

Clement Greenberg and the Politics of the Avant-Garde in His Early Writings: Recontextualizing “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” within *Partisan Review*’s Critique of the Popular Front*

SAKAI Takahiro

The University of Tokyo, Tokyo

Abstract: This paper reexamines Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) by situating it within the political and intellectual context of *Partisan Review* at the end of the 1930s. Rather than interpreting Greenberg’s Marxism primarily through the lens of Trotsky’s theory of art, I argue that his essay should be understood in relation to the journal’s critique of the Popular Front, its rejection of Stalinist cultural politics, and its defense of both socialist revolution and the autonomy of art. By analyzing Greenberg’s critique of kitsch, this paper clarifies how he associated kitsch with the pervasive deception and falsehoods of contemporary political conditions. I then trace the emergence of Greenberg’s concept of “positivism” in the 1940s, demonstrating how it provided a framework for understanding the avant-garde’s rejection of illusionism which was also a form of deception and falsehood in the era. In doing so, this paper highlights the continuity between Greenberg’s late 1930s Marxist arguments and his subsequent writings, challenging the common narrative of his “demarxization” and suggesting the need to reassess the political dimensions of his early and middle theoretical development.

Keywords: Art Criticism, Anti-Stalinism, Marxism, Positivism, The New York Intellectuals

Introduction

It is well known that when Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) began his career as an art critic and published one of his earliest essays “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) in the late 1930s, he was a Marxist who supported anti-Stalinism politically.¹ However, a reading of this essay does not provide much clarity about his political stance. While a Marxist perspective can certainly be recognized in his examination of the birth and development of the avant-garde in Western art in light of its historical and social conditions, there are only a few references to socialism and Marxism itself, and he presents an argument that emphasizes the autonomy of art rather than its relationship with politics.² Therefore, as Serge Guilbaut argues, one may view Greenberg as

* This paper is based on the Japanese version printed in *Bigaku* 75, No.1 (2024): 25–36, published by the Japanese Society for Aesthetics.

¹ For a general understanding of shifts of Greenberg’s political stance, see O’Brian 1993.

² While this paper, like much of the previous research listed below, is concerned with Marxism as a political ideology in the late 1930s, for an evaluation of the validity of his Marxism as an analytical and critical methods for art, see Clark 1982.

already apolitical at this point, merely employing the Marxist methodology and vocabulary of the time in his theory of art (Guilbaut 1983, 36).

In contrast, many previous studies have sought to address this issue by situating Greenberg's essay within the context of contemporaneous discussions in the political and literary journal *Partisan Review* (*PR*) in which it was published. Founded in 1934 as an organ of a subsidiary organization of the CPUSA, *PR* was temporarily suspended in 1936 but was relaunched at the end of 1937 as a journal independent from the party. By reversing its earlier policy and taking an explicit anti-Communist and anti-Stalinist stance, the journal came to occupy a distinctive position within the leftist literary movement of the late 1930s.³ Greenberg had a close relationship with *PR*; he joined its editorial board in 1940 and, even after leaving for military service in 1943, continued to contribute regularly until 1955.

These previous studies on Greenberg's essay mainly focused on comparisons with the art theory of Leon Trotsky, who was then a symbol of anti-Stalinism. While already in exile in Mexico, Trotsky was invited by newly independent *PR* to contribute essays; two of his writings on art were published in 1938 (Trotsky 1938; Breton and Rivera 1938⁴). Focusing on this connection, those studies have examined the argument of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in terms of its debt to, or critical response toward, Trotsky's view of art, and it has become standard to describe Greenberg's political stance in those years as "Trotskyist" (Orton and Pollock 1981; Hart 1988; Jachec 2000, 23–6; Neofetou 2022, 11–29).

