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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORM

SAM ROSE

There are drawings by Adolph Menzel (1815-1905) in which the black lead of his carpenter's pencil has been pressed into the paper with tremendous force, far exceeding the demands of the form or the requirements of the shading in that precinct of the image. I said to Kathrin: What we see here is first-hand evidence of Menzel's desire—his compulsion—to make the world as real to him, and at the same time to make himself as real to the world, as it was within his power to achieve. At whatever cost to strict fidelity to appearances, which was of urgent concern to him but only up to a point. As Kafka notes in another connection, "That is the point that must be reached."

—Michael Fried, "In the Kupferstichkabinett" <sup>1</sup>

Formalism in the visual arts just won't quite go away. Ever since the full recognition in the early twentieth century that form could ground a distinct theory of art, writers in search of a definition that would differentiate it from their own views have embraced two premises: the idea that adherents of the theory understand contemplation of the form of an artwork to be both necessary and sufficient for its aesthetic evaluation; and the idea that this contemplation is a univocal, pure, or essentially content-less one. On this basis it has been attacked for over a hundred years as a solipsistic, 'aestheticist,' position—the embodiment of everything wrong with the legacy of nineteenth-century “art for art's sake” thinking. But while formalism in this extreme sense may have existed as 'the name of a generative ideal' for artists and 'the name of a research program' for critics, as a description of an actual way in which anyone in the past looked at things it is difficult to take seriously.<sup>2</sup>

Here I want to pursue a different line. This essay is one of a set analysing the preference for the analogical and allegorical in present day writing on the visual, in particular as manifested in Anglo-American art history.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the others, in what follows I turn to a more historical dimension of this tendency, linking it with an earlier vein of art writing—“formalism”—with which continuity has not always been countenanced. The first aim is historiographic, in a pointed sense. Despite important corrective writing on formalism, the nuanced version has largely failed to filter into discussion of the modernist art and literature with which formalism is so often linked, and where as a result the problematically narrow version raised above is still widely taken as a starting point. The other aim is more contemporary. The broad version is often upheld with or without acknowledgement of its place in a longer tradition of art writing. Placing it within this tradition is not to criticise it, exactly, but it is to shed a particular light on some of its premises and assumptions, as well as to stress its difference from a range of other options in critical and historical work today. It's also to try to model a *practical* account overarching enough to come to terms with the fact that so many with widely varying justifications of their views have been able to call themselves formalists, or conversely to work in importantly similar ways even if rejecting the formalist label.

All of this means analyzing formalism sympathetically, though somewhat at a distance, with an eye to the continued allure of form in speaking to notions of style, signification, affect, materiality, expression, and so forth. In doing so here I bring to light a unifying

aspect to formalisms past and present, something that may be so obvious and pervasive that it is almost universally taken for granted. This is the role form plays *via style*, as the element in between producing artist and consuming viewer, in a very limited sense of communication, of “making contact.”<sup>4</sup> Broadly, form is taken to be the basis of the ability to recreate or recuperate the original functioning of the work: securing correspondence of experience between makers and viewers of artworks; conveying expressed thought and feeling; grounding historical re-enactment; or simply guaranteeing that one can properly assess its historical operation. For this reason, form becomes a privileged tool for historical analysis of the visual: the element through which one can move from personal experience of the work (its effects) to historical assumptions about the nature of that work (its structure), to its production, and its context, and back. Form itself may be a structural feature analyzable apart from historical and psychological speculation, as in Viktor Shklovsky’s description of form as “the principle underlying the construction of the object.”<sup>5</sup> But it is the resulting ability to securely identify the proper functioning of the work that allows, in turn, for the most ambitious of narrativized interpretations to make the characteristic double claim—to operate primarily through first-hand experience, and to be truly “historical” nonetheless.

### **Style and Communication**

Aiming to support the use of form in Marxist criticism in a way that might shed the tainted “Bloomsbury” legacy, many years ago Raymond Williams attempted to clear up confusion over the multiple legacies of formalism with a distinction between “form,” used on the one hand to mean “outward show” or “superficial appearance,” and on the other to mean “shaping principle.”<sup>6</sup> The first explains the narrow, morphological or “manifest,” view—form as a discernible property of artworks that is something like their external shape or composition. The latter meaning is closer to “forming”—form as the “how” of the work that implies process, structuring, creation, and individual “style.” As a very basic distinction, this usefully points towards a binary that has come to underpin the categorization of formalisms. On the one hand are the most commonly attacked kinds, focused on external shape to the exclusion of both process and representation, and linked by Williams, amongst others, to “art for art’s sake” views, concerned with “purely” aesthetic interests.<sup>7</sup> This is the understanding evocatively presented in T.J. Clark’s description of his quarrel with “formalism” as with an “old picture of visual

imaging as pursued in a trance-like removal from human concerns”—a view that harks back to the same Bloomsbury tradition that Williams was writing against.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand are what critics of these narrow kinds have seen as the “good” alternatives—formalisms that incorporate elements of Russian formalism, critical theory, semiotics, and phenomenology, and as such are widely appealed to in the present day.<sup>9</sup> Clark again: “It is the form of our statements, and the structure of our visualizations, that truly are our ways of world-making—at any rate the ways that hold us deepest in thrall.”<sup>10</sup> It is this latter kind that Richard Neer has defended as “a worldly—that is, political—formalism: one that is prepared to draw far-reaching conclusions on matters of historical fact from the smudges on a painted thigh, say that of Manet’s *Olympia* (T.J. Clark), or the perspectival construction of a painted dining room, say that of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* (Leo Steinberg).”<sup>11</sup>

The broad distinction also holds good for the accounts found in analytic philosophy of art, where the writers often taken to have revived and in part set the discipline on its contemporary course—Arthur Danto, Richard Wollheim, and Nelson Goodman—all dealt at points with the questions of style and expression, but with no indication that this might bear a close relation to what the early twentieth-century “formalist” art critics and theorists had always been getting at.<sup>12</sup> This explains why the same analytic philosopher can speak negatively of Roger Fry- and Clive Bell-type formalism as a theory which concentrates solely on pure contemplation of the configured properties of artworks,<sup>13</sup> while in another context talking positively of “style or form” or “stylistic or formal research” as if these were direct synonyms.<sup>14</sup> In the latter case this philosopher, Noël Carroll, can *advocate* attention to “form,” this time used to mean the work’s “style,” or the general way in which the maker has created its significant features.<sup>15</sup> It was on this basis that Arthur Danto could joke that Fry and Bell had never actually said what was “significant” about “significant form,” and make no reference to any similarity with his own view of individual artistic “style” as grounded in the expressive effects of the artist’s distortions of the natural world—the difference in artistic representation from a fully naturalistic, “transparent,” rendering of the scene.<sup>16</sup> All the same, compare Danto in 1981, “...one must decide which distortions are due to representational ineptitude and which to expressive force...but it is possible to suppose that the place in which the concepts we are after, of style and expression and even metaphor, are to be found in those

discrepancies between image and motif which the transparency theorists can only give a negative value to, and attribute to a failure of mimesis,” with Fry in 1911, “I am going to assume that you will all agree with me in saying that the artist’s business is not merely the reproduction and literal copying of things seen:—that he is expected in some way or other to misrepresent and distort the visual world.”<sup>17</sup> There are, clearly, some deep parallels between card-carrying formalists and many of those who have consciously tried to “move on” from form.

