

# The Inauguration of Formalism: Aestheticism and the Productive Opacity Principle

---

MICHALLE GAL

**Abstract:** This essay presents the Aestheticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the foundational movement of modernist-formalist aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main principle of this movement is what I denominate “productive opacity”. Aestheticism has not been recognized as a philosophical aesthetic theory. However, its definition of artwork as an exclusive kind of form—a deep, opaque form—is among the most precise ever given in the discipline. This essay offers an interpretation of aestheticism as a formalist theory, referred to here as “deep formalism”, focusing on the thinking of leading aestheticists, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and James Whistler. These three thinkers defined artwork as a form saturated with an inextricable content, viz. opaque form.

*Keywords:* Aestheticism, formalism, form, modernism, mimesis, opacity

Introducing Aestheticism with a new, broad concept of productive opacity, I show that the aestheticist definition of art is actually of an opaque symbol, whose nature is syntactic not semantic, which *produces* referents rather than reflecting them. This argument touches upon other central aestheticist concepts, such as art’s autonomy, its criticism, the uniqueness of each medium, the completeness of the artwork, and musicality.

There is much debate about who should be considered the founder of modernist painting. Among the formalists, Roger Fry gave the title to Paul Cézanne, and Clement Greenberg gave it to Édouard Manet. Considering opacity in painting, I argue that James M. Whistler should be considered the founder. Already in 1877 Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (painted in 1875) was derogatively described by *Punch* magazine as “a tract of mud; above, all fog; below, all inky flood; For subject—it had none” (Merill 36). By contrast, Walter Pater, the progenitor of British aestheticism, called this artistic phenomenon *favorably* a “suppression or vagueness of mere subject”, and claimed that “art is always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, and to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject...the ideal examples of poetry and painting being those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together” (Pater, *Essays* 51).

Four methods of suppression of the subject to gain opacity can be found in Whistler’s work: the dissolution of represented objects; the suspension of the production of the painting after experiencing the depicted, letting its residual memory subside; the flattening of the picture; and using musical titles for paintings. Whistler strove to omit the extra-artistic object or referent from his work and aimed for ontologically independent art, which is autonomous and free. I argue that the “productive opacity” of art realizes this aim, an opacity which aestheticists denominated “the essence of art”.

## 1. Opacity of Visual Arts

Rather than history of art, this paper’s argument belongs to the aesthetics and philosophy of art, and specifically on a historicized theory of aesthetics. Besides being a painter, Whistler was a

member of a philosophical movement that both proposed aesthetic modernist ideas and supported burgeoning modernist art—aestheticism and early formalism in particular. Moreover, Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* was more than a representation of an emerging aesthetic theory: its opaque flatness was a focal point of an aesthetic zeitgeist, which marked a philosophical turn that inaugurated modernist aesthetics—the aestheticist-formalist turn. Whistler insisted in his 1890 *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* that to view art, one should *look at* the picture as opposed to *looking through* it, namely, to respect its opacity. Whistler believed that art was meant to invite the viewer to cope with its substance rather than searching for pre-existing or preconceived extra-artistic referents.

The significance of this belief cannot be overstated, and I will return to it below. The shift from mimesis to aesthetic modernism was in some respect representative of art's resistance to the traditional relations between symbols and their referents. The advent of opacity was the epitome of an aesthetic theory of artistic formalist symbolism that I call "deep formalism", the main principle of which is "productive opacity".<sup>1</sup> This is a definitive condition of the artwork, classifying it as a symbol whose nature is syntactic rather than semantic. Following the aestheticist stance, I consider artwork as an opaque symbol that is based on a form which is saturated with content—a content that cannot be extracted from it—*producing* referents rather than *reflecting* them. The idea of opacity that I present here is linked with the unique relations between form and content in art. While 'transparent symbol' refers to external, preconceived content, opaque artwork contains its content so that it can be grasped only as dwelling in the artistic medium and given in its form. In other words, the artwork is not about its content, but the content is part of its appearance. Moreover, this kind of opacity allows the productivity of artwork, which Oscar Wilde, a prominent aestheticist, calls "a conversion of facts into effect" ("The Truth of Masks" 1073). The analysis of artwork's productivity, as opposed to reflectivity, is subsequently borrowed and emphasized by formalists. Fry calls reflective-transparent art a kind of "art of associated ideas" and contrasts it with the language of forms which "communicates a new and otherwise unattainable experience" (*Vision and Design*, 169). Clive Bell categorizes reflective-referential art as "descriptive", contrasting it with real art that "transports us from a world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation" (27).

