Modernism and Mass Culture
in the Visual Arts

What is to be made of the continuing involvement between modernist art and the materials of low or mass culture? From its beginnings, the artistic avant-garde has discovered, renewed, or re-invented itself by identifying with marginal, “non-artistic” forms of expressivity and display—forms improvised by other social groups out of the degraded materials of capitalist manufacture. Manet’s *Olympia* offered a bewildered middle-class public the flattened pictorial economy of the cheap sign or carnival backdrop, the pose and allegories of contemporary pornography superimposed over those of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. For both Manet and Baudelaire, can their invention of powerful models of modernist practice be separated from the seductive and nauseating image the capitalist city seemed to be constructing for itself? Similarly, can the Impressionist discovery of painting as a field of both particularized and diffuse sensual play be imagined separately from the new spaces of commercial pleasure the painters seem rarely to have left, spaces whose packaged diversions were themselves contrived in an analogous pattern? The identification with the social practices of mass diversion—whether uncritically reproduced, caricatured or transformed into abstract *Arcadias*—remains a durable constant in early modernism. The actual debris of that world makes its appearance in Cubist and Dada collage. And even the most austere and hermetic of twentieth-century abstractionists, Piet Mondrian, anchored the culmination of decades of formal research in a delighted discovery of American traffic, neon, and commercialized Black music. In recent history, this dialectic has repeated itself most vividly in the paintings, assemblages, and Happenings of the artists who arrived on the heels of the New York School: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol.
How fundamental is this repeated pattern to the history of modernism? Yes, it has to be conceded, low-cultural forms are time and again called upon to displace and estrange the deadening givens of accepted practice, and some residuum of these forms is visible in many works of modernist art. But might not such gestures be little more than means to an end, weapons in a necessary, aggressive clearing of space, which are discarded when their work is done? This has indeed been the prevailing argument on those occasions when modernism’s practitioners and apologists have addressed the problem, even in those instances where the inclusion of refractory material drawn from low culture was most conspicuous and provocative. In the early history of modernist painting, Manet’s images of the 1860s represent one such episode, matched two decades later by Seurat’s depiction of the cut-rate commercial diversions of Paris. And each of these confrontations between high and low culture was addressed in a key piece of writing by an artistic peer who assigned the popular component to a securely secondary position.

In the case of Manet (pl. 1), the argument came from Stiphane Mallarmi writing (in English) in 1876. It was true, he wrote, that the painter began with Parisian lowlife: “Captivating and repulsive at the same time, eccentric, and new, such types as were needed in our ambient lives.” But the poet, in the most powerful reading of Manet’s art produced in the nineteenth century, regarded these subjects as merely tactical and temporary. He was looking back at the work of the 1860s with relief that the absinthe drinkers, dissolute picnics, and upstart whores had faded from view. Left in their place was a cool, self-regarding formal precision, dispassionate technique as the principal site of meaning, behind which the social referent had retreated; the art of painting had overtaken its tactical arm and restored to itself the high-cultural autonomy it had momentarily abandoned. The avant-garde schism had, after all, been prompted in the first place by the surrender of the academy to the Philistine demands of the modern marketplace – the call for finish, platitude, and trivial anecdote. The purpose of modernism was to save painting, not to sacrifice it to the degraded requirements of yet another market, this time one of common amusement and cheap spectacle. For Mallarmé, Manet’s aim “was not to make a momentary escapade or sensation, but... to impress upon his work a natural and general law.” In the process, the rebarbative qualities of the early pictures – generated in an aggressive confrontation with perverse and alien imagery – were harmonized and resolved. His essay ends in the voice of an imaginary Impressionist painter who flatly states the modernist credo:

I content myself with reflecting on the clear and durable mirror of painting... when rudely thrown, at the close of an epoch of dreams, in the front of reality, I have taken from it only that which properly belongs to my art, an original and exact perception which distinguishes for itself the things it perceives with the steadfast gaze of a vision restored to its simplest perfection.

Despite the distance that separated their politics, a parallel argument to Mallarmé’s was made by “an Impressionist comrade” in 1891 in the pages of the journal *La Révolte*. Entitled “Impressionists and Revolutionaries,” his text was intended as a political justification of the art of Seurat and his colleagues to an anarchist readership – and the anonymous Impressionist comrade has been identified as painter Paul Signac. Like Mallarmi’s 1876 essay, this was another account by an avant-garde initiate
that addressed the relationship between iconography drawn from cheapened urban experience and a subsequent art of resolute formal autonomy. And, similarly, it marked the former as expedient and temporary, the latter as essential and permanent. The Neo-Impressionists, he stated, had at first tried to draw attention to the class struggle through the visual discovery of industrial work as spectacle, and “above all” through portraying the kinds of proletarian pleasure that are only industrial work in another guise: in Seurat’s La Parade for example, the joyless and sinister come-on for Ferdinand Corvi’s down-at-heels circus, or in the Pavlovian smile of the music-hall patron who anchors the mechanical upward thrust of the dancers in Le Chahut (pl. 2). As Signac expressed it:

…with their synthetic representation of the pleasures of decadence: dancing places, music halls, circuses, like those provided by the painter Seurat, who had such a vivid feeling for the degradation of our epoch of transition, they bear witness to the great social trial taking place between workers and Capital.

But this tactic was to be no more permanent than the impulse that in 1890 sent optical theorist Charles Henry, armed with Signac’s posters and charts, off to impart avant-garde ideas about color to the furniture workers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. The continuing oppositional character of Neo-Impressionist painting does not derive, the artist was quick to say, from those earlier keen perceptions of the injuries of social class; instead, it consisted in an aesthetic developed in their making, one that now can be applied to any subject whatever. The liberated sensibility of the avant-gardist would stand as an implicit exemplar of revolutionary possibility, and the artist would most effectively perform this function by concentration on the self-contained demands of his medium. Signac refused any demand that his group continue

a precise socialist direction in works of art, because this direction is encountered much more strongly among the pure aesthetes, revolutionaries by temperament, who, striking away from the beaten paths, paint what they see, as they feel it, and very often unconsciously supply a solid axe-blows to the creaking social edifice.

Four years later, he summed up the progress of Neo-Impressionism in a pithy sentence: “We are emerging from the hard and useful period of analysis, where all our studies resembled one another, and entering that of varied and personal creation.” By this time Signac and his followers had left behind the subjects and people of the Parisian industrial suburbs for the scenic pleasures of the Côte d’Azur.

For both these writers the relationship between painting and the ordinary diversions of urban life moved from wary identity to determined difference. At the beginning, “rudely thrown, at the close of an epoch of dreams, in the front of reality,” as Mallarmé put it, vernacular culture provided by default the artist’s only apparent grasp on modernity. Even this notoriously hermetic and withdrawn-poet, like the anarchist-socialist Signac, held that the advanced artist was necessarily allied with the lower classes in their struggle for political recognition: “The multitude demands to see with its own eyes; . . . the transition from the old imaginative artist and dreamer to the energetic modern worker is found in Impressionism.” But it went without saying, for both, that emancipated vision would not come from imitating the degraded habits induced in the multitude by its currently favored amusements. Mass political emancipation occasioned a “parallel"
search in the arts — now, thanks to politics, rid of an oppressive, authoritarian tradition — for ideal origins and purified practice. The alliance between the avant-garde and popular experience remained in place but came to be expressed in negative terms.

