The Context of Medium Specificity: From Riegl to Greenberg

Keywords
Alois Riegl
Clement Greenberg
Content
Formalism
Haptic and Optic
Material
Medium Specificity
Style

Abstract
By the mid-1960s the notion of medium specificity had come to define that which was most insular and protectionist about painting, with the idea of medium specificity entirely synonymous with the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg. As such, the richness of the term, and its historical situatedness, was lost behind a particular defence of the virtues of modernist painting. This article attempts to draw out the history and nuances of medium specificity: to trace its development within an extended body of speculation – commonly termed formalist – in order to re-open a discussion, too often sidestepped within contemporary discourse, as to the relationship that exists between the work of art and that which the work of art can claim to bear witness to.

Introduction
Medium specificity – what Rosalind Krauss referred to as, ‘a pointing-to-itself’ (2011: 4) – came late to formalist writing. To understand its development is thus, in part, to consider both a type of questioning and a locatable period of changing ideas that originated in Austria and Germany before emigrating to Great Britain, then on to the United States. This work re-treads some of the history of formalist art history and criticism in order to reflect on key positions against the backdrop of modernist painting, with implications for the present too. Of interest is the relationship between form and content (taking note of variations developed by individual writers), the notion of style as attached/unattached to form, the role of individual and collective judgment, and the shift from a transcendent, immaterial sense of form to an immanent, material one. I will consider the idea that the importance Clement Greenberg assigned to flatness developed in response to Roger Fry’s inability to ground the mechanism of the aesthetic in the conditions of the object, whilst ensuring that it maintained distinctions.

According to Diarmuid Costello, the conflation of medium with aesthetics (and the subsequent denigration of medium) has been responsible for the marginalisation of aesthetics within discourses of the past several decades (2007: 2). This essay sets out to
consider medium specificity’s theoretical imbrications, which include its relationship to aesthetics and its connectedness to modes of perception. The idea of a medium specificity for painting has a rather splintered history, and Greenberg’s formulation sits as a systematic abatement of earlier conjectures, yet also as a rerouting of inquiries away from murkier terrain. In the aftermath of the period of greatest hostility to Greenberg, it appears fitting to ask, as Craig Staff has done: ‘how [a] medium that remains for the most part analogue in scope and import position[s] itself’ (2013: 6).

At a time when interdisciplinarity and pluralism infuse all notions of contemporary practice, and when, as Charles Harrison contends: ‘the typical tendency of the critic is now to emphasise the mutual implication of the verbal and the visual’ (1993: 13), it might seem anachronistic to seek to promote encounters of a medium kind. Yet to accept this would be a mistake, as shedding light on the particularities of that which provided legitimation for a host of modernist practices is surely essential if one is to arrive at a clearer sense of what it is that painting and its accompanying theoretical mapping has become. If medium specificity is to be abandoned as unhelpful, then it follows that the terrain from which its Greenbergian formulation grew is to be abandoned also. Such abandonment, however, would leave painting languishing in the realm of context, denied ontological distinctions afforded it by a consideration of its very means and manner of being. I am not interested in elevating painting, but, rather, through a historiographical scrutiny of intersecting ideas, in attempting to resituate it in respect of a diverse and oft-neglected lineage of thinking, so as to clarify its reach.

To that end, this essay deals with thoughts about painting, and seeks to trace the evolution of medium specificity. I will consider a number of formalisms: from Alois Riegl’s *Problems of style: Foundations for a History of Ornament* (1893), through the Bloomsbury Group (c. 1905-35), to Clement Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting” (1960), and present a succession of interest and influence rather than a timetable of development (though, for the most part, the ideas charted herein happen to be loosely chronological). I choose not to begin with Gottthold Ephraim Lessing’s famous work: “Laocoön An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting” (1766) for two reasons. First, Lessing’s importance to formalist criticism derives largely from Greenberg’s deployment of his novel distinction between poetry and painting. Secondly, Lessing’s
ideas locate themselves outside of the History of Art, in its systematised nineteenth century guise, and therefore attach themselves firmly to a pre-modernist framework.

