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*'October and the Problem of
Formalism'*
Peter Osborne

Quaderns portàtils
MACBA

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03

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“a little formalism turns one away from History,
but ... a lot brings one back to it.”

Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, 1957

I want to talk about formalism – ‘formalism’ as a technical term and ‘formalism’ as a derogatory term, a term of abuse – about the power and the pitfalls of formal analysis. Above all, I am interested in formalism as an enduring *problem*. Formalism is not just a problem raised by ‘theory’ in the visual arts (and by the invocation of ‘French Theory’ in the visual arts in the Anglo-American world since the 1970s, in particular); it is *the* problem raised by the reception of French Theory in anglophone art criticism since the 1980s. Indeed, it is a problem that is raised not only by this reception, but by the very notion of ‘art theory’ as such, for which this reception was formative. Formalism is a problem for art theory, in general – and hence a problem for us – because *formalism is a problem for theory*, per se. When we speak of ‘French Theory’ we are largely speaking of structuralism – ‘the golden age of formal thinking’¹ – and the reactions to and against it. Formalism is a particular problem for *art* theory insofar as the concept of art retains a necessary reference to both (i) some critically significant, *irreducibly ‘aesthetic’* aspect of the artwork – that is, a kind of sensuous individuality that cannot, in principle, be grasped by *conceptual forms*, and (ii) some critically significant, *irreducibly historical aspect*, whereby the work is subject to processes of historical temporalization, which destabilize and transform what might otherwise appear as purely structural relations, conceptual or aesthetic. There would thus seem to be, at the outset, in principle, limits on the epistemological capacity of *art theory* to grasp its apparent privileged object, the work of art – assuming, for the moment, that is what it aspires to do. Or to put it another way: art theory must critically legitimate its *constructively* reductive transformation of the artwork into a structural object, if it is to avoid the charge of formalism, as a kind of self-sufficient conceptual game (‘game formalism’ being the name of the predominant formalist interpretation of mathematics, of course). For in the main critical sense in which I shall use it here, ‘formalism’ designates the failure to respect the limits suggested above: an extension of formal analyses (of whatever kind) beyond the bounds of their legitimacy: the positing of an equivalence between the constructed objects of theory and works of art themselves. At its extreme, such a formalism implies that the real itself is produced by a structural combination of elements, reversing the original meaning of formalism in mathematics into a covertly ontological model.

1 François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 1: The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pp. 210–222.

But where precisely do these limits lie? How are we to understand them? (This need not be an *empiricist* objection, for example.) And what light does the seemingly unstoppable production of theoretical formalisms (or ‘theoreticism’ as it was once known) – their multiplication in art discourse, through the appropriation of philosophies as found objects – throw on our understanding of current art-critical culture?

One of the main things at issue here is the relationship between *art history* (and other forms of knowledge about art’s conditions) and *art criticism*; in particular, specifically ‘artistic’ judgments about art, or art judgments – by which I do not mean ‘aesthetic’ judgements in the Kant’s sense, since these are *not* specifically artistic, but pertain to the aesthetic attributes of all that is sensibly given. (In this respect, it was not Kant who inaugurated the modern philosophical discourse on art, but the early Romantics, since the latter were the first to think the *ontology* of the artwork, as the condition of its experience, rather than merely to subsume art to an independently formulated philosophical problematic: namely, ‘aesthetic’, or prior to that ‘poetic’). This is a crucial point. *Are historico-ontological art-critical judgments still possible?* It is important to distinguish this question of art judgment from that of aesthetic judgment, since it was the two-fold identification (i) of art-critical judgment with aesthetic judgment, and (ii) of aesthetic judgment with Greenberg’s subjective, and essentially Humean version of Kantian aesthetic judgment – what he called judgments of ‘quality’ – that led the editorial group of the US art journal *October* to reject the problematic of judgment per se. (We might call this ‘the Greenbergian trauma’). This is a position they still maintained towards the end of their 25-year journey (the theoretical journey of their first generation, at least), in 2002 in the notorious Roundtable on ‘The Present Conditions of Art Criticism’ in *October* no. 100, tucked away at the end of a special issue on Obsolescence. Unconsciously, perhaps: obsolescence of judgement? (We may take their journey to have ended definitively, symbolically, with the publication of *Art Since 1900, in 2004*.)² This enduring rejection of the problematic of judgment, in favour of a ‘knowledge’ subtracted from any sense of experience was the condition for the development of ‘French Theory’ within art discourse in the USA.