There is no doubt that Trotsky had a significant influence on the circle around *PR* at that time. Yet, as scholarship on the journal (or "the New York Intellectuals") has pointed out, this emphasis on Trotsky is hardly appropriate when examining discussions in *PR*, at least regarding their political aspects. "Trotskyism" at the time was nothing more than a label imposed by external adversaries (i.e., the Stalinists) and by no means indicated any direct interest in or engagement with Trotsky's political ideas. In fact, only a few among these writers actually joined Trotskyist parties, and there were hardly any direct references to Trotsky's political theories in their writings.⁵ Furthermore, in terms of art theory, previous studies have relied on Trotsky's art theory to demonstrate the political nature of Greenberg's ostensibly nonpolitical argument, thus bringing up topics and concepts that do not actually exist in Greenberg's argument.⁶ While such

³ The intellectuals who gathered around *Partisan Review* were generally known as the "New York Intellectuals." For primary studies, see Cooney 1986; Wald 1987; Hori 2000; Akimoto 2001; and so on. Among these, the following will primarily refer to Cooney and Akimoto, as they focus on the late 1930s to early 1940s—the formative period for the New York intellectuals. For the circumstances around the journal's resume, see Cooney, 95–119; Akimoto, 45–77.

⁴ Although the latter was published under the names of Breton and Rivera, Trotsky was involved.

⁵ Even in the process of negotiating a contribution, *PR* once faced a temporary breakdown in talks after it refused to accept political demands from Trotsky. For this background and for the journal's relationship to Trotsky, see Cooney 1986, 126–33, 179–82; Akimoto 2001, 15–7, 155–63. Based on these facts and studies, this paper refers to Greenberg's political stance at the time as "anti-Stalinist."

⁶ For example, Jachec argues that Trotsky's significance for Greenberg lay in providing "one particular model for the future of socialism," and that Greenberg assigned to the avant-garde the role "to preserve culture" for the sake of a coming socialist society. However, as will be seen below, this is contrary to Greenberg's own account, in which

interpretations are interesting, they not only risk missing the main point of Greenberg's argument, but also make it difficult to grasp the continuity and development of his later ones.

Therefore, this study examines Greenberg's argument by focusing on the situation of *PR* itself at the end of the 1930s. The fall 1939 issue of *PR*, in which "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" appeared, was published immediately after the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which had shocked the leftist movement at the time and made *PR* much more polemical. Beginning in this context, the following discussion situates Greenberg's essay within *PR*'s contemporary critique of the Popular Front.⁷

Then, this paper examines Greenberg's concept of "positivism" in relation to his critique of kitsch. This concept appeared mainly in his essays throughout the 1940s and was often used as an adjective ("positivist" or "positive") rather than a noun. Because he did not clearly define it, previous studies have been limited to understanding the concept in the general sense and its usage since Auguste Comte, without sufficiently considering its relationship with Greenberg's earlier arguments or the background against which the concept appeared.⁸ Below, I examine this concept in relation to his critique of kitsch and clarify how he viewed the avant-garde at that time as a form of resistance against capitalist society.

1. Critique of the Popular Front and Upholding the Socialist Revolutionary Line

This section begins by examining the political and social context at the time "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was written. As previously mentioned, the autumn 1939 issue of *PR* in which this essay appeared was published shortly after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August of that year, an event that shocked the contemporary leftist movement. In response to the pact, this issue included two statements: "War is the Issue!" and "A Letter to the L.A.W." The former was issued by an organization called the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism (LCFS) and the latter was a joint statement by key members of both LCFS and another organization, the Committee for Cultural Freedom (LSCF 1939b; "Letter to L.A.W." 1939). As its name indicates, the LCFS was founded by members of the *PR* circle approximately two months prior to the pact with the

he rather needed socialism for "preserving" the avant-garde (Jachec 2000, 24, 26). Similarly, Hart also arbitrarily introduces arguments and concepts that do not directly exist in Greenberg's writings, such as contributions to socialism and "human liberation," in characterizing Greenberg's concept of the avant-garde (Hart 1988, 78–80). Orton and Pollock also conclude that Greenberg developed his argument based "on a Trotskyist claim" that "art is a form of cognition of the world and a necessary precondition for the building of a new consciousness," but it is difficult to find this point directly in his writings (Orton and Pollock 1981, 325).