The self-conscious theories of modernism formulated in the twentieth century ratified this position and made its terms explicit. In an essay that stands as one of Clement Greenberg’s most complete statements of formal method, “Collage” of 1959, he put the “intruder objects” of Cubist papiers collés firmly in their place. He belittled the view of some early commentators, like Guillaume Apollinaire and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, that the technique represented a renewed vision outward, its disruptions sparking attention to a “new world of beauty” dormant in the littered commercial landscape of wall posters, shop windows, and business signs:

The writers who have tried to explain their intentions for them speak, with a unanimity that is suspect in itself, of the need for renewed contact with “reality” [but] even if these materials were more “real”, the question would still be begged, for “reality” would still explain next to nothing about the actual appearance of Cubist collage.

The word “reality” stands in this passage for any independent significance the bits of newspaper or woodgrain might retain once inserted into the Cubist pictorial matrix. Nowhere in the essay is this even admitted as an interpretative possibility. Collage is entirely subsumed within a self-sufficient dialogue between the flat plane and sculptural effect, the artist’s worry over the problem of representation in general precluding representation in the particular. Thus, as the theory of modernism took on independent life, the dislodged bits of commercial culture came to appear, even more drastically, as the means to an end.

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The testimony of the most articulate modernists would appear thoroughly to deny that debts to the vernacular in advanced art pose any particular problem — or perhaps to indicate that its solution must be pursued in another critical language entirely. Certainly, to the many partisans of a postmodernist present, who dismiss Greenberg’s model as an arbitrary and arid teleology, it would appear foolish to look to the theory of modernism for any help whatsoever on this issue. Avant-garde borrowing from below necessarily involves questions of heterogeneous cultural practice, of trans-gressing limits and boundaries. The postmodernists, who celebrate heterogeneity and transgression, find modernist self-understanding utterly closed to anything but purity and truth to media.

The critique of Greenbergian modernism is now well advanced, and its defenders are scarce. His present-day detractors have found their best ammunition in the prescriptive outcome of his analysis as it congealed after 1950. But the later Greenberg has thereby come to obscure the earlier and more vital thinker, his eventual modernist triumphalism pushing aside the initial logic of his criticism and the particular urgency that prompted it. His first efforts as a critic in fact offered an explanation for the enforcement of cultural hierarchy as carried out by a Mallarmé or a Signac. At that point he was able to place the idealism of the former’s mirror of painting and the latter’s liberated consciousness in an historically analytical frame.

What worried Greenberg most in 1939 was not the picture plane. The founding essay of his enterprise as a critic, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” begins with a flat rejection of the limited frame of formal aesthetics: “It appears to me it is necessary to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific — not the generalized — individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place.” This preamble was mildly stated but deeply meant: what was occupying his attention was nothing less than a material and social crisis which threatened the traditional forms of nineteenth-century culture with extinction. This crisis had resulted from the economic pressure of an industry devoted to the simulation of art in the form of reproducible cultural commodities, that is to say, the industry of mass culture. In search of raw material, mass culture had progressively stripped traditional art of its marketable qualities, and had left as the only remaining path to authenticity a ceaseless alertness against the stereotyped and pre-processed. By refusing any other demands but the most self-contained technical ones, the authentic artist could protect his or her work from the reproduction and rationalization that would process its usable bits and destroy its inner logic. From this resistance came the necessity for modernism’s inwardness, self-reflexivity, “truth to media.”

Greenberg made this plain in “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” the essay in which he drew out the largely unstated aesthetic implications of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” “The arts, then,” he stated, “have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. . . To restore the identity of an art, the opacity of the medium
must be emphasized.”16 This conclusion was provisional and even reluctant, its tone far removed from the complacency of his later criticism. The formative theoretical moment in the history of modernism in the visual arts was inseparably an effort to come to terms with cultural production as a whole under the conditions of consumer capitalism. Because of this – and only because of this – it was able temporarily to surpass the idealism of the ideologies generated within the avant-garde, an idealism to which it soon tacitly succumbed. In Greenberg’s early analysis, mass culture is never left behind in modernist practice, but persists as a constant pressure on the artist, which severely restricts creative “freedom.” “Quality,” it is true, remained in his eyes exclusively with the remnant of traditional high culture, but mass culture was prior and determining: modernism was its effect.

While interdependence between high and low lay at the heart of his theory, Greenberg nevertheless could admit no positive interdependence between the two spheres because of the rigid distinction he drew between popular culture and the modern phenomenon of kitsch. The former was for him inseparable from some integrated community comparable to the kind that sustained traditional high art; the latter was peculiarly modern, a product of rural migration to the cities and the immigrants’ eager abandonment of the folk culture they brought with them. Expanded literacy and the demarcation of assigned leisure outside the hours of work, with the promise of heightened diversion and pleasure within that leisure time, set up pressure for a simulated culture adapted to the needs of this new clientele. Kitsch had emerged to fill a vacuum; the regimented urban worker, whether in factory or office, came to compensate for the surrender of personal autonomy through an intense development of the time left over, transferring the search for individual identity into the symbolic and affective experiences now defined as specific to leisure. But because the ultimate logic of this re-creation (the hyphen restoring the root meaning of the term) was the rationalized efficiency of the system as a whole, these needs were met by the same means as material ones: by culture recast as reproducible commodities. Among those of his contemporaries whose cultural horizons were limited to kitsch, Greenberg saw subjectivity as mirrored and trapped in the lifeless logic of mass production: imagining, thinking, feeling all performed by the machine long before the individual consumer encountered its products in the tabloids, pop tunes, pulp novels and melodramas of stage and film.

For this reason, the artist – in any genuine sense of the term – could expect no audience outside those cultivated members of the privileged classes who maintain in their patronage a pre-modern independence of taste. He could state categorically,

The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. . . . No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.”

In light of this analysis, it is not surprising that he should have posited the relationship between modernism and mass culture as one of relentless refusal. The problem remained, however, that the elite audience for modernism endorsed, in every respect but its art, the social order responsible for the crisis of culture. The implicit contention of early modernist theory – and the name of T.W. Adorno for modern music can be joined to that of Greenberg for the visual arts – was that the contradiction between an oppositional art and a public with appetite for no other kind of opposition could be bracketed off, if not transcended, in the rigor of austere, autonomous practice.

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If the art of Manet is taken to mark the beginning of modernism, it would be hard not to admit the general accuracy of Greenberg’s attachment to an elite. The impulse that moved Signac momentarily to make an audience of Parisian furniture workers stands out in its extreme rarity in the history of the avant-garde. The fleetingness of those efforts in Berlin, Cologne, or Vitebsk after World War I to redefine avant-garde liberation in working-class terms tells the same story. But oppositional art did not begin with Manet and did not, before him, always opt for detachment.

