Part II

METHODOLOGIES
The paragone of the arts has a distinctive and illustrious past, having engaged artists, writers, and composers from Leonardo, Alberti, and Michelangelo to Lessing, Goethe, Wagner, and Greenberg. Paragone texts that address music and the visual arts often draw support for what is perceived as the close correspondence between the two arts in terms of their structural innovations and expressive intentions. Exchange between the arts commonly serves as a way of mediating qualities that are hard to describe, and in the modernist period in particular, critics, artists, and publics faced with the unexpected frequently resorted to metaphorical comparison.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, comparisons between music and painting were increasingly common. Ostensibly non-visual, music offered the painter an alternative trajectory through which to negotiate multi-sensual experience or to defeat mimetic representation. Through alertness to the emotive affect of instrumental music (and of Wagner's in particular), critics extolled a “higher Realism,” shifting the intention of painting from mimetic illustration to the realization of psychological experience.

Concerns for the relation between the arts rely, understandably perhaps, on the discussion of formal qualities, the study of which lies at the foundation of academic art history as it developed at the end of the nineteenth century. To study the relation between music and painting is then a productive means through which to reflect upon the origins of art history as a discipline. Such work is perhaps less complementary to the socially conscious and politically engaged “new” art history developed in the 1970s particularly by Norman Bryson, T. J. Clark, Amelia Jones, Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock, and Raymond Williams, but may find renewed engagement in relation to the questioning of representation undertaken by the “October Group,” principally Yve-Alain Bois, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Not to detract from “new art history,” it is, however, for these reasons that the following outline will focus largely on the fathers of art history rather than its later exponents.

When the British artist and critic Roger Fry claimed that the painting of Wassily Kandinsky was “pure visual music,” he quite probably had in mind the observation of fellow artist-critic Walter Pater that “all art aspires to the condition of music.” For Pater, music is the ideal “identification of matter and form,” yet it is little remembered that he opened his chapter “The School of Giorgione” in *The Renaissance* (1893) by stating that it is a “mistake” to regard the arts as “translations into
different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought.”
Pater’s essential text exploring disciplinary boundaries therefore constitutes a warn-
ing to anyone embarking on work in this field. But whereas Pater’s text at heart con-
cerns comparison, Fry’s statement was more daring for dispensing with metaphor. The difference marks the modernist emphasis on the affect of art, from which its formal means could be deduced a posteriori.

Fry was the translator of artist Maurice Denis’s essay on Cézanne, published in the Burlington Magazine in 1910, and author of one of the founding texts of formalist art criticism in the Anglophone world, “An Essay in Aesthetics” (1909). Here Fry laid out six “emotional elements of design”: rhythm of line; mass; space; light and shade; color; and the inclination of the picture plane. For Fry, these formal qualities inscribed emotions that were communicated to the viewer through his or her body. Rhythm of line was the “gesture of the artist’s feeling,” and mass the feeling of the object’s “power of resisting movement, or communicating its own movement to other bodies.”

The idea that gesture and movement instigate a sensation of movement in the viewer that is comparable to the movement on the picture plane confounds our expectations of a static plane. On this basis, Fry claimed that a work of art has a “direct and immediate appeal” not to the intellect but to emotion, because the first response from the viewer is to an arrangement of form, not to a set of ideas.

On the Continent shortly before Fry’s text was published, one of the founders of art history, Alois Riegl, was developing his now-notorious concept of Kunstwollen, or “will to art,” which he described in Late Roman Art Industry (1901). Riegl believed that this will was premised on quintessentially formal values in art: “the appearance of things as form and color in the plane or in space.” According to Riegl, it is our apprehension or perception of form that accounts for our response to works of art, generated by the work itself rather than what we might bring to it. Riegl’s younger colleague Heinrich Wölfflin agreed. In his conclusion to The Principles of Art History (1915), Wölfflin described two kinds of art history, one that moved according to outward historical and societal forces, and another that evolved from its own momentum, autonomously: a history of “forms of apprehension and representation … of form working itself out inwardly.” Of course art history can better be described as a mixture of the two, and this is where Riegl and Fry concur.