The rigid distinctions between “two” formalisms depend on a neat cleaving of “form” from “style,” as if there were no bleeding of the creative process into the finished product. But while this separation is possible in theory, it is crucial to understand that formalist critical *practice* relies on collapsing the two. The object’s role as link between artist and viewer is a key point over which the binaries begin to fall apart, as it highlights that even when critics take form as a static end point, this is only one moment in a mode of analysis that ultimately uses it as a tool of enquiry into originating conditions.

One of the most straightforward starting points here is Paul de Man’s comment on the critical methodology that he took to be exemplary of formalism:

For [I.A.] Richards, the task of criticism consists in correctly apprehending the signifying value, or meaning, of the work; an exact correspondence between the author’s originary experience and its communicated expression. For the author, the labor of formal elaboration consists in constructing a linguistic structure that will correspond as closely as possible to the initial experience. Once it is granted that such a correspondence is established by the author, it will exist for the reader as well, and what is called communication can then occur.

The initial experience may be anything at all and need not have anything specifically “aesthetic” about it. Art is justified as the preservation of moments in “the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest degree . . .” The critic’s task consists in retracing the author’s journey backward: It will proceed from a careful and precise study of the signifying form toward the experience that produced

this form. Correct critical understanding is achieved when it reaches the cluster of experience, elicited through reading, insofar as they remain sufficiently close to the experience or experiences the author started out with.<sup>18</sup>

This passage might be taken as a good demonstration of why formalist critics have occasionally placed so much stress on “content.”<sup>19</sup> Form is here an intentional “structure” of the work that corresponds to artistic “experience,” and allows for “what is called communication.” This makes form the vehicle for content rather than something set against it; the aspect that allows for the sort of tracking through the artwork to the activity of the artist that is just as often described as a function of “style.” Writing in the 1950s as part of his critique of New Criticism, de Man was arguing for the inevitable failure of Richards’ project and those that followed; of the constitutive rather than merely imitative relation between language and experience, and the resulting impossibility of perfect continuity between writing (or “form”) and the writer’s (and thus reader’s) experience. There were nonetheless then and since principled counters to de Man’s critique, as well as a range of practices that simply bypassed it without too much concern (both points I’ll get to below).<sup>20</sup> It’s also worth stressing that de Man was talking of linguistic communication, but while I.A. Richards is rarely linked with contemporary formalist art theory and criticism, the same ideas can be found in discussions of visual art in the writings of those associated with “good” and narrow formalisms alike. This occurs, in other words, in contexts ranging from the earlier avant-garde, such as Wassily Kandinsky in 1910:

The work of art comprises two elements: the inner and the outer. The inner element, taken in isolation, is the emotion in the soul of the artist that causes a corresponding vibration (in material terms, like the note of one musical instrument that causes the corresponding note on another instrument to vibrate in sympathy) in the soul of another person, the receiver. As long as the soul remains joined to the body, it can as a rule only receive vibrations via the medium of the senses, which form a bridge from the immaterial to the material (in the case of the artist) and from the material to the immaterial (in the case of the spectator). Emotion—

sensation—the work of art—sensation—emotion. The vibration in the soul of the artist must therefore find a material form, a means of expression, which is capable of being picked up by the receiver. This material form is thus the second, i.e., external, element of the work of art...In art, form is invariably determined by content.<sup>21</sup>

Through to mainstream discussions, such as Roger Fry's reply to an article by the popular critic J.E. Barton, published in the BBC's *The Listener* magazine in 1932:

The work of art is really a transaction between the artist and the spectator; it is a direct link, for those who can see it properly, with the profoundest parts of the artist's nature. It is, as Mr. Barton says, a purely human value and has to do with essentially human values...What happens to us when we are thrilled by the beauty of Rembrandt's drawing is that the particular rhythms of his lines transmit to us, not only the likeness of the sow, but also Rembrandt's imaginative excitement as he apprehended certain relations of form in what he contemplated, and that excitement and exultation depended upon his peculiarly intense emotional reaction to life, an emotion expressed in his case through his specific sense of visible form. So whatever he drew he was almost always able to make us share in that emotional experience and to feel ourselves incredibly richer and, as Mr. Barton so well puts it, more civilised by that. Except so far as the sow stimulated in Rembrandt this emotional exultation she is really not in the picture at all.<sup>22</sup>

A “bridge,” a “transaction,” a “link”; with “soul,” “imaginative excitement,” “emotion,” not only expressed but received and understood. Back in 1989 David Summers wrote that this tradition had lived on in art history, where one was expected to move in a neat chain of expressed essences from form to history: the “elongated linear forms and nondescriptive colors of mannerist painting,” to the “psychological extremities” of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, and in turn to the “anguish and spiritual crisis” brought on by the “Sack of Rome, the Siege of Florence, and the Reformation.”<sup>23</sup> In late modernist art history of the time semiotics

had offered a glimpse of an alternative method that would reject “form” for “historical reconstruction of the likely meaning of any instance of the many codes discernible in a work of art” (and in which this latter reconstruction would replace form as the basis for “higher interpretation”). Even there, however, the still-overwhelming desire to use extremely close attention to the visual to make “intuitive inferences” to the historical meant that visual analogy and allegorically structured interpretation regularly floated free from strict semiotic determination—the distinction between “expressive form” and “sign” was freely collapsed.<sup>24</sup> All of this brings together early and later formalisms, and suggests that the implied connection of producer and consumer, rather than say “disinterested” contemplation of the art object, is a worthy candidate for a unifying account of formalism.

