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The landscapes of Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne: cradles of Modernism?

Paul Cézanne is often heralded as the artist who single-handedly started the unprecedented paradigm shift in painting that rid art of everything “Classical” and substituted in its place the “Modern.” No such acclaim is awarded to the Impressionists and their quintessential laborer, Claude Monet. In the Modernist account, Monet and Impressionism merely play a transitional role, their greatest achievement being the paving of the road for Cézanne and his followers. The questionable notion of the art historical canon all but bypassing the Impressionists requires a critical examination of the theories of Modernism itself. After all, Cézanne set out on his artistic journey as a member of the Impressionist group, and Monet outlived and out-worked Cézanne by nearly two decades in the twentieth century. An accurate assessment of Monet’s and Cézanne’s role in the conception of that elevated theory of Modernism must steer clear of any dogmatic biases and therefore needs to examine the artists’ relationship to Modernism from a point of view outside of Modernism. This essay strives to map out the different identities Modernism has assumed since the mid-nineteenth century and to examine Monet’s and Cézanne’s relation to those theories through analysis of several of their landscape paintings.

The first critic to use the term ‘modernism’ in reference to the visual arts was Charles Baudelaire in the middle of the nineteenth century. Awed by the major societal

transformations caused by the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent *Haussmanization* of Paris, Baudelaire found the prevalent Salon art in the mode of the “Grand Masters” to be antiquated and inadequate. Arguing that their present age was “no less fertile in sublime themes than past ages,”¹ he called for representation in artistic subject and style of the transient, the fugitive elements of life - in short, the condition of change as witnessed in everyday life. Baudelaire labeled this condition “modernity”, and defined “modernism” as modernity as it applied to painting. For Baudelaire, art was so inextricably linked to the experience of actual life that he proclaimed the domain of painting to be only the set of visible objects that could be experienced directly, bluntly withdrawing the status of valid art from the then dominant genre of mythical history painting. His theory of modernism, then, can be characterized as rejecting the past practices, and by rejecting them on the basis of inadequate subject matter first and style second². It is notable that Baudelaire advanced his ideas about a modern art before such an art existed. Essentially, Impressionism based its values on Baudelaire’s writings and thus the true beginnings of modernism are not to be found in the visual arts, but in literature.³

Given the influence of Baudelaire on the Impressionist movement, it should not come as a surprise that Claude Monet’s painting *Le Pont d’Europe, Gare Saint-Lazare*, (1877, oil on canvas, 64x81cm) fulfills all Baudelairian criteria of a modernist painting. Monet’s choice of subject matter – a vista of a bridge spanning over train tracks behind the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris – could not be more “de son temps”; after all the train is

¹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846: On the Heroism of Modern Life” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 17.

² Baudelaire also asked for an expression of modern themes with modern means. However, a painting executed in the conventional representational style could still pass as a Baudelairian modernist work. Examples include the works of Caillebotte and De Nittis.

³ Clement Greenberg, “Beginnings of Modernism,” *Arts Magazine*, (April 1983): 78.

the quintessential symbol for the Industrial Revolution and the location is clearly identifiable (already in the title) as a contemporary Parisian site. Monet's choice of formal criteria further establishes his work as 'modern': the deliberate cropping lends the depicted scene the quality of a random, fleeting moment. The evanescent aspect of the painting is further supported by the blotchy, obtrusive presence of puffs of steam that obscure any attempt to gain a clear reading of the image. Finally, the obvious, observable brushstrokes echo as a vibration on the canvas surface the movement that is depicted.

In contrast to Monet's momentary glimpse into a contemporary city scene, an early Cézanne painting, *La Route tournante en Provence* (c.1866, oil on canvas, 92.4x72.5cm) offers us a much more timeless and placeless landscape. While objects on the right side of the canvas are generally lighter than objects on the left side, no clear light source is present, making it impossible to pinpoint the painting as representing a particular moment in time. Except for a road that suddenly disappears in the middle of the canvas, Cézanne offers us no manmade artifacts to date or locate the scene further. Finally his large, mass-loaded brushwork renders static even the fickle leaves in trees and bushes (which would have presented a dynamic delight to Monet). Clearly, Cézanne is not interested in capturing the fleeting contemporary moment of modern life. In fact, in the Baudelairian sense of the term, Monet can be declared more of a modernist than Cézanne.