Benjamin Buchloh considers that: ‘[t]he formalist concept of self-referentiality had been a theoretical prescription which art until around 1965 had to abide’ (2000: 12). However, the beginning of this state of affairs preceded the emergence of discourses directed towards that which became modernist painting. In effect, this lag enabled contemporary painting to support itself on a partially constructed platform that, if not erected in an interior manner in respect of art historical practices (owing to a focus on the works of the past), offers an impression of theoretical autonomy. From Roger Fry onwards, formalism attempted to keep in step with the objects whose meanings it sought to expound, which necessitated a reconfiguring of its fundamental terms and methods. Most importantly, access to the studio processes of contemporary painters, and the newfound centrality of the studio itself, ignited an interest in the material stuff of painting that would, in turn, draw attention to paint’s formed connections to surface.

The Greenberg-Fried-October debates were extremely heated, and the complexities of the arguments generated a rich phraseology. One result of this was that more common terms, as they attached themselves to competing frameworks, required ever-increased clarification. A word on terminology: post-1965, though in respect of his own work, Michael Fried preferred to use the word formal to formalism (1998: 17), as, by the late 1960s, formalism (as an approach) and formalist (a practitioner of such an approach) had acquired pejorative connotations. I shall use the latter term to indicate the framework adopted by those who place form ahead of subject matter, or who deem form to be, itself, content. I shall reserve form for the actual properties of the works themselves (in opposition to subject matter), carrying the Friedian sense of formal.

**Alois Riegl and the Vienna School**

From the late nineteenth century we see art historians paying much greater attention to philosophical developments. For the most part this advanced an understanding of the role that formal characteristics played in the determination of the meanings of designs. Works came to be categorised and clustered around notions of style, with discussion of content taking the form of establishing distinctions between form and style (Riegl, 1893). In painting, form consisted largely of shape, harnessed within a structural
framework that sat behind the surface of the work, yet operated through it; and style denoted the particularity or configuration that a work evidenced. Shape, in the two-dimensional arts, came to be modified in accordance with the rules of perspective drawing and tenebrism (extreme chiaroscuro), underpinned by principles of design. Such reliance on convention permitted a space to appear between the locality of the artwork – as material object – and its mode of legitimation. The work pointed away.

The Vienna School – from the year of the creation of the first teaching position in Art History in 1847 to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 – laid the foundations for a form of art historical inquiry that would underpin the discipline thereafter (Rampley, 2013). Brilliant scholars, including Rudolf Eitelberger, Moritz Thausing, Max Dvořák, Julius von Schlosser, Josef Strzygowski and Alois Riegl, developed the pragmatic, idealist, structuralist, ideological and formalist schools of thought. Though each professor brought with him an approach specific to his method, all shared a belief in the empirically grounded as a bulwark against unharnessed subjectivity. Many at the School worked with museum collections as advisors and developed ideas in direct response to the objects within their purview. This nearness to the manual structures of art compelled a particular understanding of the relationships among objects, the result of which drew the artwork much closer to the response to it.

In Problems of style: Foundations for a History of Ornament (1893), Riegl set out to counter a technical-materialist view of ornamentation, in which formal properties of design in textiles and other areas were deemed little more than a logical consequence of an availability of materials and an application of artisanal processes and techniques. In the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, formal intricacies in the fine and applied arts were peeled away from the material and temporal specificities of individual works, times, peoples, places and processes, and considered discrete symptoms of an overarching process of historical change. Form became increasingly objectivised as autonomous spirit (Osborne, 2013: 44). To Riegl, who believed in modes of circumscription, a formed unity of practices appealed. Earlier accounts of the development of ornamentation failed to provide a distinct sense of historical interconnectedness, and so ignored the causes of continuity (Riegl, 1893). Riegl created a diachronic account of art history, drawing an evolutionary thread from ancient Egypt through Greece and Rome to the period of the emergence of early
Islamic pattern, and, in so doing, offered a picture of a seemingly immanent drive towards ornamentation (1893). His analysis drew on an acute attentiveness to stylistic differences and resulted in the construal of artistic periods – of epochs even – as able to bring with them their own distinct sets of artistic problems, which in resolved form served as starting points for the next, and so on. Design compels design from within, in what Friedrich Nietzsche might have termed the will to ornament. Riegl’s teleological approach would reach an apotheosis in the work of Clement Greenberg, when accounting for internal developments within modernist painting. This, then, raises an important consideration: that is, the extent to which formalist theorists adopt Normative (prescriptive) or Analytic (descriptive) models (Wollheim, 1995: 8).