Explaining the general neglect of this artist-viewer connection is simple enough, given the tendency of commentators since to privilege isolated theoretical statements over actual critical practice. Although the broadened view of formalism should be logically independent of claims made about what form *does*, single claims about the effects of form (such as the generation of “aesthetic experience”) have regularly been taken as sufficient accounts of the theory as a whole. Over the course of the twentieth century form’s significance was associated with a host of ideas: the production of particular feelings and emotions in the viewer; connection to the temperament, sensibility, “vision,” or imagination of the maker; contact with “reality,” or universal rhythms or structures; and the revelation of new, truer or just less everyday, ways of seeing the world. (Even Clive Bell’s *Art* within the space of a few pages moves between appeals to communication of expressed emotion, experiences of pure and disinterested “aesthetic emotion,” and the uncovering of deeper reality.) Far from mutually exclusive and competing, these multiple views were and are regularly alternated between or combined, even at moments feeding off of and relying on each other.<sup>25</sup> But while the communicative idea was clearly and regularly articulated, the fact that the same writers would in their texts cycle through a number of explanations of art’s importance has allowed commentators then and since to fixate on the one idea they have expected to find as if it provides the key to a definition of formalism—to draw out the narrow view of the theory through selective quotation, leaving behind more complex theoretical articulations and practical applications, and in doing so missing out on its general nature.



Historical explanation of the unifying account—or simply the communicative idea at its heart—is a more complex issue, and a wide range of interpretations are now available. Looking solely at turn-of-the-twentieth-century writers whose work was associated with “form,” an enormous range of reasons have been put forward, from the French symbolist claim to formal equivalents for emotional experiences, to the empathy-theory-based claim for identification with the psychomotor processes of the artist as objectified in the forms of their work, to the claim associated with Wölfflin’s art history for recovery through comparative analysis (and a good measure of intuition) of the “form of representation” or mode of vision of the work.<sup>26</sup> Just like with non-communicative claims for what form does—providing access to pure or transcendent beauty, or to higher or underlying reality—histories often work on the basis of just one or other of these explanations. But attempts to single out any one of these break down when we look closely at the activity of the most famous critics. Fry, for example, combined deep engagements with Maurice Denis’ symbolism, “empathy”-based connoisseurship, and Wölfflin’s art history, all the while citing Tolstoy as the theorist who had revealed the communicative nature of art.<sup>27</sup> Even then, and in the very same pages, Fry offered purist statements that allowed contemporaries and subsequent commentators alike to conclude that he was interested in nothing but a notion of beauty on Platonic lines.<sup>28</sup>

A more generalised explanation can be grounded in the idea of “interpretative vision,” or the “broadly Kantian” idea that an individual’s consciousness makes up their world for them.<sup>29</sup> For David Summers, formalism from its origins through to the poststructuralist art history of the late twentieth century has taken style to reflect this constituting activity, so that style provides a safe route to the worldview of the maker: “Artifacts belonged to styles, continuities characteristic of the imagination of individuals and groups, from the expressions of which certain conclusions might be drawn about individuals and groups themselves.”<sup>30</sup> A crucial point, on this account, came with the early modern rise of the “rejection of the idea that there was a direct causal link between the forms of things in the world and the form of mental representations.”<sup>31</sup> The new model—of the “pictorial” imagination—held that representations were presented in the imagination as unified pictures, with their unity given by the subject whose mind had constituted the picture, rather than the external world itself. As Kant put it in the

preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “our representation of things, as they are given to us, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves...these objects as appearances conform to our mode of representation.”<sup>32</sup> The idea that art was essentially “formal” emerged in the late eighteenth century as a direct corollary of these ideas. The primary object of art-critical and historical interest became the modes of representation themselves, as these representations were taken to be projections of the synthesising activity of the imagination, and as such were presumed to embody both individual and group kinds of historical subjectivity—personal “sensitivity” and collective “worldview” in what is now everyday language. As a revelation of inner “syntheses and schemata,” the “manner of treatment” or the “how of representation” was effectively the means by which the artwork “expresses” both personal and collective “points of view”:<sup>33</sup>

the “forms” of art in the new aesthetic sense of the word do not simply synthesize what is intuited or “felt,” they also express that intuition or feeling, making it evident, available, and experienceable by a “viewer,” that is, by one also assumed to possess a pictorial imagination. Form is presumed to be an adequate “medium,” conveying both personal and collective intuitions through “style,” and would thus seem to provide a clear path for interpersonal and intercultural communication, if not understanding, since everyone may see (or be taught to see) the expressive forms of everyone else’s art...If theme is constant and therefore neutral, telling variations are to be seen in comparing the character of the synthesis of the formal means of representation. Again, individual “style,” evident in idiosyncratic treatments of line, shape, and colour, is rooted in the painter’s individual temperaments and imaginations, that is, in the formative principles that literally make images out of the same but differently intuited world.<sup>34</sup>

For both Summers and Whitney Davis, who has expanded on the account, twentieth-century formalist critics emerge as direct descendants of this tradition—making use of the dynamics of form in human intuition of things in the world to move from their own sensibilities to those of the original makers.<sup>35</sup> Davis adds a more

explicit analysis of “high” formalist criticism to this model, noting that the practice of a writer like Fry is coordinated not on the object as such, but on the actual “art-historical” object of formalist analysis: “the artist’s form-making capacities and sensibilities.”<sup>36</sup> Relying on the possibility that the perceived form (the “formality”) of the work can be grasped through essential habits of human intuition, Fry’s subjectivist method enacts a kind of transference from critic to artist in order to achieve a “virtual historical psychology” of the artist and their contemporaries. It involves not just the critic’s intuitive grasp and subsequent description of the “formality” of the work, but also their formally inflected perception of the depicted scene, moving in the process from Fry’s vision in the present to the artist’s vision in the past and drawing a history out of this shift.<sup>37</sup> (History, in particular, because Fry’s interest here is not so much in form as such, but rather “in identifying artistic expressivity, what lies behind the painting’s form in the painter’s character, experience, and culture.”<sup>38</sup>) Amidst the almost unmanageable mass of contextual data that might seemingly “bear on the intentional structure of the artwork in its social and cultural milieu,” the great and continuing appeal of this kind of critical method has been its ability to sift and sort.<sup>39</sup> The apparent formality is used to provide a narrated synthesis of putatively relevant circumstantial fact with the look of the work—to give the impression that the critic’s text has opened a window onto the world of the artist at the moment of production.

