

Greenberg, Kant, and Aesthetic Judgments of Modernist Art

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In “Modernist Painting,” Clement Greenberg famously maintains that Modernism consists in a self-critical tendency and, since Kant was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, that Kant is the first real Modernist.¹ “Modernist” pictorial art refers to certain of the paintings by Manet, with whom (according to Greenberg) Modernism in pictures began,² as well to certain artworks by Cézanne and Mondrian, among others.³ I would like to explore an issue raised by Greenberg’s thesis that, like the Critical philosophy, distinctively Modernist art is self-critical and explores the conditions of its own production. I suggest that the claim that Modernist art is self-critical and explores the conditions of its own production is a cognitive, not aesthetic, claim. This raises the question of what kind of aesthetic experience of Modernist art *as* Modernist art is possible. Greenberg’s comments about form suggest that aesthetic experience can involve reflection on formal aesthetic properties. Although the experience of Modernist art can surely be intuitive and non-cognitive in this sense, this kind does not seem to be the only sort of aesthetic experience of Modernist art: the experience of Modernist art as Modernist art seems to be both a genuine aesthetic response and of a different kind. Accordingly, I suggest that there can be a partly aesthetic, partly cognitive experience of what makes Modernist art distinct, i.e., an aesthetic experience of Modernist art as reflecting on the conditions of its own production. Such a judgment concerns the Modernist artwork insofar as the artwork is Modernist in Greenberg’s sense, that is, self-critical. This kind of judgment would not be a cognitive judgment. Nor would it be what Kant calls a judgment of the agreeable, which has to do with the satisfaction of bodily needs or desires. Since the aesthetic judgment would contain a conceptual content, a notion of the artwork’s historical background and its relation to other works, it would count in Kant’s classification as a judgment of *dependent beauty*.⁴ Accordingly, one finds in Greenberg’s account two ways of reflecting on and judging aesthetically an artwork: one way focuses on or attends primarily to form, while the other way emphasizes conceptual content.

This paper is divided into three sections. Section one examines in what way Kant’s philosophy is Modernist and, second, how Modernist painting can be said to explore the conditions of its own production. Section two addresses the nature of the aesthetic satisfaction and judgment in response to art. It draws first from Kant’s notion of pure aesthetic judgment and his distinction between free and dependent beauty, and then from Greenberg’s notion of an aesthetic value judgment. According to both Kant and Greenberg, pure aesthetic judgment should be distinguished from cognitive judgment. Nonetheless, I argue, this does not mean that a pure aesthetic judgment cannot have a cognitive element. Accordingly, in section three, I examine the aesthetic judge who views and takes pleasure in Modernist art in light of its historical or other non-aesthetic conditions. Such a viewer makes a judgment that is partly aesthetic and partly conceptual. The section appeals to the distinction between free and dependent beauty and argues that the judgment of a work of Modernist art in light of its conditions and relations to other works counts as a judgment of dependent beauty.

Before proceeding, a few qualifications are in order.⁵ To claim that Modernist art is self-critical is not to attribute conceptual content to those works as they are *in themselves*. The judgment, not the painting, contains the conceptual content. The judge

attributes the content to the work. He or she sees and understands it in light of its historical conditions, artistic predecessors, or even social, cultural, political, or economic circumstances. As Robert Morgan notes, Greenberg repudiates the notion that ideas or conceptual elements are *intrinsic* to the work.⁶ The conceptual content is not “in” the work and is not, strictly speaking, an objective property. Of course, in another sense the content is objective insofar as it is based on shared knowledge of the work’s history, influence, background, and the like.

Second, claiming that Modernist art is self-critical is not to attribute a certain kind of *intention* to the artist, namely, the intention to create a work of art that appears self-critical. Greenberg downplays the role of “theory” and “fixed ideas” in the artistic creator’s mind: “It should also be understood that self-criticism in Modernist art has never been carried on in any but a spontaneous and largely subliminal way... No artist was, or yet is, aware of it [the general self-critical tendency of Modernist painting], nor could any artist ever work freely in awareness of it.”⁷ I am concerned with the experience and judgment of the aesthetic judge, not with the intentions, desires, or beliefs of the artist. While Greenberg, following Croce, implies that the *making* of art and the *appreciating* of it belong to the same order of experience and can be assimilated to one another, I do not attempt to examine the relationship between making and appreciating art in this essay.⁸ This paper primarily concerns reception of the artwork rather than its production. I focus on appreciating the work in a certain kind of way, namely, in light of a recognition of its (say) historical background. Of course, not all appreciation requires recognition of some conceptual content. One can appreciate the work aesthetically without recognizing its historical background or some other non-aesthetic feature, and one can certainly recognize the work’s historical background without appreciating it aesthetically.

