

painting and reality: art as analogy

Any proposition consists of a structure and some variables. An *analogy* to that proposition replaces the original variables in order to illuminate the structural relationship between its elements. I contend that artists do this all the time; they make analogies to the external world that illuminate its structure.

Looking at abstract painting in this way clarifies some issues about its relationship to reality and, perhaps, indicates a way in which we might conceive of its continued relevance to the 21st century. Abstract artists can make artworks that resemble, structurally, prominent aspects of the contemporary world. The role of abstraction, in its infinite plasticity, is as relevant as ever. We just need to keep making new analogies that reveal both the minutiae and the majesty of our present.

Modernism and Society

Art's link to reality has been at the forefront of Western philosophical consciousness at least as far back as Plato. Famously, Plato banished art from his Republic due to its inherent inferiority to reality; as a second-rate copy of ideal Forms, art represented 'only the *charm* of truth'. That is, art presents itself as immediate truth, but in doing so it bypasses the 'dialectical labour' of philosophy, leaving our appreciation of the character of these truths diminished. [1]

Art has sought to overcome this charge ever since, but often by relying on a complete dissolution of its connection to reality; Nietzsche repositioned art as a pure expression of will, unanchored by notions of truth or representation, and Hegel's influential dialectic has been read as culminating in a non-referential abyss. In Hegel's vision, the 'function' of art is to be representative of the character of a historical period. However, these periodical shifts are considered part of a teleological progression that terminates in the revelation of 'Spirit', whereupon this connection to a displaced referent is severed.

Hegel thought that Romanticism signalled the realisation of Spirit, but I think we can still locate the same referential impulse in abstract, modernist painting – and see it continuing. The reflective power of pre-abstract art was simply more direct than its modernist counterpart's, albeit simultaneously more oblique. It is more *direct* in the sense that mimetic painting reflects the state of a temporal/geographical situation by literally depicting it, but it is more *oblique* in that the illusory image that troubled Plato mediates its proposals. While modernism ostensibly looked *inward*, recasting art itself as the subject of artistic inquiry, it nevertheless became a first-hand embodiment of the attitudes and principles that it used to *represent*.

To take a very clear example, the Wanderers wanted art to have a social function and so, a painting like Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* depicts and denounces oppression; subsequent modernists didn't necessarily abandon any attachment to social concerns but sought to look at their own processes and enact liberation in practice. They looked down on the realism exemplified by Repin as propagandist and ineffectual, for similar reasons to Plato – our response to a painting like Repin's is not hard-won, nor is it *rational*. [2]

Malevich's revolutionary pronouncements are exemplary as statements of modernists' shift in focus:

I have established the semaphore of Suprematism, I have beaten the lining of the coloured sky, torn it away and in the sack that formed itself, I have put colour and knotted it. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you.

In his famous paintings, whiteness and blackness as pure artistic states became not just symbols of infinity and freedom, but actual tangible examples of unfettered activity. In the same way, the square, the straight line and rational form became physical manifestations of man's transcendence of nature:

The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason. The face of the new art. The square is a living, regal infant. The first step of pure creation in art.

The production of a square is, for Malevich, analogous to the act of 'pure creation' itself. These statements recast art as a bastion of liberty and creativity in a Marxist sense – Malevich wants man to *own his action* and, through the rational, considered creation of new realities, fulfil his human potential. The proposal is an *artistic* one, but it illuminates the same impulse in Marxist politics. This move represents a reconfiguration of the relationship between art and reality as Plato had seen it, potentially freeing art from the charge of deception and philosophical debasement.

Modernist painting in general was invariably engaged with the world around it in the same way, albeit without specific *political* affiliations. While Pollock's art was more inwardly focused than the Left Modernists', he still felt it to be important to reflect aspects of contemporary culture (echoing Hegel). Like Malevich this was done, not by depicting the world around him, but by creating an analogue to it: 'concentrated, fluid'. Pollock doesn't picture the automobile or the atom bomb, but nor is his work abstract *simpliciter*: rather, the painting's referent is a condensed vision of that very 'character' that Hegel invokes.

This theme is completely central to modernism as a whole. T.J. Clarke, writing on the subject of Picasso's relationship to British art, describes modernism thus:

In a culture saturated by false equivalents, short cuts to non-knowledge, pseudo-pictures, the truth of a pictorial proposal has to derive from the proposal's overtness, its factuality. This is modernism's core belief. [3]

Clarke argues for the complete literalness of a painting. Everything from the canvas's dimensions to the minutiae of cross-hatches and brush-strokes should contribute to a painting's 'proposal', in the same way that Pollock's drips and splashes – as well as his decision to abandon the easel – do. This is the way in which modern art changed its relationship to truth from mimicry to analogy.

After Modernism – Minimalist Analogies

Reinhardt's famous 'Art as Art' slogan embodies modernist painting's progression towards complete immanence and self-identification. Any connection to an external reality was rigorously avoided and the problems of painting become *negative* ones of subtraction; in seeking to reduce painting to the definition and expression of its inherent limits, Reinhardt and Greenberg collude in defining modernism as a *conservative* discipline. A Platonic desire for stasis – the ossification of an eternal ideal.

These paintings cease to be analogies for anything other than themselves (as singular tautologies).[4] I think the

existence of these paintings is a philosophical necessity, being the logical extension of the modernist impulse, but any saturated doctrine instigates a rupture. The route out of modernism's self-destruction obviously became postmodernism; the 'problem' of the relationship between art and life was essentially deflated: if art is life, we don't need to account for a link. [5]

Painting in particular had been representative of modernism's insularity and it was duly undermined by postmodernism. However, rather than establishing that painting is dead, the true outcome of postmodernism should be that *everything is alive*. If medium doesn't matter, if fetishising painting is passé, then it just allows us to focus on the 'proposal' that each work makes as opposed to the examination of its chosen medium's limits. The real question is whether this proposal is *external* to the artwork itself, or *immanent* to its sensible properties. If we reject Reinhardt's desire to establish and work within the inherent limits of a medium, must we reject 'painterly' problems and 'painterly' truths as beside the point? As the idea is privileged, do we necessarily lose the sensible object?