### **The Language of Art Criticism**

For those willing and able to adopt the Kantian terminology, such an approach may be an entirely satisfying way to pursue the issue. Nonetheless, many have so far struggled with artists’ and critics’ apparent blindness to or active refusal of these particular philosophical ideas, and with the tendency of the same artists and critics to develop a range of alternative justifications for their methods that might appear to either subvert or render irrelevant the Kantian paradigm. Further historical investigation could potentially map the reworking or rejection of this paradigm in the many variants of formalism. But a unifying account also requires an equivalent generalised discussion of the way that form is used in the narrativised synthesis of context and work that is as minimalist as possible in its intellectual-historical claims; one anchored not so much in high philosophical thought, as in the language and rhetoric commonly used by formalist writers of many different kinds.

This involves a turn away from deep theoretical “explanation” of critical practice, and a focus instead on description of its operations. Something of this sort is suggested by a combination of formalism’s connection to style and process—informed by the discussions mentioned above—with Michael Baxandall’s meditations on the language used in art history and art criticism. These meditations are so appropriate because, as will become clear, the Baxandall of *Patterns of Intention* is not so much an anti-formalist as someone with a cautious respect for writers like Fry at their most complex and interesting, and who thus wants to finally sort out what can be salvaged and what must be discarded.

In these writings Baxandall points out how little of what is said about works of art really makes use of “direct descriptive language,” or words that refer directly to the object (“large, flat, pigments on a panel, red and yellow and blue”).<sup>40</sup> Baxandall instead highlights three kinds of “indirect” language. The first of these are words that concern the *effect* of the picture on the beholder (“poignant,” “enchanted,” “surprising”).<sup>41</sup> The second are *comparative* words, including metaphors about both formal and representational features of the work (“resonance (of colours)” or “columnar (drapery)”).<sup>42</sup> The third are *cause* words, which are used to “describe the effect of the picture on us by telling of inferences we have made about the action or process that might have led to the picture being as it is” (“assured *handling*, of a frugal *palette*, *excited* blots and scribbles”).<sup>43</sup> While critical practice of all sorts will tend to shuffle between all three levels, it is the “comparative” words that deal with statements solely about the finished object. The “cause” words are those that can track back from manifest features of the object to the set of actions of the maker through which the work came into being, and as such appear to correspond more to the style or process-based (“good”) formalism. Baxandall was clear that the “effect of the picture” was the real object of interest, but under the banner “inferential criticism,” proposed that words of the third type offered the best hope of talking about works of art in convincing ways.<sup>44</sup>



It might initially here seem that comparative words correspond to a narrow or morphological formalism, and inferential cause words correspond to the style or process-based “good” formalism. But something more interesting is brought out by a passage discussed by Baxandall, from Kenneth Clark’s description of Piero della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ* (Fig. 1):

we are at once conscious of a geometric framework; and a few seconds’ analysis shows us that it is divided into thirds horizontally, and into quarters vertically. The horizontal divisions come, of course, on the line of the Dove’s wings and the line of angels’ hands, Christ’s loin-cloth and the Baptist’s left hand; the vertical divisions are

the pink angel's columnar drapery, the central line of the Christ and the back of St. John. These divisions form a central square, which is again divided into thirds and quarters, and a triangle drawn within this square, having its apex at the Dove and its base at the lower horizontal, gives the central motive of the design.<sup>45</sup>

Though Baxandall did not address this as formalism by name, his discussions make clear two key points about it. The first is that most formalist art writing tends to operate at the level of analogy. When Clark talks of a geometrical framework, with horizontals, verticals, a square, and a triangle, this description “is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture.”<sup>46</sup> Despite appearances it trades not in direct descriptions of the (physical) “object,” but in the use of indirect, comparative, words to describe something extra that the critic thinks up in front of the work (Fig. 2). This lack of direct connection between word and thing takes on a special significance given the second point, which is that in any extended piece of art critical writing “ambiguities or confluences of type develop” between “cause” and “comparative” words in particular, with “shifts in the actual reference of terms.”<sup>47</sup> “Form design,” again applied to the Baptism, might seem to be a clear enough comment on pictorial structure of the external shape kind—an example of a narrow, morphological formalism. But Baxandall notes it was originally for him “a thought that involved an inference about cause. It described the picture by speculating about the quality of the process that led to it being an object of a kind to make that impression on me that it does.”<sup>48</sup> “Design” is here doing double work as a cause and a comparative word; it starts out as a comment by the critic on the appearance of the object, then becomes an inference about cause because it is *also* a judgement about how the maker worked to make the object appear. The two types of formalism are thus folded into one.



Design was the example Baxandall took with Clark and Piero in mind, but common words such as “plasticity,” “rhythm,” “structure,” and of course “form,” all tend towards this slippery dualism, as can even the most apparently static of geometrical terms. When Clark suggests that the “triangle” with its apex at the dove “gives the central motive of the design,” the identification of the supposed shape is not just a judgement about a balanced and aesthetically pleasing composition, but also a judgement about the activity of Piero in the making of the work. The “triangle” is not just an obvious thing about the work for us in the present; it reveals that when the work was originally made—formed or designed—it functioned equally as an organizing principle in Piero’s production of the work, bound up with the set of actions through which the work was produced. In this

way the aesthetic or affective can re-enter the scene. Having taken the apparent formal structure of the work as a general “pattern of intention” embodied in the work, the critic can put into effect the rhetorical shift from their own experience in the present to that of the artist in the past. They are now able to use (type one) “effect” words—“calming,” “enchancing,” and so on—as if these take some of their authority from the discerned purposive activity of the artist.

As the example of the “triangle” suggests, because talk of formal features at the “comparative” level cannot claim to be identifying physical properties of the object, the implicit justification for their relevance is that it is equivalent to the (past) meaning of the work—be that a matter of intention or of signifying structure, as different versions of formalism might construe it. Still, the passage quoted from Clark adopts the stance of the critic looking at the object in the present day. It is only implicit that the discerned pictorial order relates to Piero’s activity, his construction of the work in a way that manifested the peculiar pictorial order. But a further feature of almost all formalist criticism is that in certain sentences or phrases the shift from “impression on me” to “quality of the process” that made it this particular impression-giving object—the slide from “effect” on the viewer back to visual evidence of the actions by which the work was created (or of which it consists)—is secured more directly, with a tactic that Christopher Green once described as that of looking “as” the artist.<sup>49</sup> “Looking as if the artist and describing as the critic” would be more precise, since in practice this way of writing gives the impression that the critic has momentarily assumed the artist’s subjectivity, and is now reporting back to the reader on what they have seen. The artist rather than the work becomes the subject of the sentence, allowing the critic’s own “effect” words to pass as (hypothetical posits about) impressions that the artist had, and their “comparative” words about formal structure to shade into “cause” words about the probable making of the work.





