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Conceptual Crossover: Metaphors in Contemporary Art Criticism

Conceptual crossover—which may or may not turn out to be indistinguishable from the production of metaphors—is the process or procedure of using (or abusing) concepts that have been developed outside art practice and putting them into the service of art production. In criticism this corresponds to testing or confronting a work, or a oeuvre, with a set of alien concepts in the attempt to change or invigorate the artwork's discursive context; in art practice this would correspond to the production of new work by contesting art's very definition. Although we are now familiar and comfortable with the claim that art's definition is something that can only be successfully known through a painstaking contextualisation of the ways in which it has been historically understood and contested, it is possible that we may less readily assume that art criticism operates analogously. In fact, as we shall see, this has not always been the case and the use of conceptual crossover in criticism has been identified, and its legitimacy questioned, by a number of critical heavyweights, such as the formalist critic Clement Greenberg.

In a published dispute with one of his contemporaries, Harold Rosenberg, Greenberg details why he believes conceptual crossover has no place in art criticism—for Greenberg, such criticism fails to distinguish between the formal qualities of a work of art (that is its material qualities), its subject matter, and its content. Before we can probe the reasoning behind this now admittedly quaint assertion, it's important to grasp what Greenberg understands by 'form' and 'content', and how, for Greenberg, if art criticism is to retain its legitimacy, the critic must restrict himself exclusively to claims that refer to the formal qualities of the work of art. From this we will be able to see why, for Greenberg, conceptual crossover is has no place in art criticism, and why the writings of those who practise it, such as Rosenberg, must be treated with scepticism.

Greenberg's tempestuous relationship with the term 'formalism', and his evident distaste at being labelled a formalist critic, was noted both by himself and his contemporaries. In an article for *Artforum* in 1967, Greenberg states that he objects to this term as he believes it 'begs the large part of a very difficult question as to just what can be sensibly said about works of art' and that it 'assumes that "form" and "content" in art can be adequately distinguished for the purposes of discourse' (CA p.269). It is clear, however, that—difficult or not—the question of what can be sensibly said about works of art can at least be attempted, and that, for Greenberg, it is on this very question that the possibility of his brand of art

criticism depends. Greenberg's fascination with the question, or possibility, of formalism is obvious throughout his writing but perhaps can be most readily seen in his 1959 essay, 'The Case For Abstract Art'. Here, initially, Greenberg attempts to make the difference between the material qualities of a painting and its subject matter explicit, before going on to locate the threshold at which critical discourse fails and such distinctions no longer become viable. His analysis of Rembrandt's portraits exemplifies this approach. Here Greenberg initially posits a definite distinction between subject matter and material qualities in order to begin his appraisal of Rembrandt's work, before conceding that this distinction can only ever be provisional or temporary. Hence, Rembrandt's portraits can be conceived in terms of their material qualities, the use of 'impasto' or 'highlights', or what Greenberg calls their 'abstract element of technique' (TC p.78). We are told that these material qualities are what constitute the 'portrait *as a picture* pure and simple' (TC p.78).¹ Nevertheless, as Greenberg immediately concedes, these material qualities must also be understood as contributing to the depiction of the 'personality of the individual' (TC p.78)—that is, to the subject the painting depicts. An account of Rembrandt's impasto as an 'abstract element of technique' thus 'coincides with its effectiveness as a means of showing just how a nose looks under a certain kind of light' (TC p.78). From this we can see that while an account of the material qualities of Rembrandt's portraits is possible, indeed essential in his assessment as an artist, these material qualities 'cannot be separated' from 'what that picture images' (TC pp.82–83). As we shall see, according to Greenberg, both material qualities and subject matter comprise the form of the artwork, and this must be distinguished from its content.

A similar initial distinction, between subject matter and material qualities, is made in Greenberg's analysis of Rubens when he states that previous critics must have 'more or less unconsciously dismissed from their minds the connotations of Rubens' nudes when assessing and experiencing the final worth of his art' (TC p.83). For Greenberg, 'they may have remained aware of the pinkness as a *nude* pinkness, but it was a pinkness and a nudity devoid of most of their usual associations' (TC p.83). The pinkness of the painted canvas thus corresponds to one of the work's material qualities² and the depicted nudes correspond to its subject matter. Nevertheless, although the material qualities of a painting are initially counterposed to its subject, Greenberg goes on to suggest, in an almost identical manner to his account of Rembrandt, that the two terms necessarily imply one another and that their respective autonomy can only ever be provisional. In the analysis of Rubens, this is achieved

¹ Greenberg often uses the term 'picture' to isolate all the material qualities that are circumscribed by the picture plane. For example, in his interpretation of Braque's early collage, he writes that: 'instead of seeing objects in space, [the eye] sees nothing more than—a picture' (CO p.74); but even in his earlier essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' (1940), he claims that the 'picture ... exhausts itself in the visual sensation it produces' (TN p.34).