Riegl alleged that the viewer meets a work of art in selfless attentiveness, “like a part of the all-embracing world soul.” Engaging with a work of art should be so engrossing that it becomes internalized by the viewer as part of his or her own experience. However, through its apprehension, the work of art should inform him or her of the way in which humanity relates to the world. Riegl thought that overarching styles such as late Roman art, the Renaissance, or modernism spoke of the desires and wills of the societies and cultures that made them. Just as we can derive a view of what societies of the past valued, and how different people from different countries or backgrounds related to one another by looking at their art, so too can we read this, he believed, in art of our own day. It is worth clarifying that Riegl’s view of “Modern art” (he was writing in 1902) was far from complimentary: modern art ignores the viewer because “it knows nothing but the subject; for according to its view, the so-called-objects are completely reducible to the perception of the subject.” Modern art, Riegl thought, was dangerously founded on sight, just when scientific discoveries were providing evidence that sight could no longer be under-
stood as the same for everyone. In place of this, Riegl championed another sense, touch, and argued that we should have to both see and touch an object in order to understand what it is. But by addressing the senses, this meant that art was not simply a representation to be read intellectually, but was integral to what it was representing. It was both representation and reality, proactive in the viewer’s experience. Moreover, that experience was profoundly multi-sensual.

By extension, one could wonder at the limits of this multi-sensual understanding of art. If touch, then why not taste or sound? Riegl himself did not turn his attention to music; however, rhythm was of central importance to his discussion of form. Indeed, in Michael Gubser’s words, for Riegl, “rhythmic form organized art and nature, man’s perception and the historical world.” It was rhythm that “provided the basis for artistic form and development.” By identifying with the work’s rhythmic contours (or gestures, in Fry’s language), the viewer apprehends essential qualities otherwise obscured by concern for its narrative or representative subjects, which are commonly pursued in cognitive and deductive looking. In contrast, a response attuned to the formal rhythms of a work opens up an intuitive and immanent looking akin to the emotive affects of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic structures in music. The implication is that even in visual art, we do not necessarily see the subject depicted first of all, but rather feel the impression of the structural organization through which that subject is manifested.

Riegl’s theory has significant implications for the way we might regard abstraction, although Riegl himself would doubtless have regarded abstraction as part of the modern art he most disliked. Because art is part of our experience, is an experience in its own right, it can show us complicated ideas without having to explain them narratively. We comprehend without having to articulate this understanding in words. And because it is the sensory experience that counts, a work of art doesn’t need to be “of” anything at all, as the experience will remain—in paint, color, and form. Indeed, arguably, the experience will be more intense if there is nothing to distract us from these sensations. If we can see a figure, landscape, or other subject, then our intellect kicks in: we relate the work to things we know already, rather than comprehending it as itself.

When Riegl disparaged modernizing tendencies that reduced the art object solely to the perception of the viewing subject, he was to an extent rehearsing a Kantian interpretation of painting that was later to become central to formalist interpretations of modernism. Kant says that we experience only appearances, not things in themselves: “What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us. We are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving them.” On this basis, modern critics have laid emphasis on the appearance of art rather than what it represents, and have used this tenet to justify “pure” and “abstract” works. For them, a modernist work of art is about itself as an art object, about paint, canvas, texture, and so on; and where these works are representational, the objects they include are not metaphorical or symbolic of anything outside the restricted confines of “art.” Abstraction is both a property (i.e., it is non-figurative, and it functions on internal relations between forms, colors, and planes); and a process (i.e., it chooses to emphasize one idea over another and uses the means of its medium to that end). In this regard, it is easy to see why early critics of painterly abstraction turned to music as a comparable art form whose internal structure is integral to its expression.
Two of the first painters to explore metaphysical abstraction through a painterly address to several senses were the Russian Wassily Kandinsky and the Czech František Kupka. Kupka, however, did not have anything “comparative” in mind in his recipe of visual and aural. Instead he claimed to have made “something between sight and hearing”—a structural and material translation of music.9 He signed some of his letters to the Austrian critic Arthur Roessler “color symphonist,” and described his painting as “concepts, syntheses, chords.”10 So what did he mean? In Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colors (1912; National Gallery, Prague), Kupka expanded his investigations into the splitting of light, combining his knowledge of the color wheel and of fugal technique in music. In fuge, progression is made through the repetition of the theme in the same key, commonly (although not necessarily) beginning on a note either a third or fifth away from the starting one. Transposing this for painting, the colors red and blue on a color wheel are either three or five colors apart, depending on the direction one moves around the circle. Kupka called his painting a “symmorphism, which, like a symphony, will develop in space.”11 He said that by employing “forms of different dimensions, composed according to rhythmic concerns, I will achieve a formal and directional structure, typical of fuge, in which the development of a theme across time, or here, space, is undertaken with limited harmonies.”12 His sweeping curves, variously expanding and contracting, manifest this unfolding by recurrence. The meeting points of the two consecutive themes are seen in harlequinesque sections: for example, the tight loop in the upper part of the canvas. Kupka’s painting is about space, the disposition of forms, and, as his title a-morpha indicates, about the transcendence of media through formlessness: literally, the title means without “morpha,” without form. His subject was the continuum of every movement in the cosmos, but he despaired: “I was obliged to be even more morphic than I would be when interpreting forms recorded in nature,” because “morphé, or form, is the fundamental condition for art of any description.”13 For Kupka, the means of art—of any media—were inadequate for his ends.