The two artists together most responsible for defining advanced art in terms of opposition to established convention, making painting a scene of dispute over the meaning of high culture, were Jacques-Louis David and Gustave Courbet; and the art of each, at least in the critical moments of 1785 and 1850, was about a re-definition of publics. The formal qualities that are rightly seen as anticipating fully fledged modernism – the dramatic defiance of academic compositional rules, technical parsimony and compressed dissonance in the Oath of the Horatii or the Burial at Ornans – were carried forward in the name of another public, excluded outsiders, whose characteristic means of expression these pictures managed to
address. In the process, “Rome” or “the countryside” as privileged symbols in a conflict of social values were turned over to the outsiders. The antagonistic character of these pictures can thus be read as duplicating real antagonisms present within the audience assembled at the public exhibitions. Already perceived oppositions of style and visual language, drawn from the world outside painting, were thrust into the space of art and put to work in a real interplay of publics. The appeal of each artist to the excluded group was validated by the hostility exhibited by the established, high-minded art public; that hostility was redoubled by the positive response of the illegitimate public; and so on in a self-reinforcing way.18

But with the installation of oppositional art within a permanent avant-garde, that group itself comes to replace the oppositional public precariously mobilized by David or Courbet; antagonism is abstracted and generalized; and only then does dependence on an elite audience and luxury-trade consumption become a given. One writer of Greenberg’s generation, rather than bracketing off this dependence, made it central to his analysis: this was Meyer Schapiro. In his little-known but fundamental essay of 1936, “The Social Bases of Art,” and in “The Nature of Abstract Art,” published the following year in the independent Marxist Quarterly, he argued in an original and powerful way that the avant-garde had habitually based its model of artistic freedom on the aimlessness of the middle-class consumer of packaged diversion.” The complicity between modernism and the consumer society is clearly to be read, he maintained, in Impressionist painting:

It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays, and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860s and 1870s; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art solely as a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of freedom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated rentier was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owed his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the “accidental” momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenader and the refined consumer of luxury goods.”

Schapiro’s contention was that the advanced artist, after 1860 or so, succumbed to the general division of labor as a full-time leisure specialist, an aesthetic technician picturing and prodding the sensual expectations of other, part-time consumers. The above passage is taken from the 1937 essay; in its predecessor Schapiro offered an extraordinary thematic summation of modernism in a single paragraph, one in which its progress is logically linked to Impressionism’s initial alliance with the emerging forms of mass culture. In the hands of the avant-garde, he argued, the aesthetic itself became identified with habits of enjoyment and release produced quite concretely within the existing apparatus of commercial entertainment and tourism — even, and perhaps most of all, when art appeared entirely withdrawn into its own sphere, its own sensibility, its own medium. If only because of the undeserved obscurity of the text, it is worth quoting at length:

Although painters will say again and again that content doesn’t matter, they are curiously selective in their subjects. They paint only certain themes and only in a certain aspect. . . . First, there are natural spectacles, landscapes or city scenes, regarded from the point of view of a relaxed spectator, a vacationist or sportsman, who values the landscape chiefly as a source of agreeable sensations or mood; artificial spectacles and entertainments — the theater, the circus, the horse-race, the athletic field, the music hall — or even works of painting, sculpture, architecture, or technology, experienced as spectacle or objects of art; . . . symbols of the artist’s activity, individuals practicing other arts, rehearsing, or in their privacy; instruments of art, especially of music, which suggest an abstract art and improvisation; isolated intimate fields, like a table covered with private instruments of idle sensation, drinking glasses, a pipe, playing cards, books, all objects of manipulation, referring to an exclusive, private world in which the individual is immobile, but free to enjoy his own moods and self-stimulation. And finally, there are pictures in which the elements of professional artistic discrimination, present to some degree in all painting — the lines, spots of color, areas, textures, modelling — are disengaged from things and juxtaposed as “pure” aesthetic objects.21
Schapiro would one day become a renowned and powerful apologist for the avant-garde, but his initial contribution to the debate over modernism and mass culture squarely opposed Greenberg’s conclusions of a few years later: the 1936 essay was, in fact, a forthright anti-modernist polemic, an effort to demonstrate that the avant-garde’s claims to independence, to disengagement from the values of its patron class were a sham; “in a society where all men can be free individuals,” he concluded, “individuality must lose its exclusiveness and its ruthless and perverse character.” The social analysis underlying that polemic, however, was almost identical to Greenberg’s. Both saw the modern marketing of culture as the negation of the real thing, that is, the rich and coherent symbolic dimension of collective life in earlier times; both believed that the apparent variety and allure of the modern urban spectacle disguised the “ruthless and perverse” laws of capital; both posited modernist art as a direct response to that condition, one that would remain in force until a new, socialist society was achieved. Given these basic points of agreement and the fact that both men were operating in the same intellectual and political milieu, how can the extent of their differences be explained?

One determining difference between the two theorists lay in the specificity of their respective understandings of mass culture: though the analysis of each was summary in character, Greenberg’s was the more schematic. His use of the term “kitsch” encompassed practically the entire range of consumable culture, from the crassest proletarian entertainments to the genteel academism of much “serious” art: “all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch.” was Greenberg’s view in a pithy sentence. Schapiro, on the other hand, was less interested in the congealed, inauthentic character of cultural commodities taken by themselves than he was in behavior: what, he asked, were the characteristic forms of experience induced by these commodities? In his discussion of Impressionism, this line of inquiry led him to the historically accurate perception that the people with the time and money able fully to occupy the new spaces of urban leisure were primarily middle class. The weekend resorts and grands boulevards were, at first, places given over to the conspicuous display of a brand of individual autonomy specific to that class. The correct clothes and accessories were required, as well as the correct poses and attitudes. The new department stores, like Boucicaut’s Au Bon Marché, grew spectacularly by supplying the necessary material equipment and, by their practices of sales and promotion, effective instruction in the more intangible requirements of this sphere of life. The economic barriers were

enough, in the 1860s and 1870s, to ward off the incursion of other classes of consumer. Even such typically working-class diversions of the present day as soccer and bicycle racing (Manet planned a large canvas on the latter subject in 1870) began in this period as enthusiasms of the affluent.

In Schapiro’s eyes, the avant-garde merely followed a de-centering of individual life which overtook the middle class as a whole. It was, for him, entirely appropriate that the formation of Impressionism should coincide with the Second Empire, that is, the period when acquiescence to political authoritarianism was followed by the first spectacular flowering of the consumer society. The self-liquidation after 1848 of the classical form of middle-class political culture prompted a displacement of traditional ideals of individual autonomy into spaces outside the official institutions of society, spaces where conspicuous styles of “freedom” were made available. That shift was bound up with the increasingly sophisticated engineering of mass consumption, the internal conquest of markets, required for continuous economic expansion. The department store, which assumed a position somewhere between encyclopedia and ritual temple of consumption, is the appropriate symbol for the era. It served as one of the primary means by which a middle-class public, often deeply unsettled by the dislocations in its older patterns of life, was won over to the new order being wrought in its name.

