

Clement Greenberg Between The Lines Including A Debate With Clement Greenberg By Thierry De Duve 2010 04 15

Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: A Critical Engagement with Thierry de Duve's Debate

Clement Greenberg, a towering figure in 20th-century art criticism, remains a subject of intense scholarly debate. His pronouncements on modern art, particularly his championing of "high modernism," continue to provoke discussion and re-evaluation. Thierry de Duve's 2010 engagement with Greenberg, a debate that transcends a simple disagreement, offers a compelling lens through which to understand the complexities of Greenberg's critical project. This article delves into the core arguments of de Duve's critique, exploring the nuances of Greenberg's theory and its lasting legacy. We'll examine Greenberg's key concepts like *modernist painting*, *formalism*, and *kitsch*, analyzing de Duve's counterpoints and ultimately assessing the enduring relevance of this critical exchange.

Greenberg's Formalist Doctrine: A Foundation for Critique

Greenberg's critical approach is fundamentally rooted in formalism. He believed that the inherent qualities of a medium—the flatness of the canvas for painting, the three-dimensionality of sculpture—should be the primary focus of artistic expression. He saw modern art as a process of self-purification, a progressive shedding of illusionistic techniques and a relentless exploration of the medium's unique properties. This emphasis on *modernist painting*, particularly abstract expressionism, led him to valorize artists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, whose works he saw as embodying the ultimate expression of modernist principles. This assertion, however, became a focal point for de Duve's critique.

The Limitations of Formalism: de Duve's Counterarguments

De Duve challenges Greenberg's formalism, arguing that it overlooks the socio-historical contexts within which art is produced and received. He contends that Greenberg's emphasis on *autonomy* in art—the idea that art exists independently of external forces—is a naive simplification. De Duve insists that art is always entangled with its historical moment, its social structures, and its cultural meanings. He points out the inherent contradictions within Greenberg's system: how can a theory emphasizing the self-sufficiency of art simultaneously claim to define the essence of historical periods and movements? This interrogation forms the backbone of the 2010 debate between the two thinkers.

Kitsch and the Battle for Cultural Hegemony

Another significant aspect of Greenberg's criticism is his concept of *kitsch*. He defined kitsch as a form of mass-produced, commercially driven art that lacks originality and authenticity. Greenberg saw kitsch as a threat to high art, a debilitating force that diluted aesthetic values and undermined genuine artistic expression. De Duve, however, complicates this binary opposition. He argues that Greenberg's definition of kitsch is too narrow and that it fails to account for the complex relationship between high art and popular culture. The discussion surrounding *kitsch* highlights a broader debate about the role of art in society and the power dynamics that shape aesthetic judgments.

The "Avant-Garde" and its Historical Trajectory

Greenberg's writing extensively engaged with the concept of the "avant-garde," portraying it as a progressive force pushing the boundaries of artistic innovation. He saw modernism as the culmination of this historical trajectory, a moment of unprecedented artistic achievement. However, de Duve challenges this linear narrative, highlighting the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies within Greenberg's account of the avant-garde's development. De Duve's analysis considers the socio-political contexts that shaped the avant-garde, arguing that it was not simply an autonomous movement but rather a product of specific historical conditions. This critique demonstrates the limitations of a purely formalist analysis in understanding the complexities of art history.

Legacy and Ongoing Relevance: Rethinking Greenberg's Influence

Despite the critiques leveled by de Duve and others, Clement Greenberg's influence on art criticism and art history remains undeniable. His writings sparked crucial discussions about the nature of modern art, its relationship to tradition, and its social function. De Duve's 2010 debate, far from dismissing Greenberg, offers a crucial

corrective, enriching our understanding of Greenberg's thought and prompting a more nuanced interpretation of his legacy. The debate prompts us to consider the limitations of formalism while acknowledging the enduring value of Greenberg's insights into the formal properties of art. It calls for a more contextualized approach to art history, one that integrates formal analysis with social and historical understanding. This ongoing dialogue is vital for contemporary art criticism and historical scholarship.

FAQ

Q1: What is the central argument of Thierry de Duve's critique of Clement Greenberg?

A1: De Duve primarily criticizes Greenberg's formalism, arguing that it ignores the social, historical, and cultural contexts shaping art production and reception. He challenges Greenberg's notion of art's autonomy, suggesting that art is always embedded within broader power structures and social relations. He also takes issue with Greenberg's simplistic dichotomy between high art and kitsch.

Q2: How does de Duve's work contribute to our understanding of Greenberg's theories?

A2: De Duve's critique provides a crucial counterpoint to Greenberg's formalism, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to understanding modern art. By highlighting the social and historical dimensions of art, de Duve expands the scope of art historical inquiry, enriching our understanding of Greenberg's work and its limitations.

Q3: What is the significance of the concept of "kitsch" in Greenberg's writings and de Duve's response?

A3: Greenberg uses "kitsch" to denote mass-produced, inauthentic art, contrasting it with the authenticity of high modernism. De Duve challenges this stark binary, arguing that it oversimplifies the complex interplay between popular culture and high art, and that Greenberg's definition is too narrow.

Q4: How does de Duve challenge Greenberg's narrative of the avant-garde?