Aestheticism included in the definition of art in the definition of art this artistic condition—the special fusion between form and content of the artwork. In doing so, aestheticism defied both the magisterial mimetic-realistic and the conceptual paradigmatic models of art. When the artistic symbol is sealed to pre-existing referents, it is at liberty to produce new ones. "Meaning" is thus newly produced by an arrangement of elements. The meaning of *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, which was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877 together with other three *Nocturnes*, three *Arrangements*, and one *Harmony*, is not constructed in a referential relationship with preconceived objects or ideas. The new model of art motivated one of the foremost theoreticians of art in the European 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the representative of the contemporary mimetic (actually conceptualist-mimetic) model of art, John Ruskin to write a disapproving review of the exhibition. Ruskin undermines the identification of the painting as a work of art, and Whistler as an artist:

For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay (owner and curator) ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of willful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of the Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face (Quoted in Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 1).

There is a clear similarity between Whistler's "flinging of a pot of paint" and Jackson Pollock's drip style painting. However, about 70 years after Ruskin's critique of Whistler was published, Pollock's opaque drippings received a devoted theoretical support by Clement Greenberg, one

of the foremost theoreticians of late-formalism and modernism in aesthetics. In 1910, Fry anticipated that by the end of the modernist era, art would become “a purely abstract language of form – a visual music” (*Vision and Design*, 167). Indeed, Pollock’s opaque drippings, as well as the work of his Abstract Expressionist peers, were accepted by the contemporary art world. Furthermore, opaque flatness was indicated by Greenberg to be the essence of the medium of painting, thus the highest accomplishment of visual art.

The concept of “opacity”, rather than “abstraction”, was carefully chosen to describe this trend. I argue that artistic abstraction, despite being crucial to art’s understanding of itself, mainly represented specific movements of art. However, opacity characterizes – or should characterize – art in general, given that art’s medium is of significance by itself and thereby its affordance is rich. Art is not as transparent as communicative media such as journalism, scientific research, or advertisement. Moreover, opacity is important to the autonomy of each artform. As Greenberg notes in his 1940 “Towards a Newer Laocoon”: “to restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts, the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically” (1: 32).

Greenberg’s imperative of opacity was expressed in the last stage of modernism, the foundations of which were laid by the aestheticists. Greenberg, like Fry and others before him, echoed the aestheticists’ propositions in numerous essays, sometimes nearly verbatim—at times with no explicit credit given to them. In “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, Greenberg reiterates Pater’s request for the musicality of painting to endow painting with the opacity that music has been fortunate to enjoy while the other arts were committed to mimetic transparency. Both Pater and Greenberg refer to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* from 1766 as introducing the foundations of modernist aesthetics. But even before Greenberg published his “Laocoon”, Fry attributed musicality to the opaque nature of Post-Impressionist paintings. This terminology was borrowed from Pater, who used it to refer to the opaque trait of the language of music. The content of music is “nothing without the form,” since in it “form, the handling, penetrates the matter” (86). Whistler’s decision to use musical terms to title his paintings is clear in light of the link between musicality and opacity. His aim was to draw viewers’ focus to the form, which in its turn would produce new meanings and referents. To the question asked in an 1878 interview “Why should not I call my works ‘symphonies,’ ‘arrangements,’ ‘harmonies,’ and ‘nocturnes?’” he answers:

As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour... The great musicians knew this. Beethoven and the rest wrote music—simply music; symphony in this key, concerto or sonata in that. On F or G they constructed celestial harmonies—as harmonies—as combinations, evolved from the chords of F or G and their minor correlatives.... Art should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it; and that is why I insist on calling my works “arrangements” and “harmonies.” (126-7)

Whistler applied this view to the very famous, relatively mimetic portrait of his mother, “Arrangement in Grey and Black,” clarifying that “to me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?” (127).