The next defining thesis of modernism comes to us through the criticism of Clive Bell in the first decade of the twentieth century. Again, modernism is defined by a stark break with previous traditions, only that now the theories declared as outdated are those of Baudelaire and the Impressionists. For the new 'capital M Modernism', representation

became irrelevant⁴. The Modernist painting had to distinguish itself not through subject matter, but through *significant form* – a criterion related solely to formal aspects of painterly execution on the canvas. Bell argues that this significant form is the “one quality without which a work of art cannot exist”⁵ – in other words, everything else can be discarded. In contrast to Baudelaire, this conception of Modernism happens as an *a posteriori* response to a change of direction that a new generation of artists had undertaken and for which Clive Bell et al. were now struggling to erect a theoretical foundation. Bell claimed that artists like Cézanne had abandoned the painting of objective optical experience for something altogether new and different, while Monet and the Impressionists were still stuck in their old ways, trapped in a “cul de sac” with nowhere to go.⁶ Cézanne was especially lauded for his new technique – Bell exclaimed him to be “the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form.”⁷ But what exactly was it about his technique that set him apart from Monet?

A comparison between Cézanne’s *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire au-dessus de la route du Tholonet* (1896-98, oil on canvas, 78x99cm) and Monet’s *Summer at Veteuil* (1879, oil on canvas, measurements unknown) shall explore this question. Both artists present outlooks over a rural landscape, where the horizon is defined by a natural elevation – a hill behind the village Veteuil in Monet’s case, Mont Sainte-Victoire in Cézanne’s case. The two paintings register with the viewer as unified compositions first – that is to say that the viewer is made aware of the work as a flat canvas before being

⁴ Clive Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 72.

⁵ Clive Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 68.

⁶ Clive Bell, “The Debt to Cézanne” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 76.

⁷ Clive Bell, “The Debt to Cézanne” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 76.

made aware of what the canvas contains.⁸ In both works then, the highly abstracted brushwork appears to define objects only as a side-effect of its presence on the flat canvas surface (in Cézanne this flatness is more pronounced whereas Monet offers more of a sense of recession in space). While there are obvious disparities in execution - Cézanne uses his strokes to define *masses* and *curves*⁹, Monet focuses more the *reflectance* of objects - these differences are merely the result of the two artists working according to the same technique: both Monet and Cézanne are recording their personal sensation of the direct confrontation with nature. In this light, Bell's discrimination between the two artists with respect to their "significant forms" appears contrived.

To further relate these observations to the theories of Modernism, introducing another Modernist point of view will be useful. In a variation on Bell's definition of Modernism, Roger Fry contends that humans as conscious beings lead a double life, one actual, and one imaginative; and that art is operating solely in the domain of the imaginative and is thus completely autonomous of actual reality. Fry specifies exactly what the distinctions in form are that grant a painting meaning in the imaginative domain: a greater clearness of perception and a greater purity of emotion from what is perceivable in actual life.¹⁰ Clearness of perception (past mimetic representation) is implied for Cézanne, but is explicitly awarded to Monet by Fry: "Monet is an artist whose chief

⁸ The formulation of this tricky concept was adapted from Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in Modern Art and Modernism, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 6.

⁹ Denis argues that Cézanne was incapable of abstracting to two-dimensional shapes, noting that for the artist all forms are *volumes*, namely the sphere, the cone and the cylinder. Maurice Denis, "Cézanne" in Modern Art and Modernism, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 17.

¹⁰ Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics" in Modern Art and Modernism, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 79.

Fry argues that since in actual life we have to be permanently concerned about our responsive actions to sensible objects of the world, we have to focus our perception on the objects most directly involved with us and cannot afford to focus our whole consciousness "upon the perceptive and the emotional aspects of the experience."

claim to recognition lies in the fact of his astonishing power of faithfully reproducing certain aspects of nature.”¹¹ Furthermore, Monet’s focus on reflectance – in the objects themselves and especially in the Water – is Modernist on the most basic level: a projection of the painting into the painting, a dialogue completely enclosed within the confines of the canvas and the domain of pigment.

Cézanne’s professed superiority over Monet has to have its source in the emotional aspect then. However, since both artists derived their forms directly from their subjective sensations of nature, choosing one over the other would mean to raise one particular instance of subjectivity to the level of an objective standard of judgement. Maybe the perceived emotional dullness of Monet was simply a result of the critics having become too accustomed to his visual style four decades after his artistic debut.

