

Greenberg's Self-Negation

During the 1940s, Clement Greenberg, one of the first champions of American Abstract Expressionism, developed a critical position based on three sets of binary oppositions: high and low; abstract and literary; surface and illusion. In his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", he described how modernity had simultaneously given rise to an avant-garde, characterised by its critical treatment of artistic traditions, and a rearguard, parasitic rather than critical, that exploited existing cultural traditions for commercial or political gain. Convinced that the former was under threat from the latter (whether in the form of totalitarian propaganda in Europe, or the ubiquitous imagery of popular culture in the United States) Greenberg dismissed the rearguard as "kitsch", a form of low culture destined for those who are "insensible to the values of genuine culture".¹

In order to avoid contamination, art needed to keep its distance, not just from popular culture but from society at large. This meant "art for art's sake", and required that content be "dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself". The corollary was that a work of art in one medium should not be reducible to another. For the visual arts, the first step was using abstraction to escape from the dominance of literature and from "ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society". The second was the recognition that the uniqueness of each art lies in its medium and that "purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art".²

Given that, as Greenberg later put it, "flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art", in the case of painting, purity meant renouncing illusionism.³ From the Renaissance onwards, the painter's task has been to create an illusion of three-dimensional space. Now, however, "painting had to spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat".⁴ Greenberg acknowledged that this was never going to be easy, because "The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness". To remake the flatness of the surface through the very means that destroys was therefore an achievement of the highest order. It was "the tension inherent in the constructed, recreated flatness of the surface" that produced the strength of Jackson Pollock's work, just as it had in "almost all post-cubist painting of any real originality".⁵

¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.12 ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1939)

² Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.8, 28 ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1939) and 32 ("Towards a Newer Laocoon", 1940)

³ Greenberg, *Essays*, 4.87 ("Modernist Painting", 1960) and Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 139 ("The New Sculpture", revised 1961)

⁴ Greenberg, *Essays*, 3.190 ("Abstract and Representational", 1954) and Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 71 ("Collage", revised 1961)

⁵ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.125 (Review of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock, 1947).

Greenberg's argument is counter-intuitive, but it has a relentless logic. Art is in danger of being swamped by kitsch; to remain pure it must be true to itself, and so every art must true to its own medium, which means that painting must renounce the illusion of space, even while using a technique that inevitably produces it. Only if each art systematically negates itself can the future of culture as a whole be secured.

Sex

The political implications of this theory, in particular the insistence that art should not be infected by ideological struggle, have long been a topic of debate, and their possible consequences for the cultural politics of the Cold War era have been extensively discussed.⁶ However, Greenberg's account of modernism was not only conceptually original but also rhetorically distinctive. His key aesthetic distinctions are frequently expressed in terms of stereotypical gender dichotomies in which masculinity always constitutes the positive term. Masculine "ugliness" and feminine "prettiness" become key evaluative markers, and Greenberg's favoured artists are distinguished as exemplars of the former: Pollock "is not afraid to look ugly – all profoundly original art looks ugly at first", and if Gorky acquires arrogance "it is possible that he will begin to paint pictures so original they will look ugly".⁷ And in case anyone misses it, Greenberg makes the gendering of these terms explicit. It might be possible to accuse Pollock of bad taste, but

what is thought to be Pollock's bad taste is in reality his willingness to be ugly in terms of contemporary taste. In the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty... Pollock's superiority lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing control. His emotion starts out pictorially; it does not have to be castrated.⁸

The danger that threatens the avant-garde comes not from excess, but from feminization. For example, Roger de la Fresnaye was "endowed with a feminine sensibility" and had anticipated "the softening and prettifying of cubism". He had been gassed in the First World War, and died at the age of forty, but Greenberg's verdict is brutal: "Whether he had much left to say is doubtful".⁹ There was a lesson to be learned from such failures, and that is why Greenberg is worried when he sees "attractive" abstract painting in America.¹⁰ "Prettiness" had always been "the besetting sin of English pictorial art" and

⁶ See, for example, the essays in Frascina, *Pollock And After*.