These early essays of Greenberg and Schapiro, which took as their common subject the sacrifice of the best elements in bourgeois culture to economic expediency, were both visibly marked by the classic interpretation of the 1848-51 crisis in France: that of Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. There Marx described the way in which the forcible exclusion of oppositional groups from the political process necessitated a kind of cultural suicide on the part of the propertied republicans, a willed destruction of their own optimal institutions, values and expressive forms:

While the parliamentary party of Order, by its clamor for tranquillity, as I have shown, committed itself to quiescence, while it declared the political rule of the bourgeoisie to be incompatible with the safety and existence of the bourgeoisie, by destroying with its own hands in the struggle against other classes in society all the conditions for its own regime, the parliamentary regime, the extra-parliamentary mass of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, by its servility toward the President, by its vilification of parliament, by its brutal treatment of its own press,
invited Bonaparte to suppress and annihilate its speaking and writing section, its politicians and its litérate, its platform and its press, in order that it might be able to pursue its private affairs with full confidence in the protection of a strong and unrestricted government. It declared unequivocally that it longed to get rid of its own political rule in order to get rid of the troubles and dangers of ruling.28

When Schapiro spoke of the “enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class,” he sought to go a step beyond Marx, to describe the concrete activities through which that detachment was manifested. Out of the desolation of early nineteenth-century forms of collective life, which affected all classes of the city, adventurous members of the privileged classes led the way in colonizing the one remaining domain of relative freedom: the spaces of public leisure. There suppressed community was displaced and dispersed into isolated acts of individual consumption; but those acts could in turn coalesce into characteristic group styles. Within leisure a sense of solidarity could be recaptured, at least temporarily, in which individuality was made to appear imbedded in group life: the community of fans, aficionados, supporters, sportsmen, experts. Lost possibilities of individual effectiveness within the larger social order were re-presented as a catalogue of leisure-time roles.

Another contributor to this extraordinary theoretical moment of the later 1930s, Walter Benjamin, made this point plainly in his study of Baudelaire and Second-Empire Paris. Speaking of the privileged class to which the poet belonged, he wrote:

The very fact that their share could at best be enjoyment, but never power, made the period which history gave them a space for passing time. Anyone who sets out to while away time seeks enjoyment. It was self-evident, however, that the more this class wanted to have its enjoyment in this society, the more limited this enjoyment would be. The enjoyment promised to be less limited if this class found enjoyment of this society possible. If it wanted to achieve virtuosity in this kind of enjoyment, it could-not spurn empathizing with commodities. It had to enjoy this identification with all the pleasure and uneasiness which derived from a presentiment of its destiny as a class. Finally, it had to approach this destiny with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods. Baudelaire, who in a poem to a courtesan called her heart “bruised like a peach, ripe like her body, for the lore of love”, possessed this sensitivity. To it he owed his enjoyment of this society as one who had already half withdrawn from it.29

In his draft introduction to the never-completed Baudelaire project, Benjamin wrote, “In point of fact, the theory of l’art pour l’art assumes decisive importance around 1852, at a time when the bourgeoisie sought to take its ‘cause’ from the hands of the writers and poets. In the Eighteenth Brumaire Marx recollects this moment. . . .”30 Modernism, in the conventional sense of the term, begins in the forced marginalization of the artistic vocation. And what Benjamin says of literature applies as well, if not better, to the visual arts. The avant-garde left behind the older concerns of official public art not out of any special rebelliousness on the part of its members, but because their political representatives had jettisoned as dangerous and obstructive the institutions and ideals for which official art was metaphorically to stand. David’s public, to cite the obvious contrasting case, had found in his pictures of the 1780s a way imaginatively to align itself with novel and pressing demands of public life; his Horatii and Brutus resonated as vivid tracts on individual resolve, collective action, and their price. Oppositional art meant opposition on a broad social front. Until 1848, there was at least a latent potential for a middle-class political vanguard to act on its discontent, and an oppositional public painting maintained itself in reserve. This was literally the case with the most powerful attempt to duplicate David’s early tactics, Giricault’s Raft of the Medusa, which failed to find an oppositional public in the politically bleak atmosphere of 1819.31 But when the Revolution of 1830 roused Delacroix from his obsession with individual victimization and sexual violence, he reached back to his mentor’s great prototype. The barricade in his Liberty Leading the People, heaving up in the foreground, is the raft turned ninety degrees; the bodies tumble off its leading rather than trailing edge (Delacroix shifts the sprawling, bare-legged corpse more or less intact from the right corner to the left, precisely marking the way he has transposed his model); the straining pyramid of figures now pushes toward the viewer rather than away. In the first days of 1848 the republican Michelet employed the Giricault painting in his oratory as a rallying metaphor for national resistance. And after the February uprising, Liberty emerged briefly from its captivity in the storerooms.32

The events of 1851 ended all this, denying, as they did, any ambition Courbet had entertained to shift the address of history painting to a new outsider public, an opposition based in the working classes. For a middle-class audience, the idea of a combative and singular individuality, impatient with social confinement, remained fundamental to a generally internalized sense of self — as it still does. But that notion of individuality
would henceforth be realized in private acts of self-estrangement, distancing and blocking out the gray realities of administration and production in favor of a brighter world of sport, tourism, and spectacle. This process was redoubled in the fierce repression that followed the uprising of the Commune twenty years later; between 1871 and 1876, the heyday of Impressionist formal innovation, Paris remained under martial law.

If the subjective experience of freedom became a function of a supplied identity, one detached from the social mechanism and contemplating it from a distance, then the early modernist painters — as Schapiro trenchantly observed in 1936 — lived that role to the hilt. That observation might well have led to a dismissal of all avant-garde claims to a critical and independent stance as so much false consciousness (as it does for some today). But in his essay of the following year, Schapiro himself came to resist such a facile conclusion. The basic argument remained in place, but “The Nature of Abstract Art” deploys without irony terms like “implicit criticism” and “freedom” to describe modernist painting. Of the early avant-garde, he wrote,

The very existence of Impressionism which transformed nature into a private, unformalized field of sensitive vision, shifting with the spectator, made painting an ideal domain of freedom; it attracted many who were tied unhappily to middle-class jobs and moral standards, now increasingly problematic and stultifying with the advance of monopoly capitalism. ... in its discovery of a constantly changing phenomenal outdoor world of which the shapes depended on the momentary position of the casual or mobile spectator, there was an implicit criticism of symbolic and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these.33

Added here was a recognition of some degree of active, resistant consciousness within the avant-garde. And this extended to its valuation of middle-class leisure as well. He spoke of an Impressionist “discovery” of an implicitly critical, even moral, point of view. This critical art had not been secured through withdrawal into self-sufficiency, but had instead been grounded in existing social life outside the sphere of art.