## 2. Opacity of Linguistic Arts

Although 19<sup>th</sup>-century British Aestheticism was the foundational movement in modernist-formalist philosophy of art, it has not been sufficiently accounted for within aesthetics. Other disciplines, mainly English Studies, have a rich literature on aestheticism. Angela Leighton provides one of the major comprehensive studies regarding the concept of form throughout the aestheticist and early modernist periods of poetry and literary arts.<sup>2</sup> An earlier example is Jonathan Freedman’s

presentation of the dialectical relationship between the aestheticist stance and the social-economic sphere.<sup>3</sup> These projects address the historical and social aspects of the Aestheticist movement rather than its philosophical implications and motivations. They propose an approach to the subject that is substantially different from my own, which is motivated by concerns that go beyond literature, instead taking an analytic-philosophical approach. Literary presentations of aestheticism tend to see it as a cultural movement evolving in a cultural context. By contrast, the analytic-philosophical approach to aestheticism attempts to formulate an aestheticist *ontological* definition of art.

The aestheticist theory has not been systematically presented by a philosophical-analytic method. The aestheticist account of the unique structure of artwork (whether as an opaque symbol or deep form whose content is not extractable) is among the most precise ever given within aesthetics. This account proffers an array of ideas informing the debate about artwork.

Furthermore, the Aestheticist philosophy of art provided the source and inspiration for early soft British (or even European) Formalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of Fry and Bell, and the late extreme American Formalism in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Monroe Beardsley, for example. As it manifests in philosophical articles poetic essays, art criticisms, reviews, interviews, letters, and artworks, I argue that the proper status of Aestheticism has not been recognized.

As I mentioned above, the focus of this paper is on what I consider to be Aestheticism's main claim: formulating the relations between form and content in the artwork which renders it opaque, but productive. This argument pertains to other central arguments and concepts: art's autonomy, art's formalist criticism and judgment, the uniqueness of each medium, the internal completeness of the artwork, and musicality. Attaching the broad concept of the *opaque productive symbol* to aestheticism might help re-introduce it to current discourse about aesthetics. This current discourse is taking a visual turn in culture and theory, bringing closure to the linguistic age during which the artistic medium is at risk of being subsumed by philosophy. Art physicality, to which Greenberg pointed, can be brought back to the fore, given that the visual sphere is re-considered as the right one for analyzing us and our culture.

Reintroducing Aestheticism into the philosophical discourse is plausible for two reasons. First, it allows us to revisit the history of modernist aesthetics, tracking anew its starting point as well as the progressive evolution of its main ideas. It enables us to recognize the dynamic-dialectic character of the aestheticist, or deep formalist, theory and practice. This involves laying down the formalist understanding of the power of the artwork as a significant form, as well as the force of the artwork's composition, which is unique to the discipline of art. While formalist theories proceeded towards purism with regard to the concept of artistic form, the *symbolist--formalist* theory of aestheticism is more elaborate. Its concept of form emanates from a dialectical characterization of the appearance of the artwork. According to symbolist-formalist theory, art is both opaque and productive. Visual and nonvisual artistic appearance is defined by aestheticism as symbolically rich, yet non-referential, and not aimed at literal interpretation. In other words, the depth of appearance is not dependent on aboutness, but rather on the saturation of the form with what Wilde calls "latent elements of culture". The artwork's form is saturated with content but is *not* about content or referring to it. Thus, the second aim of reintroducing aestheticism to the aesthetic discourse is its special ability to capture the essence of art, and its ability to describe art as form saturated with un-extractable content, as deep form.

The first aestheticist to analyze the unique relationship between form and subject matter which creates art's opacity, both in visual and non-visual arts, was Pater. He was also the first among the aestheticists to argue that music is the paradigmatic art in that respect, and to apply musicality to all of the arts. Pater famously suggested that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," because "in its consummate moments the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; they inhere in and completely saturate each

other" (*Essays* 53). Thus, Pater presents music as the epitome of productive opacity. Realizing the artistic ideal of total identification of form and content, the effect of music is not a corollary of transparency; rather, it is the power of composition. Musicality applies to both visual and non-visual arts. Even the non-material elements of visual artwork, like thoughts and ideas, are integral to its *visible* appearance: "It is the drawing, the design projected from that peculiar pictorial temperament in which all things whatever, all poetry, all ideas however abstract or obscure, float up as visible scene or image" (49). Accordingly, in his *Aesthetic Poetry*, Pater stresses the opaque sensuality of non-visual (non-sensual) arts, like poetry. Pater draws a distinction between mimetic-semantic poetry and lyric-aesthetic poetry, which holds a formal depth: poetry, for instance, that employs productive opacity, that does not lend itself to interpretation but to evocation. "The ideal types of poetry," he argues:

are those in which this distinction [between form and subject] is reduced to its minimum, and the very perfection of such poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding. (52, emphasis added)