⁷ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.17 (Review of multiple exhibitions, 1945) and 2.80 (Review of Paul Gauguin and Arshile Gorky, 1946)

⁸ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.75 (Review of multiple exhibitions, 1946)

⁹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.167 ("The Present Prospects of American Painting", 1947) and 2.40 (Review of De la Fresnaye and Stuart Davis, 1945)

¹⁰ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.266 (Review of Whitney Annual, 1948)

American painting might fall into the same “temptation” if it did not resist the seductions of a middlebrow taste that “softens and sweetens” art.¹¹

What this meant in practice was that a painting should not, even inadvertently, create the illusion of three-dimensional space by opening up what Greenberg (following Hans Hofmann) called “holes” in the canvas.

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to “hole through” it for realistic perspectival space.¹²

This was difficult to achieve. Not even Pollock always managed it; his “single fault is not that he crowds his canvases too evenly but that he sometimes juxtaposes colors and values so abruptly that gaping holes are created”.¹³ But as Caroline Jones argues, for Greenberg “it might be *better* to crowd canvases evenly than to risk creating “holes” in the image, *better* to produce a decorative all-over surface than to risk a *retardataire* (and possibly gendered) dimensional illusion”.¹⁴ It is no wonder that she characterises Greenberg’s theory as one in which “the ontogeny of modernist painting was made to recapitulate the phylogeny of sexual difference”.¹⁵

Nevertheless, that judgement may not be the whole story. Greenberg’s denigration of the feminine was not always aimed at women. On the same page as his remarks about the seductions and temptations of the middlebrow, he complained that art magazines were written by “permanent college girls, male and female”.¹⁶ And Greenberg rarely mentions a homosexual painter without some covert negative reference to their sexuality. His remarks about the dangers of “attractive” abstract painting appeared in a review of the Whitney Annual of 1948 and were prompted by his dismissal of the “sickeningly sweet, inept and utterly empty” works of Theodoros Stamos.¹⁷ The “besetting sin of English art” review ends with an exhortation to the bisexual Larry Rivers to use his “native force” instead.¹⁸ With the increasing prominence of a new generation of homosexual artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the attack was renewed: Greenberg complains about “neo-Dada prettiness” and found pop art and Johns “a little too easy to enjoy”. In this context, closing off the holes becomes all the more important, because these holes are the route through which kitsch can violate the purity of the avant-garde:

¹¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.291, (Review of Jean Dubuffet, 1949) 293 (Review of Henri Matisse, 1949), and 162 (“Present Prospects”, 1947); Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 11 (“Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, revised 1961)

¹² Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.34 (“Towards a Newer Laocoon”, 1940)

¹³ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.17 (Review of multiple exhibitions, 1945)

¹⁴ Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 220

¹⁵ Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 175

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.162 (“Present Prospects”, 1947)

¹⁷ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.266 (Review of Whitney Annual, 1948)

¹⁸ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.301 (Review of Ben Nicholson and Larry Rivers, 1949)

middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such, and insinuates itself everywhere, devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, and corrupting the honest.... Insidiousness is of its essence, and in recent years the avenues of penetration have become infinitely more difficult to detect or block¹⁹

This interpretation becomes all the more plausible in the light of Greenberg's concern with the cultural impact of homosexuality. In unpublished notes on the topic probably written c. 1940, he had suggested that homosexuality was no longer merely a fashion, but "something infinitely more profound and pervasive": "queens" were imposing their own "conceptions of love, pleasure and beauty" on society at large.²⁰

The theme re-emerges in Greenberg's review of *Dim Luster*, a new ballet by the homosexual choreographer and dancer Anthony Tudor which appeared in *The Nation* in 3 November 1945. Greenberg considered it "one of the most original and successful works of art produced in the last five years", and described the scene at a ball in which a couple in white are dancing together until someone touches the male partner and awakens a memory. The dancer freezes, leaving his partner perplexed. Then the floor empties, the lights go down, and the man dances alone in front of the illusion of a mirror, on the other side of which another dancer, identically dressed, dances his reflection. This sequence, which is subsequently repeated by the female partner, obviously struck Greenberg as the key not just to the ballet as a whole but to the very nature of contemporary culture:

the narcissistic passages offer a clue to the meaning underneath the obvious one... the partners are each in love with their respective selves, and because they are in love with their selves, they are in love with their own sex.... The final impression is that the triumph of homosexual over heterosexual love is being celebrated; a homosexual pattern imposing itself on a heterosexual situation.