2 Round Table, ‘The Present Conditions of Art Criticism’, *October* 100, Spring 2002, pp. 200–228; Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004.

Formalisms, theoretical and aesthetic

It is important in this respect, to distinguish the general *theoretical* formalism I am concerned with here from two other types of formalism encountered in US art criticism in the period under discussion: the *aesthetic formalism* that was the outcome of Greenberg's so-called formalist-modernism (better described as a 'modernist formalism', since, by then, from the mid 1960s onwards, his modernism had been reduced to the establishment of the historical conditions for a generalized aesthetic formalism, and had no further developmental dynamic); and *Russian Formalism*, that school of *linguistics* concerned above all with the semiological specificity of the poetic or aesthetic literary work, which preceded and fed into French Structuralism, in its Barthesian generalization, but retained an independent appeal, especially via Jakobsen's later work with the Prague circle.³ Both of these types of formalism are ultimately concerned, albeit in very different ways, with the individualizing function of the aesthetic: at the levels of *feeling and signification*, respectively. The more general *semiological formalism* of the 'theory' of French Structuralism, on the other hand, (and its immanent successors) is a self-contained epistemological discourse *qua* theory of signification; hence its diametrical opposition to late Greenbergian formalism; and thereby also its secret dialectical affinity with it.

'Theory', we may say, is the name given to those general-theoretical discourses that held themselves apart from the disciplinary constraints and history of 'philosophy', by achieving *immanently generalized, transdisciplinary* forms of universality – 'semiology', for example, or 'Lacanian psychoanalytical theory', or most generally, 'structuralism' as a *new kind* of transcendental philosophy; but also, let us not forget, 'historical materialism' as a wholly new kind of general-theoretical formation.⁴ As such, it is in this conjoint 'holding itself apart' from both philosophy and its own privileged originating domains (linguistics, psychology, ethnology...) that theory posits 'form' – intellectual form; at its purest, a purely differential system of relations – as being in some sense *epistemologically self-sufficient*. It is through this *self-sufficiency of pure intellectual form* that formal analysis becomes open to the project of formalization, in the logico-mathematical sense (as in the hyper-formalism of the French journal of the

³ See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1972.

⁴ Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy After Theory: Transdisciplinarity and the New', in Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, eds, *Theory After 'Theory'*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 19–33, 21. The idea of structuralism as a new transcendental philosophy derives from Deleuze. Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?' (1967/72), in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, trans. Michael Taomina, pp. 170–192.

1960s, *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, for example;⁵ or the mathematizations of the later Lacan and middle period Badiou); and thereby becomes philosophically 'formalistic'. Insofar as it has a 'morphological' aspect (the *October* term for the later Greenberg's aesthetic formalism),⁶ such formalism is *diagrammatic*: subject to representation by 'icons of relations' (Pierce's semiotic definition of the diagram). As we shall see, in its fondness for Greimas's structural semantics – his use of Klein group diagrams, in particular – Rosalind Krauss's work marks the displacement of formalism from the aesthetic to the theoretical field, within her own development, with a trace of morphological continuity.

Structuralism is a formalism, for sure, indeed, ironically more of a formalism than Russian Formalism, since it pertains to 'the organization of the total sign-system'.⁷ In Althusser's phrase from his 1974 'Elements of Self-Criticism': structuralism is a 'crazy formalist idealism' because it projects the production of the real out of a combinatory of elements. (Althusser himself confesses in this text to the 'deviation' of formalism in his work of the early 1960s, but *not* to being a structuralist.

"[W]e were never structuralists", he insisted in 1974, on behalf of his group: "we were never structuralists... *we were Spinozists*" – which is a whole different kettle of fish.)⁸ In the language of the time, one might say that it was part of the aspiration of the *October* journal that the move from Greenberg to Krauss (*Artforum to October*) represents an 'epistemological break' in the early Althusserian sense. Much ink has been spilt over the Althusserian concept of the 'break' or rupture. But as Althusser himself came quite quickly to see, the real problem was less the concept of the break itself than 'the idealist connotations of *all epistemology*'⁹ [p.124, note 19] – a position he shared with Adorno. This remains the case today. Form is opposed here, in his self-criticism, by Althusser neither to 'content', nor to 'matter' (nor to the 'referent'), but to *practice*. This should be borne in mind constantly. It is not that there cannot be structuralist practice, a transition from the structuralist concept of the subject to practice (the final section of Deleuze's 1967/72 essay, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?' gestures explicitly towards it); but rather that this practice is restricted to working on the formal variations set down by the logic of the structure itself – which is not what Althusser had in mind when he used the term 'practice'. I will come back to this question of practice at the end.