While many aesthetic theories present language's semanticity or intentionality as a primary constituent of literal artwork, aestheticism favors the syntacticity of the artwork, which Wilde called the "grammar of art" ("each art has its grammar and its materials", *Complete Works* 1054) and which the formalists called the "language of forms". Aestheticism proposes the structure of literal work as its main trait, "in literary as in all other art, structure is all-important," to which meaning is subjugated. Moreover, in the essay "Style" Pater coins the term "architectural conception" of the literary artistic medium as well as phrases such as "the physiognomy of words", and "that latent colour and imagery which language as such carries in it" (Pater, *Essays*, 78). Pater was followed directly by Whistler, and by Wilde, who (in a review of Whistler's *Ten O'clock* lecture) claims that "the poet is the supreme Artist, for he is the master of colour and of form" (quoted. in Whistler 161).

It is therefore apparent that, according to aestheticism, both literal and visual arts aspire to opacity, since their infrastructures are structurally parallel, both having deep form as their definitive core. Literal arts, although their medium is originally semantic, do not establish their depth from distinct preconceived meaning. Rather, meaning is derived from the profundity of structure that lends itself to sensual perception no less than to the intellect.

### 3. Opacity and Autonomy

Pater's theory applies the principle of the amalgamation of content and form, and of opacity, to all of art's media. Moreover, it logically connects this principle to the philosophical-essential differentiation between the different artistic media. Deep form, which is the unifying element of the different arts, is the very element necessitating their essential distinctiveness from one another. This theory of differentiation between the arts is later expounded upon by Wilde in "The English Renaissance of Art". It is further elaborated by later modernists, like Fried and Greenberg, who focus on this subject in much of their writing.<sup>4</sup>

It will be helpful to portray the theoretical mimetic perspective with regard to the form-content distinction, in opposition to the perspective presented by deep-formalist aestheticism. Pater and Ruskin both influenced Wilde while he was at Oxford, though Wilde explicitly followed Pater's aestheticist hypothesis. Ruskin, a conceptual-mimesis scholar, defined visual and nonvisual artwork as a referential symbol whose main element is its motivating idea, or its subject matter—what he often referred to as "thought". He suggests that "painting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing" (*Modern Painters* Part I, Sec. I, Chapter II, Paragraph I). Ruskin goes as far as to claim that visual artwork is composed of thought.

Interestingly, the mimetic definition of art does not necessarily stipulate visual similarity (or ‘iconic similarity’, to some philosophers) as a necessary condition for mimesis. According to the mimetic model, the similarity of the artwork to its symbolized referents is not entirely of the iconic-visual kind. Rather, a correct representation of objects or situations is based on truthful thought, the embodiment of which supplies the compositional elements of the work. A conceptual grasp of reality, viz. the idea, is the founding element of realistic work and iconic imitation of reality. Importance is given here to the cohesive infrastructure which organizes the artwork, validates it, and supplies it with a sense. Ruskin posits that artwork’s visuality necessitates a definite level of transparency and dependence on its preconceived external referents. He argues that the artwork’s merit is defined mainly by its cognitive elements, not its aesthetic qualities:

the picture which has the nobler and more numerous ideas, however awkwardly expressed, is a greater and better picture than that which has the less numerous ideas, however beautifully expressed. No weight, nor mass nor beauty of execution, can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought. (*Lamps* 1-2)

For aestheticism, this argument (which characterizes the artwork as an executed or embodied thought) constitutes a foundational error of the mimetic and conceptual philosophy of art. In *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater posits that:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words in poetry. In this way, the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is a matter of indifference. (*The Renaissance*, 83)<sup>5</sup>

The significance of this argument cannot be overstated. Pater here reveals what aestheticism considers to be the illusion of a preconceived, distinct “thought”, which is reflected through the artwork. This illusion is held by the mimetic-conceptualist model of art. Following Pater, Whistler protests against the viewer’s tendency to endorse transparency; he posits that “people have acquired the habit of looking not *at* the picture but *through* it [Whistler’s emphasis] at some human fact. So we have come to hear of...the picture that is full of thought, and of the panel that merely decorates” (*The Gentle Art*, 137-8). According to what may be called ‘contemporary conceptualist philosophy of art’,<sup>6</sup> at the end of the interpretive process, this thought, which is supposedly distinct, translated, and deciphered, is meant to transfer the beholder “back” into the world of extra-artistic referents.