Greenberg then goes on to draw this astonishing and far reaching conclusion:

This seems to me something much more realistic than anything ballet has ever dared to do before. It has behind it the courage of the truth, for the tendency toward the homosexualization of all sex in our society is becoming more and more apparent. What is involved is not simply homosexuality as such but the devaluation of love and sexual relations in general.²¹

This vision of universal devaluation is surely a rehearsal for the passage quoted above, written three years later, when, still using the language of sexual hygiene, Greenberg writes that middlebrow culture insinuates "itself everywhere, devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy" etc.. In this, perhaps surprising context, many of Greenberg's preoccupations are, brought into alignment. Self-love, illusionism, devaluation of cultural values, and homosexuality are all equated, with homosexuality seemingly the master-

¹⁹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2. 257. ("The State of American Writing: A Symposium", 1948)

²⁰ Getty Research Institute. Clement Greenberg papers. Box 26.3

²¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.36-8. (Review of *Dim Luster*, 1945)

trope that binds them together. Perhaps homophobia, rather than misogyny, is the key to Greenberg's critical rhetoric.

There is plenty of contextual evidence to sustain such an interpretation, for the cult of masculinity in post-war America promoted a homophobia that extended to the otherwise permissive New York art world.²² But it cannot be the whole story, any more than Jones's gender-based interpretation, for it is impossible to read Greenberg's remarks about self-love without reference to his better-known account of self-hatred.

Race

In an essay written for *Commentary* in 1950, Greenberg had tackled the difficult subject of Jewish self-hatred – a topic much discussed among New York intellectuals in the post-war period.²³ Greenberg was himself a Jew, the child of immigrants from the Lithuanian Jewish community in north-eastern Poland, and the opening of his essay was blunt: "One looks into oneself and discovers what is also in others. A realization of the Jewish self-hatred in myself, of its subtlety and the devious ways in which it conceals itself".²⁴ Greenberg acknowledged that self-hatred might explain many puzzling aspects of Jewish behaviour including, potentially, his own writing, for in a symposium in 1944 he had admitted that "a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write".²⁵

The argument of the Jewish self-hatred essay is that there are two types of Jew: the "negative" Jew who, "fleeing his Jewishness, expresses his self-hatred directly" and the "positive" Jew who "revels in his Jewishness" but, Greenberg suggests, may in fact be "exorcising from [his] own consciousness an image of the Jew that is no less 'negative'".²⁶ The abuse that "positive" Jews turn upon others "who refuse to make a fetish of their... conception of Jewishness is... a symptom of the kind of jealous fear felt by ambitious mediocrity, as it is also a secret self-hatred".²⁷ Greenberg, who identifies himself as a "negative Jew", was the target of just such criticism. According to Ludwig Lewisohn, the Zionist novelist and critic, the Jewish writers for *Commentary* (where Greenberg was an associate editor) were "hopeless illiterate young men" committed to "ethnic self-liquidation".²⁸

²² See Craven, *Abstract Expressionism* 115-123; Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism* 10-12; Butt, *Between You and Me*, 23-9 and 41-5, and Reed, *Art and Homosexuality* 152-9.

²³ S.A. Glenn, "The Vogue of Jewish Self-Hatred", 95-136. See also Baigell, "Clement Greenberg", 651-64.

²⁴ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.45 (Review of Whitney Annual, 1945)

²⁵ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.177 ("Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature", 1944)

²⁶ Greenberg, *Essays*, 3. 46-7 ("Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism", 1950). In this respect the positive Jew is the counterpart of the homosexual who, Greenberg suggests, is determined to "flaunt what you are supposed to be ashamed of" (Greenberg papers, Box 26.3)

²⁷ Greenberg, *Essays*, 3.54 ("Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism", 1950)

²⁸ Quoted in Glenn, 109.