⁷ For similar attempts, see Cooney 1986, 211–2; Akimoto 2001, 190–216. Although this paper owes much to both, it cannot be said to have fully examined the argument of the "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" from this perspective. For example, Akimoto notes that Greenberg discussed the birth of the avant-garde in relation to Marxism and argues that he defined kitsch in contrast to the avant-garde's "political innovativeness" (Akimoto 2001, 193). However, as will be seen below, this does not take into account Greenberg's description of the development of the avant-garde after its birth as a process of 'rejecting' even "revolutionary politics." This paper instead seeks to clarify the social-critical dimension of the avant-garde by interpreting Greenberg's theory of kitsch in relation to the critique of the Popular Front.

⁸ For previous studies on Greenberg's "positivism," see Craven 1993; Bois 1993; Jachec 1998; Jones 2005, 97–119; Neofetou 2022, 101–16.

aim of defending cultural freedom and advancing socialism. And the founding statement appeared in the preceding issue bearing the signatures of the participants listed at the end. Among them were the editors such as William Phillips, Philip Rahv, and Dwight Macdonald (discussed below) along with the magazine's regular contributors, including Greenberg. The following discussion will focus primarily on this founding statement.

The founding statement denounced the cultural control exercised in totalitarian states, such as Germany and the Soviet Union, while fiercely criticizing the emergence of similar tendencies within the United States. However, while in Germany and the Soviet Union such control was exercised through state institutions and systems, in the United States intellectuals were voluntarily suppressing their intellectual life under the "pressure of anti-fascist hysteria." "Cultural circles, formerly progressive, are now capitulating on the spirit of fascism while ostensibly combatting its letter" (LCFS 1939a, 125).

The primary targets of this criticism were the Communist Party-led Popular Front movement and its supporting organization, the League of American Writers (LAW). The Popular Front was the name of a united front against fascism, adopted in 1935 through a policy shift by the Communist Party. It was launched in response to the growing threat of fascism following Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and aimed to form a broader alliance under the slogan of "the people," replacing the previous emphasis on the "working class" or the "proletariat." This policy shift garnered significant support from intellectuals and writers within the United States, and by the late 1930s, Stalinism and the Popular Front had become the mainstream leftist movements. Conversely, anti-Stalinist positions, such as those of *PR* remained a minority.

Then, what did it mean to say that the Popular Front, which proclaimed itself anti-fascism, was "now capitulating to the spirit of fascism"? First, this criticism implied accusations against those who continued to express support for Stalin, even as the totalitarian nature of his regime became increasingly evident through a series of political events, including the Moscow Trials. However, it was more directly aimed at the abandonment of the socialist revolutionary line by the Communist Party and Stalinists, accompanying a policy shift toward the Popular Front.

The last war set moving in this country a profound current of skepticism in respect to bourgeois values in art and life. Responsible for the finest cultural achievements of the post-war period, this tendency culminated after 1929 in the radicalisation of a significant part of the intelligentsia. But now, in the name of a spurious "anti-fascist" unity, numerous intellectuals are deserting their hard-won critical independence. They are giving up their opposition to capitalist exploitation and oppression, to imperialist domination of colonial lands. (126)

The "profound current of skepticism" that had spread among intellectuals since "the last war" and the Great Depression of "1929" specifically referred to Marxism, which had fostered a critical attitude toward and resistance against the prevailing systems of "capitalism" and "imperialism." The reason that intellectuals were now "deserting" it and ceased opposing "capitalist exploitation and oppression" and "imperialist domination," was because the policy shift toward the Popular Front effectively meant tacit acceptance of the very system they had once sought to overthrow.