⁵ Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds, *Concept and Form, Volume 1: Selections from Cahiers pour l'Analyse; Volume 2: Interviews and Essays on Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Verso, London and New York, 2012.

⁶ 'Introduction 3. Formalism and Structuralism', in *Art Since 1900*, op. cit., p. 33.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, op. cit., p. 101.

⁸ Louis Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism' in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Locke, New Left Books, London, 1976, pp 128–9; 131–2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.124, note 19.

First, though, let us briefly recall two paradigmatic formal analyses by Rosalind Krauss, from the standpoint of the problem of formalism, in order to get a more concrete sense of the issues it carries that remain alive, in different forms today: ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, first published in *October* in 1979, and the semantic analysis of ‘the logic of modernism’ as it appears at the outset of *The Optical Unconscious* (1993).¹⁰ I treat Krauss here as the symbolic representative of the French-theoretical trajectory of *October*, and I take *October* to function as a metonym for the reception of French Theory’ in the Visual Arts in the anglophone artworld from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s. These are classic analyses of the application of structural semantics and Lacanian theory, respectively, to contemporary art. As such, they illustrate both the extraordinary power and the theoretically problematic status of the formalism of structural analysis.

Example 1. Krauss on sculpture: The semiotic redemption of a decomposing medium

‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ represents the second stage in the five-stage odyssey of Krauss’s reflections on medium. Krauss travels from the internal transformation of sculpture as a conventional medium charted in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) – “the transformation of sculpture, from a static, idealized medium to a temporal and material one, that had begun with Rodin”¹¹ – (stage 1) to ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ (stage 2), to the recovery of a more differentiated history of modernisms (stage 3 – a more general project of the *October* journal, holding its various theoretical trajectories together), to an acknowledgment of the ‘post-media condition’ (stage 4) and the subsequent project to ‘reinvent’ medium (stage

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, *October* 8 (1979), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1985, p. 276–290.

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1977, pp. 282–3.

5, 1999).¹² In this developmental context, the essay appears less as the affirmation of an expansion of the field, that it seemed to be, and something more like a case study in the theoretical *management* of historical change. Its historical meaning is to be found less in what the analysis itself proposes than in its inadvertent effects in supporting the expansion not of the field in which ‘sculpture’ is located – its topic – but the institutional definition of sculpture itself; and thereby, the ideological reappropriation of all those practices of object-making that were *against* ‘sculpture’ by the idea a *renewal* of sculpture. This was the great reactive victory of artistic tradition in the 1980s (rather than the short-lived revival of expressionist painting, which gained attention at the time). This is perhaps most explicit in the case of Robert Smithson,¹³ but the point is a general one. Let us see how it worked.

The starting point is the Klein group. This a simple structure originally employed in mathematics (also known as the Piaget group, in its social psychological application) and sometimes known as the Greimas square, for the latter’s application of it to semantics – Krauss’s source. Krauss herself calls it the ‘structuralism graph’ (Fig. 1). Krauss was influenced here, I think, by Jameson’s 1972 *Prison House of Language*, in which Greimas appears as playing an important role in re-diagramming Levi-Strauss’s structures from triangular to rectangular forms.

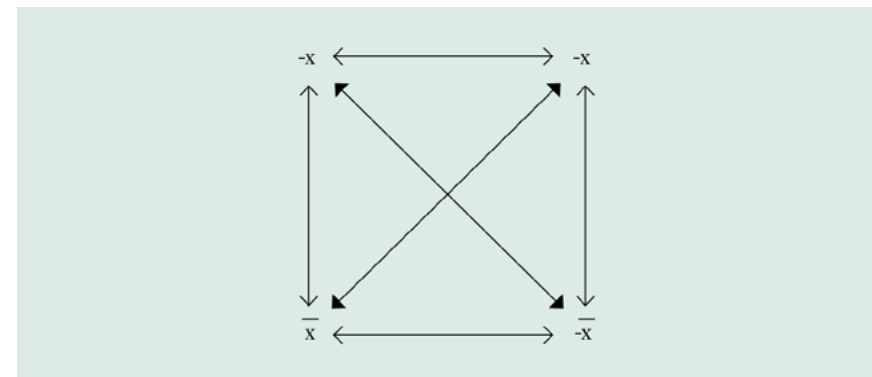


Fig. 1 Klein Group/ ‘Structuralism’s graph’

¹² Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1993; ‘A Voyage on the North Sea’: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1999; ‘Reinventing the Medium’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 289–305.