There is more than one theory as to how Jewishness may have inflected Greenberg's criticism. De Duve takes as his starting point Greenberg's admission, shortly before his death, that at the age of sixteen or seventeen his ambition had been "to paint and draw like Norman Rockwell", the artist responsible for the *Saturday Evening Post* covers that Greenberg had cited in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" as egregious examples of contemporary kitsch. De Duve therefore asks whether "kitsch, *for him*, was not similar to his Jewishness". Perhaps the love of kitsch is "the pleasure taken in the corruption of one's own taste, and therefore, indeed, the aesthetic expression of self-hatred. Jewish self-hatred?"²⁹

Not necessarily, because for Thierry de Duve it is nothing like as simple as that. Kitsch is a commodity in which the labour of the other is alienated, so "the love of kitsch is... hate of the other that finds an aesthetic outlet by eroticizing the commodity". In this respect it "regresses towards primary narcissism; [and] therefore it is not love at all, but pleasure gleaned from the disappearance of otherness". Kitsch therefore flourishes in a "a society that fantasizes its identity on the physical suppression of the other", a fantasy that in the 1930s takes the form of eliminating the Jews. Greenberg's Jewish self-hatred therefore manifests itself in the momentary liking for Norman Rockwell, a self-hating identification with a form (kitsch) in which the Gentile fantasizes the suppression of the (Jewish) other.³⁰

In contrast, Margaret Olin develops an argument based on the potential analogy between literature as the dominant, and the visual arts as the subservient form of culture, and the dominant Gentile cultures in which Jewish culture was subservient. On this interpretation, "the ultra-assimilationist Jew, like painting trying to achieve the effects of literature, does violence to himself", whereas the unassimilated position corresponds to truth to medium. So, "Greenberg's attraction to formalism corresponded to his attraction to traditional Judaism; the separation that he struggled to maintain between art and life he thought he saw in traditional Judaism as well".³¹

Both of these interpretations seem wide of the mark, in that neither seems willing to allow that self hatred might, as Greenberg implied, be present in every word he wrote. More promising, and far less counter-intuitive, is Louis Kaplan's argument in "Reframing Self-Criticism: 'Modernist Painting' in the Light of Jewish Identity" that Greenberg's identification of modernism with "the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant" might be linked to the Jewish willingness to make jokes at their own expense. On this view, "self-criticism" was displaced from the matrix of Jewish identity onto other, more neutral markers like Kantianism and formalism.³² But in concentrating on Jewish jokes to the

²⁹ De Duve, *Between*, 41

³⁰ De Duve, *Between* 45

³¹ Olin, *Nation*, 173 and 176

³² Greenberg, *Essays*, 4.85ff ("Modernist Painting", 1960) and Kaplan, "Reframing", 180-199.

exclusion of Jewish self-hatred, Kaplan ignores the possibility that self-criticism might be a manifestation of a self-hatred rather than just a form of self-definition. And he, like De Duve and Olin, takes little account of the way in which Jewishness was actually constructed in the art criticism of the previous generation (or, indeed, by Greenberg himself).

In the inter-war period it was commonplace for assumed racial characteristics to play an explanatory role in the discussion of the visual arts. It is no surprise to find the wholesale denigration of Jewish culture in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*:

The Jewish people, despite all apparent intellectual qualities, is without any true culture, and especially without any culture of its own. For what sham culture the Jew today possesses is the property of other peoples, and for the most part it is ruined in his hands... there has never been a Jewish art and accordingly there is none today either.³³

But such views were by no means confined to fascist ideologues; they were the common currency of critical discussion. In *The Meaning of Art* (1931) the left-wing English critic Herbert Read makes much the same point:

Certain types of art have characterized certain types of people; and if we take a broad distinction, such as that between the Aryan and Semitic races, we find a very marked difference in their modes of aesthetic expression. The Semites, in fact, are not expressive at all in plastic modes – that is to say they are not original or ‘creative’ in them. Relatively speaking there is no Jewish art. By origin the Jews are a desert race, nomadic, quickly reacting to physical experience. But the major arts belong to sedentary peoples, to those who settle in cities and form a stable civilization, an atmosphere of refinement. Nomadic races are only capable of a popular art, expressed in mobile objects, and popular art of this kind has an affinity with Chagall.³⁴

Read, who was here responding to a book about Chagall by René Schwob (a Jewish convert to Catholicism) entitled *Marc Chagall et l'âme juive* (1931), suggests that “Chagall, with a directness and fluency which is quite characteristic of his race, paints from the heart. He is in fact a lyricist in paint, and his paintings have their analogies in poetry. He is not afraid of being called ‘literary’”.³⁵

What is striking here is the explicit identification of the two qualities that Greenberg most abhors in modern painting, literariness (“the incubus of literature”) and popular art (the “infection” of kitsch) with Jewishness itself.³⁶ Indeed in the 1930s the link between Jewishness and kitsch was so strong that Hitler himself referred to it, claiming that in the

³³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 302

³⁴ Read, *Meaning*, 143

³⁵ Read, *Meaning*, 143

³⁶ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.27 and 28 (Towards a Newer Laocoon”, 1940)

Weimar republic it was Jewish art critics who had persuaded people to accept “the worst kitsch in painting” as “the height of artistic accomplishment”, and that it was the Nazis who had eliminated kitsch in 1933.³⁷ (This was no idle boast: the Nazis had sponsored an exhibition “Away with National Kitsch” held in Cologne in August 1933.)³⁸ In this context, and it is difficult to construe Greenberg diatribes against kitsch as an affirmation of Jewishness. The temptations that modernist painting must resist are the temptations of Jewishness itself.

Greenberg’s ambivalent response to Chagall’s work must be understood in these terms. Chagall’s painting could succeed only if it took the assimilationist route of the “negative” Jew. According to Greenberg, Chagall overcame his early “maladroitness” and “provincial harshness”, but in the process other (specifically Jewish) qualities crept back in: “He polished, softened and refined his art; and at the same time, he sentimentalized and prettified it —”³⁹ Revising the review of Chagall for his book *Art and Culture*, Greenberg added a sentence to make the wider point more explicit: “Ease and facility are attained either by growing up inside the dominant culture or, if you are an immigrant to it, by surrendering and denying yourself without reserve”.⁴⁰

It is impossible to read Greenberg’s comments on the need for immigrants to surrender and deny themselves without reserve, without reference to the famous passage in “The New Laocoon” in which he states that:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium... In making this surrender, painting... got rid of imitation—and with it, “literature”.⁴¹

There is a direct analogy between his recommendation to (Jewish) immigrants and to painters: deny yourself and surrender to the other. In the case of a Jewish painter like Chagall, surrender to the medium and surrender to the dominant culture amounts to the same thing – a refusal of literariness and populist illusion – but it in Chagall’s case it was never “surrender without reserve”.

According to Greenberg, “self-hatred is as intimate a thing as love”,⁴² and so what the self-hating Jew must “surrender and deny without reserve” is the love of self in favour of love for the other. Painting with the heart, Chagall does not completely surrender that love (so evident in the tender depictions of Jewish subjects), and ends up softening and prettifying his art. In effect, he falls back into a form of Jewish narcissism that parallels

³⁷ Hitler, *Table Talk*, 280 [translation modified to include the word “kitsch” used in the original]

³⁸ See Betts, *Authority*, 31-34

³⁹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.83 (Review of Marc Chagall, 1946)

⁴⁰ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 92 (Revision of 1946 review of Marc Chagall, 1961)

⁴¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.34 (“Towards a New Laocoon”, 1940)

⁴² Greenberg, *Essays*, 3.58 (“Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism”, 1950)

the homosexual narcissism that Greenberg had identified in *Dim Luster*. In both cases it devalues the true object of love, the other, by turning love back toward the self.⁴³