And yet Riegl’s formalism differed in one vital sense from the approaches of his contemporaries (and from later approaches too): that is, in the notion of Kunstwollen (a shaping of Man’s connectedness to the world). This became central to his thinking, and evident in his preference for style over form. And so, the subject was retained as an active participant in the bringing about of stylistic particularity. Christopher Wood describes how, to Riegl, the world and its artworks do not simply happen to humankind: it is humankind that happens to the world and frames its artefacts as worldview, in accordance with a measure of that which meets humankind’s needs (2000: 95). Thus, paintings evidenced the collective stigmata of a people’s will.

**Haptic and Optic**

There was a consequence to Riegl’s attentiveness, and to verifiability and an overemphasis on the objectively-sourced, which Rosalind Krauss has drawn attention to when addressing his method in relation to her own theoretico-formalist positioning of Agnes Martin’s film Gabriel (1976), though she tends to work around the implications of the Kunstwollen, no doubt for her own theoretical ends. This arises out of the need to consider objects in terms of their physical locatedness…as things sharing a space…to be related to. In situ, the object presents itself to its surroundings and to the beholder of its traits, who, in an act of reciprocity, presents himself to it. Krauss writes:

In acknowledging the object in terms of almost any level of sculptural relief (that is, in promoting an experience of its tactility), the shadow is necessarily admitted into the confines of the object—shadow, which, marking the position of the
spectator relative to the object, is the very index of subjectivity (Krauss, 2000: 86).

Riegl not only recognised the implications of this, but also framed its irresolvability as that which compelled the art of antiquity through a myriad of guises. The problem of seeking objectivity subjectively, and vice versa – of an awareness of one’s senses in respect of the material objects of art – created a difficulty, the varied solutions to which permitted each period its specific struggle. According to Krauss’s reading of Riegl, the *haptic objectivism* of the ancient Greeks – evident from the integration of painting, sculpture and architecture – allowed the Romans to embrace an *optical objectivity*—the freestanding sculpture (Krauss, 2000). As a consequence, the objective-optical began in opposition to the tactility that preceded it, and from whence its particularity came.

**Heinrich Wölfflin and Classification**

Under the influence of the cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt and the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin developed a keen interest in detailing the practical approaches used to examine visual works of art (in order to determine style). With his dislike of a social approach, Wölfflin nevertheless applied an extensive knowledge of social circumstances to his terse prose. He devised and employed a tight hermeneutic method that drew together aspects of the psychological, the visual and the empirical (Wölfflin, 1915). To Wölfflin, art was nothing less than a language, complete with a grammar and vocabulary that, when grounded by historical specificity, permitted utterances in the form of material works. Like Riegl and his contemporaries, Wölfflin believed that to deepen one’s understanding of art was to move beyond the individual work in search of the universal laws that govern it.

In *Principles of Art History* (1915), Wölfflin considered the Renaissance and the Baroque, outlining a system of classification designed to facilitate the measurement of visual differences between works. In particular, Wölfflin paid attention to the direction and function of lines in paintings. His pioneering use of two projectors made formal comparison easier by allowing lecturers and students to point to polarities of difference, so as to provide close readings of objects and images from disparate times and places. Wölfflin produced a series of markers to measure formal developments over several centuries: markers that, through logic and inference, could be used to
envisage probable change too: to predict the future course of development based on observable differences from an empirical and publicly verifiable present (1915).

Wölfflin’s binaries denoted sequences of formal movement, which could be used to mark differences between religious and historical works that happened to address the same theme. Direct comparisons could therefore be made between two paintings of *The Holy Family* – by Raphael and Rubens respectively (*Figures 1 and 2*) – separated by approximately one hundred and twenty years. These binaries included: from linear to painterly, from plane to recession, from closed (techttonic) form to open (a-techttonic) form from multiplicity to unity, and from absolute clarity to relative clarity (Wölfflin, 1915). Such markers placed an emphasis on seeing, whilst ensuring the subjugation of the iconographic possibilities of images (of that which images represented) and of the material by which design became manifest. Wölfflin’s system made no distinction between the characteristics of discrete parts in respect of the whole work, to the point where style is recognisable throughout (Wollheim, 1974: 201). Wölfflin’s writings were highly influential and were translated into English earlier than Riegl’s, taking hold more quickly. This was felt first in Britain, then in America, where a greater inclination to pragmatism allowed formalism to resonate more strongly still.