To take another passage favored by Baxandall as an example, this time Wölfflin's description in *Classic Art* of Raphael's frescos in the Camera della Segnatura (Fig. 3), we read that "Raphael saw that," "Raphael wanted to," "Raphael complied with" (though "he reserved his right to"), "Raphael decided to" and so on.<sup>50</sup> The full power of this technique is clear in a sentence like "There is a distinct flow of movement from the left towards the centre: the pointing youth, the praying figures, the expressive figure seen from behind, combine to form a sequence of related actions which the eye follows with pleasure, and Raphael always took this guiding of the eye into consideration, even in his later works."<sup>51</sup> The eye's "pleasure" in the composition is secured by the "knowledge" that Raphael always enacted this kind of consideration, and with this, the "distinct flow of movement" referred to becomes as much a statement about cause—Raphael's characteristic concern in distributing figures—as a judgement on morphology or effect on the viewer.

What is so striking about this tendency, aside from its almost universal employment by formalist art critics and historians, is how despite the wealth of accounts of intention offered before and since Baxandall wrote, it in practice seems to obviate the worries about intention (and evidence for it) that communication might involve.<sup>52</sup> The kind of "intention" allegedly recovered is not a particular psychological state or set of mental events inside the artist's head, as Baxandall was keen to stress, but a more general idea of "purposefulness" that implies little more than the common sense premise that a set of historical circumstances stands behind and has

constituted the “forward-leaning look” of any object.<sup>53</sup> Assuming the work’s structure in the past to sufficiently equate to the work’s structure in the present, the most salient effects in the present are taken to match up to the relevant effects in the past. Formalism thereby assumes that the features being picked out are part of a “best possible” construction of what was done when the work was created, but even where the “artist’s vision” is rhetorically adopted this need have nothing to do with the artist’s biography, psychological disposition, or mental states. In this way formalism can work equally well for those who see intention as equivalent to meaning (the experience may be of the “intentional structure” of actions that make up the work), and those who see intention as a naïve and unworkable construct (the experience may simply reveal the particular codes or devices through which the work operates).<sup>54</sup> In the latter case it is able at once to attribute significance through the quasi-intentionalist mode of writing described here, and to pass in everyday description as “anti-intentionalist,” as writers from Wölfflin and Shklovsky to Clement Greenberg have combined this general way of operating with explicit denials of the admissibility of artists’ actual, consciously made, statements about their own work.

### **The Formalist Tradition**

To sum up, then. The work’s structural equivalence in present and past gives apparent authority to the critic’s own experience of the work, with form allowing descriptions of salient effects in the present to become descriptions of relevant effects in the past. This also allows the critic to recognize (intuit or infer to) cause, not in terms of a set of separate and now recoverable mental states, but as the set of the artist’s actions that are taken to make up the work. In the writing technique that I have referred to in terms of “the artist’s vision” this is reflected at the rhetorical level in critics’ narration of their “looking” at the picture as if they have direct knowledge about that artist’s actions, with the artist made the subject of the sentence and the (particular critic’s) “effect” words used as if the posits about intention behind and experience of the work have come from the artist themselves. Form may well be encountered as external shape or composition, but this is taken not only as a static finality but also as the end process of the artist’s creative (forming) activity, trading on the inevitable ambiguity between the two. The attempt categorically to demarcate morphological and style- or process-based formalisms is thus rendered irrelevant in practice, and all the while formalism’s ability to slide along this scale allows it to dodge attacks and to

reappear in new guises unruffled. The securely identified operation of the work in turn allows for higher level interpretation to proceed on this basis, taking it up as the foundational ingredient—moving from effects in the present, to the past, and potentially on to everything from the thematization of problems like those described in this essay, to meanings of the work in its original social and cultural milieu.<sup>55</sup>

I want to finish here with nods in just three directions: the discussion of non-formal elements; the place of intention; and consequences for thinking about the history of formalism.

First of all, attention to the actual writing of critics reveals that even the most rigid of formalists tended to “see” and talk about subject matter, context, and so forth in their descriptions of works, giving form a particular sort of primacy rather than exclusive attention. Form is the basis of using items of visual culture historically because it is there that one has the affective material trace—“first-hand evidence” in the words of Michael Fried’s poem—of what the producer has done, the functioning of their work, and thus the basis of any kind of thematic or historical interpretation that claims to proceed through sensitive consideration of the work itself. The effects identified by the critic have ranged, depending on other theoretical commitments, from the narrowest sort of “aesthetic emotion” (Clive Bell) to any type of experience at all put into the work (I.A. Richards), but even in Bell’s case examination of his actual critical practice inevitably demonstrates broad discussion of aspects such as represented subject matter and even context. This is because even for as dogmatic a writer as Bell, form is a stage in the interpretative process—the interest is not form in isolation, but form’s ability to “properly” guide (determine and delimit) the often highly speculative and imaginative ways in which the work is engaged with.<sup>56</sup> Hence the appeal of T.J. Clark’s apparently counterintuitive observation that “The best formalists of a theoretical disposition—Riegl, Wölfflin, Sedlmayr, Marin in his distinctive way—end up treating the problem of form’s meaningfulness on a case by case basis, much like the rest of us, producing ‘readings’ ad hoc, and at all key points deploying (floridly) analogical and metaphorical language.”<sup>57</sup> And no wonder that for Clark one of the most skillful critics in this vein might be the at first glance radically anti-formalist —“literary” and “unsystematic”—Edward Snow.<sup>58</sup>

Looking more closely at intention raises a deep question about formalist method, at least in the “artist’s vision” vein. In reality, what gets attributed as the purpose or generalised intention behind the

work is simply a set of hypothetical posits. It is unclear as such whether critical skill lies more in getting these posits “right,” or in presenting them in an imaginative and rhetorically satisfying way. This, ultimately, is the game that must be played when form is used to produce the most satisfying critical writing—a project of significance-construction that not only brings us to “see the work in a new way,” but which can, through its rhetoric, present this new-found seeing as a kind of historical discovery. And acknowledgement of the “game” implies that attacks on traditional art history as a discipline that fetishizes passive reception might have missed the point—might have been too quick to take allusions to the possibility of direct artist-viewer transference at face value.<sup>59</sup> Art history, in as much as it has historically relied on formalist method as one of its grounding premises, was (and still is) an activity of active construction and creation rather than merely passive art appreciation.<sup>60</sup>