Third, when an aesthetic judge claims that Modernist art is self-critical, he or she is making a claim about the artwork’s *relation* to other objects, events, or works, rather than a claim about the work as it is in itself or a claim about its formal features alone. In other words, the judge in this case is seeing it in its *continuity* with other works. Making this judgment, seeing the work in this way, requires adopting a historical (or some other non-aesthetic) perspective. To use Greenberg’s language: the viewer makes a “judgment-decision,” choosing to see the picture in a certain way, namely, to view and understand it in light of certain non-aesthetic properties.⁹ Adopting such a perspective gives the judgment its cognitive content. It is worth pointing out that the perspective that is adopted by the judge may have been (or may be) unavailable to the artist.

Moreover, I am not attributing to Greenberg the view that self-criticism is the *goal* of Modernist art. I am interested in how to understand a certain kind of aesthetic response made by viewers, judges, or critics. I examine the act of judging certain works of art, and for the sake of argument, let us assume that these works are considered by the judge to be among the “best” examples of Modernist art. I consider judging these works in a certain way, namely, understanding or cognizing them in light of some historical or other non-aesthetic feature of the artwork.¹⁰ It is the partly cognitive nature of this judgment that renders the aesthetic judgment a judgment of dependent rather than free beauty.

I

This paper is not primarily about either Kant or Greenberg. Rather, it is a constructive response to a question raised by reading Greenberg and Kant together: How should we conceive of the aesthetic appreciation and judging of Modernist art as Modernist art?

Nonetheless, since I will be appealing to Kant's notion of free beauty, some explanation of Kant's aesthetics is necessary. Moreover, the claims that Modernist art explores its own conditions and that Kant also is a Modernist naturally raise question of how exactly Kant's philosophy explores its own conditions. Accordingly, in the next paragraph I turn to how Kant's philosophy can be said to do this. In section three, I appeal to Kant's notions of dependent beauty to characterize a judgment that is both partly aesthetic and partly conceptual. Note that this paper is not a comparison of Greenberg to Kant, strictly speaking; nor do I attempt to show in what ways Greenberg is Kantian or follows Kant, even if some of these ways may be apparent to the attentive reader.¹¹

I turn to Kant's philosophy in order to explain how his transcendental idealism can be said to be self-critical and thus, for Greenberg, Modernist; the reason for this explanation is that Greenberg uses "Modernism" to characterize certain paintings by Manet, Cézanne, Mondrian, and others. Because the theme of this paper concerns looking at Modernist art as Modernist art, it is necessary to understand the meaning of "Modernism" as Greenberg uses the term. Seeing in what ways Kant's philosophy is Modernist can help us understand Modernism better, even if this overview takes up only a few paragraphs.

The Critical philosophy, according to Kant, demarcates the limits of knowledge. Transcendental idealism holds that there are two necessary conditions of experience: intuition (*CPR* A19/B33) and the "pure concepts of the understanding," the categories (*CPR* A65/B90).¹² In order to have a genuine cognition, we must 1) receive an intuition through one or both of the pure forms of sensible intuition, space and time (*CPR* A22/B36), and 2) determine an intuition through one or more of the categories of *quantity* (unity, plurality, totality), *quality* (reality, negation, limitation), *relation* (inherence and subsistence, causality and dependence, community), and *modality* (possibility, existence, necessity) (*CPR* A80/B106).

According to Greenberg, "Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic."¹³ To put it another way: Kant uses reason to critique reason. For Kant, such self-criticism makes room for a practical faith (*CPR* B xxx), a morally-based hope that happiness will be the recompense for leading a virtuous life or that God will reward the just in the afterlife (*CPrR* 5:122-132).

