



## Classical Abstraction versus Romantic Abstraction: Towards a Shift in Consciousness

Dr. Daniel Shorkend

Technion Institute of Technology

### ABSTRACT

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In this brief essay, I outline the two fundamental strands of art: The Classical and the Romantic. I illustrate these notions with key examples culled from the history of art. I argue that an extreme of either side propels art forward, but this is opposed to the larger stream of life in which balance and a middle road is called for. I then argue that through consciousness of art (...or science...etc.) and of the aesthetic, a second-order reflective stance is possible which, together with a moral sensibility, evolves a consciousness that may improve the quality of life for individuals and collectively.

### KEYWORDS:

Classical, Romantic, morality, aesthetic, consciousness

### INTRODUCTION

Continuing the mimetic tradition of “making a likeness”, abstract art is “about something”. In both representational and abstract arts, one pole of the continuum is geometric, and the other pole is expressive or perhaps to be more precise, one pole is Classical and the other Romantic. In this essay, I will argue that both these extremities meet in the finest exponents of them. In this regard I refer to the work of Reinhardt; Malevich; Picasso’s Cubism; Newman; Rothko; De Kooning, Matisse, and Kandinsky. It will then be argued that to “go to the extreme” may be as fruitful in art as it is to integrate and be “in the middle”. The upshot is that these artists exemplify novelties that prove as such. In this sense it would appear that there is a divide between art and life. This is so, because in art an extreme may be a wonderful solution, but in life moderation – an interdisciplinary overlap or integration – is called for, that is the mingling of the Classical and Romantic spirit. Yet, curiously, it is because of this divide or schism between art and life that there is consciousness itself.

To briefly define the “Classical” and the “Romantic”, the former is precise, geometric abstraction, not distorted, a simple

correspondence (i.e. the counterpart of Realism, naturalism and Classical Greece and the High Renaissance) and in abstraction, perhaps one of the greatest exponents were Reinhardt, Picasso’s Cubism, Malevich and Newman; while the latter is often wild, chaotic, expressive, often distorted and symbolic (i.e. the counterpart of expressionism; Fauvism, Baroque art and in the West, Christian art of the Middle ages as well as paleolithic art) and in abstraction, perhaps the greatest exponents were Rothko, De Kooning, Matisse and Kandinsky.

#### i) *The four Classical*

Reinhardt’s “art as art” polemic and his sustained creations – works of scintillating beauty and purity in the eschewing all reference to the material world and a portal to a precise, clinical, and simple geometric configuration in muted, subtle nuances of color, some, simple shades of black. In these geometric configurations, the emotional is staid, linear precision and brush mark is heightened in their extreme accuracy and patience articulates order, control, and a sense of a singular true solution. Picasso’s Cubism (though one cannot forget Braque’s role) abstracts empirical reality into geometric cubes or rectangles. The color range is limited and the organic becomes mechanical, mathematical – one of measure and limit. Picasso thought to fragment reality in order to understand it and then reconstitute it into a singular form, never thus losing a grip on reality, that is to say, the empirical.

Yet there was one who did move away from reality: Malevich. Malevich’s non-objectivism or Suprematism, a form of

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Daniel Shorkend*

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simplifying to basic symbols cast in paint on canvas. Malevich's work is a detour into another dimension, where squares and circles become emblems, devices to teach people to think beyond literal meanings. It is a Classical world of order, where meaning is such that the symbol embodies sense.

Newman was able to create formal coherence that referred to the mystical through the sheer clarity of design in formal arrangement and his development of the famous "zip" or line of force which in its verticality sharply defined, bound and determined formal coherence which in turn corresponds to metaphysical content. Careful color consideration and technical savvy combined to create images of powerful presence, a Classical ode akin to an Egyptian sculpture of a god cast in rigid stone.

These examples demonstrate the formal order that characterizes the Classical where elements such as measured proportion; considered scale and format; minimal texture and the lack of jarring lines predominate; rather there is either realistic accuracy or, as in the above cases, abstraction that can be defined as composed, thoughtful and can be reduced to parts.

The common thread is that the Classical embodies formal clarity in design and meaning. It is reductive, analytical and pares down meaning to a singular truth or answer, one that is finite and measured. Yet it can still refer to the metaphysical in its very finitude and precision.

### *ii) The four Romantic*

Rothko's paintings are alive with vibrating, shimmering colors. Colors are mixed and only loosely defined as formal shapes. The scale is large like the patterns of sea against sky. Though the lines are soft while the energetic brushwork is visible, they invite meditation though this is catalyzed through emotive processes. In the presence of the work, one may be able to perceive the tragic, a sense of loss and nostalgia.

De Kooning's paintings are wild, aggressive, even violent. His use of color is excessive, his lines are haphazard and spontaneous, and his canvases are large and energetic. His work is impulsive, unconsidered, chaotic and exuberant. Yet he sustained his approach, so it is elevated to that of a style, which is peculiarly Romantic in definition.

Matisse, however, is soft and gentle. Yet in its organic pattern-making, in its colorful array of lines and dots neatly arranged, it is one of passion, rather than geometric. In some examples, his output is an excessive use of one color, say red amidst dabs and flurries of other colors. It is never a purist Reinhardt, it only alludes to this, and yet strays into wild abandon and gaiety.