² In his account of Rubens, Greenberg also refers to these material qualities as its 'abstract formal unity' (TC p.78); this is, presumably, the end result of the painter's 'abstract element of technique' referred to in the case of Rembrandt (TC p.78).

by the introduction of a system of qualifications that slightly amend each claim (allowing subject matter and material qualities to be temporarily distinguished) while eventually allowing the terms to collapse into one another. Hence Rubens' critics were 'almost' unaware of his risqué subject matter, they were 'more or less' unconscious of its connotations, and they enjoyed the picture in the absence of 'most' of its usual associations (TC p.83). From these qualifications, these subtle caveats, we can see that the distinction between subject matter and material qualities is, strictly speaking, impossible. It is impossible to *completely* distinguish a painting's material qualities from what it depicts as the 'thing imaged impregnates' its material qualities in any viewing experience (CA p.271), but for the purposes of criticism—for the 'purposes of discourse' (CA p.269)—it is necessary that we try.

While form comprises both the work's material qualities and its subject matter, we can see that, for Greenberg, it is the counterpart to content, and, in principle at least, can be distinguished. Again, this difference is explicated in the 1967 article; Greenberg states that:

Anything in a work of art that can be talked about or pointed to automatically excludes itself from the "content" of the work, from its import, tenor, gist, or "meaning" (all of these terms are but so many stabs at a generic term for what works of art are ultimately "about"). Anything in a work of art that does not belong to its "content" has to belong to its "form".

Complaints of an Art Critic, p.269

From this we can see that, as things that can be 'pointed to', all the material qualities of artworks are necessarily part of their form, as are those aspects of them which can be 'talked about' (their subject matter). What is striking about this account, however, is Greenberg's insistence that what can be 'pointed to' or 'talked about' is different from the content of the work, and that this content is synonymous with the work's "meaning".³ As Greenberg concludes, content is by definition 'indefinable, unparaphraseable, undiscussable' (CA p.269). The content of the work—its "meaning"—is therefore not the object of critical discourse. This explains the significance and ultimate importance of the work's formal qualities for Greenberg: if the content of the work is ineffable, then the only legitimate object of the critic's attention is its formal qualities. It is his evident interest in these qualities, to the exclusion of the work's content, that ultimately explains why Greenberg believes that art criticism cannot employ metaphor, or concepts from other disciplines, to throw light on the

³ In his subsequent published correspondence with art historian Robert Goldwater, Greenberg clarifies the way he uses the word "meaning", and his tactical use of parentheses: 'Where I use the word "meaning" without quotes I attach it to "illustrated subject" or say "literary meaning as such," precisely in order to make it clear that I am not talking about "content"' (CA p.276). "Meaning" in scare quotes, however, refers to the work's content.

“meaning” of the work, that is, its ‘content’ or (and these are synonyms) its ‘import, tenor, [or] gist’.

We have seen that the artwork’s form comprises two components—its material qualities and subject matter—and that, for Greenberg, form is the only legitimate object of critical discourse. Nevertheless, in order to understand his remarks on the legitimate approach of art criticism, we must complicate this picture and show exactly how Greenberg would envisage a legitimate critical investigation of form to proceed. His remarks on John Ruskin provide a clear indication of what is not legitimate:

You can write at length about the questions raised by the kind of life depicted in an indifferent novel or even poem, and whether or not you make a contribution to general wisdom, the chances are that your failure to deal with the picture or novel as art won’t be noticed. Ruskin, murmuring about a picture he otherwise liked, because it showed children drinking wine, would not sound half so silly were it a piece of fiction he was talking about.