---

*Figure 1*: Raphael (c.1507-8), *The Canigiani Holy Family*, oil on wood, 107 x 131 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.
Figure 2: Peter Paul Rubens (c.1630), *The Holy Family with Saint Anne*, oil on canvas, 90 x 115 cm, Prado, Museum, Madrid, Spain.

Taken together, early formalist methods of systematisation served as critical responses to Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives* (1550) and, more importantly, as extensions of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s *History of Art in Antiquity* (1764). It was Winckelmann’s emphasis on beauty, as providing the ultimate goal for art – in part the product of what he perceived to be Vasari’s overly biographical, content-based approach to the examination of artefacts – that appeared most persuasive to historians at this time. It is interesting to note that, as an archaeologist, Winckelmann’s preference was for a history of objects without names, based on a close observance of what the material art works in themselves were. Vasari’s work had shifted the focus away from painted, sculpted or built objects towards the particularities of the lives of eminent men (1764).

**Roger Fry: Form and Content**

Roger Fry was the most influential art critic in the English-speaking world, from 1910 up until the Second World War (Fisherman, 1963: 2). Establishing a reputation as a Renaissance scholar, through works on Giovanni Bellini (1899) and other of the Italian Masters, Fry contributed to the founding of *The Burlington Magazine* (1903), which he later jointly edited. Most importantly, however, in respect of formalism, was his appointment as the curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1906. It was here that Fry discovered the works of Paul Cézanne, an encounter that would change the course of his life and the orientation of art criticism thereafter (Reed, 1996). In a painting such as *Montagne Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine* (Figure
3), Fry saw how it was possible to pass from the world that is actual – or appears to be so – to a plastic form of geometrical simplicity that sat in situ as design. It was Fry, therefore, who brought modernist painting squarely into formalism’s field of vision.

Figure 3. Paul Cézanne (c. 1887), *Montagne Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine*, oil on canvas, 92 x 67 cm, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London.

In 1910, Fry organised *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* at the Grafton Galleries, in London, and followed it with a second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912. On show, in addition to works by Edouard Manet and Cézanne, were works by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, George Seurat and Maurice Denis. This exhibition came several years before the so-called Armoury Show took place in New York, and permitted a British audience access to the flattened, simplified planes of recent French painting. In the years that followed, the reputations of these painters would grow, yet the show drew hostile criticism from a conservative press, and Fry was lampooned.

In *Vision and Design* (1920), Fry identified what he took to be Post-Impressionism’s progressive break with Impressionism, the result of a return to something akin to transcendent values of design and an abandonment of the realism of Monet. An
admirer of Wölfflin (in 1903 Fry wrote a positive review of Wölfflin’s *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*), Fry expounded the notion of *classic quality*, to denote an aesthetic attribute common to the best of ancient and modern works (1920). The prefix *classic* alluded to the High Renaissance’s preoccupation with the distillation and idealisation of natural form into beautiful arrangements, such as those evident in the works of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael. In alluding to such exalted company, Fry sought to legitimise the present by connecting it to a glorious past.

With such a distillation an effect of thinking, *classic quality* could be considered a value judgment or else the recognition of an a priori truth. Here, Fry stressed the role of the spectator: in the first instance, in the honing of an ability to distinguish classic quality from non-classic quality, and, in the second, through a pressure to negate knowledge of lived experience (of all that might interfere with truth), so as to garner a universal resonance. With Fry, *form* replaced *style*, with the latter term tending to be used to denote the signature mannerism of a painter, or else a visual characteristic of formal particularity. However, Fry never conceded that the existence of comparable arrangements of forms outside of a work (in the world) in any sense compromised a privileging of form within the work. This willingness to retain the possibility of a form of intrinsic quality was more preferable than an acknowledgement that, for example, a painted square might be important to a viewer because it reminded him of his house.

In 1924, in a lecture to the British Psychological Society titled *The Artist & Psychoanalysis*, Fry identified two types of artist. First, there are artists who are intent on constructing: ‘a fantasy-world in which the fulfilment of wishes is realised’ (1934: 4). Secondly, there are artists who concern themselves with the, ‘contemplation of formal relations’ (Fry, 1924: 4). The latter activity Fry aligns with science as, ‘detached from the instinctive life’ (1924: 4). Though both aims persist in individual works, they are, Fry contends, different in function and perhaps in origin too. Fry does accept that interesting discoveries might result from the Freudian method, though it is also clear to him that as a tool to excavate the aesthetic the psychoanalytical approach is unsuited.