There is, however, a counter-argument to the abstraction of Kupka and Kandinsky. Clement Greenberg, in “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), addressed medium specificity rather than correspondence between the different media. He saw it as characteristic of modern art to define itself according to the limits of its medium, and he argued this in order to justify abstraction. The title of his article referred to two earlier texts: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Laocoon: An essay on the limits of poetry and painting (1766), which not only discussed the arts as separate entities but imposed a hierarchy on them, with poetry at the top; and Irving Babbitt’s The New Laocoon: An essay on the confusion of the arts (1910), which argued that any mixing of the arts should stop. Babbitt was particularly reactionary in his views, and it is worth noting that Greenberg, as harbinger of the avant-garde, turned to a conservative critic. Greenberg entered the fray saying that “purism” springs from anxiety about the identity of the art in question. Greenberg’s generic “purism” is a “salutary reaction against the mistakes of painting and sculpture … which are due to such a confusion” in the arts.14

It is also in this essay that Greenberg considers the medium-specific qualities of the other arts. Musicologists will doubtless not enjoy his observation that “[m]usic was saved from the fate of the pictorial arts,” by which he refers to their subservience to and imitation of literature, “by its comparatively rudimentary technique
and the relative shortness of its development as a formal art.” At the same time, he goes on to suggest that the avant-garde of the twentieth century, in an attempt to secure the integrity of painting, looked to the method of music: its “abstract” nature, constructed according to its own laws. Music’s formal sovereignty was something for other arts to aspire to. Bringing the Laocoon texts up to date, Greenberg concluded his essay with the happy assertion that each art is “safe now” (in 1940), having “accepted” both its own limitations and the powers of its sister arts. For the visual arts, the key was the physical affect of the object, and Greenberg stressed the vital importance of the picture plane which broke with realistic space to assert its own presence.

In the course of several major texts, Greenberg espoused a dominant definition of modernism that traced a teleological advancement from the work of Édouard Manet to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. In this movement toward purity, and toward a self-reflexive interest in the medium, painting moved toward flatness. In his 1960 essay “Modernist Painting,” Greenberg claimed that modernism “uses art to draw attention to art,” as opposed to the Renaissance tendency to “use art to conceal art.” The text continued: “Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself … to entrench it in its area of competence.”

What Greenberg’s narrative lacks is a sustained consideration of the socio-political and historical context of the works in question. His is a very selective history: he despised Duchamp, for example, and gave little attention to Dada, or to the social-realist works contemporaneous with the start of Abstract Expressionism in America. Socialist realism is, after all, still regarded as being outside most definitions of modernism. Greenberg’s scholarship, however, evolved. He had addressed some of these issues in one of his earliest articles, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” published in the American Trotskyist journal Partisan Review in 1939. Here Greenberg addressed what he regarded as an increasingly divisive tendency in art production, the double-edged sword of art that engages critically with its environment while bending to the needs of that environment. The article distinguishes between the avant-garde, which “keep[s] culture moving,” and easily digestible kitsch, an “ersatz culture” which welcomes “insensibility” and “uses for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture.” It is clear on which side Greenberg’s favor lies; nevertheless, it is in this article that he most fully examined the “relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific … social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place.”