The equation of homosexuality, Jewishness and kitsch came easily enough, for all were potential sources of shame,⁴⁴ and together they constituted the demeaned intersection of sexuality, race and class to which Greenberg had gestured earlier in life when, having tried unsuccessfully to get a job with the Hollywood studio RKO, he dismissed it as “a Jewish business... with a lot of sporty looking little Jews and fairy scenario writers”⁴⁵ Yet it was only in terms of ethnicity that Greenberg could be identified with, and so also wish to distance himself from, a subordinate identity. So perhaps the key to Greenberg’s binaries is to be found not in the code of gender, or even of sexuality, but rather in the division of race – women standing in for homosexuals who are standing in for Jews. In which case, the denigration of the former categories is perhaps a displacement of the hatred Greenberg claims to have felt for himself, a heteroerotics of Judaism in which the desire for assimilation and the desire for women are both manifestations of the same denial of self-love. But it is difficult to leave race as the determinant when Jewishness was already a code for something else.

Capital

Since the nineteenth century the affinity between Jewishness and capitalism had been noted by many commentators, particularly amongst those who were critics of both. The most influential representative of this discourse was the sociologist Werner Sombart, whose 1911 book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (translated into English in 1951) articulates many of the themes repeated by others in the following decades.

According to Sombart, a “modern, capitalistic and Jewish economy are identical concepts”.⁴⁶ One aspect of the Jewish character that was particularly adapted to the functioning of the capitalist economy was “abstraction”. Sombart asks: “Are we not continually struck by the Jew’s love for the inconcrete, his tendency away from the sensuous, his constant abiding in a world of abstractions?” This quality had its origin in geography and climate, and was particularly associated with deserts where the

⁴³ It was an anti-Semitic commonplace that the Jews were “the inventors of masturbation and homosexuality”, as these were seen as “mechanical sexual acts without any true relationship between the sexual partners”, Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 250.

⁴⁴ Greenberg thought someone might be ashamed to admit to that they were moved by Normal Rockwell more than Raphael, *Essays*, 4.268 (“Complaints of an Art Critic”, 1947); he asked Larry Rivers if he was ashamed to be Jewish (Rivers and Weinstein, *What*, 182) and claimed that homosexuals “flaunt what they’re supposed to be ashamed of” (Greenberg papers, Box 26.3). Apparently Greenberg’s father claimed that his son was ashamed of him on account of his Yiddish accent, Rubinfeld, *Greenberg*, 41.

⁴⁵ Marquis, *Art Czar*, 25.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Lange, *Antisemitic Elements*, 216

inhospitable environment served to distance its inhabitants from nature. But it was also this that had adapted the Jew to modernity, for according to Sombart “the modern city is nothing else but a great desert... forcing its inhabitants to become nomads”.⁴⁷

Judaism and capitalism therefore share the same alienation from organic nature, and the same disidentification with their surroundings that produces abstract reasoning:

The traces of the peculiar circumstances which gave it birth are still visible in the Jewish religion. In all its reasoning it appeals to us as a creation of the intellect, a thing of thought and purpose projected into the world of organisms, mechanically and artfully wrought, destined to destroy and to conquer Nature’s realm and to reign itself in her stead. Just so does Capitalism appear on the scene; like the Jewish religion, an alien element in the midst of the natural, created world; like it, too, something schemed and planned in the midst of teeming life.