Through musical analogy (of *God Save the King*), Fry demonstrates that associated, symbolic meanings (those gathered from or wished onto works) are not present – in any material sense – and can thus be generated from an experience of a work through associative connections made (with one’s actual or fictive history). However, these
feelings, real though they no doubt are, become entangled with the other feelings, generated by the response to dissociated, non-symbolic formal relations. Fry writes:

Since very few people are so constituted by nature or training as to have developed the special feeling about formal design, and since everyone has in the course of their lives accumulated a vast mass of feeling about all sorts of objects, persons, and ideas, for the greater part of mankind the associated emotions of a work of art are far stronger than the purely aesthetic ones (1924: 4).

In the case of God Save the King, the anthem’s associated meanings serve to cloud an awareness of the spatiotemporal relationship between notes—of the song’s form.

Clive Bell: Significant Form
As early as 1914, Fry’s friend, Clive Bell, in his popular book Art, presented the idea of significant form, declaring nothing outside of the formal properties of an artwork to be of any aesthetic importance. Whilst this shored up the distinction between form and content, it did little to advance an understanding of the causes of form’s significance. Nevertheless, significant form stuck, and with its promotion Bell consigned content – what Greenberg would later term subject matter – (and insignificant form) to the margins of critical consideration (Platt: 1986: 69). In Bell’s analysis, to grasp a modernist work is to discern significance from an arranged meeting of lines, shapes, tones and colours (1914). Bell’s inclusion of colour was novel; it rested on the impossibility of perceiving a colourless space, or a formless arrangement of colours. Susan Platt contends that Bell promoted feelings more so than Fry, who emphasised vision (1986: 73). As with Fry’s aesthetic model, Bell’s significance drew from a realm outside, and one at odds with the mundanity of one’s quotidian comings and goings.

It should be pointed out that in conceiving of formalism on the back of the Vienna School, Fry’s and Bell’s understanding of the characteristics of contemporary French painting (and on the English painting that took up in its wake) rested in large part on translations of academic studies of the works of late antiquity, the Renaissance and the Baroque (Reed, 1996). And so, early twentieth century formalism therefore redeployed a toolkit designed to service very different groupings of artworks. The paradox of British formalism – of formalism minus the idea of a medium – is that, in order to
assert modernity, Fry and Bell needed to invoke the antique – the lasting truth of prior values – and, in so doing, undermined the very modernity they each sought to espouse.

To discover the classical kernel within the shell of modernist painting meant, then, to read the works against the grain of the artist’s intentions (as expressed in personal correspondence): to supress the immanent aspect of the work in favour of a recourse to seemingly transcendent, ahistorical values of design: and to wrest methods of art historical scrutiny from their discrete place of origin, reapplying them within a broad contemporary context. If form really was oppositional to content, then the aesthetic, to Fry and Bell, amounted to something approaching a defamiliarisation of the familiar—a bracketing impulse, or a means of letting go. Yet to relinquish the world risked aligning oneself with another. This proved too mystical for Greenberg, who, within a few years of Fry’s death, set out to establish for formalism a more logical foundation.

Clement Greenberg: Form as Content

The relation between formalism and medium is a somewhat slippery one until we get to Clement Greenberg, primarily because Greenberg’s formalism, unlike Riegl’s, is conditioned by developments in modernist practices, and, unlike Fry’s, eschews a notion of design per se. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was Greenberg’s second published article, after a review of Bertolt Brecht’s “A Penny for the Poor”. Within the critical climate of the 1940s, that Fry had helped to shape (Jones, 2005: 122), it had an immediate impact, launching his career as a polemicist. In short, the work amounts to a neo-Marxist call to resist the stultifying effects of what Greenberg considered to be: ‘the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture’ (1986: 12), that is kitsch, through an attempt to: ‘create something valid solely on its own terms’ (1986: 12).