Pater and the aestheticists consider this view to be a mistake for two reasons. First, the view overlooks the dialectic relations between content and form which are unique to art, and which render it opaque. Aestheticism holds that the content is not only originally welded in the form, but subordinated to the form and senseless without it. The content of art can be conceived only within the remit of its medium. In “The Critic as Artist” and “The Artist”, Wilde characterizes the creative process as emanating from form, and one in which the artist “thinks” directly in a specific medium. This characterization is later used by formalist philosophers of art such as Bell, who classified transparent, “descriptive painting” as non-art, stressing that if realistic form has significance, it is “in its place as part of the design, as an abstract” (Bell, *Art*, 27). The idea that opacity is gained by thinking in the medium itself was also adopted by artists who were theoretically supported by formalism, such as Matisse, who claimed in his 1912 *Notes of a Painter* that “the thought, the idea, must not be considered as separate from the painter’s pictorial means, for the thought is worth no more than its expression by the means” (*Matisse on Art*, 35-6). Matisse’s opposition to transparency is expressed in his criticism of the public who “likes to think of painting as an appendage of literature and therefore wants it to express not general ideas suited to pictorial means, but specifically literary ideas.” (35). His support of the idea of art as productive rather than reflective of pre-existing referents is expressed in the following imperative: “a work of art must carry within itself its complete significance and impose that on the beholder even before he recognizes the subject matter” (38).

The second reason for the aestheticist opposition to the privileged status that Ruskin attributed to thought in artwork is that it renders the artistic medium a mere means. This involves imagining art merely as a vehicle of meaning or thought, and hence replaceable. In contrast, aestheticism defines real art as inherently autonomous. For aestheticists, art is immune to recruitment to external obligations, and created for its own sake.

As the substance of artwork, deep and opaque form enables the self-possession of significance and immunity from recruitment, while transparency is logically bound up with recruitment by extra-artistic forces. The idea that real art is a form saturated with subordinate content entails that it is *un-recruitable* in character and cannot be subject to the public or to government approval. Contrary to transparent art, an opaque artwork cannot serve as propaganda. With this in mind, Rosalind Krauss aimed directly at the formalist's common use of the opaque grid in abstract paintings. Calling the Avant Garde a "myth", Krauss suggests that the modernist is working under the illusionistic spell of opacity. She posits that "[w]hat I have been calling the fiction of the originary status of the picture surface is what art criticism proudly names the opacity of the modernist picture plane", and "only in so terming it, the critic does not think of this opacity as fictitious" (161). Krauss's aim is to ridicule the modernist use of opacity to avoid recruitment. She attributes transparency to grid paintings, adding that "from *our* perspective...there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication" (161, emphasis in original). A representation of the linguistic turn of aesthetics, Krauss's view is a paradigmatic example of the intention to have art subsumed by language and philosophy. This is precisely what formalism is trying to prevent.

The link between opacity and sealing the artwork to extra-artistic commitments is foundational to the attribution of autonomy to real art by formalist-modernist aesthetics. Wilde writes in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" that art is at constant risk of being recruited as a result of the public's "desire to exercise authority over the artists and over works of art" (1096). For aestheticism, exercising authority over art is an attempt to force literal transparency onto it, thereby forcing it to emanate from a distinct subject matter or content and aboutness.<sup>7</sup> In "The Decay of Lying", Wilde calls on art to depart from public interest, an interest which is forced on art as its subject matter. Wilde's suggestion is for artists to assume indifference to subject matter, which will lead to an immunity to recruitment. Apprehension regarding the public's assertion of authority continues to follow formalism. Greenberg, for example, notes that complete opacity provides the immunity that results from art's resistance to extra-artistic efforts to "literalize" it: "the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself" (1:5).