¹³ See Peter Osborne, ‘An Interminable Avalanche of Categories: Medium, Concept and Abstraction in the work of Robert Smithson, 1966–1972’, in *Cornerstones*, Witte de Witt/Sternberg Press, Rotterdam/Berlin, 2011, pp. 132–151.

(Jameson's influence also appears in the title of *The Optical Unconscious*, which is not an allusion to Walter Benjamin's remark about photography, as one might think, but to Jameson's 1981 *The Political Unconscious*.) The Klein group consists of relations between four terms generated by contrariness (opposition) and formal contradiction – two different types of negation – expanding outwards from a founding term (X). In the case of the structural analysis of the field generating the category of sculpture, sculpture is located within a structure defined by the opposition between landscape and architecture as the point of indifference between 'not-landscape and not-architecture' (Fig. 2). This is both a novel analysis of the categorical status of sculpture as monument (the whole analysis depends on that definition), and an analytical reduction of the remaining possibilities within its field to three basic types, or what might retrospectively be called new mediums: labeled 'site construction', 'axiomatic structures' and 'marked sites'.

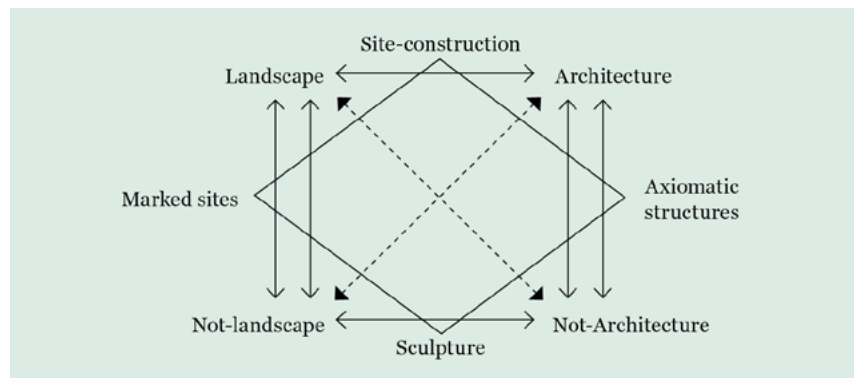


Fig. 2 Krauss's 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field'

The combination of logical simplicity and taxonomic productiveness of the structure of this diagram is extraordinary, especially in the context of the categorical chaos of critical discourse at the time, in response to the multiplicity of new practices of the previous decade (1967–77) – a situation Smithson had described as an 'interminable avalanche of categories'.¹⁴ The structure appears as a 'generative' mechanism: it generates *formal* possibilities. However, the structure of interpretation is clearly grounded retroactively, in the *prior* identification of 'site constructions', 'axiomatic structures' and 'marked sites', as new types of work, which are then 'produced', and so given new formal meanings, in a purely logical categorical form, as an effect of

¹⁴ 'What is a Museum: A Conversation Between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, p. 48.

the founding opposition between landscape and architecture, which sustains the definition of sculpture as 'monument'. This is a powerful interpretative tool, but the outcome of the game is fixed in advance, determined, on the one hand, by the *decision* upon a founding element (X/landscape) and its particular opposite (-X/architecture); and on the other, by transcoding (or in this case, simply selecting) the derivative taxonomical terms from an existing critical vocabulary, which is thereby theoretically redefined. (One could imagine a quite different structural definition of sculpture in relation to the scale of the human body, for example.) Is this precisely the kind of thing that Althusser was complaining about in his 'Elements of Self-Criticism' when he wrote of the 'idealism' of the effect of 'producing the real by a combinatory of elements'?¹⁵ That depends upon how these categories are treated. It is the way in which they are taken up into critical and institutional practices, which is what ultimately determines their status.