It is this affinity that made the “the abstractness of capital... congenial to the soul of the Jew”.⁴⁸

Sombart’s analysis had obvious implications for culture; he claimed that there was always something intellectual about the work of the Jewish artist: “Does he not “paint with his brain?”⁴⁹ His views were echoed by many, not least Greenberg himself. “Capitalism”, he wrote, “was nothing new to the ghetto... The Jew has been a capitalist more or less since the beginning of the Diaspora”.⁵⁰ He too acknowledged the “Jewish bias toward the abstract” and identified the capacity for abstraction with the development and progress of culture: “Man was unable to attain to civilization until he could make some sort of mental abstraction from the evidence of his senses... the failures of civilization usually have come about because the senses were not sufficiently informed by the mind”.⁵¹

Sombart had noted the destructive element in Jewish capitalism, which resulted in the dissolution of traditional communities and ways of life, but he acknowledged that in capitalism such destruction was also creative. Indeed, Sombart was the first to use the term “creative destruction” to characterise the capitalist economy. But it was Joseph Schumpeter, the Austrian economist who taught at Harvard from 1932, who gave the term a lasting currency in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942). Schumpeter’s

⁴⁷ Sombart, *Jews* 183

⁴⁸ Sombart, *Jews* 144 and 192.

⁴⁹ Sombart, *Jews* 183

⁵⁰ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.157 (“The Jewish Dickens”, 1943)

⁵¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.177 (“Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature”, 1944) and 2.147 (Review of Herbert Read, 1947)

account is devoid of Sombart's increasingly overt anti-Semitism,⁵² but he too emphasised the qualities of capital that Sombart had identified as Jewish—its abstract rationality and its restless appetite for change.

The reason capitalism “not only never is but never can be stationary”, is not due to external factors such as changes in the social or natural environment, or even to the unpredicatability of the monetary system. Rather, the impulse that keeps change in motion comes from the new products, new production and transportation methods, and new forms of industrial organization:

[This] revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live with”.⁵³

The essential problem of capitalism is not how it administers existing structures, it is “how it creates and destroys them”. Were the conservation of capital “the chief aim of entrepreneurial activity”, capitalism would be incompatible with progress, because “progress entails... the destruction of capital values”.⁵⁴ As Schumpeter explained in his 1939 book *Business Cycles*, “Any prosperity... induces a period of liquidation which, besides eliminating firms that have become obsolete... involves a painful period of readjustment... as the contours of the new equilibrium system emerge”.⁵⁵ There is in capitalism “a tendency toward self-destruction”.⁵⁶

The idea of “creative destruction” had an immediate resonance in the arts as well. Greenberg's mentor, the painter Hans Hofmann, picked up the idea, saying that he thought it was only by following his “creative instincts in an act of creative destruction” that he would be able “to experience the manifestation of the absolute”.⁵⁷ Greenberg does not appear to have used the phrase himself, but all of these themes are present in his criticism from the start, applied not to the economy but to the arts. When he claimed that modernism represented “almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture” and that its essence lay in the fact that “it criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized”, he was only applying to the arts the qualities that were already attributed to capital itself.⁵⁸

⁵² However, he echoed Sombart's views in private: “What is the greatest achievement of our civilisation? Modern capitalism! Which race has made perhaps the largest contribution to that development? The Jews!”, quoted in R.L. Allen *Opening Doors*, 66

⁵³ Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 83

⁵⁴ Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 84, 96

⁵⁵ Schumpeter, *Business*, 154

⁵⁶ Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 162

⁵⁷ Friedel and Dickey, *Hofmann*, 91

⁵⁸ Greenberg, *Essays*, 4.85 (“Modernist Painting”, 1960)

If capitalism could never be stationary, nor could its culture. From this it followed that “the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to “experiment”, but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving*”.⁵⁹ Greenberg would not have known Marx’s reference in the *Grundrisse* to “the violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation”, but the logic of Marx’s analysis is clear enough from the *Communist Manifesto*, which emphasizes that capital is “constantly revolutionising the instrument of production”.⁶⁰ And Greenberg is true to it in “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, when he describes how “the avant-garde, both child and negation of Romanticism, becomes the embodiment of art’s instinct of self-preservation”.⁶¹ To be both child and negation is the only possible means of self-preservation.