Remarkably, in this text, from 1940, Greenberg repeats Pater's assertion from 1877 that of all arts painting is at the highest risk of becoming literalized.<sup>8</sup> He clarifies that when an artistic medium is endowed with dominance, as literature has been, its characteristic effects become the prototype of other kinds of arts. Consequently, those other arts conceal their essential qualities in favor of an imitation of the effects of the ruling art. Greenberg notes that "a confusion of the arts results, by which the subservient ones are perverted and distorted; they are forced to deny their own nature in an effort to attain the effects of the dominant art" (1:24).<sup>9</sup> Greenberg also echoes Whistler's warning that for the mimeticist theoretician who aspires to the transparency of art: "a picture is more or less a hieroglyph or a symbol of story. Apart from a few technical terms, for the display of which he finds an occasion, the work is considered absolutely from a literary point of view." (Whistler 146). Wilde concurs in an argument from 1882 "The English Renaissance of Art":

the channels by which all noble imaginative work in painting should touch, and do touch, the soul are not those of the truths of life, not metaphysical truths. But that pictorial charm which does not depend on any literary reminiscence for its effect on the one hand, nor is it yet a mere result of communicable technical skill on the other, comes of a certain inventive and creative handling of colour. (*Collected Works*, 16)

Aestheticists and formalists hold that since mimesis is founded on semanticity and referentiality that separates between content and form, the mimetic method leads different arts to self-estrangement. This estrangement is the negative embodiment of aestheticist beliefs.

#### 4. Opacity and Art Criticism

The agenda of art theory and criticism goes beyond a mere tendency of public oppressiveness. It seeks a proper literalization of different arts. This is the main concern of aestheticist philosophical defiance. Aestheticism distinguishes between the ‘interpretational model’ and the ‘aesthetic model’ of criticism. Under the interpretive model, Ruskin argues that the critic ought to require the artist to exhibit the “resources of his mind no less than the dexterity of his fingers,” and the artist should “recommend the spectator to value order in ideas above arrangement in tints” (qtd. in Merrill 292). Whistler notes that on this model, the critic “becomes merely a means of perpetrating something further, and its mission is made a secondary one, even as a means is second to an end” (146). According to Whistler, the interpretive critic addresses art as “mere execution” and supposes that “as he goes on with his translation from canvas to paper, the work becomes his own” (147).

However, the un-recrutable structure of the artwork should not allow the critic or the theoretician a textual conquest of the artwork to make it transparent. Aestheticists formulate a theory of art criticism that addresses the mistake of defining the artwork as a translation, or an embodiment, of a distinct preconceived thought. Interpretive criticism, seeking to extract a distinct content from the form, operates in what Wilde calls a “lower sphere”, as Wilde names it in “The Critic as Artist”. In contrast, Wilde asserts that aesthetic criticism defies transparency in favor of opacity”, and that it:

rejects these obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it becomes dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final. (*Collected Works* 1031)

The aestheticist model thus respects the untranslatability of artwork; it even aspires to extend it by deepening its opacity through criticism. For aestheticism, the object of the critic:

will not always be to explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its mystery [...] He will not be an interpreter in the sense of one who simply repeats in another form a message that has been put into his lips to say. (Wilde, *Collected Works* 1032)

Wilde and Pater thus assign criticism the role of guarding the commitment of the artwork to the essence of its medium, opacity and productivity. The essence of the medium is in turn defined as isomorphic to the structure of art:

The highest criticism deals with art, not as expressive, but as impressive purely, and is consequently both creative and independent, is in fact an art by itself, occupying the same relation to creative work that creative work does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. (Wilde, *Collected Works* 1028)

The main proposition here is that criticism should be “an art by itself,” and, as such, should substantiate artwork’s productive opacity. Real criticism addresses artwork as a starting point for new compositions, parallel to art’s engagement with reality. Critical work, like artwork in general, is not committed to mimesis or transparency. It is not attached to preconceived referents, and it ought not direct the beholder of the artwork to return to these referents or to reality. Criticism is free to proceed by offering an emergent creation. Moreover, Wilde argues that critical work, being one level further removed from reality than artwork, exists in an elevated epistemological and ontological category. After all, it deals with established artificial forms: “the highest Criticism [...] is in its way more creative than creation, as it has the least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end” (1027).