It is this attention to context that provides an unlikely moment of correspondence between Greenberg and Raymond Williams, an exponent of “new” critical theory. For both critics, modernism is recognizable for its interest in itself, supporting a transnational community based on a like-minded approach to the medium in question. It is also recognizable for its technical innovation and sophistication; its liberation from conventions, largely facilitated by its urban environment; and its rejection of domesticity in the pursuit of the new. “Creativity is all in new making, new construction,” Williams writes in “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” before launching into an analysis of the combative strategies of manifesto-led movements. But, Williams also writes: “Although Modernism can be clearly identified as a distinctive movement, in its deliberate distance from and challenge to more traditional forms of art and thought, it is also strongly characterized by its inter-
nal diversity of methods and emphases: a restless and often directly competitive sequence of innovations and experiments, always more immediately recognized by what they are breaking from than by what, in any simple way, they are breaking towards.”

This openness, or uncertainty, is similarly embedded in the version of modernism given by T. J. Clark in his revised introduction to *The Painting of Modern Life*. Here Clark pinpoints the moment of modernism as commencing with Manet, identifying the change as “a kind of scepticism, or at least unsureness, as to the nature of representation in art.” As a result,

Painting would replace or displace the Real ... for reasons having to do with the nature of subjectivity, or the truths revealed by higher mathematics. ... Unbrokenness of surface could be seen—by Cézanne par excellence—as standing for the evenness of itself, the actual form of our knowledge of things. That very claim, in turn, was repeatedly felt to be some kind of aggression on the audience, on the ordinary bourgeois. Flatness was construed as a barrier put up against the viewer’s normal wish to enter a picture and dream, to have it be a space apart from life in which the mind would be free to make its own connections.

In this passage, modernism is elitist in its address to a mind able to follow its abstract vision of the world, while also constricting in its demands for attention: we have to see as it sees, we cannot “dream.” Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life*, however, goes on to entrench a modernist emphasis on form within a changing social structure. He is adamant that the “form of the new art is inseparable from its content.”

The economic change of industrialization that brought “tourism, recreation, fashion and display” created a population with new tastes in art; correspondingly, some art was made to satisfy the new taste, while other art sought to reflect the change in modern patronage and modern life, and to reflect it critically. Central works of Impressionism—Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882; Courtauld Institute of Art, London), Renoir’s *La Loge* (1874; also Courtauld), or Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884 (1884–86; Art Institute of Chicago)—ambiguously negotiated the two demands, both mirroring modern leisure, yet perhaps, through innovative technique, questioning some of its pretensions to a more “civilized” experience of life.

Clark’s groundbreaking book on Impressionism pulled back the façade of chocolate-box contentment to reveal a critically engaged history beneath the surface. In a different vein, but no less unsparingly, Rosalind Krauss and the critics involved with the journal *October* have, over the last thirty years, forcefully staged a reassessment of the intentions and limits of the art-historical canon. Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* wages war against the selective and visually driven histories of modernism that occlude instances of anti-form, inter-media collaboration, and the daily lives of those who make and look at art. Resisting the “withdrawal of each discipline into that sphere of sensory experience unique to it,” Krauss abandoned the objective, empirical, and analytical voice of art history to engage with literary and fictional texts by André Breton and Georges Bataille, works of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, and philosophical texts by Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard.

Looking for what was absent in existing histories of
modernism, Krauss also sought what was absent from our cognition or perception: what was seen, but not expressed.

Formalist questions return us to core concerns for art history—the material object, cultural analysis, and aesthetic practice. Formalism has often been chastised for regarding art as an end in itself. However, by tracing the processes of making, the aspiration was in fact the reverse: to record an index of cultural movements, desires, and intentions. Many of the themes broached in this short outline—the transference between internal and external, the enigma of presence implied through absence, the multi-sensual, and the temporal—find correspondence in responses to music. These formalist endeavors in both the art-works themselves and the criticism about them share a desire to give voice to an ineffable quality in art that eludes analysis yet, it is argued, is responsible for conveying meaning beneath (or separate from) surface content. This is, after all, the gist of the immediate aftermath of the contest between satyr and god in the myth of Apollo and Marsyas: Apollo’s brutality in the defense of an art of harmony was incongruous with the powers of music, Harmonia, Rhythmos, and Logos understood as the components that ordered the spheres, of which the human world is an incomplete reflection. According to Diodorus, on flouting the musical balance of the spheres, Apollo stopped playing the lyre for some time. So Marsyas silenced the god of music: his aspiration to music un-did music altogether. In other words, we regard form and skill as ends in themselves at our peril, but to ignore them would be to ignore the very qualities that the arts—and only the arts—can express.

Notes

12 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 563.
18 Ibid., 540.
20 Raymond Williams, “The Emergence of Modernism,” in ibid., 43.
22 Ibid., 5.

Further Reading