Schapiro created a deliberate ambiguity in the second essay, in that it offered a qualified apology for modernism without renouncing his prior dismissal of the reigning modernist apologetics.34 “The Nature of Abstract Art” is an inconclusive, “open” text, and it is just this quality, its unresolved oscillation between negative and affirmative positions, that makes it so valuable.35 By 1937 Schapiro had ceased to identify the avant-garde with the outlook of a homogeneous “dominant” class. So, while Impressionism did indeed belong to and figured a world of privilege, there was, nevertheless, disaffection and erosion of consensus within that world. The society of consumption as a means of engineering political consent and socially integrative codes is no simple or uncontested solution to the “problem of culture” under capitalism. As it displaces resistant impulses, it also gives them a refuge in a relatively unregulated social space where contrary social definitions can survive, and occasionally flourish. Much of this is, obviously, permitted disorder: managed “consensus depends on a compensating balance between submission and negotiated resistance within leisure. But once that zone of permitted freedom exists, it can be seized by disaffected groups in order to articulate for themselves a counter-consensual identity, an implicit message of rupture and discontinuity. From the official point of view, these groups are defined as deviant or delinquent; following contemporary sociological usage, they can be called resistant subcultures.36

In one of the founding formulations of cultural studies, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson set out the traits of such subcultures in a way that can serve with little modification to characterize the early avant-garde as a social formation:

They cluster around particular locations. They develop specific rhythms of interchange, structured relations between members: younger to older, experienced to novice, stylish to square. They explore “focal concerns” central to the inner life of the group: things always “done” or “never done”, a set of social rituals which underpin their collective identity and define them as a “group” instead of a mere collection of individuals. They adopt and adapt material objects — goods and possessions — and reorganize them into distinctive “styles” which express the collectivity of their being-as-a-group. These concerns, activities, relationships, materials become embodied in rituals of relationship and occasion and movement. Sometimes, the world is marked out, linguistically, by names or an argot which classifies the social world exterior to them in terms meaningful only within their group perspective, and maintains its boundaries. This also helps them to develop, ahead of immediate activities, a perspective on the immediate future — plans, projects, things to do to fill out time, exploits. ... They too are concrete, identifiable social formations constructed as a collective response to the material and situated experience of their class.37

To make the meaning of that last sentence more precise, the resistant subcultural response is a means by which certain members of a class
“handle” and attempt to resolve difficult and contradictory experience common to their class but felt more acutely by the subcultural recruits.

It was the work of community activist Phil Cohen (now scandalously unrecognized in the ascendency of cultural studies as a field) that made the breakthrough, joining an empirical sociology of deviance to systematic visual aesthetics.\(^3\) No one before him had seen past the stereotypes of adolescent deviance even to think that the menacing particulars of the original skinhead style in London’s East End — the boots and braces, the shaved scalps and selective racial marauding — might reward the sort of interpretation practiced by art-historical iconographers. What he found was a precisely coded response to the changes in the city’s economy and land use that had eroded beyond recovery the neighborhood life that the skinheads’ parents had known. Where the mods of the 1960s had articulated — through sharp, Italian-style suits and gleaming Vespas — an imaginary relation to the closed option of upward mobility, the skinheads turned around and fashioned a similarly imaginary relation to the downward option of rough manual labor, an identity that had become equally inaccessible to them in the wake of the closing of the East End’s docks and industries. An imaginary belonging to a lost local culture, a refusal to assent to fraudulent substitutes for community, were figured in the dress, speech, and rituals of enforced idleness that so alarmed outsiders.

Though this in no way redeemed the racism, ignorance, and apathy on view, what Cohen decoded at least amounted to an eloquence in choices of style and imagery. Battered and marginalized by economic rationalizations, working-class community could only be recovered as an imaginary solution in the realm of style, one limited further to the temporary, inherently ambiguous phase of “youth.” Cohen’s stress on the symbolic and compensatory rather than activist function of subcultures, along with the shift from blocked verbal facility to high competence in visual discrimination, fits the pattern of the early artistic avant-garde movements just as well. By the later nineteenth century, an artistic vocation, in the sense established by David, Goya, Géricault, Delacroix, or Courbet, had become so problematic as to require similar defense. With the emergence of a persistent avant-garde, a small, face-to-face group of artists and supporters became their own oppositional public, one socially grounded within structured leisure. The distinctive point of view and iconographic markers of the subculture came to be drawn from a repertoire of objects, locations and behaviors supplied by other colonists of the same social spaces; avant-garde opposition was and is drawn out of inarticulate and unresolved dissatisfactions which those spaces, though designed to contain them, also put on display.

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At this point, clearer distinctions need to be drawn between kinds of subcultural response. There are those that are no more than the temporary outlet of the ordinary citizen; there are those that are merely defensive, in that the group style they embody, though it may be central to the social life of its members, registers externally only as a harmless, perhaps colorful enthusiasm. But the stylistic and behavioral maneuvers of certain subcultures will transgress settled social boundaries. From the outside, these will be read as extreme, opaque, inexplicably evasive and, for that reason, hostile. The dependable negative reaction from figures in authority and the semi-official guardians of propriety and morality will then further sharpen the negative identity of the subculture, help cement group solidarity, and often stimulate new adherents and imitators.

The required boundary transgression can occur in several ways. Where different classes meet in leisure-time settings, objects, styles, and behaviors with an established significance for one class identity can be appropriated and re-positioned by another group to generate new, dissonant meanings. This shifting of signs can occur in both directions on the social scale (or scales). Another means to counter-consensual group statement is to isolate one element of the normal pattern of leisure consumption, and then exaggerate and intensify its use until it comes to signify the opposite of its intended meaning.

It is easy to think of examples of such semiotic tactics in present-day subcultures; our model of subversive consumption is derived from the analysis of these deviant groups. But the same tactics can just as easily be seen at work in the early avant-garde, where a dissonant mixing of class signifiers was central to the formation of the avant-garde sensibility. Courbet’s prescient excursion into suburban pleasure for sale, the Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine of 1856, showed two drowsing prostitutes in the intimate finery of their betters, piled on past all “correct” usage of fashionable underclothing.\(^3^9\) And Manet would exploit similar kinds of dissonance in the next decade. It showed up in his own body; his friend and biographer Antonin Proust speaks of his habitual imitation of the speech patterns and peculiar gait of a Parisian street urchin.\(^4^0\) The subject of both the Déjeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia is the pursuit of
commercial pleasure at a comparably early stage when it necessarily involved negotiation with older, illicit social networks at the frontier between legality and criminality.  

Establishing itself where Courbet and Manet had led, “classic” Impressionism, the sensually flooded depictions of weekend leisure in which Monet and Renoir specialized during the 1870s, opted for the second tactic. The life they portray was being lived entirely within the confines of real-estate development and entrepreneurial capitalism; these are images of provided pleasures. But they are images that alter, by the very exclusivity of their concentration on ease and uncoerced activity, the balance between the regulated and unregulated compartments of experience. They take leisure out of its place; instead of appearing as a controlled, compensatory feature of the modern social mechanism, securely framed by other institutions, it stands out in unrelieved difference from the denial of freedom that surrounds it.