What is interesting in this case is the way in which the cultural authority of the traditional term ('sculpture') gradually came to override the new, 'expanded' categorical system, such that by the end of the 1980s, the institutionally legitimated situation was that of a sculptural appropriation of the expanded field itself, with the previous 'sculptural' position reduced to the 'monumental' definition from which it derived (fig. 3). This is largely how it remains today. The term 'sculpture' is wholly restored, in an expanded sense far, far wider than the initial expansion of the early 1970s, recuperated by Krauss in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. The appropriative logic of the institution semantically over-determined the rigid structure of formal possibilities, turning 'sculpture' into a meta-critical term, and exploding the quantitative restrictions of the model, to embrace a more radical multiplicity of practices – just as, theoretically, critics of structuralism had proposed replacing its structural logic with a logic of multiplicity. The Deleuze-Guattari critique of structuralism, for example, broadly corresponds to what Adorno diagnosed as the *increasing nominalism* of artistic production, but in the form of an *embrace* of the entropic crisis of art-critical categorization. Philosophically, however, this apparently 'superior' empiricism (transcendental empiricism) just throws criticism back onto a new version of more traditional categories: ontology of sensation. It is interesting that while a shallow version of Deleuze-Guattarian aesthetics has become hegemonic in some British art schools, it does not appear to have made that much headway in a US art-critical context.

¹⁵ Louis Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', p. 127.

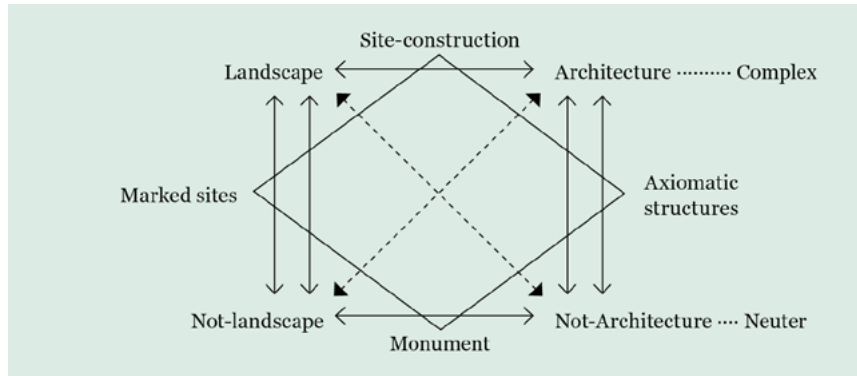


Fig. 3 The Expanded Field of 'Sculpture'

Krauss's subsequent analysis of the optical logic of modernism follows the same model, although 'modernism' here means, restrictedly, *modernist painting, in a strictly Greenbergian sense* – at which point all fundamental critical issues about modernism have already been begged. This is thus not actually about 'modernism' but rather about our understanding of those works that fall within Greenberg's conception of modernist painting. The difference here is that a psychoanalytical dimension is overlaid on the basis of a homology between the Klein group and Lacan's schematization of the structure of the subject. Psychoanalytical theory is thereby used to deconstruct the self-understanding of Greenbergianism. In this instance, Krauss is not concerned with the generation of new categories (post-sculptural objects) through reflection on the points of indifference in the semantics relation between two basic categories (previously, landscape and architecture), but rather with the way in which a practice transcodes particular categories, and thereby transforms the meaning of the structure.

Example 2. Krauss on modernism as a structural logic of vision

The analysis sets out from the relation of opposition between ground and figure that constitutes an illusionistic pictorial space (Fig. 4). It proceeds via the interpretative transcoding of their negations (not-ground and not-figure) by some early paintings by Mondrian from 1914–16 – *Pier and Ocean*, 1915; *Composition in Lines* (Black and White), 1916–17, and *Composition 1916* – to give us a new optical logic, here called 'modernism' (Fig. 5).

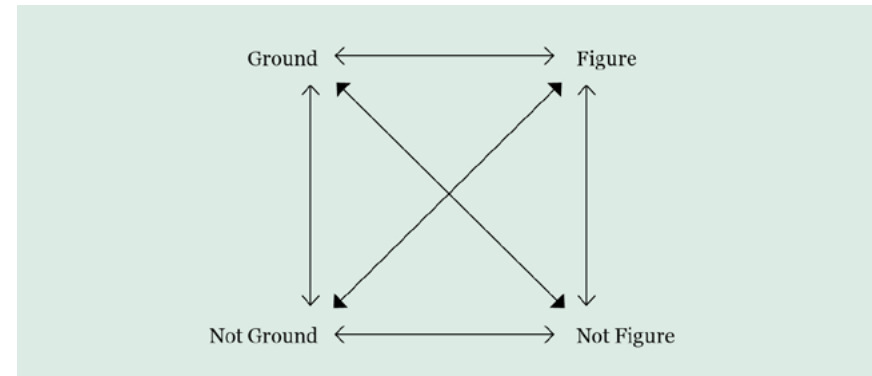


Fig. 4 Pictorial Space (The Optical Unconscious, p. 14)