That is, the shift to the Popular Front policy meant prioritizing the struggle for “anti-fascism” over a socialist revolution led by the working class, and seeking to forge new solidarity with the non-fascist sectors of capitalist society, including the middle class, under the new banner of “the people.” In other words, the “anti-fascist” struggle championed by the Popular Front was virtually synonymous with shelving an attempt to overthrow the existing capitalist and imperialist system for the time being, and even defending that system against the threat of fascism. Regarding what this war would bring to America, the founding statement declared: “And inspired by Stalinist and social-reformist propaganda they advocate a new war for ‘democracy.’ Yet this war must give birth to military dictatorship and to forms of intellectual repression far more violent than those evoked by the last war” (ibid). Thus, far from criticizing the deceptions and falsehoods of the Popular Front’s proclaimed “anti-fascism” and “defense of democracy,” the intellectuals and writers who supported it were instead actively propagating these very ideas through their own works, thereby fostering a totalitarian atmosphere that suppressed dissenting or opposing views. The founding statement fiercely criticized all of this.

Approximately two months after this founding statement, the signing of the Nazi–Soviet Pact became known. The fact that the Soviet Union allied with Germany, a fascist state it had previously regarded as an enemy to oppose, shocked intellectuals both at home and abroad who supported the Popular Front. From this point onward, the Popular Front rapidly disintegrated. The two aforementioned statements from the LCFS address a situation in which the Popular Front’s ideals were fundamentally overturned by the pact. In effect, they were their declaration of victory over the LAW.

Thus, *PR* in the late 1930s viewed the Popular Front as a reaction against the leftist movement and fiercely criticized those seemingly “progressive opinion” (ibid) of the Popular Front’s proclaimed “anti-fascism” and “democracy,” while upholding the necessity of maintaining the socialist revolutionary line. It is crucial to note that “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was written in the midst of this very context.

2. Criticism of the Leftist Literary Movement and the Defense of the Autonomy of Art

However, if the above describes the political stance of *PR* in the late 1930s, what was its stance on artistic matters? The founding statement condemned writers and intellectuals supporting the Popular Front for becoming “apologists for the Kremlin dictatorship” (ibid) and for their works degenerating into propaganda. Yet, this did not mean *PR* called for a return to the pre-Popular Front policy—that is, the promotion of the proletarian literary movement. Rather, the journal had already seen the seeds of the process through which art was subordinated to politics.

In this regard, arguments in *PR* were led by William Phillips and Philip Rahv, who were at the core of the editorial board. For example, their jointly authored editorial “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature” (published in the May-June 1934 issue) addressed critically the problem of “leftism” within the proletarian literary movement as early as 1934, even before the shift in policy toward the Popular Front. They criticized writers who, without

confronting political reality, merely echoed the ideology and theories advanced by the Communist Party, producing works that “distort and vulgarize the complexity of human nature, the motives of action and their expression in thought and feeling” (Phillips and Rahv 1934, 5). This approach to literature was what they called “leftism.” At this point, their criticism still addressed the nature of the Proletarian Literary Movement from within. However, following the temporary suspension of *PR*, they shifted toward an explicitly anti-Stalinist position, directing their criticism toward Communist Party theory.

For example, Phillips’s essay “The Esthetic of the Founding Fathers,” published in the March 1938 issue, criticized how many of the theories attributed to Marx and Engels, the “Founding Fathers” of Marxism, had in fact been fabricated as “myths” by others, particularly by the Stalin regime. Art as a weapon in class struggle, the central theory of the proletarian literary movement, was no exception (Phillips 1938a, 11–12). Nevertheless, Phillips did not call for the abandonment of Marxism itself in this essay. While insisting on the necessity of dismantling the myths and dogmas created by the Communist Party, he concluded that Marxism still “supplies a method not only for finding the social origins of values but also for determining their contemporary significance” (20). What mattered for Phillips and Rahv was to re-examine the validity and limits of Marxist theories of art.