It is in this sense that Schapiro could plausibly speak of Impressionism’s “implicit criticism of symbolic and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these.” But what Schapiro did not address was how this criticism came to be specifically articulated as criticism: a difference is not an opposition unless it is consistently legible as such. This raises once again the question of modernism in its conventional aesthetic sense — as autonomous, self-critical form. The “focal concern” of the avant-garde subculture was, obviously, painting conceived in the most ambitious terms available. It was in its particular opposition to the settled discourse of high art that the central avant-garde group style gained its cogency and its autonomy. The “focal concern” of the avant-garde was, obviously, painting conceived in the most ambitious terms available. 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The most provocative and distinctive pictorial qualities of early modernism were not only justified by formal homologies with its subject matter as an already created image, they also served to defend that image by preserving it from inappropriate kinds of attention. So that the promises of leisure would not be tested against too much contrary visual evidence — not only dissonant features of the landscape, like the prominent factories of Argenteuil, but also the all-too-frequent failure of the promise of happiness — the painters consistently fixed on optical phenomena that are virtually unrepresentable: rushing shoppers glimpsed from above and far away, the disorienting confusion of the crowded café-concert, smoke
and steam in the mottled light of the glass-roofed railway station, wind in foliage, flickering shadows, and, above all, reflections in moving water. These phenomena have become, thanks largely to Impressionism, conventional signs of the spaces of leisure and tourism, of their promised vividness and perpetual surprise. But as optical “facts” they are so changeable or indistinct that one cannot really hold them in mind and preserve them as a mental picture; and therefore one cannot securely test the painter’s version against remembered visual experience. The inevitably approximate and unverifiable registration of these visual ephemera in painting makes large areas of the canvas less descriptive than celebratory of gesture, color, and shape—pictorial incidents attended to for their own sake.

The passage from deliberate evasiveness and opacity to insistence on material surface—to modernist abstraction, in short—has been admirably articulated in an essay on Monet by the novelist Michel Butor (in effect taking up the matter where Mallarmé had left it a century before). Speaking of Regattas at Argenteuil of 1872 (pl. 3), a picture dominated by broadly rendered reflections of sailboats and shoreline villas, he writes:

It is impossible to interpret the reflected part as the simple notation of what lay before the painter’s eyes. How can one suppose that Monet would have chosen any one of the millions of images that the camera might have registered? He constructed an image, animated by a certain rhythm, which we may imagine as conforming to that of the liquid surface (yet there is nothing to confirm even this), based on real objects. The semantic relation of above and below obviously works in both directions: a) the upper names the lower: this aggregate of blotches which means nothing to you is a tree, a house, a boat; b) the lower reveals the upper: this boat, this house, which may seem dull to you contains secret congruences of color, elementary images, expressive possibilities.

The upper part corresponds to what one recognizes, the reality one is used to; the lower, which leads us toward the houses and boats, corresponds to the painter’s act. The water becomes a metaphor for painting. The very broad strokes with which these reflections are indicated are vigorous assertions of material and means. The liquid surface provides an instance in nature of the painter’s activity.42

Monet used the artifice of painting to make his scene better, more congruent and formally satisfying, than it could ever be in life. Impressionism’s transformation of leisure into an obsessive and exclusive value, its inver-

3 Claude Monet, Regattas at Argenteuil, c.1872. Oil on canvas, 48 × 75 cm. Paris, Musée d’Orsay.
negation have occurred when the two aesthetic orders, the high-cultural and subcultural, have been forced into scandalous identity, each being continuously dislocated by the other.

The repeated return to mass-cultural material on the part of the avant-garde can be understood as efforts to revive and relive this strategy — each time in a more marginal and refractory leisure location. Seurat, when he conceived Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte as the outsize pendant to his Bathers at Asnières in the 1880s, pointedly placed an awkward and routinized bourgeois leisure in another context, that of exhausted but uncontrived working-class time off. His subsequent figure painting, as Signac pointed out, drew upon the tawdriest fringes of Parisian commercial entertainment, the proletarianization of pleasure for both consumer and performer alike. This scene was dissected according to the putatively objective and analytic system of Charles Henry. But according to the first-hand testimony of Emile Verhaeren, Seurat was moved to the artifice and rigidity imposed by Henry's emotional mechanics through identifying an analogous process already at work in his subject. Art historians have long noted the appearance in Seurat's later paintings of the exaggerated angular contours that were the trademark of the poster artist Jules Chéret. As much as the circus or the café-concert, Seurat's material was the advertisement of pleasure, the seductive face it puts on; he spoke of that face in a deferential tone and pushed his formal means in an attempt to master it. As Verhaeren put it: “The poster artist Chéret, whose genius he greatly admired, had charmed him with the joy and gaiety of his designs. He had studied them, wanting to analyze their means of expression and uncover their aesthetic secrets.” These last words are significant for the present argument, indicating as they do that the artist begins with an already existing aesthetic developed in the undervalued fringes of culture. In its marginality is its secret allure, one which is not so much the promise of pleasure — from the evidence, Seurat was cool and critical in his attitude — as the simple existence of a corner of the city that has improvised an appropriate and vivid way to represent itself. The sophisticated and self-conscious artist, intent on controlling the artifice and abstraction that have irrevocably overtaken his art, on keeping it in contact with an appropriate descriptive task, finds subject matter in which this connection has already been made.

Cubism secured its critical character through a re-positioning of even more exotically low-brow goods and protocols within the preserve of high art. The iconography of café table and cheap cabaret mark out its milieu with significant precision. The correct brand name on a bottle label was as significant for Picasso and Braque as it had been to Manet in the Bar at the Folies-Bergère. The handbills, posters, packs of cigarette papers, department-store advertisements, are disposed in the pictures with conscious regard for the specific associations of each item and the interplay between them. The Cubists proceeded in the manner of mock conspirators, or Poe's sedentary detective Dupin, piecing together evidence of secret pleasures and crimes hidden beneath the apparently trivial surface of the popular media. Picasso for one could also take the measure of rival groups seeking identity in distraction. The provincial and chauvinist Midi displayed in his Afiçionado of 1912 (pl. 4) stands in pointed contrast to the idyllic south of France embraced by the established avant-garde. Given the associations of French bullfighting, the figure in the painting — the stuffed
painting should be understood as a mediated synthesis of possibilities driven by the principle of collage construction — which entered Cubist practice around the same date as the *Aficionado* — further collapsed the distinction between the mastery and the burlesque, by turning pictorial invention into a fragmented consumption of manufactured images. Collage does its work within the problematic of pictorial modernism, dramatizing the literal support while preserving representation, but it is a solution discovered in a secretly coded world describable by means of these literal surfaces. And Cubism is readable as a message from the margins not only in the graphic content of the intruder objects, but in their substance and organization as well. The ersatz oilcloth and wallpaper substitutes for solid bourgeois surfaces, supplied originally by Braque from his provincial decorator’s repertoire, are determinedly second-rate — in present-day terms, the equivalent of vinyl walnut veneers or petrochemical imitations of silk and suede. As such surfaces soon degrade, peel, flake, and fade, as newsprint and handbills turn brown and brittle, so collage disrupts the false harmonies of oil painting by reproducing the disposability of the most ordinary consumer goods.