In this manner, aestheticism elaborated the idea of criticism that is internal to cultural progression. This becomes a progress from one cultural creation to another, with no external reality involved and no commitment to transparency. This concept of internal criticism is applied by Greenberg to culture in general, where culture is defined as a self-reflection of a discipline towards its essence and commitment to it. Aestheticists first applied this concept to different art media. Their argument is dialectic and original, logically relating the condition that unifies different arts to the condition that separates them from each other. Following Lessing's request to separate sculpture and poetry in *Laocoon*, Pater in 1877 proposed a wider application. This wider application is based on the idea that each art has its own way of producing the aesthetic experience as well as its own "special responsibilities to its material" (Pater, *Renaissance* 83-4). Drawing a clear link between opacity and productivity, he argues that "a clear apprehension of the [...] principle—that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind—is the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism" (*Essays* 49). We can see, then, that a subsequent trait of aesthetic modernism proposed by aestheticism is the internal, logical, relation between the dissolution of the distinction between form and content and the uniqueness of each medium. This untranslatability both of art of the different arts to each other is fundamental here and clarifies the idea of art as deep form, that is, its productive opacity. The contention is that a distinct, preconceived thought, commonly expressed in different media, is *not* to be sought and found in artwork. This contention is entailed by the infusion of form and content.

Wilde offers a similar argument to Pater's in a lecture on Aestheticism for an American audience:

health in art is the artist's recognition of the limitations of the form in which he works. It is the honour and the homage which he gives to the material he uses – whether it be language or marble or pigment – knowing that the true brotherhood of the arts consists not in their borrowing one another's method, but in their producing each of them by its own individual means, each of them by keeping its objective limits, the same unique artistic delight. (Jackson 17)

The principle of the distinctiveness of every medium assumes that in art that truly realizes its essence, content and form cannot be extracted from one another.

Embodying this view, Whistler flattens, abstracts, and seals his paintings. In effect, these paintings are opaque to any preconceived external objects, thoughts, and ideas. In the process, Whistler produces new meanings, insights, and effects of composition. Interestingly, flatness permits the dialectic relation between form and content. The idea is that compressing the content to the syntactic structure of the work – so that the content will be conceivable only in the form of the artwork – will render the content opaque but also evocative. Pre-existing referents taken from pre-existing reality are preempted by newly produced referents—even new realities such that the realistic character of artworks, which was demanded by the mimetic model, is preempted what Wilde calls a "sense of realness" (and what Nelson Goodman would later call "realist effect"). Whistler supported this practice by setting a custom of naming paintings in musical terms. "By using the word 'nocturne,'" he explained to the judge in his lawsuit against Ruskin, "I wished to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form and color first" (Merill 144).

This dialectical move represented Pater's formulation of the concept of musicality, and his philosophical call to apply musicality to the different arts. "One of the chief functions of aesthetic criticism, dealing with the products of art, new or old," Pater argues, "is to estimate the degree in which each of those products approaches, in this sense, to musical law" (Pater, *Essays* 53). The idea is *not* to turn non-musical media into music—quite the opposite. Musicality, rather than literality, will enable non-musical arts to be themselves and be free to commit to their essence. Of all arts, music is considered by Pater to be "the art which most completely realizes this artistic

ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form” (Pater, *Renaissance* 88). Applying musicality to different arts enables each art to reach this ideal. Wilde writes in *De Profundis* that musicality is a structure “in which all subject is absorbed in expression and cannot be separated from it,” and he presents music as a paradigmatic example for “a spirit dwelling in external things” (*Complete Works* 919–20).

Aestheticism includes visual arts and literary arts in its exclusion of mimesis and literality for the sake of musical opacity. This inclusion is for the sake of a philosophical unification of the different arts as philosophically different kinds of deep form (of artistic media). The exclusion of mimesis, literality, and transparency from the definition of art is an attempt to set a new shared philosophical foundation for different kinds of artistic media. This philosophical unification necessitates a philosophical distinction between the various arts, along with the essential uniqueness of each art. Wilde argues that “in poetry too the real poetic quality comes never from the subject but from an inventive handling of rhythmical language and the sensuous life of verse” (Jackson 16). For Wilde, overcoming transparent literality especially by poetry and literature is significant to the depth of the form of the work. Literature and poetry only seldom attain musicality. Using a linguistic medium, they are inclined to be literal and semantic or referential. “Real” linguistic arts, therefore, may be more musical than music. The productive opaque structure of deep form that music assumes relatively effortlessly, is rarely gained by poetry and literature due to their originally semantic nature. However, overcoming semanticity, which is originally inherent to the poetic medium, may bring about a powerful renouncement of pre-conceived referents, which moves from the reflection of referents into productive opacity.