Kandinsky was perhaps the pioneer of Modern Romantic abstraction. His oeuvre reveals a remnant of the empirical world only translated into essential features, into basic configurations with an organic flair – lines and colors that dart here and there, traces of the empirical, yet forever moving and bound by neither

the heavens nor the earth. His paintings are whimsical, but not trivial; emotional yet glued by connective tissue, that is, a sensitive composition neither premediated nor without some cohesion. It is not, however rigid and solid as such.

The common thread is that the Romantic spirit in contradistinction to that of the Classical evokes the sublime, the formless, the unquantifiable and is more closely associated with the passions than the intellectual, the empirical or pure geometric abstraction.

### *iii) Formal extremism*

The examples cited above are perhaps one of the most consequential exponents of these said traditions and their seminal influence defines not just their individual proclivity or style, but the cultural Zeitgeist of a particular time and place. In this sense, such artists carve out and form a certain perception and conception of the world. In either the Romantic or Classic strain, it is the formal extremism to one or the other that serves to etch out these artists as either one or the other or rather as being defined in such terms.

It is precisely because of such extreme positions that rigorous definitions are found. In the purity of being predominantly if not solely one or the other that their formal excellence (and thence content) is enhanced and communicated. It is the particularly of the excess of Baroque and Rococo that distinguish it from Minimalism or the International style. It is the ruthless Fauvist wildness that distinguish it from centuries of Mimetic naturalism or the prehistoric simplicity of design that distinguish it from the complexity of realism, the latter a rather late manifestation. It is the expressiveness of say a Kirchner or Rouault or Soutine that is so very different from the considered approach of Cezanne; Monet or Mondrian. Of course, I am not suggesting that the whole history of art can be divided into artists being of either one tributary or the other. It is a continuum or intertwined, only that there are extremes and it is these extremes that allow for at least a loose definition of the narrative of art in such terms. It is also such extremes that encourage formal creativity and motivate evolution in the arts.

### *iv) Life is balance*

While extremism may develop the arts, in life the reality is different. Art is simply a subset of life. For most it does not even exist. Such a consideration implies the following: i) Intellect and passions are not in conflict, ii) organic and geometric co-exist, iii) the inter and multidisciplinary are encouraged, iv) there are not always ultimate and singular solution but multiple answers and methods and v) neither hierarchical dominance nor chaotic individualism.

It may be, however that extreme focus on one pole needs to be met with an extreme in the other direction to restore balance. The state desired however is a middle ground – neither too

much force nor too little. These ideals, if one can call them that need not apply to art, though of course there is an ethics to art-making as well, that is, murder or theft could not be a sane option even in the context of art. In this sense, art is indeed a subset of life where a biological balance leads to health and growth, just as moral rectitude does. Only in art there is some leeway and flexible where the extreme may be an artistic good. In the case of formal transformations to elicit otherwise unknown content, it may indeed be very good.

Balance implies that rights go with responsibilities; power with compassion; strength with humility; beauty with victory and knowledge with speech. It means that no-one is dominant, and the parts fit into a holistic picture. Even the extreme elements are equalized by the whole, neutralized by the weight not of compliance and mediocracy, but my moral rectitude and a more moral and astute civilization as a whole.

v) *Consciousness and a new world*

The separation of art and life – art as a subset of life – is a necessary panacea against the erosion of such a boundary condition and the fantastical and dangerous equating of art and life, wherein a certain judgement is lost, a certain second-order reflective awareness is lost or never mind lost, there is no knowledge of the very definition of either art or life, definitions sinking into the abyss, the reign of chaos.

Thus, once a separation is made, one can treat art as both a subject and an object, as a discipline. How then within its formal language it might then join again with life and transform it, is not at all clear, but culturally design elements of art permeate the cultural landscape, making an indelible mark in life – it defines our fashions; our environments; our insatiable need for tools and technologies and products; it all manner of everyday life – but also and importantly as fine art, the white cube: the gallery and the museum. It is found in the studio, but perhaps as an aspect of play in all domains: in medical theatres; in courtrooms, in the stadium, in the bedroom. Yet, still art is but a sub set to life and while one can make these associations

ever widening the embrace of art, it is still poised at its edge in the form of the Mona Lisa and the Vatican, in the great wall of China and the western wall. It is an extreme assertion in the face of the stream of life. Hobbyists and Sunday painters are not making art, though they too drink of its luscious and reviving waters. For art defines the aesthetic of a given age, howsoever history in retrospect shall define and document bygone eras.

Paradoxically, then, it is the split in consciousness between life itself, which escapes any one discipline and art, defined as fine art or even more radically as encompassing an everyday aesthetic, that gives rise to a higher or new state of consciousness: the ability to reflect on life and create new things in response to it. My claim is that the more people that can accomplish this, the more likely is it for a new consciousness to emerge and a new aesthetic to emerge.

What might be the nature of this new world through collective higher consciousness? To be conscious implies to be aware of something, that is to say, something other, beyond self. This enables one to describe, to create (or make), to symbolize and to experiment. This aligned with a moral sense – a sensitivity towards the other – produces a rectified world. Only at this current moment, the great majority have not made the first step – the awareness of art. And even most who may know of art (...or science etc.), have not made another crucial step: moral fortitude. The situation, in fact, appears bleak.

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