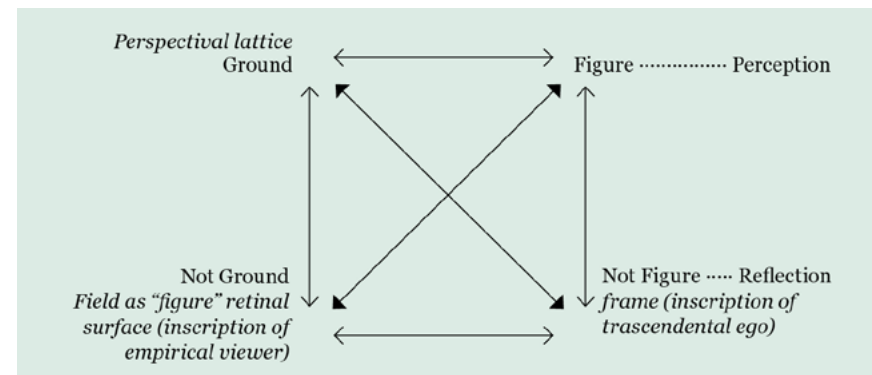


Fig. 5 Logic of Modernism (The Optical Unconscious, p. 20)

This optical structure is then itself transcoded with some of the basic categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Fig. 6), including Lacan's schema of the structure of the subject itself (Fig. 7). Giving us the following concluding, palimpsestic analysis of an 'automatist' modernism (Fig. 8):

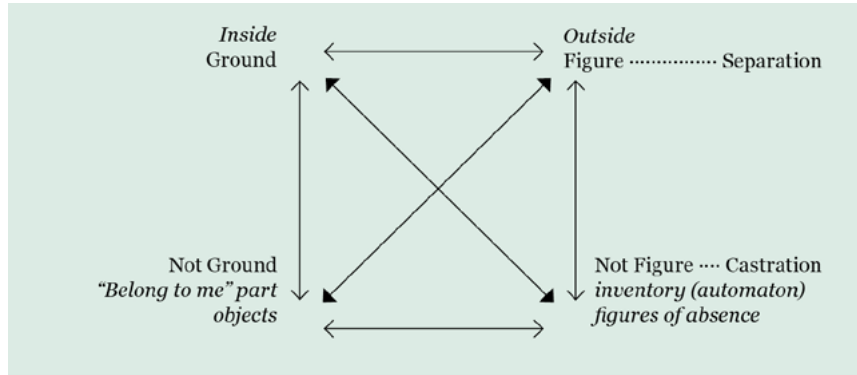


Fig. 6 Psyche-logic of Modernism (The Optical Unconscious, p. 74)

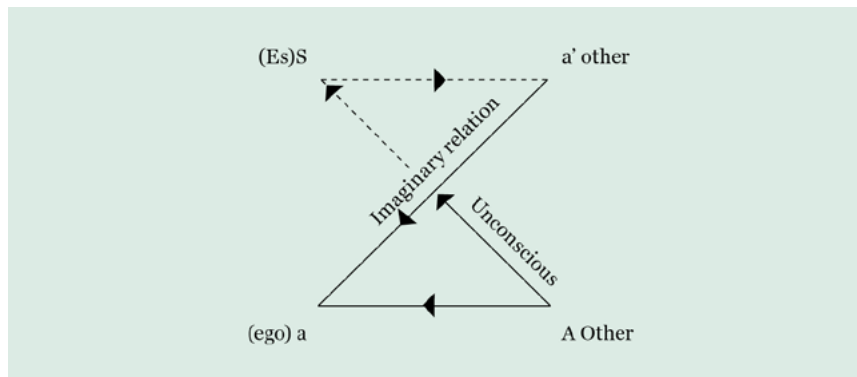


Fig. 7 Lacan's L Schema (The Optical Unconscious, p. 23)

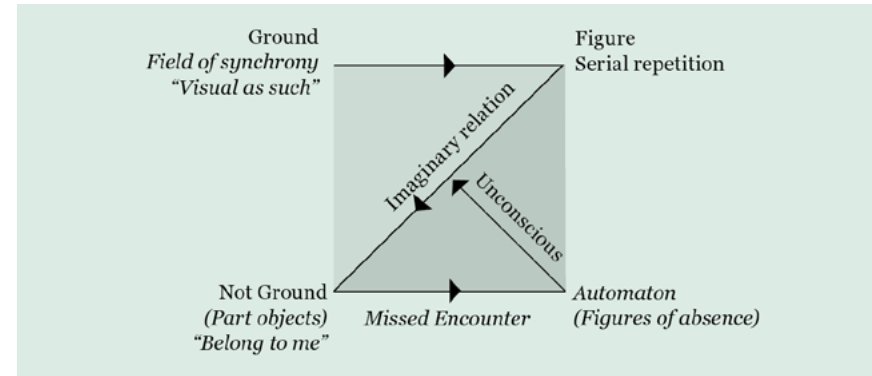


Fig. 8 Automatist Logic of Modernism (The Optical Unconscious, p. 75)