According to Kant, human reason has a natural tendency to overstep the limits of sensibility and to seek the "unconditioned" for any condition. This tendency results in claims that (to summarize the "thesis" for each of the four antinomies) the world has a temporal beginning and is enclosed in spatial boundaries (*CPR* A426/B454), the soul is a unitary, simple substance (*CPR* A434/B462), that there is a causality through freedom that can explain appearances (*CPR* A444/B472), or that there is an absolutely necessary being (*CPR* A452/B480). Human beings postulate that we are free, have immortal souls, and that God exists (*CPR* B xxix-xxx).

Nonetheless, Kant maintains, it is necessary to understand that this tendency arises from what Kant calls "transcendental illusion" (*CPR* A501/B530). According to the *Critique of Pure Reason's* Dialectic, transcendental illusion arises when one moves from the (perfectly acceptable) logical maxim or directive, "[F]ind the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed" (*CPR* A307/B364), to the "transcendental

principle of reason,” which has a propositional (rather than imperative) form and is misleadingly presumed to yield objective knowledge. The transcendental principle of reason is: “when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection)” (*CPR* 307-8/B364). Michelle Grier refers to the logical maxim or subjective principle as P_1 and to the transcendental principle of reason as P_2 .¹⁴ The latter, unlike the logical maxim P_1 , involves a metaphysical assumption concerning the reality of a complete and unconditioned set of conditions for every conditioned.¹⁵ In other words, P_2 posits the unconditioned, the absolute totality of conditions.¹⁶ This totality can never be given as an object, such a judgment is erroneous and results in a metaphysical error.

This overview allows us to see the meaning of Greenberg’s characterization of Kant as the first real Modernist. By explaining the sources of transcendental error and pointing its roots in human reason, the Critical philosophy explores the conditions of reason. In other words, reason carries out a self-criticism. Accordingly, it can be said that the Critical philosophy explores and criticizes the conditions of its own production. In carrying out this self-critique, reason identifies and characterizes two necessary (what Greenberg calls “limiting”) conditions of experience and knowledge of the world: the pure forms of intuition and the categories.

So much for Kant. How can it be said, in a similar vein, that Modernist art explores the limiting conditions of its own production? Two-dimensionality is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of all pictorial art, including Modernist pictorial art. Modernist art “recognizes” this (though here I leave aside the issue of artistic intention) and makes flatness explicit. Flatness reveals the two dimensionality of pictorial art, and thus Modernist art explores one of its own necessary conditions whenever it gestures toward the flatness of the painting. Modernist art shows this flatness; it need not express it in words. Naturally, this self-criticism did not come from out of nowhere. Much happened in the art world before Modernist art explored its own conditions and became self-critical. Greenberg recognizes this in the final words of “Modernist Painting”:

Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is—among other things—continuity, and unthinkable without it. Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, Modernist art would lack both substance and justification.¹⁷

Modernist art, too, counts as a historical development, and was of course not the last one. Indeed, this is what leads Arthur Danto to claim:

Greenberg’s was the most developed account [of those accounts meant to replace the Vasarian paradigm], and in a way the most consistent with “modernist painting” (Greenberg’s expression) but it broke down badly with exactly the emergence of the kind of art that raised both the ontological [What is art?] and the modal [What kind of art is possible?] question. It was the incapacity of the Greenberghian [sic] paradigm to account for what I call “art after the end of art”—art which attained to the kind of philosophical self-

consciousness that made the ontological question vivid—that meant not only that the Modernist period of art history was over, but that the entire developmental progressive phase of the history of art had come to an end.¹⁸

However, rather than examining whether Danto's claim is correct, I would like to turn to the nature of aesthetic judgment of art, now that we have seen how Kant's philosophy and Modernist art can be considered self-critical.

II

In exploring the nature of aesthetic satisfaction and judgment more closely, I draw from Kant's theory of aesthetic experience and his account of its conceptual component as well as from Greenberg's notion of an aesthetic value judgment.