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Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to work for art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. . . . This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead. (T.W. Adorno, 1962)48

Of the surviving contributors to the theory of modernism and mass culture that coalesced in the 1930s, Adorno alone was able to preserve its original range of reference and intent. One purpose of the present discussion of the avant-garde as a resistant subculture has been to lend historical and sociological substance to Adorno’s stance as it pertains to the visual arts. In that light, the formal autonomy achieved in early modernist painting should be understood as a mediated synthesis of possibilities derived from both the failures of existing artistic technique and a repertoire of potentially oppositional practices discovered in the world outside. From the beginning, the successes of modernism have been neither to affirm nor to refuse its concrete position in the social order, but to represent that position in its contradiction, and so act out the possibility of critical consciousness in general. Even Mallarme, in the midst of his 1876 defense of Impressionism as a pure art of light and air, could speak of it also as an art “which the public, with rare prescience, dubbed, from its first appearance, Intransigent, which in political language means radical and democratic.”49

In the examples cited above, a regular rhythm emerges within the progress of the Parisian avant-garde. For early Impressionism, early Neoclassicism and Cubism before 1914, the provocative inclusion of materials from outside validated high culture was linked with a new rigor of formal organization, an articulate consistency of attention within the material fact of the picture surface; joining the two permitted the fine adjustment of this assertive abstraction to the demands of description — not description in the abstract, but of specific enclaves of the commercial city. The avant-garde group enacted this engagement itself, in an intensification of collective cooperation and interchange, individual works of art figuring in a concentrated group dialogue over means and criteria. But in each instance, this moment was followed by retreat — from specific description, from formal rigor, from group life, and from the fringes of commodity culture to its center. And this pattern marks the inherent limitations of the resistant subculture as a solution to the problematic experience of a marginalized and disaffected group.

Monet’s painting after the early 1880s can be taken as emblematic of the fate of the Impressionist avant-garde. The problem of verifiable description was relaxed when the artist withdrew to remote or isolated locations to paint: the difficulty of improvising pictorial orders appropriate to a complex and sensually animated form of sociability was obviated by concentration on stable, simplified, and depopulated motifs (one knows this is a cathedral, a stack of grain, a row of poplars; the painting does not have to work to convince). In the process, the broad and definite touch of the 1870s, held between structure and description, was replaced by a precious, culinary surface, which largely gives up the job of dramatizing constructive logic. Not coincidentally, the 1880s was the period when Monet, thanks to Durand-Ruel’s conquest of the American market, achieved secure financial success. Pissarro dismissed it all in 1887 as showy eccentricity of a familiar and marketable kind: “Monet plays his salesman’s...
was in fact lyrically supportive. The Fauves came close to being the first Vauxcelles, who supplied them with their supposedly derisive sobriquet, even before it gained its public identity in the exhibitions of the major pictures. Vollard was buying out their studios; the critic Louis Tower Bridge.* The Fauve “movement” was practically appropriated his business when, having in mind the success of Monet’s London pictures Independants free abstraction of surface effects. Derain’s dealer Ambroise Vollard knew of the Conventionalized landscape motifs do much of that work and license the color, the descriptive function of which is casually loose and unsystematic. was painting built from loose sprays and spreading patches of saturated colors to convey bleakness and dereliction, an aspect of the raw, unsettled quality of this particular landscape. In formal terms as well, this painting is one of the most uncompromising and unified Fauve works, and the artist’s blunt confidence, his ability to use the brightest colors to convey bleakness and derection, may well have intensified Derain’s anxieties about his own direction.

But with that success came the sort of indeterminacy that Pissarro had decried in Monet. Derain, writing from L’Estaque in 1905, expressed his eloquent doubts to Maurice Vlaminck:

Truly we’ve arrived at a very difficult stage of the problem. I’m so lost that I wonder what words I can use to explain it to you. If we reject decorative applications, the only direction we can take is to purify this transposition of nature. But we’ve only done this so far in terms of color. There is drawing as well, so many things lacking in our conception of art.

In short, I see the future only in terms of composition, because in working in front of nature I am the slave of so many trivial things that I lose the excitement I need. I can’t believe that the future will go on following our path: on the one hand we seek to disengage ourselves from objective things, and on the other we preserve them as the origin and end of our art. No, truly, taking a detached point of view, I cannot see what I must do to be logical.53

With assimilation into a more or less official modernism came the felt loss of a descriptive project and the corollary erosion of pictorial logic. A useful contrast can, in fact, be drawn between the work of Derain or Matisse at that moment, and the contemporaneous work of Vlaminck, who remained in the semi-industrialized suburban ring of Paris. In the latter’s paintings of 1904-5, like Houses at Chatou (pl. 5), Fauve color and gesture work against their expected connotations of exuberance and ease; the deliberate instability of the technique is instead made to stand for the raw, unsettled quality of this particular landscape. In formal terms as well, this painting is one of the most uncompromising and unified Fauve works, and the artist’s blunt confidence, his ability to use the brightest colors to convey bleakness and derection, may well have intensified Derain’s anxieties about his own direction.

A child of the suburban working class, Vlaminck in these paintings was not a tourist, and this set him apart from his colleagues. Braque, who had taken liberated gesture and color the furthest toward surface abstraction, made the most decisive break with the short-lived Fauve idyll a few years later; he withdrew with Picasso from the exhibition and gallery apparatus during the crucial years of Cubist experimentation, renewing the old avant-garde commitment to collaborative practice. Even if the collectivity was reduced to the minimum number of two, the effacement of creative personality was all the greater. And that combined withdrawal and
commitment to reasoned, shared investigation was tied down to specific representation — and celebration — of a compact, marginalized form of life.

* * *

Modernist practice sustains its claim to autonomy by standing, in its evident formal coherence, against the empty diversity of the culture industry, against market expediency, speculative targeting of consumers, and hedging bets. But it has achieved this contrast most successfully by figuring in detail the character of the manufactured culture it opposes. Picasso’s Aficionado twisted the south of France idyll into an embarrassing leisure-time pose. The Dadaists of Berlin were most attentive to this potential in Cubism, seeking in their own work to expose the debility of life in’ thr’all to industrial rationality. Raoul Haussmann wrote in 1918:

“In Dada, you will find your true state: wonderful constellations in real materials, wire, glass, cardboard, cloth, organically matching your own consummate, inherent unsoundness, your own shoddiness.” 54 But the example of Berlin Dada serves to demonstrate that to make this kind of meaning unmistakable was to end all of art’s claims to resolve and harmonize social experience. The Cubist precedent, by contrast, had been an effort to fend off that outcome, to articulate and defend a protected aesthetic space. And because it was so circumscribed, it was overtaken, like every other successful subcultural response.

Collage — the final outcome of Cubism’s interleaving of high and low — became incorporated as a source of excitement and crisp simplification within an undeflected official modernism. In the movement’s synthetic phase, translation of once-foreign materials into painted replications resolved the noisy and heterogeneous scene of fringe leisure into the sonority of museum painting. Critical distance was sacrificed further in 1915 when Picasso, in the wake of Braque’s departure for the army, returned to conventional illusionism and art-historical pastiche while at the same time continuing to produce Cubist pictures. That move cancelled Cubism’s claim to logical and descriptive necessity, and acknowledged that it had become a portable style, one ready-to-wear variety among many on offer. The critic Maurice Raynal, writing admiringly in 1924 of Picasso’s Three Musicians, said more than he knew when he called it “rather like magnificent shop windows of Cubist inventions and discoveries.” 55 The subject matter of that painting and others before it tells the same story: after 1914, virtually on cue, the raffish contemporary entertainers who populated previous Cubist painting gave way to Harlequins, Pierrots, and Punchinellios — sad clowns descended from Watteau and the pre-industrial past, the tritest metaphors for an alienated artistic vocation.