The problem, of course, once again, is not the logic of possibility here – which is indeed exhilarating – but the logic of *exclusion*, the exclusion of more radically experimental multiplicities. As her own formal model of unconscious structural inversion indicates, *Krauss's theoretical formalism mirrors, precisely, the prior limits of Greenberg's aesthetic formalism*. As the family romance of the literary form of the text of *The Optical Unconscious* betrays, in a truly extraordinary symptom, Krauss appears 'uncle Clem's *theoretical unconscious*. 'French Theory' is here well and truly *domesticated*. This suggests that the story of 'French Theory' in the USA is perhaps best imaged, not economically, as a tale of imports and exports, but domestically, as a narrative of domestication.

Reduction, multiplication, pragmatism

Theoretically, the problem of the exclusion of more radically experimental multiplicities is, of course, a new version of structuralism's old problem of the exclusion

of history. This takes us back to my epigram, Roland Barthes's famous motto – “a little formalism turns one away from History, but... a lot brings one back to it” – to which it is necessary to give a new meaning. What Barthes meant by this (I have always presumed) was that the more formalistic the analysis, the more purified of historical contingencies, the more structural the analysis, then the more *fundamental* the categories detected will be, operating submerged beneath the realm of appearances, determining its ideological and unconscious meanings; and the most fundamental of categories would be those of history itself (historical materialism). It is 1957. The context was Barthes's collection of his 'mythologies' and he capitalizes the word 'History'. This Marxist version of early structuralist theoretical optimism (Barthes was basically still a Brechtian at this time) was, of course, not sustainable. Both meaning and historical actuality turned out to be a lot less stable than the semiotic model of ideology-analysis allowed – brilliant though it remains, not just in its simplicity, but in its insight. So where does this leave Barthes's motto? (And how can the *October* quartet continue to cite it affirmatively, as they do, in their third 'Introduction' to *Art Since 1900*, entitled 'Formalism and Structuralism'? One is tempted to say that 'history' has falsified it: that 'a little formalism turns one away from History, and... a lot takes you even further away.' But this would be wrong, I think. For the problem here has as much to do with the simplicity of the concept of history to which Barthes appeals as it has with formal analysis as such. The problem of the relationship of formal analysis to history needs to be reposed, from both sides. On the one hand, there is the under-determination (and hence proliferating multiplicity) of the basic categorical oppositions out of which structures like Klein groups are constructed; on the other, there has been a multiplication of theoretical paradigms through which these structures of practice are transcoded. A lot of formalism does thus indeed 'turn one away' from a lot of history (those aspects of historical actuality not grasped by a concentration on *particular* basic structure). However, if we reflect on this distance from the standpoint of the multiplication of structures of practice and theoretical paradigms that produces it, we see that this theoretical multiplicity models something of the multiplicity of the historical actuality that produces the problem, for any *particular* formal analysis. We could call this reflection 'philosophical' (philosophy is “second reflection” in Adorno's phrase), in order to draw attention to the way in which it is occluded from 'theory' by theory's founding exclusion of philosophy and its history from its formal constitution – an act of insulation that its Anglophone reception has by and large preserved. There will be no 'Elements of Self-Criticism' by Rosalind Krauss.

The character of the problem thus shifts. It becomes that of how we are to conceive and deal with theoretical multiplicity (which, *qua* 'theory', will always remain formalistic, at some level – if not necessarily in a structuralist manner). This is

where the question of practice returns as the question of what kinds of social practice theoretical practices are part of. In the founding, 'heroic' period of French Theory in France, from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, the answer was always ultimately *politics* of one sort or another, which gave practical meanings to theoretical universalities. In the founding period of 'French Theory' *qua* 'French Theory' in the USA, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, it was a mixture of academic and art-institutional practice and politics. In the subsequent period, from the mid 1980s to the end of the century and beyond, it has been by and large exclusively academic and art-institutional practices. This has changed theory's relations to practice, and marks another, broader domestication: the appropriation of French Theory by the dominant US intellectual tradition of *pragmatism*: here, in its degenerative, non-metaphysical (non-Peircean) form – pragmatism as an interest-based management of theoretical multiplicity, with eclecticism as a kind of market-based democracy of theoretical forms.¹⁶ At its most extreme, the principle of critical distribution becomes: 'to each artist their own French theorist' (something of this can be detected in Hal Foster's critical practice, I think). This is the consequence of formalism under particular social and political circumstances. The questions that we face are: just how universal have these circumstances become? And what can be done about them?