Accordingly, we must return to Kant, this time to his aesthetics. For Kant, an aesthetic judgment is a judgment whose determining ground cannot be other than "subjective," which means that its "determining ground" cannot be other than the feeling of pleasure or displeasure (*KU* 5:203).¹⁹ An aesthetic judgment mentions and is based on one's own feeling of pleasure or displeasure, revealing something about one's experienced sensible state. An aesthetic judgment about a thing is made exclusively on the basis of how one experiences or engages with the object, and not for any other reason. The nature of one's experience of the thing provides one with a reason to make an aesthetic judgment about the object, and this occurs only if one reacts to the perception of the object with pleasure or displeasure. An aesthetic judgment asserts an item's capacity or suitability to provide pleasure or displeasure to someone who experiences it. An aesthetic judgment does not give a reason why one feels pleasure or displeasure, but is an expression or statement *that* one has the feeling. The judgment mentions or "lays claim" to the feeling of pleasure (*KU* 5:244). It is the linguistic or discursive account of the feeling, though it reveals no knowledge about an object and makes no claim to "cognition of the object" (*KU* 5:244; cf. *MS* 6:211-12). It does not refer to an objective property, technically speaking, but to the subject's feeling (cf. *KU* 5:250). The judgment does not evaluate the feeling, does not label it good or bad, and does not endorse or condemn it from a practical point of view. Endorsing or condemning always involves a rational determination of the faculty of desire, but insofar as one is making a pure aesthetic judgment the faculty of desire remains undetermined.

Accordingly, Kant distinguishes pure aesthetic judgment from not only cognition (*KU* 5:205) but also from judgments of instrumental and moral goodness. Pure aesthetic experience is not to be confused with pleasure in response to some instrumental or moral good (*KU* 5:207-210). Indeed, Kant refers to the practical, agent-oriented response to the morally good as the moral feeling of respect (*CPrR* 5:72-78).

The claim that Modernist art reveals and criticizes the conditions of its production constitutes a plainly cognitive, not aesthetic, judgment. Such an assertion makes a truth claim, a statement about a feature of the world, about how the world is. It is descriptive, cognitive, and classificatory: it sees the artwork *as* Modernist art. To use Greenberg's phrase, it is categorical. Since the judgment is not aesthetic, it cannot count as the basis of what Greenberg calls an aesthetic value judgment, a pure aesthetic experience. The judgment says, "Modernist art is thus," and describes what Modernist art is. The claim that "The pencil is on the table," for instance, and the self-reflection claim are both descriptive, and in that alone there is no pure aesthetic pleasure. In order to feel the ordinary aesthetic

pleasure of (what Kant calls) the *agreeable*, desire or interest must be the ground of the judgment. For example, you might be pleased that the pencil is on the table, since you were looking for something with which to write; this pleasure would be a pleasure of utility, but not a pure aesthetic pleasure. Similarly, while you might be pleased that Modernist art is recognizing its own conditions, this does not by itself bring pure aesthetic pleasure, since it is a cognitive and descriptive claim. But it might very well bring you pleasure of the agreeable, should it be united with desire or interest. For example, suppose you wished to see the art world head in the direction of self-critical Modernist art—suppose you had predicted that art would head that way and now you have been proved right.²⁰ This fulfillment could bring you fame, money, and, if you are very, very lucky, tenure at an elite institution. But it would not bring pure aesthetic pleasure.

The next Kantian aesthetic concept that remains to be examined here is that of dependent beauty. It is worth noting that there is some controversy surrounding the distinction between free and dependent beauty. Here is how I understand Kant's distinction. A pure aesthetic judgment can be *free*, in which case any conceptual content that the judgment might have is bracketed out in the making of the judgment; or it can be dependent, accessory, appendant, or adherent (*anhängend, adhärierend*), in which case the conceptual content is attended to in the act of judgment. That is, in the case of dependent beauty the content is not abstracted out, even though it never becomes the *sole* basis for the judgment (which would render the judgment cognitive): the subject still feels a kind of pleasure, the basis of the pure aesthetic judgment. In an adherent judgment the concept is appendant, so to speak: it adheres and hangs on. In a free judgment, the conceptual content can be temporarily removed or, as it were, *detached*.

A judgment of free beauty consists in a reflection on mere form; the pleasure derives from the play of the mental faculties upon the form of the object. While there may be some conceptual element involved, it is not directly integrated into the judgment when the aesthetic spectator judges. When I take a certain palm to be beautiful, I still recognize it as a palm tree, and thus presuppose a concept, but my pleasure comes from the play between imagination and my capacity to think (the understanding). This play is elicited by the form and structure of the object.

