaluative criteria of Greenberg’s modernist canon was the same as that belonging to any other critical system that judged art according to pre-ordained theories and standards. With specific reference to the critics Greenberg and Rosenberg and, hence, to their respective formalist and existentialist critical positions, Kozloff observed

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that they were unable to view art independent “from their own systems or ideologies.”¹²¹ In an attempt to avoid the pre-judgment of art based on an “arbitrary hierarchy of values” as well as to acknowledge those aspects of art most relevant to the critic’s direct experience, Kozloff proposed a critical stance derived from a phenomenological view of human consciousness. This was calculated to free the experience of art from contamination by prior knowledge, that which obscured the critic’s “verifiable consciousness.”¹²² His ambition in this regard is intelligible only in terms of the goal of Edmund Husserl’s epistemological phenomenology: “cognition that is absolutely certain.”¹²³

Finally, of equal importance to this study is the target of “decanonization” represented by realism and associated mimetic theories of representation, fundamental to which was the belief that reality resided “in the objective, external world, and art was an imitation of this objective form.”¹²⁴ The “social” critics without exception distinguished between realism – “the artist’s perception of objects in space and their translation into iconic, or faithful signs” – and pop art – the representation of “material that already exists as signs.”¹²⁵ This distinction stemmed from their common perception of the role played by mass communications in the post-war period in the proliferation of signs and symbols in society and therefore in the increasingly mediate nature of contemporary experience in which “no reality claims to be more real than its representation.”¹²⁶

The cultural critic Susan Sontag was equally concerned with subverting the authority of realism. However, as explained in relation to Ihab Hassan’s revision of the subject in the post-modernist period, her objections were manifested in criticism of the critic’s interpretive role that she saw as inappropriate in the modern period when art, as exemplified by the “literal” imagery of pop art, was, clearly, calculated to frustrate interpretation. To the extent that realist art rests on the mimetic assumption that it is a reflection of the world in its “external” and “objective” form,¹²⁷ it implies agreement with the “spectatorial and intellectualist epistemology” of Cartesianism.¹²⁸ Sontag endorsed, instead, a phenomenological view of human consciousness. This holds that the world cannot be known in any objective form, but, rather, in a manner that arises from the intentional mind-world relation.