And what light, finally, does this generalised model cast on the history of formalism? At one end of the twentieth century, it suggests that the shift towards modernist critical method was at once an attempted correction to *and* a wider popularization of what have been called “the impressionistic characterizations of art that had been promulgated in the handbooks—characterizations that were subjective in the bad sense because their authors imagined that they could see, or empathetically replicate, the *Geist* of the artist in the work.”<sup>61</sup> In this sense it may be deeply misleading to take the Anglo-American critical tradition from Roger Fry and Clive Bell through to Clement Greenberg as having inaugurated a new “formalist” aesthetic paradigm, rather than as a smaller sub-section of a much wider trend. At the other end of the century, it bolsters the earlier suggestion that with his programme of “inferential criticism,” Baxandall was looking not to reject outright so much as to sort through and salvage the useful bits of formalist critical method. (Baxandall, incidentally, did try to ally his practice with what he called “the English art critical tradition—Fry, Ruskin, Adrian Stokes,” and even joked that the pushing away of aesthetic value was hard to take for a “Roger Fry man” such as himself.<sup>62</sup>) Ironically enough, too, the strongest critics of an intrinsic tie between form and the aesthetic evaluation of artworks might also be examples of the fulfilment, or culmination, of formalist logic. Take the Richard Wollheim of *Painting as an Art*, a book that Baxandall himself described as “in the Roger Fry tradition.”<sup>63</sup> Rejecting “form” as a source of singular aesthetic experience, Wollheim turned instead to the recovery of

process as a source of meaning: holding up stylistic analysis (as connoisseurship) as the paradigmatic art-critical activity, and turning to deeper psychological and psychoanalytic analysis for explanation of the role of the surface of the artwork in revealing the mind (and its depths) of the artist.<sup>64</sup>

These concerns have remained prominent wherever “close looking” has held sway, a point dramatized, finally, by two apparently very different recent books.<sup>65</sup> In *Realism after Modernism*, Devin Fore recovers Russian formalist method through attention to individual “devices” by which realism is organized, understood as “systems for the production of self-knowledge and frameworks for organizing subjective perception” that “historically contributed to a particular configuration of thought and experience now associated with the modern humanist subject.”<sup>66</sup> In *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, Richard Neer turns to an analysis of style as “the specific way in which artifacts are seen to address themselves to beholders,” noting that “structures of beholding constitute real historical and political situations,” wherein “ideologies of gender, modes of subjection, relations of power” are “at stake.”<sup>67</sup> Fore’s assumption that form always opens on to subjectivity and ideology allows him to extrapolate from the formal devices of 1920s and 1930s artistic production—described variously as “individual mimetic devices” or “aesthetic devices” or “techniques or genres”—to the specific historical configuration of their “corresponding anthropomorphist postulates”: from the historical transformation of “linear perspective” to that of “the spatially centered Cartesian ego,” or that of “autobiography” to “the mnemonic integrity of the self.” Neer is able to likewise work from the appeal to the beholder made by surface and narrative to the apparent revelation of interiority implied by Classical sculpture, or from a newfound three-dimensionality in relief sculpture to Athenian politics in the shadow and wake of the Peloponnesian War. Neer is more direct in stressing the role of personal experience in his analyses of the historical operations of the works, but even a recovered Russian formalism cannot claim to have found the rules for a “language” of visual form that would obviate this step.<sup>68</sup> In both cases forms are used to move from experiential encounters in the present to the proper functioning of works, which in turn forms the basis of the historical account — “deducing from the *form* of an object the *forces* that have been at work,” according to Franco Moretti’s “most elegant definition ever of what literary sociology should be.”<sup>69</sup>

In terms of the persistence of formalism, from this perspective, it is clearly beside the point that few ever managed a criticism predicated on the pursuit of pure “aesthetic experience,” the total neglect of representation in favour of “form,” and complete indifference to “purposefulness” or human made-ness. Wollheim once complained that the “historical” bias of the academic study of the visual arts was itself a historical accident that needed interrogation. But his confident use of style to see the past in the present was then, and has remained, as standard a way as any to examine art and end up with history.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> “Three Poems,” *nonsite.org* 10 (13 September 2013), <http://nonsite.org/poetry/three-poems-2>.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Wollheim, “On Formalism and Pictorial Organization,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (Spring 2001): 133.
- <sup>3</sup> See also Sam Rose, “Close Looking and Conviction,” *Art History* (forthcoming).
- <sup>4</sup> See Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Autumn 1980): especially 208. This stress on communication may seem unusual, given that even the most disparate of formalists (from Russian formalists to the so-called “morphological” art critical formalists) have stressed form’s removal from everyday communicative interaction. It would certainly be contentious to claim that any kind of *ordinary* (day to day or habitual) communication can be read into formalism. “Limited” communication is here intended to acknowledge the more general idea of artwork as link—the artwork as a thing made by someone to have a particular structure, which in turn would give rise to a related reaction in someone else who encountered that thing. I retain the word for this process because, as will be seen, the claim to “communication” of some special sort is one explicitly made in theory and developed in practice by a number of formalist writers. In Prown’s particular variant on this, it is worth noting, he drew on Jan Mukařovský to suggest that for formal analysis the artwork acts as an “artistic sign” rather than a “communicative sign”—the artifact does not “communicate information outside of itself,” but instead “illuminate[s] beliefs embodied within the object itself.”
- <sup>5</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park, Il.: Dalkey, 1990), 46.
- <sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 138-39.
- <sup>7</sup> Sophisticated recent books that have touched on aspects of formalism in the visual arts in ways that complicate but ultimately hold to the narrow version of formalism include Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Rachel Teukolsky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Janet Wolff, *Anglomodern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), and Jason Gaiger, *Aesthetics and Painting* (London, 2008). See also Gene Bell-Villada, *Art for*

*Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); and Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), for more polemical versions of the narrow use. Aspects of the broad view I describe here, conversely, are interestingly brought out in Mark Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 122. This is not to say that this view is universally criticized. For a recent analysis of the history and merits of something like this view, based on the idea that formalism is “the claim that the essence of any art resides in relationships of elements within an artistic work itself, not in relationships to anything outside the work...it is the study of structure rather than meaning,” see Patrick McCreeless, “Formalism, Fair and Foul,” *nonsite* 8 (January 20, 2013). In terms of the present essay, this neglects the way that structure is characteristically treated as the most reliable way to get at meaning.

<sup>9</sup> For an argument that Russian formalism and its continuation in French theory constitute a “good” variety in a sense relevant to visual art, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Formalism and Structuralism,” in Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). A considered discussion of Adorno and formalism can be found in, among many places, Espen Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For brief discussions of more recent phenomenological, materialist, and “neo-formalist” approaches in art history and criticism and their occasional allegiance to some notion of “form,” see David Peters Corbett, “Visual Culture and the History of Art,” in *Dealing with the Visual: Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Culture*, ed., Caroline van Eck and Edward Winters (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Keith Moxey, “Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7 (2008): 131-146.