By contrast, if when making the judgment I think about the palm's purposes in the biosphere, I am doing something slightly different. If I think about how the palm is suited to house a bird's nest, to provide protection from strong winds coming in hard off the water, or even to reduce carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, then I am making a pure aesthetic judgment of dependent beauty (at least, assuming that the conditions of *purity* are met—that is, disinterestedness, purposiveness without a purpose, necessity, and subjective universal validity).²¹ In seeing the palm as a dependent beauty, I see the tree in terms of the concept of a palm, say, in terms of what a palm does or can do in the biosphere, its evolutionary history, and so on. This conceptual element, is directly incorporated or integrated into the judgment of dependent beauty. I see the palm not only as a palm (which I do even in the case of free beauty), but also in terms of the conceptual content that I associate with palm trees.

Even in the case of a free beauty, e.g., a bird of paradise, one might have a concept of the object. In the case of a free judgment, this knowledge is bracketed. Accordingly, James Kirwan is right to insist that qualifying as a free beauty depends not on the beauty's actually being "undetermined by a concept" but rather upon that beautiful object's being cognized at the moment of judgment as so undetermined.²² The free/dependent distinction does not hinge on the *ontological* status of the object, but is a function of the *psychological* state of the person making the judgment. Thus, it is not the case that a strong, healthy work horse (viewed as a dependent beauty) and the bird of paradise (viewed as a free beauty) are representative of two distinct kinds of objects; rather, what distinguishes these two cases is that the bird and the horse are seen in different ways by the aesthetic judge at the moment of judging. Denis Dutton and Nick McAdoo argue that for Kant all beauty is dependent; however, since Kant's text clearly makes the case for free beauty, they slightly overstate their views.²³ Nonetheless, their point usefully counterbalances any tendency to focus on free beauty alone.

Let us now turn to Greenberg's views of aesthetic satisfaction and aesthetic judgment. Greenberg repudiates reducing aesthetic judgment to a judgment about pictorial art reaching its alleged end, flatness. He views the latter as a misleading interpretation of his position. In the 1978 Postscript to "Modernist Painting," Greenberg laments this misrepresentation:

There have been some further constructions of what I wrote that go over into preposterousness: that I regard flatness and the inclosing of flatness not just as the limiting conditions of pictorial art, but as criteria of aesthetic quality in pictorial art; that the further a work advances the self-definition of an art, the better that work is bound to be. The philosopher or art historian who can envision me—or anyone at all—arriving at aesthetic judgments in this way reads shockingly more into himself or herself than into my article.²⁴

Nor does the genuine aesthetic viewer or critic make judgments based on a work's newness or oldness, since this would amount to making a cognitive judgment. In "Art Criticism" (1981), Greenberg writes:

But what about the extra aesthetic contexts of art: social, political, economic, philosophical, biographical, etc., etc.? The historical moment? Don't they have to be brought in? And how can aesthetic value be kept enough in sight in such contexts? It doesn't have to be. For when such contexts are brought to the fore it's no longer criticism that's being practiced.²⁵

Greenberg distinguishes aesthetic value judgment from a categorical, classificatory judgment:

Being for the new simply because it's new, or being for a certain kind of art simply because it's in vogue, doesn't entail an aesthetic value judgment. Nor does rejecting what seems old-fashioned simply because it seems that. (Categorical judgments are in any case never truly aesthetic ones.) What's involved here is something I'd call aesthetic incapacity: the incapacity lies in letting irrelevant factors like newness and oldness shut off aesthetic experience, inhibit the operations of Taste. This amounts to, has amounted to, a kind of judgment on aesthetic experience itself. And it's this judgment, this disparaging

judgment, that seems to control too much of what's offered as criticism of contemporary fine art.²⁶

But in what exactly does making an aesthetic value judgment consist, according to Greenberg? Greenberg considers aesthetic value judgments to be unanalyzable:

Value judgments constitute the substance of aesthetic experience. I don't want to argue this assertion. I point to it as a fact, the fact that identifies the presence, the reality in experience of the aesthetic. I don't want to argue, either, about the nature of aesthetic value judgments. They are acts of intuition, and intuition remains unanalyzable.²⁷

Greenberg suggests that the critic, qua critic, should examine his own aesthetic experience, rather than make cognitive, categorical, or historical judgments. "Inner experience" or feeling, revealed by "searching introspection" is, or at least should be, the basis of an aesthetic value judgment.²⁸

For Greenberg, an aesthetic value judgment consists in reflecting on an artwork's form.