In this regard, Rahv’s editorial essay “Twilight of the Thirties,” published in the same issue of *PR* as the founding statement of LCFS, called for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between art and politics within Marxism. Certainly, the 1930s was an era in which the contradictions of capitalist society became obvious in various ways, placing writers in a situation where they could no longer create while ignoring political realities. However, as writers deepened their political engagement, politics began to erode their work, producing a large number of works that were nothing more than propaganda for specific political claims. Especially under the Popular Front, in the name of defending democracy, “as the tide of patriotism and democratic eloquence rises,” Rahv noted, “one observes an ebb of creative energy and a rapid decline of standards in all spheres of the intellect and of the imagination.” Through their political commitments, writers were thus “adapting their products to the coarsening and shrinking of the cultural market,” facing “the first stage of a process that might be called the withering away of literature” (Rahv 1939, 4–5). At this juncture, it became necessary to reconsider how art should relate to politics.

Then, what Rahv called for was a reevaluation of the modernist literature of the 1920s, which the leftist literary movement of the 1930s had criticized as “ivory tower” (7). According to him, “those few whose conscience in such matters is still awake have begun to look back at the nineteen-twenties as at a golden age, since that period, though not marked for its political wisdom, was exceedingly alive with experiment and innovation” (5). Given the current literary situation where politics were stifling literary imagination and “provoke[ing] its self-destructive impulses” (7), Rahv argued that the modernist literature of the 1920s, which had been involved in “the throes of a constant inner revolution” (5) through their experiment and innovation, “was a thousand times more ‘progressive,’ ... infinitely more sensitive to the actual conditions of human existence, than the shallow political writing of our latter days” (14).

Therefore, in the late 1930s, while *PR* advocated upholding the revolutionary stance in

politics, what it sought in art was separation from politics; that is, the autonomy of art. The founding statement of the LCFS is as follows.

The defense of intellectual freedom requires, moreover, that we reject all theories and practices which tend to make culture the creature of politics, even revolutionary politics. We demand COMPLETE FREEDOM FOR ART AND SCIENCE. NO DICTATION BY PARTY OR GOVERNMENT. Culture not only does not seek orders but by its very nature cannot tolerate them. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with the spirit of conformity; and if art and science are to be true to the revolution, they must first be true to themselves. (LCFS 1939a, 126–7)

Following this, the founding statement noted that this defense of the autonomy of art shared the same belief with Trotsky's essay on art published in *PR*. Trotsky's arguments, which liberated art from the narrow framework of class struggle that viewed traditional artistic traditions as products of bourgeois society and actively valued their role as a social critique, greatly influenced the members of *PR* (cf. Phillips 1938a, 16; Rahv 1939, 11). However, the difference lies in their understanding of the relationship between art and the revolution. While Trotsky called art "a strong ally of the revolution" (Trotsky 1938, 10) and called on artists to participate in the revolutionary movement, the founding statement, which called for the separation of art and politics, asserted the necessity to "reject" any kind of "orders" even from "revolutionary politics," and suggested only a link between the two. Similarly, Greenberg does not assume a direct relationship between art and revolution, as discussed below. However, this did not mean a return to the "ivory tower" of the 1920s. As we have seen, *PR*, faced with a situation in which art was subordinated to politics through the leftist literary movement of the 1930s, called for a re-examination of the relationship between the two.⁹ Greenberg's argument can also be situated within this context.