Malevich was ahead of his time in bringing the conflicting impulses of immanence and transcendence together. His minimalist paintings are not mere formal exercise, nor simply irrelevant as signs for wholly external meaning – their content is dependent on their being-a-painting but not exhausted by this fact. We get to keep Plato's transcendental object without defining artworks as *inferior* or secondary by comparison (which was Nietzsche's gripe).

In fact, minimalism followed the post-painterly abstraction of Louis, Olitski et al. as the best example of this distillation of form and idea but, in the saturation of its own formal language, it is to be overcome; not only does minimalism threaten to wallow in a mannered, decorative functionality but, crucially, *the world is not minimal*. Judd dealt with mass production and industrial techniques – the sameness of things, the flawlessness of modern goods – but that is no longer a pertinent reflection of the immediate present, it is not necessarily a reflection of the most pressing technological/political concerns.

Paintings should operate in minimalism's unstable terrain, threatening to collapse into an idea or an object at any moment, but without upholding the stifling constraints of its even surfaces, lack of tension and reduced composition. While Greenberg made vague noises about the unity of abstraction mirroring the unity of reality, we need to let this 'reality' be in flux and allow painting to achieve *relevance* by anchoring its particular unity in a vital context. This amounts to accepting Hegel's vision of art as reflecting historical periods, but without the need to settle into a final resolution; it recognises that there is always already a context willing to accept any given artistic proposal – the infinite is never revealed in isolation, but always through a finite lens.

In defining the 'vital context' that a contemporary artwork operates in, the artist exercises her vision; this is how the abstract painter conceptualises, interprets, translates and shapes their world – but I don't mean to mythologise and aggrandise the visionary artist; this is not the product of a single hand but the emergent product of a class of artworks. The proposal an artwork makes in this view is an *artistic* one – it develops or establishes an artistic truth stemming from its particular framework (its '-ism' if you will) – but this truth is given context and historicised in any particular incarnation. So, the 'analogy' to the external world lies in its structural parity to a given phenomenon (that is properly contextual), while the 'variables' in the proposition are immanent to the artwork and essentially self-referential.

Contemporary Analogies

So, what is our context? What are the structural phenomena that currently invite analogies? I think it is

inappropriate for abstract painters to deal with particulars (specific issues, isolated incidents), and it is narcissistic and banal to deal with *identity* or *personal expression* – Reinhardt had this much right – but the solution is not to look to eternal, noumenal truths that exist *entirely independently of their incarnation*. Art produces its own truths, but always against a background. It is intimately connected to technology and political systems; questions of technology inform the actual production of artworks and, from the art-external view, they manufacture our high-level conceptualisation of ‘the present’. [6] The great avant-garde painters of the 20th century translated developments in science (relativity, psychoanalysis), technology (industrial machinery) and political thought (Marxism) into increasingly abstract aesthetics that positioned the human subject in this shifting landscape.

Today, we are dealing with the still nascent digital age, complex ‘late’ capitalism and the elusiveness of a Utopian vision. In this transitional stage, abstract art can be an important means of understanding the implications and machinations of our present: the role of the subject amidst complex hyper-connectivity, the massiveness of data networks, the ideological stranglehold of capitalism, the absurdity of the Internet. Abstraction can operate in that space where the sensible exceeds the conceivable: painters once expressed the enormity of skyscrapers within the walls of a gallery, today we are made small by information. The Internet is sublime.

As such, abstraction can express the power of networks and connectivity (Lombardi, Mehretu), or find aesthetics that analogise the character of digital technology in the same way that Bomberg or Marinetti characterised industrial machinery (Wasmuht). It can dialogue with painting’s past while it expresses anxiety or hope about the future (Butzer), or express the agony of human agency in the face of digital technology (Guyton). Abstract artists, armed with an edifying understanding of both their medium’s history and their world’s present still have plenty of work to do and, despite the humbling shock of postmodernism, they possess the philosophical mandate to justify it.

Notes

[1] Badiou, A., *The Handbook of Inaesthetics*, (Stanford University Press, 2005)

[2] It speaks volumes that Constructivists in the Soviet Union were exiled, imprisoned and killed. Stalin dismissed them as insignificant bourgeois intellectuals but clearly recognised the political potency of creative freedom.

[3] Clarke, T. J., ‘False Moderacy’, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 34, No 6, March 2012

[4] There is a confusing relationship to Plato in Reinhardt’s philosophy; it relies on an atomistic and stable conception of the concept ‘Art’ but it does away with the external object/idea that Plato invokes.

[5] This is equivalent to the deflation of the mind-body problem by admitting that they aren’t distinct metaphysical *substances* with different ontological statuses.

[6] Of course, the production of art itself is also brought into question by technological change. Painters largely justified their existence in the wake of photography by going abstract but, the question that painters continually ask themselves today is: ‘why paint at all’? It can seem borderline masochistic to use age-old brush and pigment when Photoshop exists, and I think it is too simplistic to rely on the idea that painting is somehow more ‘human’ or ‘real’. Peter Doig suggests that he thrives on painting’s niche status and there is an argument that painting can happily occupy a fringe, suitable for enthusiasts and nerds. Nevertheless, while people still pay attention

to painting as a medium, it has currency. Provisional painting has drawn attention to the inevitable failure contained within painting, but Beckett did the same for writing and it continues.