Matisse's art speaks for itself through its "mechanics," its "form" and through the feeling which that "form" makes manifest. It's not by far the first to do so and to transcend the illustrated subject by doing so. (All good painting and sculpture does that to some extent). But just as Matisse rejected verbal rhetoric so he kept every last trace of illustrational rhetoric out of his art. He may have been the first painter in our tradition to do that in a really radical way.²⁹

But even if all good painting speaks for itself through its form and through the aesthetic pleasure that the form elicits, this claim does not exclude the possibility that form can be combined with conceptual content.

In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg describes the "abstract technique" as "a play of lines, colors, and spaces" that (in his Picasso-Repin example) represents a woman.³⁰ Greenberg esteems the reflective process itself:

But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso's painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the "reflected" effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the "reflected" effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator's unreflective enjoyment. Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*.³¹

The sensitive and cultivated spectator must work for her aesthetic enjoyment. With kitsch, she is not even given the opportunity. She is deprived of the chance to let her imagination and reflective capacity play. She does not even have the opportunity to reflect. It is—in a very different sense of the word—*ready-made* for her. She accepts a decision that has already been taken for her by the artist.³² She makes no decision for herself or entirely on her own—it is already given. She arrives too late, after the fact. The art is already synthesized and packaged for her. Like junk food, kitsch is satisfying, but remains a quick fix. It gets the job done—it might even be necessary at times—but there are healthier foods for thought.

III

Greenberg's comments about form might be taken as suggesting that aesthetic experience requires reflection on only formal aesthetic properties. But surely this is not the only type of aesthetic experience that can occur. It seems that there can also be a partly cognitive, partly cognitive experience of Modernist art, namely, an experience of the work of art in light of its historical or other non-aesthetic features.

Granted, an aesthetic experience of Modernist art sometimes consists in a reflection on mere form—I do not deny this. Greenberg seems to recognize this, too, as we have seen. Sometimes we simply see the painting more or less as it presents itself to the eye, putting only a little cognitive effort into it, e.g., without classifying it, viewing it as part of a development, or recognizing its historical background or influences, and so forth.

But an aesthetic judgment of Modernist art can also sometimes incorporate cognitive content that is associated with or pertains to the Modernist artwork. It is possible to see and understand the Modernist artwork as an instance of Modernist art, in light of all that this entails in terms of its historical, social, cultural, or political conditions. Because such a judgment incorporates cognitive content and directly “depends” on a conceptual element (though it is not, in this act of judging, *reduced* to a cognitive judgment), it would count, in Kant's classification, as a judgment of dependent rather than free beauty.

The aesthetic judgment of the beauty of Modernist art can be fleshed out in light of the distinction between free and dependent beauty articulated in the previous section. Such a judgment, in other words, counts as a judgment of dependent beauty: it not only contains a conceptual element but *incorporates* it into the act of judging. To be sure, Greenberg warns against reducing aesthetic value judgments to cognitive, historical, moral, political, or any other non-aesthetic judgments, and we can follow him in making this move. Nonetheless, a concept can still play an important and crucial role in the aesthetic judgment. Even if an aesthetic judgment cannot be based on conceptual content alone, the latter can be combined with the pleasure experienced by a judge, for instance, a viewer who sees Modernist art as Modernist art.

Greenberg's own introspective statements suggest that judging in light of conceptual content is possible. He refers to his encounter with a work of art in a way that reveals that conceptual content can play a role in an aesthetic value judgment:

It was years later that I got to see Monet's lily-pad murals in the Orangerie in Paris, and they were even more centrifugal in organization than *Bathers by a River*, but they weren't as “flat” and didn't cause my eye to “slide” nearly as much—though they, too, seemed to leak through their sides and corners. But by that time *I knew more of what it was all about* and so did my eye.³³

Of course, attention to the picture's visual syntax remains crucial; the aesthetic properties that are evident to the eye must still be *seen*, after all. The eye plays an indispensable role even in judgments of dependent beauty. Nonetheless, having some conceptual content, knowing what it is “all about,” can play an important part in such acts of judging.³⁴