The musical suppression of subject matter that is to be subordinated to the opacity of the artistic composition, and its presentation as a definitive condition of art, was a critical moment in the advent of modernist visuality by aestheticism. This inauguration of aesthetic modernism was manifested mutually by contemporary philosophy of art and art itself. Ruskin expanded the definition of artistic mimesis by ascribing a dimension of literality and even narrativity to mimetic work: “it ought farther to be observed respecting truths in general, that those are always most valuable which are most historical; that is, which tell us most about the past and future state of the object to which they belong” (part II, Sec. 1, Ch. VI, par I). Ruskin applied literality and narrativity to all kinds of depiction, from figurative work to landscape and still life work. In contrast, in an interview from 1878, wherein Whistler was asked about the reason for entitling his painting by musical terms, he explained that the content of his *Harmony in Grey and Gold* was subordinated to its appearance: “I care nothing for the past, present or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot” (*The Gentle Art*, 126–7).

*Shenkar College, Israel*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gal’s *Aestheticism: Deep Formalism and the Emergence of Modernist Aesthetics*.

<sup>2</sup> See Leighton’s *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See Freedman’s *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* for discussion.

<sup>4</sup> It is well known that Greenberg supported the idea of the purism of different media, combined with the medium’s internal commitment. These views were expressed in “Avant Garde and Kitsch” (1939), “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), “Modernist Painting” (1960), and “Avant Garde Attitudes” (1968). It is less known that those ideas were a clear continuation of aestheticist ideas.

- <sup>5</sup> *The Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published in 1873, was re-titled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in the second and later editions. The canonical essay “The School of Giorgione” was added to the third edition and forward, hence it is common to refer to it or to its subsequent ones.
- <sup>6</sup> The reference here is to the conceptualist philosophy of art that was formulated following the linguistic turn of aesthetics, advanced by Arthur Danto, Nelson Goodman and others. These thinkers address art as language, whose meaning, aboutness, and referentiality are its main elements.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilde posits that: “The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art. The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art’s subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent” (*Collected Works* requires page number).
- <sup>8</sup> Pater suggests that painting “is the art in the criticism of which this truth most needs enforcing, for it is in popular judgments of pictures that the false generalization of all art into forms of poetry is most prevalent” (“The School of Giorgione” 84). “The School of Giorgione” which was first published in 1877 in the *Fortnightly Review*, was added to the third edition of *The Renaissance* in 1888.
- <sup>9</sup> Greenberg’s concern about forced literality is the motivation for his philosophical support for abstract art in its defiance of mimesis. In “Avant Garde and Kitsch”, Greenberg explains why artists, given the chaotic reality of ideologies, find it crucial to withdraw from the public. Greenberg raises this concern again in “Towards a Newer Laocoön”.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Clive. *Art*. Capricorn Books, 1958.
- Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*. Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Fry, Roger. *Vision and Design*. Dover Publications, 1981.
- Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*. Edited by John O’Brian. The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- . *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume II Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. Edited by John O’Brian. The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Jackson, John W, editor. *The Uncollected Oscar Wilde*. Fourth Estate, 1993.
- Matisse, Henri, in Jack Flam, editor. *Matisse on Art*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Merill, Linda. *Pot of Paint*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- Pater, Walter. *Essays on Literature and Art*. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1990.
- . *The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myth*. The MIT Press, 1985.
- Ruskin, John. *The Lamp of Beauty: Writings on Art*. Phaidon Press, 1995.
- . *Modern Painters*. John Wiley & Sons, 1885.
- Whistler, James McNeill. *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. Dover Publications, 1977.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde stories, plays, poems and essays*. Harpers and Row Publishers, 1989.
- . *The British Renaissance of Art*. CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork, 1997.