3. The Avant-Garde as Resistance to Capitalist Society

One of the key differences between Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and his later writings on "modernism" (a concept he began to use in earnest only from the late 1950s onward) lies in the fact that the former situated the birth of the avant-garde in relation to Marxism. The avant-garde arose in capitalist societies after the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century. Usually, when such profound transformations of the existing social structure as the Industrial Revolution occur, "all the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question," and artists cease to engage in innovative acts, falling instead into a state of "Alexandrianism," in which "all larger questions" are "decided by the precedent of the old masters" (Greenberg 1939, 34–35). Despite those circumstances, what made the avant-garde possible without falling into such a pattern was "a superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an[sic] historical criticism" (35),

⁹ For discussions of this issue within the pages of *PR*, see Cooney 1986, 146–62; Akimoto 2001, 115–63.

namely, Marxism. With “the moral aid of revolutionary political attitudes,” artists were able to “assert themselves as aggressively as they did against the prevailing standards of society,” thereby achieving artistic innovation. “It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe” (ibid).

However, Greenberg went on to observe that the avant-garde “turned out soon to be demonstratively uninterested in politics” (ibid), describing its subsequent development as a rejection not only of “bourgeois politics” but also of “revolutionary politics.” “Yet it is true that once the avant-garde had succeeded in ‘detaching’ itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeois.” This was because, as the “welter of ideological struggle” intensified and art became increasingly entangled in it, art and poetry soon came to regard such struggles as “unpropitious” (36). Thus, the avant-garde ceased “experiments” that sought to apply socialist ideas to culture, such as Russian Constructivism, and instead turned toward the pursuit of “the expression of an absolute,” in which “all relatives and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point.” Consequently, “art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry” emerged (ibid).

As mentioned in the introduction, such passages make the political implications of Greenberg’s essay difficult to grasp. Yet, in separating art from politics and even rejecting “revolutionary politics,” Greenberg’s position can be understood as sharing the same stance as that of *PR* concerning art already discussed. In addition, the founding statement of LCFS demanded that art and science remain “true” to themselves; that is, that art should pursue its own inherent logic and rules. Greenberg later theorized this point in his well-known discussion of medium in “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” published the following year (this point will be discussed later).

Another point common to the *PR*’s stance at the time could also be discerned in the concluding section of the essay (the only part that directly refers to “socialism” and “Marx”). There Greenberg declared that “as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word,” and that “[t]oday we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture” (49). The idea that a new culture would arise from “socialism” was a tenet of the proletarian literary movement and Communist Party theories. What was demanded was a departure from this and a return to the original texts of “Marx.” Instead, he argued that the reason we should turn to socialism was “*simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have” (ibid, italics in original). The “living culture,” including the avant-garde, was then in crisis due to the decline of the elite class that once sustained it. To “preserve” this, he urged a socialist revolution that would transform the means of production and create a new social basis for support.

Thus, the conclusion of the essay argued not that the avant-garde could contribute to revolution, but rather that the former needed the latter. Yet, it was also clear from the following passage in the conclusion that he never viewed the avant-garde as isolated from society: “Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence. Advances in culture no less than advances in science and industry corrode the very society under whose aegis they are made possible” (48–49). However, this passage still does not clarify how the avant-garde as “progress in culture”

could become a “threat” or “corrosion” to “capitalism.” To clarify this point, we must turn to his discussion of kitsch, a concept in direct opposition to the avant-garde.

4. From the Critique of Kitsch to Positivism

The examples of kitsch that Greenberg enumerated were forms of mass culture, such as commercial art and popular music (39). Therefore, the opposing concepts of “avant-garde/kitsch” have largely been understood as almost equivalent to the conventional artistic distinction between “highbrow/lowbrow.” However, what deserves attention here is that, as expressed in his assertion that “kitsch is deceptive” (40), Greenberg emphasized the dimension of kitsch as deception or falsehood. “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” (ibid).

First, this characterization was due to kitsch’s commercial exploitation of previous artistic achievements. As “a product of the industrial revolution,” kitsch borrowed “devices, tricks, strategems[sic], rules of thumb, themes” from “a fully matured cultural tradition” and transformed them into commodities for mass production. In this sense, kitsch is nothing more than a counterfeit of genuine culture (39–40). However, Greenberg’s strong denunciation of kitsch as “the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” suggests more than just the aesthetical inferiority of kitsch. To examine this, it is necessary to return to the LCFS’s criticism of the Popular Front.