* * *

The basic argument of the present essay has been that modernist negation — which is modernism in its most powerful moments — proceeds from a productive confusion within the normal hierarchy of cultural prestige. Advanced artists repeatedly make unsettling equations between high and low which dislocate the apparently fixed terms of that hierarchy into new and persuasive configurations, thus calling it into question from within. But the pattern of alternating provocation and retreat indicates that these equations are, in the end, as productive for affirmative culture as they are for the articulation of critical consciousness. While traditionalists can be
depended upon to bewail the breakdown of past artistic authority, there will always be elite individuals who will welcome new values, new varieties and techniques of feeling. On the surface, this is easy to comprehend as an attraction to the glamor of marginality, to poses of risk and singularity. But there is a deeper, more systematic rationale for this acceptance, which has ended in the domestication of every modernist movement.

The context of subcultural life is the shift within a capitalist economy toward consumption as its own justification. The success of this shift – which is inseparably bound up with the developing management of political consent – depends on expanded desires and sensibilities, that is, the skills required for an ever more intense marketing of sensual gratification. In our image-saturated present, the culture industry has demonstrated the ability to package and sell nearly every variety of desire imaginable, but because its ultimate logic is the strictly rational and utilitarian one of profit maximization, it is not able to invent the desires and sensibilities it exploits. In fact, the emphasis on continual novelty basic to that industry runs counter to the need of every large enterprise for product standardization and economies of scale. This difficulty is solved by the very defensive and resistant subcultures that come into being as negotiated breathing spaces on the margins of controlled social life. These are the groups most committed to leisure, its pioneers, who for that reason come up with the most surprising, inventive and effective ways of using it. Their improvised forms are usually first made salable by the artisan-level entrepreneurs who spring up in and around any active subculture. Through their efforts, a wider circle of consumers gains access to an alluring subcultural pose, but in a more detached and shallow form, as the elements of the original style are removed from the context of subtle ritual that had first informed them. At this point it appears to the large fashion and entertainment concerns as a promising trend. Components of an already diluted stylistic complex are selected out, adapted to the demands of mass manufacture and pushed to the last job lot and bargain counter.

The translation of style from margin to center depletes the form of its original vividness and subtlety, but a sufficient residue of those qualities remains such that audience sensibilities expand roughly at the rate the various sectors of the culture industry require and can accommodate. What is more, the success of this translation guarantees its cyclical repetition. While it is true that the apparatus of spectacular consumption makes genuine human striving – even the resistance it meets – into saleable goods, this is no simple procedure. Exploitation by the culture industry serves at the same time to stimulate and complicate those strivings in such a way that they continually outrun and surpass its programming. The expansion of the cultural economy continually creates new fringe areas, and young and more extreme members of assimilated subcultures will regroup with new recruits at still more marginal positions. So the process begins again.

Elements of this mechanism were in place by the mid-nineteenth century, and the rest of the century saw its coming to maturity in sport, fashion, and entertainment. The artistic avant-garde provides an early, developed example of the process at work. In fact, because of its unique position between the upper and lower zones of commodity culture, this group performs a special and powerful function within the process. That service could be described as a necessary brokerage between high and low, in which the avant-garde serves as a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry.

To begin with its primary audience, the fact that the avant-garde depends on elite patronage – the “umbilical cord of gold” – cannot be written off as an inconsequential or regrettable circumstance. It must be assumed that so durable a form of social interchange is not based merely on the indulgence or charity of the affluent, but that the avant-garde serves the interests of its actual consumers in a way that goes beyond purely individual attraction to “quality” or the glamor of the forbidden. In their selective appropriation from fringe mass culture, advanced artists search out areas of social practice that retain some vivid life in an increasingly administered and rationalized society. These they refine and package, directing them to an elite, self-conscious audience. Certain played-out procedures within established high art are forcibly refused, but the category itself is preserved and renewed – renewed by the aesthetic discoveries of non-elite groups.

Nor, plainly, does the process of selective incorporation end there. Legitimated modernism is in turn re-packaged for consumption as chic and kitsch commodities. The work of the avant-garde is returned to the sphere of culture where much of its substantial material originated. It was only a matter of a few years before the Impressionist vision of commercial diversion became the advertisement of the thing itself, a functioning part of the imaginary enticement directed toward tourists and residents alike. In the twentieth century this process of mass-cultural recuperation has operated on an ever-increasing scale. The Cubist vision of sensory flux and isolation in the city became in Art Deco a portable vocabulary for a whole modern “look” in fashion and design. Cubism’s geometricization of organic form and its rendering of three-dimensional
illusion as animated patterns of overlapping planes were a principal means by which modernist architecture and interior design were transformed into a refined and precious high style. Advertised as such, now through the powerful medium of film costume and set decoration, the Art-Deco stamp was put on the whole range of Twenties and Depression-era commodities: office buildings, fabric, home appliances, furniture, crockery. (The Art-Deco style was also easily drawn into the imagery of the mechanized body characteristic of proto-fascist and fascist Utopianism.)

The case of Surrealism is perhaps the most notorious instance of this process. Breton and his companions had discovered in the sedimentary layers of an earlier, capitalist Paris something like the material unconscious of the city, the residue of forgotten repressions. But in retrieving marginal forms of consumption, in making that latent text manifest, they provided modern advertising with one of its most powerful visual tools: that now familiar terrain in which commodities behave autonomously and create an alluring dreamscape of their own.

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This essay has not aimed to supply a verdict on modernism in the visual arts. Recent discussion of the issue has suffered from a surplus of verdicts. Typically, one moment of the series of transformations described above is chosen as the definitive one. The social iconographers of modernism (the most recent trend in art history) largely limit themselves to its raw material. The aesthetic dialecticians, Adorno holding out until the end, concentrate on the moment of negativity crystallized in form. The triumphalists of modernism — the later Greenberg and his followers, for example — celebrate the initial recuperation of that form into a continuous canon of value. Finally, that recuperation is the object of attack from two contradictory strains of postmodernist: the version offered by the Left sees in this moment a revelation that modernist negation was always a sham, never more than a way to refurbish elite commodities; that offered by the Right, advancing a relaxed and eclectic pluralism, sees this recuperation as insufficient and resents the retention of any negativity even if it is sublimated entirely into formal criteria.

The purpose of the present essay has been to widen discussion to include, or rather re-include, all the elements present in the original formulation of modernist theory. One motivation for writing came from reflection on the fact that the founding moments for subsequent discourses on both modernist art and mass culture were one and the same. Current debates over both topics invariably begin with the same names — Adorno, Benjamin, Greenberg (less often Schapiro, but that should by now be changing). Very seldom, however, are these debates about both topics together. But at the beginning they always were: the theory of one was the theory of the other. And in that identity was the realization, occasionally manifest and always latent, that the two were in no fundamental way separable. Culture under conditions of developed capitalism displays both moments of negation and an ultimately overwhelming tendency toward accommodation. Modernism exists in the tension between these two opposed movements. And the avant-garde, the bearer of modernism, has been successful when it has found for itself a social location where this tension is visible and can be acted upon.