This separation of high from low art merits comparison with Fry’s two types of artist, yet Greenberg draws attention to the cultural and socio-political conditions of kitsch rather than to a form of response, and to the historicist bent of the period from which it emerged. The avant-garde and kitsch were, to Greenberg, products of the Industrial Revolution; a time when authentic folk culture became less relevant as a result of the emergence of the modern city and the proliferation of mechanisation. The historicism that is a symptom of this loss of tradition is, to Greenberg, in large part responsible for the avant-garde’s overt desire to free itself from the shackles of political and social
dependence so as to move forward of its own accord—to establish a mode of art beyond what he termed *subject matter*, wherein, in itself, amounted to content.

This notion of autonomy as a reaction to a moment of historical specificity would be developed in greater detail in Greenberg’s next essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön”, which he envisioned as a modern companion piece to Lessing’s “Laocoön An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting”, where Lessing had defined poetry as a temporal art and painting as a spatial art. Here, we find limitation, purity, and the artist: ‘engrossed in the problems of his medium’ (Greenberg, 1986: 23). We come to understand modernist practices as a form of resistance to subject matter (the literary) in favour of a, ‘new and greater emphasis upon form’ (1986: 28), which, Greenberg contends: ‘involve[s] an assertion of the arts as independent vocations, disciplines and crafts, absolutely autonomous and entitled to respect for their own sakes’ (1986: 28)…to be understood as an opposition to what remains of the last bourgeois flowering of Romanticism…the result of a retreat to a: ‘Bohemia which was to be art’s sanctuary from capitalism’ (1986: 28). Later, Greenberg would narrow and retitle this essay, putting it back to work as “Modernist Painting” (1960). To Peter Osborne, this and other moves, made over more than twenty years, marked: ‘the aestheticist collapse of [Greenberg’s] earlier historical self-understanding’ (2013: 46) in favour of exclusion.

**Judgment and Opticality**

The emphasis on opticality, which Caroline Jones has described as a positivistic management of the senses in mid-twentieth century America (2006), is central to Greenberg’s formalist scaffolding—judgment amounted to response only, and the look of modernist painting supplied the criteria with which to test it. Support for this came from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant identified four reflective judgments: the agreeable, the good, the beautiful and the sublime. It is his concept of the beautiful that is relevant here, which he defines, paradoxically, as a subjective-universal judgment. The judgment that something is beautiful is a subjective one, yet it is made from a conviction that others will agree with it, even though they may not. The beautiful appears to be constructed with purpose, though it serves no practical purpose. This *purposiveness without purpose* serves to establish the beautiful as beautiful, and so functions to separate out objects of beauty from those without beauty. Though the beauty that Kant writes of is not contained *within* the object of scrutiny, the object,
nevertheless, must be able to be seen to be beautiful, which in turn legitimises its subsequent labelling as an object of beauty. To discern a purposiveness without purpose the beholder must firstly discern no purpose, and, secondly, must retain a position of disinterestedness in respect of the non-purposive object. To respond to a work of art as a result of associations (red reminds me of home etc.) is to acknowledge agreeableness, and, when intuiting beauty, the agreeable acts only to distract, re-introducing learned responses that short-circuit intuition and undermine the aesthetic.

Osborne writes that:

Aesthetic modernism negated the system of social dependencies constitutive of the academic art of the first half of the nineteenth century on the basis of an affirmation of artistic freedom via the aesthetic concept of art: free or autonomous aesthetic art (2013: 78).

In citing Kant as the first modernist, by virtue of him: ‘being the first to criticise the means itself of criticism’ (Greenberg, 1993: 87), Greenberg sought to clarify the route by which a work’s meaning becomes accessible. In sum, the eye saw only form, which it processed as content. Hal Foster has described the notion of pure opticality as one of the two doctrines (along with significant form) to which modernist painting pledged allegiance (1996: 4). To Greenberg, Fry had had hold of the right end of the stick, but he had failed to sharpen it. Sharpening amounted to a form of internal movement, and one that developed at a different rate from the ebb and flow of events outside. In this model, the eye could be seen to take from rather than add to. If the body became relevant, then what it did – and where, when and how it did it – became relevant too.