As seen earlier, the founding statement of LCFS fiercely criticized the deceptions and falsehoods of the Popular Front’s advocacy of seemingly “progressive opinion” like “anti-fascism” and “democracy,” arguing that it essentially affirmed the status quo. For them, the Popular Front was nothing more than “fighting one falsehood [i.e., fascism] with another” (LCFS 1939a, 125). What is important here is this view of the era’s defining characteristic—the pervasive spread of deception and falsehoods, along with the dissemination of the propaganda slogans and myths that generated them—was widely shared among members of the *PR* circle at the time.

For example, in a 1938 essay, Phillips described the present situation as “a period of masquerade,” stating: “To-day, even more than at any other time in the past, we must unmask our false prophets. This is a period of *masquerade*. Rogues ply the trade of revolution; reactionaries pose as liberals; liberals have become the attorneys for Stalin. Peace, progress, and freedom have become the universal gospel of our time, while double dealing and chicanery are reaching almost inconceivable proportions” (Phillips 1938b, 8–9, italics in original). Moreover, they shared concern for examining the historical conditions and cultural traditions that produced such social situations through literature and art.¹⁰ Although “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” did not explicitly focus on a criticism of the Popular Front, it could nonetheless be seen as sharing the same critical perspective in its emphasis on the deceptive and false aspects of kitsch.

Crucial in this context is that Greenberg’s concept of “kitsch” was conceived directly in response to an article by Dwight Macdonald on Soviet cinema published in the Winter 1939 issue

¹⁰ For this issue, see Cooney 1986, 133–6, 153–60; Akimoto 2001, 148–50.

of *PR*.¹¹ Macdonald posed the following question: “Why, after all, should ignorant peasants prefer Repin to Picasso?” (Macdonald 1939, 88). According to him, Picasso’s abstract paintings were no less close to the icons of peasant folk art than the works of Ilya Repin, one of the leading painters of Socialist Realism. Therefore, there must have been some other reason why paintings of Socialist Realism, filled with deceptions and falsehoods of Stalinist praise, gained popularity. Macdonald’s answer was “conditioning.” He argued that the Stalin regime thoroughly “conditioned” people through educational institutions and cultural policies to like Socialist Realism in order to use it as an instrument of propaganda (*ibid*). In response, Greenberg introduced the concept of “kitsch.” He countered that if such “conditioning” had been truly effective, then at least in the United States we should have been conditioned “to respect the old masters” such as “Rembrandt and Michelangelo” (Greenberg 1939, 42). He thus suggested that the fundamental reason why kitsch was closely linked with “demagoguery” and “propaganda,” and why “totalitarian regimes” employed it as an “official cultural trend,” lay within kitsch itself (46–7).¹²

Thus, Greenberg’s critique of kitsch was not directed at popular culture in general but more at the way kitsch contributed to the deception and falsehoods of the era. If so, its opposing concept, the avant-garde, could be characterized in terms of resistance to such deceptions and falsehoods. Although this idea was not fully explored in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” it can be found in Greenberg’s writings of the 1940s. The key to this is his concept of “positivism.” In his 1944 essay “Abstract Art,” Greenberg stated the following.

The deeper meaning of this transformation is that in a period in which illusions of every kind are being destroyed the illusionist methods of art must also be renounced. The taste most closely attuned to contemporary art has become positivist, even as the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time. (Greenberg [1944] 1986, 203)

Here, the “transformation” referred to the fact that, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, avant-garde painting had turned away from the “illusion” that had characterized traditional Western painting, toward an emphasis on the medium itself, particularly flatness. Traditional Western painting, characterized by “illusion,” employed techniques such as perspective and chiaroscuro to create a fictive spatial depth behind the picture plane. It drew the beholder’s attention and rendered transparent the material elements of the medium, such as lines and colors. By contrast, the avant-garde sought to make this fictive depth shallower, bringing it forward toward the picture plane by emphasizing flatness and thus directing the beholder’s attention to the medium.