If this is correct, certain acts of judging contain a cognitive element. The judge who sees the Modernist painting as self-critical views the work not merely as a painting—nearly everyone does that. (For the best way of seeing *any* kind of picture aesthetically is to see it as a picture first. The point is that one does this quite readily with a Modernist painting.)³⁵ The judge might see the work as revealing the conditions of its own production. He or she might view the picture *as* a picture *as* revealing its own flatness, or see the painting as a picture that gestures toward its two-dimensionality. To do this, the judge needs to have a concept of flatness and a notion of two-dimensionality. Such *artistic* notions are not simply “given to the eye” in mere form. In making such judgments, the viewer knows what to look for, what it is all about. In some cases, if one does not keep in mind such conceptual content, one may very well not appreciate the work at all. As Tom Wolfe puts it (with characteristic wit): “A man from Mars or Chester, PA, incidentally, would have looked at a Morris Louis painting and seen rows of rather water-looking stripes.”³⁶

Whether or not a picture is aesthetically appreciated in light of conceptual content associated with the picture depends on the aesthetic judge—the subject—and not on the object or artwork. *Which* concept is chosen in the case of a particular artwork also depends largely on the subject: the subject makes a judgment-decision here. Moreover, the judge need not hold that the artist intended to convey whatever conceptual content is associated with the work.

The content associated with the artwork may very well be determined and decided by the artist. However, the artist’s decision need not be accepted by the judge. Moreover, she might reject the artist’s theory of art, if, that is, the artist has one at all. This rejection may lead the judge to associate the work with some other conceptual content than the one intended by the artist.

On this account, beauty is (following Kant), technically speaking, a subjective property, not a property of the object. One and the same Modernist artwork could elicit a judgment of free beauty and, later, dependent beauty. The distinction between free and dependent beauty does not fall along ontological lines, as we have seen. Moreover, the very same judge could make a judgment of dependent beauty and, moments later, make a judgment of *free* beauty, seeing the work more in an intuitive glance and less in terms of what he knows of “the social, political, economic, philosophical, [or] biographical.”³⁷ Whether or not such knowledge enters into the judgment is an empirical, not a conceptual, matter.

In short, there are at least two basic ways of experiencing an artwork. The first way emphasizes the work’s spatial and temporal form, its visual syntax and structure, and the like. The second way focuses more on the conceptual content associated with the work.³⁸ Both ways of interacting aesthetically with an artwork are possible and, indeed, seem to obtain in reality. Which act of judging occurs more frequently is an empirical matter, a function of how the judge views the work.

Moreover, I see little reason to maintain that one type of judgment is more valuable, important, or pleasant than the other. A conceptual element does not necessarily or by itself render the aesthetic pleasure that is associated with the

judgment either intrinsically superior or inferior. At least, this is how it seems to me at present.

I would thus like to end on a pleasant note, as it were. The aesthetic value judgment of dependent beauty brings pleasure, pure aesthetic pleasure. Although this pleasure may very well feel similar to the aesthetic pleasure of the agreeable, the pleasure felt when we satisfy bodily needs, the source of the former pleasure is different. If Kant is right, pure aesthetic pleasure derives from the harmonious, free play of one's mental capacities. In the case of self-critical Modernist art, the free play arises from a particular sort of object, a Modernist work of art. The pleasure does not arise because the artwork fulfils some previous desire, at least, none other than the desire to feel pure aesthetic pleasure. It comes from the artwork alone, even if the work's satisfied judges can and do view it in various ways.³⁹

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Notes

¹ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." Accessed February 7, 2008. <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>. A list of References is found above.

² For Greenberg, Modernism began in poetry and prose fiction with Baudelaire and Flaubert, respectively. Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern." Accessed February 7, 2008. <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html>.

³ Greenberg cites Manet, Cézanne, and Mondrian in his essay. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." Accessed February 7, 2008. <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>.

⁴ Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space to examine the *sublime* as a response to art nor the response to *natural* beauty. This paper thus focuses on beauty found in works of (Modernist) art. It is worth pointing out, however, that Greenberg does at times use the language of sublimity ("exhilarated," "elated," "deeply moved"). See Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, p. 147.

⁵ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this essay for helping me to clarify these points.

⁶ Robert C. Morgan, introduction to Greenberg's *Late Writings*, p. xvii.