¹⁶ Cf. Peter Osborne, “Whoever Speaks of Culture Speaks of Administration as Well”: Disputing Pragmatism in Cultural Studies, *Cultural Studies* Vol. 60, no. 1 (2006), pp. 33–47.

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27. Ana Janevski

'We can't promise to do more than experiment.' On Yugoslav experimental film and cine clubs in the sixties and seventies

28. Peter Osborne

'October' and the Problem of Formalism

Notes

This is the text of a lecture delivered at MACBA on 13 April 2012. An earlier version was prepared for the symposium, 'French Theory in the Visual Arts in the United States between 1965 and 1995', held at Wiels Center of Contemporary Art, Brussels, 11–14 May 2011, organized by the Centre de recherche en théorie des arts (CeRTA) and the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography (LGC), at the Catholic University of Louvain.

Colophon

'October and the Problem of Formalism'

Peter Osborne

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About the author

Peter Osborne is Professor of Modern European Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University London, and an editor of the journal *Radical Philosophy*. His books include *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (1995; 2011), *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (2000), *Conceptual Art* (2002), *Marx* (2005), *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* (2005) and in Spanish *El arte más allá de la estética. Ensayos filosóficos sobre el arte contemporáneo* (2010). He has contributed in catalogue essays to *Manifesta 5*, Tate Modern, 2006 Biennale of Sydney, Walker Art Center Minneapolis, Office of Contemporary Art Norway, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design Oslo, CGAC in Santiago de Compostela, and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León. His new book, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* will be published by Verso in late 2012. He is currently directing a research council project in London on transdisciplinarity within the Humanities (2011–13).

In April 2012 Peter Osborne was invited to give a seminar at MACBA called *Whatever happened to theory II. Periodising Contemporary Art* (or, *What Happened to 'Postmodernism'?*). Within this context he gave the lecture entitled 'October and the Problem of Formalism'.

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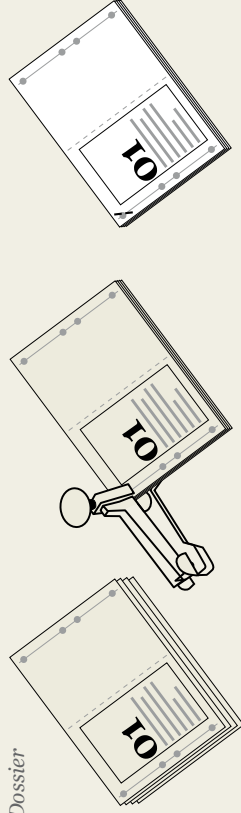
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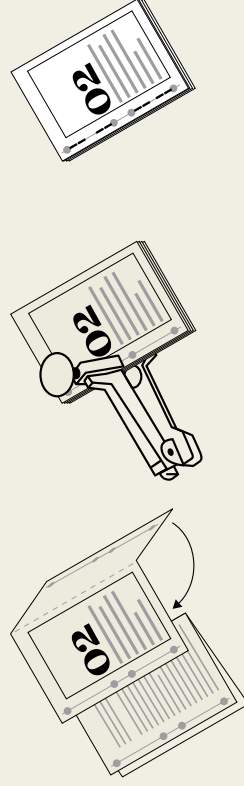
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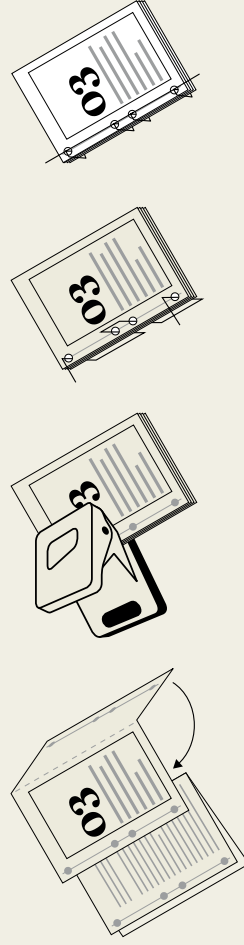
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