Complaints of an Art Critic, p.272

Greenberg’s complaint is directed at the fact that, in this case, Ruskin only describes the subject matter of the picture and not its material qualities. This strategy would—and this is the basis of the objection—be appropriate in the analysis of literature, but it is not appropriate for the analysis of visual art.⁴ Ruskin’s description is deficient, not because it deals with the picture’s form, but because it only deals with this form insofar as it is considered to be synonymous with the picture’s subject matter. The work’s material qualities are absent from Ruskin’s description—this is why his description of the picture is lacking. (It is of course also worth noting that, for Greenberg, this kind of description is not entirely appropriate for literature either. Greenberg makes it clear that simply describing literature’s subject matter is not treating it ‘as art’. Nevertheless, such descriptions are more normal in a literary context (descriptions of ‘plot’ or ‘character’), and for this reason Greenberg suggests that, although ultimately aberrant, they often pass unnoticed.)

While Ruskin’s description cannot count as legitimate art criticism for Greenberg as it simply overcodes an account of an artwork’s material qualities with an account of its subject, the alternative (describing its ‘content’—its “meaning”, import, tenor, [or] gist’) is just as misguided, but for different reasons. As I mentioned earlier, Greenberg’s dismissal of this kind of art criticism is articulated most clearly in his published dispute with Harold Rosenberg, which appeared in the 1962 issue of *Encounter* entitled ‘How Art Writing Earns

⁴ Greenberg’s extended analysis of the pernicious effect of literature is found in ‘Towards A Newer Laocoön’. Here Greenberg differentiates the visual art from literature by emphasising that literature is simply a ‘vessel of communication’ (TN p.28), and that has minimal material qualities.

Its Bad Name'. In this article, similarly to his account of Ruskin, Greenberg gives us a valuable insight into how he believes art criticism can and cannot operate. As usual, we can infer how he believes legitimate criticism should proceed simply by paying close attention to his complaints regarding bad critical practice. For Greenberg, just as Ruskin's strategy of reconstructing and analysing the subject matter of a painting was shown to be deficient, Rosenberg's strategy of commenting exclusively on the painting's content fails to give a full account of the painting as a work of art. Moreover, as we will see, Greenberg also objects to the way Rosenberg is satisfied to offer an interpretation an artwork while feeling no obligation to contextualise it within the history of art. Greenberg recounts:

An article by Harold Rosenberg appeared in *Art News* in New York under the title "Action Painting" [*sic*]. Though it named no names, it was taken as a first attempt to throw real light, friendly or hostile, on the intensions of the new American painters. Transposing some notions from Heidegger's and Sartre's Existentialism, Mr. Rosenberg explained that these painters were not really seeking to arrive at art, but rather to discover their own identities through the unpremeditated and more or less uncontrolled acts by which they put paint on canvas. For them the picture surface was the "arena" of a struggle waged outside the limits of art in which "existence" strove as it were to become "essence."

How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name, p.136

Apart from the slightly pejorative tone that lingers in the term 'transposing', this appears to be a fair summation of Rosenberg's article. In this article Rosenberg claims that:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

[...]

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.

[...]

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a "moment" in the adulterated mixture of his life—whether "moment" means the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.

Here, a discussion of the artwork’s material qualities has clearly been replaced by a discussion of its content, that is, a discussion of what American action painting “means”. Not only does Rosenberg attempt to say something about the *content* of the work, however, but he attempts to do so using unorthodox resources—concepts that have been developed in contemporary continental philosophy. Moreover, by decontextualising and then re-contextualising such concepts, or ‘transposing’ as Greenberg may say, Rosenberg is engaging in a process of conceptual crossover and is using these concepts metaphorically. Greenberg’s objection to this innovation is two-fold: first, Rosenberg attempts to say something about the content of the work (attempts to critically articulate what American action painting “means”); second, he fills his account with concepts taken from outside of art history, concepts that, for Greenberg, have no relevance to the work Rosenberg is attempting to critique. It is not clear how Greenberg would envisage a valid relationship between the content of a work and the history of art but, from Greenberg’s analysis of Rosenberg’s article, we can see that he believes an account of action painting’s historical antecedents is missing. For Greenberg, if an account of the content of action painting is to some extent possible—even if this is always incomplete or provisional—then it must be a historical account, one that reveals, in this case, action painting’s ‘almost completely Cubist basis’ (HA p.141). It seems, therefore, that a critical account of action painting does have to be—at least in part—historical. Greenberg complains that, ‘when praising a contemporary artist,’ contemporary art writing tends to imply that ‘he has come out of nowhere and owes practically nothing to anything before him’ (HA p.143). While this complaint does not precisely articulate the extent to which a historical analysis must be included in the critical analysis of a work of art, it does indicate that Greenberg would warm to critical account that referred to the history of art, rather than to concepts outside of this history.