A4: De Duve rejects Greenberg's linear and teleological account of the avant-garde, arguing that it neglects the complexities and contradictions inherent in the historical development of artistic movements. He emphasizes the socio-political factors that shaped the avant-garde, highlighting its embeddedness within specific

historical contexts.

Q5: What is the lasting impact of the debate between Greenberg and de Duve on art criticism?

A5: The debate underscores the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to art criticism, one that integrates formal analysis with social, historical, and cultural considerations. It encourages a more contextualized understanding of art history, avoiding simplistic binaries and teleological narratives.

Q6: Can Greenberg's formalist approach still be relevant in contemporary art criticism?

A6: While de Duve's critique effectively challenges the limitations of pure formalism, Greenberg's emphasis on close formal analysis remains a valuable tool in art criticism. A contemporary approach integrates this formal awareness with a strong understanding of the social and historical contexts of art production, offering a richer and more complete analysis.

Q7: What are some key texts to further explore this debate?

A7: To deepen your understanding, explore Greenberg's collected essays, particularly those focusing on modernism and kitsch. De Duve's own writings, including his works directly engaging with Greenberg, provide a crucial counterpoint. Scholarly articles and books analyzing the relationship between Greenberg and de Duve offer further valuable perspectives.

Q8: How does this debate impact the study of Modernist Painting specifically?

A8: The debate forces a reassessment of Modernist Painting, moving beyond a purely formalist interpretation to consider its social and historical embeddedness. It invites a richer understanding of the artistic movements, the artists themselves, and the reception of their work, going beyond purely aesthetic judgments to explore its broader cultural significance.

Deconstructing the Canon: Exploring Clement Greenberg's Legacy Through Thierry de Duve's Critical Lens

Clement Greenberg, a colossus of 20th-century art theory, remains a debated figure. His pronouncements on modern and abstract art, while hugely influential, also provoked intense criticism. Thierry de Duve's 2010 article – "Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: Including a Debate with Clement Greenberg" – offers a particularly penetrating examination of Greenberg's legacy, engaging in a hypothetical dialogue that allows for a deeper understanding of the critic's subtleties. This article will investigate de Duve's approach, highlighting its key arguments and their relevance for understanding Greenberg's enduring influence on the art world.

De Duve's strategy is brilliant. Rather than simply summarizing existing critiques of Greenberg, he creates a imaginary dialogue. This technique allows him to explicitly engage with Greenberg's theories while simultaneously exposing their underlying contradictions. The constructed debate acts as a instrument for deconstructing Greenberg's stances, pushing beyond the apparent level of his essays.

One of the central topics de Duve explores is Greenberg's insistence on the autonomy of art. Greenberg famously maintained that modern art's evolution was driven by an intrinsic desire to purify its own methods, abandoning any extraneous elements. De Duve interrogates this statement, highlighting the fundamental paradoxes within Greenberg's own evaluative framework. For instance, how can one truly isolate art from its cultural environment while simultaneously assessing its value based on its link to the history of art itself? De Duve suggests that Greenberg's notion of autonomy is itself a outcome of specific historical and cultural influences.

Another key aspect of de Duve's examination is his exploration of Greenberg's preference for certain styles of modern art, particularly Abstract Expressionism. De Duve challenges the criteria by which Greenberg chose these schools as genuine expressions of modernism. He points to the underlying bias in Greenberg's critical judgments, suggesting that his choices were determined by factors beyond the purely aesthetic. This undermining of Greenberg's seemingly neutral framework is a crucial contribution of de Duve's article.

De Duve's approach – the constructed debate – allows for a engaging exploration of Greenberg's theories. The discussion allows the reader to see the evolution of arguments and the dismantling of seemingly unshakeable positions. This makes the article accessible and fascinating, even for those unfamiliar with the complexities of Greenberg's thought.

In summary, Thierry de Duve's "Clement Greenberg Between the Lines" is not simply a reiteration of existing analyses of Clement Greenberg. It's a provocative re-evaluation of his legacy, employing a novel method to uncover the complexities of his writing. By engaging directly with Greenberg's ideas through a simulated debate, de Duve clarifies the contradictions and partialities within Greenberg's approach, inviting a more sophisticated understanding of his continuing influence on the art world.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. **What is the main purpose of de Duve's essay?** The primary goal is to offer a fresh perspective on Clement Greenberg's art criticism by using a fictional debate to critically examine the inconsistencies and subjective elements within his theories.
2. **How does de Duve challenge Greenberg's ideas?** De Duve questions Greenberg's emphasis on the autonomy of art, highlighting the inherent contradictions in separating art from its social and historical context. He also challenges Greenberg's subjective choices in favoring certain art movements.
3. **What makes de Duve's approach unique?** His use of a fictional debate is a novel approach, allowing for a dynamic and engaging exploration of Greenberg's ideas and enabling a more accessible analysis of complex theories.
4. **What is the significance of de Duve's work?** It contributes to a more nuanced and critical understanding of Clement Greenberg's legacy, prompting a re-evaluation of his influence on art history and theory. It also demonstrates a valuable methodological approach for engaging with complex intellectual figures.

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