Formalism dominated art criticism in the United States during the postwar period, a time in which the center of gravity of the Western art world shifted from Paris to New York, the U.S. experienced an economic boom, complacency characterized political life, and dissent was scarcely tolerated. The North American art critic Clement Greenberg was the leading prolocutor of formalism during this time. Many less prominent critics followed his lead. [...] Greenberg believed that the subjects of the visual arts should be their respective media. Painting should be about paint, and sculpture about the materials of sculpture. [...] Formalists evaluate art according to physical qualities such as color, size, shape, line, texture, and so on, and treat the ideational content of works as irrelevant. They view themselves as being mainly protectors and upholders of high aesthetic standards.

By excluding considerations of idea content and social context, [formalist art criticism] obscured the substantive concerns that artists frequently sought to express in their works. Thus, while Piet Mondrian wrote extensively on art’s role in a dialectical revelation of harmonized oppositions, for example, by reading Clement Greenberg on Mondrian we could learn no more about this than that the artist "has theories" (Greenberg, 1986: 64). Greenberg's disregard of the idea content of Mondrian's art was typical of his approach. Even in cases in which artworks, according to the extensive writings of artists such as Mondrian (Holtzman and James, 1993) and Wassily Kandinsky (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982), were heavily invested with ideational or affective content, Greenberg evaluated such works only in terms of their formal properties. If he acknowledged the content at all, he gave it short shrift, dismissing it a priori as not pertinent to the value of art.

As modernist art became more abstract, its symbolic content became more obscure. [...] The opaque symbolic lexicons of the modernist arts proved to render many works vulnerable to misleading interpretations by formalist critics who ignored the explicatory literature and the statements of artists. North American Abstract Expressionism was especially vulnerable, because few of its artists wrote at length about art. During the period of its reign as the foremost modernist movement, Greenberg and other formalists took full avail of Abstract Expressionism's susceptibility to misunderstanding.

[...] Early in his career, [Greenberg] advocated formalism as a way of resisting kitsch, which he viewed as a product of mass culture, and which in turn was an effect of the industrial revolution. As he wrote in 1939 regarding the birth of kitsch, "newly urbanized masses set up pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised, ersatz culture, kitsch" (Greenberg, 1939: 10). He viewed formalism as a way of insuring high art against a loss of autonomy by militating against absorptions of high culture by mass culture. Greenberg's defense of abstract painting is consistent with his formalist position. He argued that art could best ensure its integrity by its exclusion of representational content. Greenberg declared that the modern arts must preserve their autonomous status, "by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity." This would require each art to "narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its
possession of this area all the more secure" (Greenberg, in Frascina, 1982: 5). The exclusion of extraneous content, according to Greenberg, was accomplished by North American Abstract Expressionist art, which Greenberg called "American-style painting."

Greenberg's criticism thus provided an intellectual basis for the support of tendencies toward greater abstraction in modern art, tendencies that culminated after World War II in North American Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg's formalist focus on aesthetics alone, however, demanded an abstraction of art from life. He demanded that art should exclude social or existential concerns that would supposedly compromise artistic autonomy as well as defile the aesthetic purity of visual art. Like the contemporary literary criticism that Eagleton discussed, his criticism thus has no substantive bearing on social concerns. His art criticism was neither antagonistic nor threatening to the dominant ideologies by which society reproduced itself. Its advocacy of a radicalized artistic autonomy and purity obviated any implications for social critique. Greenberg was a proponent only of art for art's sake. [...]

Prior to the war years, art critic Harold Rosenberg, who along with Greenberg was part of the Partisan Review circle, also viewed modernist culture as an enclave of individualism and of opposition to politically oppressive ideologies.¹ After World War II, he came to see modernism as opposed to the leveling effects of mass culture and stultifying cultural traditions. "Individual culture," for Rosenberg, should withdraw from political and social concerns to protect its revolutionary consciousness from the mass culture that threatened it from without. The implications of Rosenberg's advocacy of the radical isolation of artistic activity were thus the same as Greenberg's in terms of an effective, socially critical role for art.

**The Rebellion Against Formalism**

A critical counteroffensive against formalism began in the 1950s. The art historian Herbert Read (1952) published the first major attack on formalism in an article titled "Farewell to Formalism" in Art News. Read points out in this piece that while there are many very different types of modern art with different objectives, criticism of all modern art has been dominated by "a hazardous combination of subjective judgment and formal analysis" (Ibid.: 36). [...] A critical appreciation of much of modern art, [...] according to Read, requires an interpretive dimension of understanding that is beyond the epistemological range of a formalist analysis. Such work, in Read's view, requires a symbolic interpretation.