Our contemporary understanding of Modernism was fundamentally shaped by the writings of prominent critic Clement Greenberg in the 1950s and 1960s. Greenberg’s conception of Modernism does not present a break with the theories of Bell and Fry, but rather an evolution that narrowed down the defining criteria, while at the same time generalizing Modernism’s applicability from painting to all domains of artistic endeavor. The essence of Modernism for Greenberg lies “in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself.”¹² Art has to become self-critical and self-referential – essentially *l’art pour l’art*. Thus, only art that eliminates from itself all aspects it shares with other arts and solely concentrates on what is unique to its own discipline can be called “pure” art. According to Greenberg, “flatness”, the two-dimensionality of the canvas, is the *single* condition unique to painting. Not only are all

¹¹ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 79.

¹² Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 5.

other effects (like color or three-dimensionality) irrelevant, moreover, concentration on those effects render a work “impure” and thereby disqualify it from reaching the status of art. Visual analysis has thus become a tool of only marginal functionality for Modernists— used for showing the absence of representational practices rather than their presence.

Two late works by Cézanne and Monet, *Arbres et rochers dans le parc du Château noir* (1904, oil on canvas, 92x73cm) and *Corner of the Pond at Giverny* (1917, oil on canvas, 46x32 5/8”) respectively, will demonstrate this point. Both works present outdoor scenes much narrower in scope and much closer to the viewer than the previously discussed landscapes. More so than in the previous images, these two paintings first and foremost assert their existence as abstract marks of paint applied to a flat surface by means of a brush. The patterning of the brushwork inhibits the discovery of a natural scene containing discernible objects to a level of near illegibility. True to Greenberg’s Modernist tenets, these works then are more about the act of painting than about the objects painted. Even so, it is important to understand that for both Cézanne and Monet, the motif was always essential. While the outcome of their work might be abstract, their intentions were genuinely concrete: the principal goal of both artists was the truthful *representation* of their subjective experience of the *object* in the *real world*. In this sense neither Cézanne nor Monet were Modernists in motivation. However, for Greenberg, the artist’s position is irrelevant: that the artist does not realize his own Modernism does not discount his work as Modernist.¹³

Yet, in a way, the theoretical approach taken by the artist is inextricably linked to his work’s Modernist qualities. Both Cézanne and the later Monet produced *series* of

¹³ Clement Greenberg, “The Later Monet” in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984): 41. Also: Clement Greenberg, “Cézanne” in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984): 54.

paintings that interpreted the same subject repeatedly. By working and reworking in this fashion, they not only considered their immediate response to their subject, but also reflected on their past experiences of the same motif as well as the past paintings that resulted from the process. That is Modernist self-criticism at its best. According to Greenberg's thesis then, both Cézanne and the (later) Monet are quintessentially Modernist.

It has been argued that while the theories of Modernism have changed over time, in the examined scope of landscape painting, Claude Monet's work cannot be regarded as inferior to Paul Cézanne's with respect to its Modernist qualities. Given the favoritism with which Cézanne is treated in most Modernist writing (only recently has Monet become subject of some re-evaluation), the validity of the aesthetic judgment passed according to "capital M Modernism" has to be scrutinized carefully. Whereas Modernist theory has certainly enriched the debate about the definition of art and heightened public and critical awareness of painterly form and technique, its contributions to a balanced understanding of the history of art are questionable. Dangers of misrepresentation are inherent in its methodology: because it is a theory of "high art" that seeks to uphold its standards of value, it will choose certain artists and reject others. However, by "[organizing] in retrospective evidence in accordance with [...] theoretical forecasts,"¹⁴ Modernism is in permanent danger of committing the intellectual error of *historicism* – the "neglect or even suppression of evidence inconsistent with the writer's own interests and ends."¹⁵

¹⁴ Charles Harrison, "Impressionism, Modernism and Originality" in *Modernity and Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 166.

¹⁵ Charles Harrison, "Impressionism, Modernism and Originality" in *Modernity and Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 165-166.

More importantly, Modernism may not be suitable at all as a standard a *history* of art can be based on. Since its judgment is purely *aesthetic* in nature, it disregards that artistic work, like all human activity, is a social practice that occurs within a social network specific to a particular place and era.¹⁶ By being part of a society with certain values and practices, the artist cannot help but reflect upon these conditions in his art— he simply does not know how not to. From this perspective, Baudelaire’s initial requirement of modern painting to be “of its time” appears as a more appropriate measurement of artistic value.

¹⁶ Howard S. Becker, Art Worlds, (University of California Press, 1982): 1.

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