⁷ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

⁸ Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, "Judgment and the Esthetic Object," p. 40. On aesthetic judgments and aesthetic decisions, see pp. 42ff. The relationship between the artist and the beholder is somewhat complex in Greenberg's account, since the artist "invites" the beholder to accept the judgment-decisions that the artist has accepted for himself (p. 43).

⁹ On judgment-decisions, see Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, pp. 42-45, 60, and 62.

¹⁰ For Greenberg's views of self-criticism and development in art, see Charles Harrison, introduction, *Homemade Esthetics*, p. xvi.

¹¹ See Paul Crowther, "Greenberg's Kant and the Problem of Modernist Painting," (1985) *British Journal of Aesthetics* v. 25, no. 4; and Mark Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*, chapter 3.

¹² Citations in this paper use the *Akademie Ausgabe* pagination. For a list of Kant's cited writings, see the References. Abbreviations are as follows:

KU = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
CPrR = *Critique of Practical Reason*
CPR = *Critique of Pure Reason*

¹³ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

¹⁴ Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, pp. 117-30. Based on Grier's discussion, Henry Allison also refers to P₁ and P₂. Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 330-32.

¹⁵ Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 312.

¹⁶ Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 330.

¹⁷ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

¹⁸ Arthur C. Danto, "Works in Progress: Art and the Historical Modalities." *Æ, Canadian Aesthetics Journal / Revue canadienne d'esthétique*, Volume 1, Spring 1996. Accessed June 18, 2007. http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol_1/danto.html.

¹⁹ For a helpful discussion, see Malcolm Budd, *Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, pp. 25-6.

²⁰ Note that if the judgment is to be disinterested (and I am assuming that it is disinterested in the case being discussed in this essay), then the judge cannot be

“defending” a school of art, since this would render the judgment interested and the judgment would be grounded on an interest.

²¹ For Kant, by introspection I can never be certain that I am making a pure rather than an impure (say, interested) aesthetic judgment.

²² James Kirwan, *The Aesthetic in Kant*, p. 46.

²³ Denis Dutton, “Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 226-41; and Nick McAdoo, “Kant and the Problem of Dependent Beauty,” *Kant-Studien* 93 (2002), pp. 444-452.

²⁴ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting.”

²⁵ Greenberg, “Art Criticism.” Accessed June 18, 2007.
<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/criticism.html>.

²⁶ Greenberg, “Art Criticism.” Accessed June 18, 2007.
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²⁷ Greenberg, “Art Criticism.”

²⁸ Greenberg, “Art Criticism.”

²⁹ Greenberg, “Influences of Matisse.” Accessed June 18, 2007.
<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/matisse.html>.

³⁰ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture*, p. 15.

³¹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture*, p. 15.

³² On accepting “ready-made decisions” (April 14, 1971), see Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, pp. 131-132, 139.

³³ Italics added. Quoted by Morgan in his introduction to Greenberg’s *Late Writings*, p. xix. Originally published in “Influences of Matisse,” in *Henri Matisse* (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 1973), unpaginated; also published in *Art International* 16 (November 1973): 28:31.

³⁴ Moreover, Greenberg’s notions of “surprising expectation” and of the satisfaction of expectation suggest that aesthetic experience can contain a conceptual element of some sort. For expectation presumably presupposes having something in mind, namely, whatever is expected. For surprising expectation, see “Counter-Avant-Garde,” in Greenberg, *Late Writings*, p. 14; and “The Factor of Surprise,” in Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, pp. 31-39. In the latter, Greenberg claims that with past art the “feel” is different from that of contemporary art. We are already set to “read” the works of the past more or less as they ask to be read (p. 33); the newness of and in the art “has to maintain

a degree of continuity with previous art” (p. 34). On expectation and surprise, see Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, pp. 116-119. On seeing and conceptual content, see Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, pp. 152-3.

³⁵ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting.”

³⁶ Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, p. 59.

³⁷ Greenberg, “Art Criticism.”

³⁸ These two ways are probably best conceived as being on a spectrum, rather than as fixed, disjointed contradictories.

³⁹ I would like to thank Will Buschert, Eric Dayton, and the participants of “What’s Left of Modernism?: Greenberg, Kant, and Contemporary Aesthetics” (June 1-3, 2007, Emma Lake Kenderdine Campus, University of Saskatchewan) for their assistance or comments. I am also grateful to both of the paper’s anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.