<sup>10</sup> T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 165.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Neer, “Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Autumn 2005): 26.

<sup>12</sup> All three, in other words, continued to attack a caricatured “pure” aesthetic or “manifest formalism.” For key statements on style, see Arthur Danto, “Metaphor, Expression, and Style,” in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nelson Goodman, “The Status of Style,” in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks: Hackett, 1978); Richard Wollheim, “Style in Painting,” in Caroline van Eck, James McAllister, and Renee van de Vall, eds., *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 37-49. For their narrow views of formalism, see Nelson Goodman, “The Pure in Art,” in *Ways of Worldmaking*; Richard Wollheim, “On Formalism and Pictorial Organization,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (Spring 2001): 127-137; *Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Daniel Herwitz and Michael Kelly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 164.

<sup>13</sup> Noël Carroll, “Formalism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed., Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Noël Carroll, “Film Form: An Argument for a Functional Theory of Style in the Individual Film,” *Style* 32 (Fall 1998): 358-401.

<sup>15</sup> See Carroll, “Film Form.” The “functional” view of form, based on the realization of the purpose of the artwork, is contrasted directly with the other in Noël Carroll, “Art and Form,” in *Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Danto in *Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, 1981), 162; Roger Fry, “Post Impressionism” (1911), in *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago, 1996), 101. The idea lives on in such unexpected places as the attempt by V.S. Ramachandran to give

neuroscientific weight to something like this view of art on the basis of “peak shift,” see John Hyman, “Art and Neuroscience,” in *Beyond Mimesis: Representation in Art and Science*, ed. Roman Frigg and Matthew C. Hunter (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 245-54.

<sup>18</sup>. Paul de Man, “The Dead End of Formalist Criticism,” in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 231-32.

<sup>19</sup>. See for example Rosalind Krauss, “A View of Modernism,” in *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 117-21, 126-28.

<sup>20</sup>. Though note for now de Man’s comment, after having decided that a Shakespeare line opens on to an “indefinite number” of possible experiences, that “the ‘meaning’ of the metaphor is that it does not ‘mean’ in any definite manner” (235). In the semiotic variant of the process that I describe below, this might itself be taken up as an exemplary formal analysis of the work—a secure understanding of the work’s operation on the basis of which higher interpretation (historical or otherwise) can proceed. This correlates with the position de Man later in the essay attributed to Roland Barthes, who around the same moment wrote that “the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism” (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972], 112). In literary studies “new formalism” has been the name for the legacy and uptake of this position. For an excellent critical discussion of this legacy, see Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82 (Summer 2015): 385-405, and for another attempted turn away from the desire to make form a stepping stone to history, Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>21</sup>. Wassily Kandinsky, “Content and Form” [1910-1911], in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed., Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Da Capo, 1982), 87.

<sup>22</sup>. Roger Fry, “Sensibility Versus Mechanism,” *The Listener* 7 (April 6, 1932): 498.

<sup>23</sup>. David Summers, “‘Form’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 372-406, and for this example, David Summers, “Form and Gender,” *New Literary History* 24 (Spring 1993): 244.

<sup>24</sup>. Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics”: 388-92. Summers’ alternative, what might be thought of as an alternative to formalism as outlined throughout this essay, was a kind of “functionalist” art history. “Functionalist art history would not proceed from the work “essentially” understood in any way to context; rather it would be based on the assumption that works of art are radically cultural or historical and that they are therefore always meaningful in the circumstances in which they are made and that they continue to be meaningful in new circumstances in which they survive” (393-94).

<sup>25</sup>. In the hands of the popularisers of the early to mid-twentieth century, this subsuming of multiple historical and theoretical “justifications” along with the free oscillation between multiple claims to effects was entirely standard. To give just one such formulation: “The artist is a spirit grappling with life; his works are the records of his experiences, how things looked to him, what things meant to him, his vision of reality...[In front of the artwork] we feel that we are in contact with reality, and derive a deep unconscious satisfaction from that reality...In every painting so conceived we are conscious of a paradox. We feel that we are in contact with something that is at the same time both personal and impersonal, both universal and particular...The value of such work does not consist in the accuracy with which natural facts or scenes are represented, but in the power of the work to symbolize an idea, to communicate a state of mind”; Margaret Bulley, *A Simple Guide to Pictures and Painting* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 19, 22-23.

<sup>26</sup>. For discussion of these three in relation to formalism, see Christopher Green, “Expression and Decoration,” in *Art in France, 1900-1940* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), Whitney Davis, “The Stylistic Succession,” in *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), and Margaret Iverson and Stephen Melville, “What the Formalist Knows,” in *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,



2010). The possibility that “affect” is the means of transfer on which formalism modelled itself has received a detailed evaluation in Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

27. For Fry and Denis, see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For Fry and Berenson, see Caroline Elam “Roger Fry and Early Italian Art,” in *Art Made Modern*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Merrell, 1999), 88-98. For a note on Fry’s prolonged interest in Wölfflin, see Anon, “Heinrich Wölfflin,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 84 (June 1944): 133. Fry’s references to Tolstoy were made in essays of 1909 and 1920, in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 18-19, 193-94.

28. This shifting is epitomized in, for instance, Fry, *Vision and Design*, 193-94.

29. Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics”: 373, and for the original discussion of “interpretative vision,” Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 61.

30. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 15. See also David Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics,” and David Summers, “Representation,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, second edition, ed., Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

31. See Summers, “Representation,” 9-13; Summers, *Real Spaces*, p28-36.

32. Quoted in Summers, “Representation,” 12.

33. Summers, “Representation,” 14.

34. Summers, *Real Spaces*, 32.

35. See Whitney Davis, “What is Formalism?,” in *A General Theory of Visual Culture*; Whitney Davis, “What is Post-Formalism?,” *nonsite.org* 7 (October 11, 2012), <http://nonsite.org/article/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte>; Whitney Davis, “Formalism as Art History,” in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, second edition, ed., Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

36. Davis, “Formalism as Art History.”

37. Davis, “Formalism as Art History.” For extended discussion of these terms, see Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*.

38. Davis, “Formalism as Art History.”

39. Davis, “Formalism as Art History.”

40. Michael Baxandall, “The Language of Art History,” *New Literary History* 10 (Spring 1979): 453-465 (later reprinted in shortened version as “The Language of Art Criticism,” in *The Language of Art History*, ed., Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge, 1992)); Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On The Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, 1985), especially 1-11.

41. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6.

42. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6.

43. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6.

44. Baxandall, “The Language of Art History”: 461-465; Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 5-11, 135-37.

45. Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca* (London: Phaidon, 1951), 13, quoted in Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 5.
46. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 5.
47. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 7.
48. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 7.
49. Christopher Green, “Bernard Berenson and Roger Fry: Connoisseurship and Modernism” (unpublished paper, 1998). For a highly condensed statement, see Green, ed. *Art Made Modern*, 18-19.
50. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Peter and Linda Murray (New York: Phaidon, 1968), 89-91. (As discussed in Baxandall, “The Language of Art History”: 458-459)
51. Wölfflin, *Classic Art*, 91.
52. For an extended discussion of this issue see section two of Sam Rose, “Close Looking and Conviction,” *Art History* (forthcoming).
53. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 41-42
54. In the former case many have subscribed to a way of thinking that suggests that works are not narrowly intended, where this would mean causally related to a separable mental state, but are things that are *done*, commensurate with the action that the work of art is. Taking intention in this broader sense of a meant action, intention is not separable from the work’s meaning: it would make no sense to say that one has understood just one or the other; or put another way, the artist doesn’t intend something *in* or *by* or *through* the work, they just intend the work. A foundational text in relation to art and literary criticism here is Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), though for an alternative version and extended defence, including its relation to Michael Fried’s writing, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Taken one way, the Baxandallian account presented here might not meet up to this standard—if one infers from current form to past intention, as if the former were a sign for something external to the work. And certainly semiotic accounts do not, assuming exactly this kind of mediated relation (for many adherents of semiotics, to paint with an overly broad brush, this means that intention is best avoided, despite their regular use of rhetorical constructions that narrate interpretations as if they *are* straightforward presentations of artistic intent). But noting that for Baxandall intention is no longer equated with mental states, but instead is commensurate with the set of actions that constitute the visually intuited purposefulness of the work, one can see the potential compatibility. For more on overlaps between such apparently conflicting positions—including humanist intentionalism, “new formalism,” Object Oriented Ontology, and “new materialism”—see Macpherson, “A Little Formalism.”
55. For the artistic thematization of intentionality, for instance, see the chapter on Charles Ray in Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). I give two examples of the latter in closing, below.
56. This can be seen in any of Bell’s extended critical-historical texts, for instance Clive Bell, *An Account of French Painting* (London: Harcourt, Brace, 1931).
57. T.J. Clark, “More Theses on Feuerbach,” *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008): 7.
58. Clark, “More Theses on Feuerbach”: 7, where he cites Edward Snow, *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children’s Games* (New York: North Point, 1997).
59. For example, Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 46. Preziosi’s aim in the surrounding pages is to critique the directness assumption, but the more basic point here is that formalist method inevitably

involves *active* construction (dealing with inferred actions and agents), however much it might seem to discount the role of active construction by modelling its viewers as “passive reader[s] and consumer[s] of images.”

<sup>60.</sup> For a recent argument in this vein, see Jas Elsner, “Art History as Ekphrasis,” *Art History* 33 (February 2010): 10-27.

<sup>61.</sup> Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, 119.

<sup>62.</sup> Allan Langdale, “Interviews with Michael Baxandall,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 1 (December 2009): 20, 22. For more on Baxandall and Fry, see Michael Baxandall, *Substance, Sensation, and Perception*, interview by Richard Candida Smith (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998), 2, 21, 95, 109-12.

<sup>63.</sup> Baxandall of course understood the distance between the two, adding that Wollheim’s book had a far more advanced conceptual framework; Baxandall, *Substance, Sensation, and Perception*, 111-12.

<sup>64.</sup> For connoisseurship, see Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 10. For one of Wollheim’s final statements on the rejection of formalism, see Richard Wollheim, “On Formalism and Pictorial Organization,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (Spring 2001): 127-37.

<sup>65.</sup> In case it seems like formalism has come to encompass more or less every option for art history, I should note here that priorities and methodologies that do not require formalist thinking are many and various, with some prefigured in Summers’ idea of a “functionalist” art history (see note 24 above). To give a few examples, bearing in mind that these are by no means mutually exclusive: the deep attention to form, system, and structure that finally abandons the use of “intuitive inference” to past vision, or relies on principles of seriatinal analysis as a means by which to avoid the assumptions of interpretative vision (Inge Hinterwaldner, David Summers); the placing of agency and meaning outside of the formalist purview, be it in material, the basic power of the visual, or in networks that displace human actors (Alfred Gell, W.J.T. Mitchell, Bruno Latour); histories of objects as they move between times and cultures, uses, and ways of seeing (Finbarr Barry Flood); the way that artworks even within narrower context of origin and use might slip in and out of visualities, just as they help constitute and re or deconstitute these (Whitney Davis); the more general ways that artworks resist reduction to their original temporal contexts, or embody forms of temporality far removed from individual creators (Keith Moxey, Christopher Wood); the transformation of human-object relations, or histories of the use and meaning of objects and images, within longer cultural and intellectual histories, as well as the history of interactions between theory and practice that these involve (Hans Belting, Horst Bredekamp).

<sup>66.</sup> Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>67.</sup> Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 12, 215.

<sup>68.</sup> For a start on this point see Wollheim, “On Formalism and Pictorial Organization”: 133-5. In terms of the many *possible* legacies of Russian formalism, this kind of work in art history can be productively contrasted with the recent texts in note 20 above, though even in literary studies the question of the rigour and commensurability of formalist analyses is open to debate. As Sandra Macpherson puts the negative case, after surveying various slippages in a recent discussion of form and genre, “this lack of clarity might be a peculiar feature of our own discipline—odd given that form is arguably the *only* expertise our discipline can claim to possess.” Macpherson, “A Little Formalism”: 388.

<sup>69.</sup> Franco Moretti, “Graphs Maps Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History—II,” *New Left Review* 26 (March/April 2004): 97. Moretti is actually a telling exception here. His notion of “distant reading” has attempted to shift analysis into the realm of the quantitative, making use of teams of researchers and information processing tools that search thousands of books rather than the few that close readings aim to engage. Though “distant reading” and its

analogues has gained some popularity in recent years, it is the exception that proves the rule. Its still-marginal status dramatizes the dominance in the humanities of individually investigated case-based studies of particular works or small groups of works. It is also worth noting that Moretti still keeps to the strategy of inference, in the case of “Graphs, Maps, Trees” moving from the rise of free indirect style, via its tension between partial freedom of the individual and the impersonal narrative stance, to the problem of modern socialization.

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