That is why Greenberg repeatedly emphasizes that the most advanced painting takes the form of destruction. According to him, the Cubists “inherited Cézanne’s problem, and solved it, but – as Marx would say – only by destroying it”; there was a “Crisis of the Easel Picture” because “in using this convention as they do – and cannot help doing – artists like Pollock are on the way to destroying it”.⁶² But Greenberg also insists that such destruction was also creative. The best example of this was cubism “whose attack on the third dimension had of itself generated something equally positive to take its place; a new conception of pictorial space”. In contrast De Chirico’s “destruction had been too exclusively negative”.⁶³ “The avant-garde... believes that history is creative, always evolving novelty out of itself”.⁶⁴

Schumpeter was of the opinion that what he called “capitalist art” had distinctive features that reflected the abstract rationality that was the distinguishing feature of capitalism itself. A hypothetical line running from Giotto all the way up to Picasso or Matisse would be one to which the “expressionist liquidation of the object forms an admirably logical conclusion”.⁶⁵ Greenberg could hardly have put it better, though in his case it is Cubism that brings about the same result. The cubists solved Cézanne’s problem Marx’s way when they “conclusively liquidated the illusion of the third dimension” and “sacrificed the integrity of the object to that of the flat surface”.⁶⁶ “Self-liquidation” was, it seems, as necessary for the survival of painting and capitalism as it was for the “negative” Jew.

⁵⁹ Greenberg, *Essays* 1.8 (“Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1939)

⁶⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 667; Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 222.

⁶¹ Greenberg, *Essays*, 1.28 32 (“Towards a Newer Laocoon”, 1940)

⁶² Greenberg, *Essays*, 3.98 (Review of Arnold Hauser, 1951) and 2.225 (“The Crisis of the Easel Picture”, 1948)

⁶³ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.135 (Review of Giorgio de Chirico, 1947)

⁶⁴ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.15 (Review of multiple exhibitions, 1945)

⁶⁵ Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 126

⁶⁶ Greenberg, *Essays*, 2.245 (Reply to George L.K. Morris, 1948) and 3.98 (Review of Arnold Hauser, 1951)

Self-Negation

Within Greenberg's criticism, self-negation does a remarkable amount of work: sexually, it is the way to avoid narcissism and homosexuality; ethnically, it is the means of escape from the ghetto; artistically, it keeps the culture moving. All this provides clear evidence, if further evidence is needed, of the way in which the discourses of sexuality, ethnicity, and aesthetics can become interwoven even in texts that seek to keep them apart. And yet within these multiple, overlapping frameworks, self-negation always performs the same role: it is the condition of progress rather than stasis; a negative relation to the self that enables a positive relation to the other; a rejection of the past that creates an opening to the future.

Although distinct from the idea of permanent revolution, with which it is sometimes confused, this concept of self-negation has a Marxist, ultimately Hegelian, origin.⁶⁷ It always describes an internal relationship, and as both Marx's critique and Schumpeter's guarded defence of capitalism emphasise, self-negation is inextricably linked not to the praxis of revolution but to the revolutions of capital itself. This has a significant bearing on its role within Greenberg's criticism. The question that arises with every interpretation of Greenberg is always "Can this be the whole story?". Every potential displacement – whether from the discourses of gender or race to the aesthetic, or between the discourses of sexuality and race themselves – appears to open up the possibility of another, and the quest for completeness seems increasingly vain. In this context, what capitalism offers is not a foundation – an originary economic self-negation that underpins all the others – but an explanation of self-negation as a form. If creative destruction is the essence of capitalism, the culture of capitalism (both art and its criticism) must take on the self-destructive form of capital's negation of itself simply in order to survive. Capitalism may not be the whole story, but it determines the way the story has to be told.

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⁶⁷ According to Victor Burgin, writing in 1973, "By the 1950s, the search for stylistic innovation in painting and sculpture, embalmed in Clement Greenberg's slogan "perpetual revolution", had become the legitimating ritual of a New York based ideology", Burgin, *Situational*, 16 (cf. David and Cecile Shapiro in Frascina, *Pollock*, 139). In fact, the identification of stylistic change with "perpetual revolution" came not from Greenberg, but from Michael Fried in 1964, and drew on Merleau-Ponty rather than Trotsky. As Fried later acknowledged, his usage was at odds with Greenberg's ideas. (Fried, *Art*, 34)

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