Read observes that the dominance of formalist analysis is a 20th century phenomenon. In the 19th century, Ruskin, Baudelaire, and Pater were all symbolic critics who "insisted that we should first see the work of art, and then read it." In fact," Read proclaims, "all criticism that was ever worth anything, and that has survived its brief day of topical relevance, was symbolic in this sense, taking the work of art as a symbol to be interpreted, rather than an object to be dissected" (Ibid.: 38). Because the referents of symbolic art are often metaphysical and thus of a numinous nature, they can elude translation by mere words. Thus, to appropriately represent art, criticism should, ideally, be artistic. A beautiful literary

¹ Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) was an art critic, historian, and philosopher. He was something of a rival of Greenberg, and his 1952 essay, “American Action Painters,” was an important challenge to Greenberg's formalist approach. In the essay, Rosenberg argued that each painter recognized as part of the abstract expressionist movement (although he preferred to call them action painters) was creating their own "private myth" through the act of painting. Unlike Greenberg, Rosenberg emphasized the importance of biography in Action and argued that each painting could be seen as a record of an experience of the artist.
interpretation supplements the visual experience of a work of art, facilitating a more complete aesthetic experience. Criticism, then, according to Read, may serve as the "midwife of painting." The writings of Apollinaire and Breton exemplified such "true" criticism in the 20th century, in Read's view. He points out, however, that criticism should not only be a poetic exercise. To avoid lapsing into solipsism, the critic should keep in mind that he or she is translating the work, and this requires that the critic's interpretation should not be at variance with that of the artist. As Read (Ibid.) writes, "the critic should play fair, and not substitute his own symbols and metaphors for those intended by the artist." [...]  

Symbolic criticism, according to Read, allows penetration of the "mystery" that much art expresses. The mysterious content in art is in his view an expression of the artist's most deeply felt concerns. It arises from the "tragic situation of modern man" and expresses the artist's "profoundest fears and hopes" (Ibid.: 39). Read urges that art criticism should facilitate rather than fetter or obscure such expression. [...]  

Non-formalist criticism began to flourish in the late 1960s, a time in which questions about the legitimacy of ideology and authority proliferated in counter-culture movements. As the art historian and critic Barbara Rose observed in 1968, William Rubin, Robert Rosenblum, and Leo Steinberg had already made significant contributions to the development of an alternative "synthetic criticism, which has no vested interest in ignoring subject matter or subject content" (Rose, 1968: 32). However, as Rose (Ibid.: 32) observed, conservative tendencies persisted:  

In the meantime, however, criticism is dominated by an element of the disenchanted American left, led by Rosenberg and Greenberg, which has managed to reach a rapprochement with the society it once rejected. Traumatized by Stalinism, anesthetized by McCarthyism, and pacified by affluence, it has found a comfortable home in art criticism.  

Echoing Read, in 1966 Rose observed that the relevance of formalist analysis had narrowed due to the variety of types of modern art that had emerged. She observed that the formalist perspective was most suited to discussions of Cubism. However, so many other kinds of modern art, and Abstract Expressionist art in particular, rendered formalist terms of analysis less relevant. Formalism is appropriate to a discussion of Cubism because the latter "was a hermetic art for art's sake [and] depended for its success or failure on a balanced structure created by the relationship of analogous parts." However, the Abstract Expressionists, for example, "themselves claimed that theirs was above all an art of content." Therefore, Rose avers, "today, if we wish to keep pace with the art being done, critics must be willing to discuss what is implicit in an artwork: that is, its content and intention." Because so much of modern art does not seek to be hermetic, but is openly responsive to the historical situation, criticism should take into account the historical context in which art is created. Such criticism contributes to making artworks intelligible to the public and providing, as Rose writes, "such an interested public with the clues to experiencing and interpreting the messages of new work" (Rose, 1988: 215-219). [...]  

Against the growing strength of non-formalist and synthetic criticism, Greenberg took another stand for his position in a 1972 article titled "Necessity of Formalism." Greenberg here reminds readers that modernism should be devoted above all to the preservation of high standards of artistic quality against the degenerative effects of mass culture. In response to a cultural "emergency," modernism is charged

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2 Solipsism is the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist.
with "continuity with the highest aesthetic standards of the past.... The modernist preoccupation with aesthetic value or quality...could not but lead to a much closer and larger concern with the nature of the medium in each art, and hence with technique" (Greenberg, 1972:105-106). Thus, modernism's "artisanal emphasis" reacted against Romanticism, which, according to Greenberg, contributed to a deterioration of aesthetic standards by subordinating form to content.

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