Flatness
Judgment required site. The progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium was, for Greenberg, part of the solution to a form of aesthetic homelessness, evident in Fry, that permitted a creeping indeterminacy to develop between the work as cause and its presumed aesthetic effect. The question remained: what caused a work to affect? Recognising the question as unanswerable, Greenberg approached it from another angle, asking instead: what is needed for a work to affect? To put it another way, what is now superfluous? To expose the framework of formalism – that which sat behind the surface of the painting and operated through it – meant to excavate the work. Yet
rather than search for formal truths hidden behind associated meanings, as Fry had done with God Save the King, Greenberg, disliking Fry’s interdisciplinary reach (Reed, 1996: 278-9), re-directed attention from the extrinsic values of design to the intrinsic flatness of the painted object, and in opposition to the sculptural. What came to matter was the vehicle itself—not what form evidenced, but how it was. Greenberg states that:

It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique to pictorial art (1993: 87).

The stressing of flatness (the result of an elimination of representation) is couched in terms of an essential contradiction—the necessity of retaining the, ‘integrity of the picture plane’ (Greenberg, 1993: 90) within or above illusionistic concessions, without conceding ground to the world’s three-dimensionality. Thierry de Duve has described how this integrity came to act as a bulwark against the sculptural (cited in Guilbaut: 1990: 250). Later, Greenberg reminds the reader of the need to exaggerate, claiming that: ‘[t]he heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l’œil, but it does and must permit optical illusion’ (1993: 90).

Greenberg argues that with modernist paintings: ‘one is made aware of the flatness […] before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains’ (1993: 87). Like the symbolist painter Maurice Denis before him, Fry recognised this, but did not explore its implications. In short: Manet, Post-Impressionism and Cubism brought painting’s longstanding reliance on perspective to an end. To Greenberg, it was not the recognisable object that had been abandoned by modernist painting, but the type of space: pictorial space superseded fake three-dimensional space. Perspective, therefore, had contributed to making paint invisible. To make it opaque meant to return it from illusion. To make it too opaque meant to take it too far from illusion, towards mere material. Pictorial space, it could be argued, served as a holding bay between paint and picture. It was not a return to the world, then, that Greenberg required of painting, but protection from it. Alternatively, one might argue that Greenberg’s focus on self-criticism and specificity was itself a form of realism. In this light, the idea that Greenberg was arguing for art as end-game retreat is simply a postmodernist conceit.
As the messy, material abstraction of the 1940s and early 1950s – in works such as Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm (number 30)*, de Kooning’s *Woman I* and Franz Kline’s *Painting Number 2* – gave way to the much cleaner all-surface painting of the 1960s, and works such as Jules Olitski’s *Tin Lizzie Green* and Morris Louis’s *Where* – the integrity of the picture came under threat, for it became less easy to distinguish from the world that framed it. Perhaps paradoxically, it was in its proximity to dissolution that the picture plane became attained greatest visibility. It is interesting to note that, though Greenberg was no vulgar materialist, Krauss would later assert that: ‘[his] specificity is empirically tied to a physical substance’ (2011: 7). The danger of losing a method of connectedness to the work – as it appears – or indeed of losing the sense of connectedness itself (in respect of the very idea of the work), is what is really at stake here. Connections require connecting parts, and these parts demand the conceptual apparatus of the whole so as to sanction their distinctions. Yve-Alain Bois has gone as far as to present Greenberg’s plea for a medium specificity for painting as perhaps rhetorical even, in that, ‘judgment [is] based on pictorial criteria’ (1998: 127).

Notwithstanding, without something to hang form on, the boundary between art and non-art dissolved. As painting approached a point of dissolution the modernist project stuttered, requiring ever-increased justifications in order to retain and promote its distinctions. With the diversification of practice from the early 1960s came the task of delineating the nature and conditions of the art object from the nature and conditions of all else. It was, however, Michael Fried, in “Art and Objecthood”, not Greenberg, who sought to allay the allure of the commonplace, not through a redefinition of medium specificity, nor from a retreat to the immateriality of design, but through a clarification and circumscription of the particular form of engagement that a work of art demanded.

What came to matter to Fried was not that a painting contained forms of one sort or another, or that it evidenced particular properties as such, but, rather, that that which a painting contained was able to be *experienced as a painting* (1998: 149-151). “Art and Objecthood” was, therefore, for Fried, an attempt to rewrite the terms of medium specificity away from the formalism of Greenberg and, to a lesser extent, of Fry.