The above argument had already been presented in the aforementioned 1940 essay “Laocoon” (Greenberg 1940, 307–8), but here Greenberg reinterpreted this “transformation” in relation to the fact that “the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time” was “destroying” “illusions of every kind.” The “illusion” in painting, like other forms of illusion, was also seen as

¹¹ For details on this background, see Rubinfeld 1997, 50–8.

¹² For details on this point and a comparison with Macdonald’s argument, see Akimoto 2001, 195–196.

a form of deception and falsehood, presenting the pretense and fiction of things. The task of philosophy and politics in this period was to eliminate illusions such as deception and falsehoods and to clarify things and events in question based on verifiable facts. Similarly, the fact that modern painting rejected illusions and examined and emphasized the factual medium that constituted the painting itself was also seen as an expression of this positivist attitude.

As seen in the passage above, the “transformation” of painting was understood not merely as the pursuit of internal logic and rules within painting, but also as a response to social and historical conditions. Indeed, Greenberg pointed out that what caused this “transformation” should not be sought solely in the exhaustion of “the techniques of art founded on the convention of representation,” but that “the trouble lies also with exterior reality itself” (Greenberg [1944] 1986, 203). The primary concern of traditional painting had been the “visual representation” of things because their “appearance” had been believed to be “the true and the real,” and painting had sought to “represent” it. However, in the modern era, the “appearance” of things guaranteed neither “the true” nor “the real.” On the contrary, “the modern imagination was numbed by visual representation.” Thus, the avant-garde turned toward exploring “the question [of] what a corporeal object is” from a perspective distinct from “appearance,” just like Impressionism sought to recapture things through their dissolution into light and color. During this exploration, artists began directing the same inquiry toward painting itself (203–4). The rejection of illusion and the emphasis on medium were thus not merely formal concerns within painting; they were expressions of a “positivist” attitude that sought to resist the deceptions and falsehoods of the age. In this, Greenberg saw the avant-garde’s resistance to capitalist society.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the argument of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” within the context of *PR*’s criticism of the Popular Front in the late 1930s. By examining his critique of kitsch and the concept of positivism, it has clarified how Greenberg viewed the avant-garde as a resistance to the capitalist society at that time. Throughout the 1940s, the concept of “positivism” occupied an increasingly important position in Greenberg’s writings. For example, in a 1947 essay he evaluated the “positivist” aspect of Jackson Pollock’s paintings from the perspective of how they responded to urban life in an American society undergoing industrialization and rationalization (Greenberg [1947] 1986, 164–6). Thus, the significance of this paper lies in presenting a perspective to understand the continuity of Greenberg’s thoughts from the late 1930s to the 1940s. Greenberg’s theoretical development after the late 1930s has generally been understood in terms of his demarxization and the accompanying shift toward a supposedly apolitical “modernism.” This perspective has tended to place emphasis not on continuities with his earlier arguments but rather on how his Marxist perspective was lost and his theory became increasingly dogmatic.¹³ Indeed, in an addendum to an essay reprinted in *Art and Culture* (1961), Greenberg himself made

¹³ See the reference in the first note. A series of cultural Cold War studies known as “revisionism” have attempted to critically examine Greenberg’s later political conservatism and his turn toward anti-communism. For an overview of this research, see Kajiya 2003, 85–91.

a comment that seemed to affirm his own demarxization (Greenberg 1961, 230). However, this statement should be read against the political background of the Cold War, when Greenberg's stance moved toward political conservatism and anti-communism. If so, in addition to critically examining this later political conservatism, it is necessary to consider how the issues and arguments originating in his writings of the late 1930s continued to develop thereafter. The present paper is one such attempt.

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