Stephen Melville has argued that ‘the question of medium has not been simply set aside in the wake of minimalism’ (cited in Arnold and Iversen, 2003: 169), and thus, to Melville, it remains germane in respect of how one approaches contemporary practice.
Though I stop short of a detailed discussion of Fried’s ideas here, it is useful, as
Margaret Olin has pointed out (1989), to compare his notion of theatricality with
Riegl’s sense of the beholder. Riegl’s conception amounted to a binding of the
observer to the observed through the internal structures of the work of art. Whereas, for
Fried, the work presents itself to the observer as an a priori: the potential meaning of
which precedes the encounter to which the viewer subsequently attests. This has
proven of considerable interest to those seeking to reconstitute theatricality as a form
of intersubjectivity in support of post-minimalist, performative and participatory
practices. And so, attentiveness, to Riegl, is a form of exchange—the beholder comes
across a work’s structure in light of what else has been encountered. Thus, there is a
temporal precondition, and attentiveness amounts to an attentiveness in one’s time.

Conclusion
For fifty years formalism has been almost entirely synonymous with the ideas of
Clement Greenberg. Yet this formalism was itself formed. An understanding of the
processes of form(ing) is valuable if one is to remain receptive to painting’s persistent
– and present – possibilities. The seeming singularity of the concept of medium
specificity (by the mid-twentieth century so vividly drawn) disguises not only a host of
past and hidden thoughts, but also significant struggles. Unpacking formalism’s
theoretical conjectures affords a timely opportunity to re-open channels of access to
painting; to re-invoke – with medium – issues of spectatorship, history, aesthetics,
content and style, and to navigate, also, important Greenbergian constructions. Yet
there are some fashionable obstacles to overcome. Osborne has written of witnessing
consternation – at an October roundtable discussion – at the very idea of critical
judgment, by those who continue to associate it with matters of quality (2013: 5).

Such channels might well permit a greater clarity of comprehension in respect of the
complex relationship that exists between the thing of painting and its situatedness in
the world. The context of medium specificity is the context of both ideas about
painting and painting about ideas. In tandem, if at times out of joint, formalism follows
and is followed by the object-subject of its speculations. Content does not oppose form,
it merely provides it with a workable opposition with which to develop and refine ideas
in accordance with the logic of internal possibility, before reapplying them in real-
world scenarios: it is the obverse of form only in so far as one’s inclination to read into
or *through* the work licenses a taste for difference. And *suspension*, here, becomes formalism’s chief strategy, not its *raison d’être*. Medium specificity is a consequence.

A century after Lessing’s advancement of painting as spatial and poetry as temporal, the Vienna School ramped up the need for verifiable criteria in the assessment of artworks. With Riegl, this pivoted on the relationship between the haptic and the optic. Wölfflin’s method of markers for measuring formal advance sidestepped Riegl’s idea of a dialectical tension between the sensuous body and the eye, or at least resolved it in favour of the eye. This helped to shape twentieth century art criticism by fostering what came to be regarded as a reductivist idea of autonomy. One consequence of the reaction that followed is that only recently has it been considered acceptable to ask again, as Ewa Layer-Burcharth and Isabelle Graw have done, if painting can indeed be a subject at all (2016: 9). Notwithstanding, it was Fry and Bell who endeavoured to unite formalism and modernism. However, lacking the empirical disposition of earlier scholars, both came to centre quasi-mystical principles of design, disregarding everydayness for a rarefied formal disinterestedness. The result: that the presumed meaning of a painting could not be reconciled with a sense of the work’s materiality.

Finally, Greenberg, in sharing Fry’s inclination to address the now, and also Riegl’s desire to perpetuate a series of resolutions, conflated form and content – sitting them in opposition to the literary – and abandoned the notion of design (other than as vague support for the idea of compositional rigour or picture-making), to, in effect, push the material constituents of painting to the fore. At the same time, however, and in seeming contradiction, he sought to disavow the substance of paint in favour of a pictorial situatedness arrived at though a curious appeal to the logic of the picture plane. That the paint of painting might even become the very practice of painting served, in the short-term at least, to privilege paint, yet left painting in want of a reconnection with that which it had lost. To be medium specific meant for painting to do what only painting could. In circumscribing that doing, painting could now do less.
References


Fry, R. (1899), Bellini, London: At the Sign of the Unicorn.


Winckelman (1764), The History of the Art of Antiquity, translated by G. Henry Lodge (1873), Boston: James R. Osgood and Co.


