

The Phenomenology of Modern Art

Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style

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1) The Thematic and Scope of the Book

As a philosophical approach, phenomenology is by nature concerned with structure in how phenomena are experienced. The present work, accordingly, adapts phenomenological insights so as to explain the significance of style in modern art – most notably Impressionism, Expressionism, Cezanne and Cubism, Duchampian conceptualism, and abstract art.

However, my book explores this thematic in a new way. In terms of scope, it is a philosophical work, but one that addresses specific visual artworks and tendencies in much more detailed terms than most other philosophical works studies of the visual arts. It also introduces a new methodology - *post-analytic phenomenology*.

This method is not content to simply relate a few attractive insights from selected thinkers to selected modern works. Rather, it relates theory to modern artistic practice through a sustained *analysis* of the relevant thinker's ideas. Equally

important, it is willing to engage critically with those ideas – to show their scope and limits - and, to *develop* them in a more viable form, or offer alternatives to them.

It is this more critical, post-analytic orientation, that allows the present work to make use of some unexpected phenomenological resources. Gilles Deleuze, for example, is not associated with phenomenology, and is often quite critical of it. However, his book ***Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*** (Continuum, 2003) has an *overriding* phenomenological orientation through its focus on how Bacon's and other works of modern art appear.

Deleuze's thought is, of course, often applied, and commented on. It is much rarer for him to be analyzed in close, step by step terms. But such analysis is vital. For – in spite of all its brilliance - *Deleuze's theory of painting is riven by unwarranted hierarchies and essentialist distortions.*

The present work begins by exploding these hierarchies through detailed exposition and critical analysis. Through this, Deleuze's important phenomenological insights are made available on a freer basis, as the starting point for the understanding of style in modern art, and for use in other Chapters.

The book goes on to develop arguments found in two other thinkers – Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty. (Nietzsche's theory of art is especially useful in the understanding of Expressionist tendencies, whilst Merleau-Ponty is of great worth in the understanding of Cezanne, and abstract art.)

Now, for a phenomenology of modern art to be convincing, it must also be able to negotiate alternative philosophical approaches. The most significant of these arises from twentieth-century critical appropriations of Kantian ideas.

The middle Chapters in this work, therefore, addresses those figures and tendencies in relation to whom the Kantian interpretations have been most influential. (namely, Cubism, Duchamp, and the theory of modern painting in general). This interpretative tradition, however, is severely limited, and its shortcomings are demonstrated through both critical analysis and phenomenological description of specific works.

Finally, I offer a sustained and detailed analysis of that most characteristic deep modern art tendency – abstraction. Again, I start from ideas in Deleuze as a point of orientation but go beyond them, in much broader directions. In the course of this, I offer what is – as far as I know- the first sustained analysis ever made of the phenomenological significance of theoretical work by the great abstract expressionist painter Hans Hofmann.

All in all, then, the book offers the first sustained phenomenological approach to modern art, and does so on the basis of a new approach that can draw upon an unusual selection of thinkers.

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7) Individual Chapter Outline

My Introduction explains the importance of a phenomenological approach to modern art, and sets out four of its commonly remarked upon stylistic features. The approach is then described in more detail, and the Chapter structure set out.

Chapter 1 considers Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon and modern painting, at great length. It argues that his essentialist and hierarchical approach, and 'grand narrative' of modern painting is extremely problematic and has to be criticized systematically. However, Deleuze's notions of 'diagram' and the 'body without organs' have further potential. Indeed, his approach is exemplary in its insistent attentiveness to painting as both visual phenomenon and physical medium.

In Chapter 2, an alternative account of the origins of modernism and the avant-garde in the visual arts, is proposed. The analysis converges on the notion of ontological reciprocity (a concept I derive from Merleau-Ponty, mainly). This is a factor whose historical transformation in visual art is profoundly implicated in the rise of visual modernism from Impressionism onwards.

The next two Chapters employ phenomenological insights to address the stylistic meaning of specific painters or artistic tendencies.

More specifically, Chapter 3 outlines Nietzsche's philosophy of art as found (primarily) in the notes contained in *The Will to Power*. It is argued that this philosophy is highly amenable to the ratification of such features as the overcoming of 'finish' and the constraints of aesthetic and moral propriety. I then consider how the theory illuminates those recurrent idioms of modern art called 'Expressionism'.

In Chapter 4 Merleau-Ponty's general theory of painting is introduced and explained. The special importance that it assigns to Cezanne is then investigated. I show, however, that the perceptual effects he ascribes to Cezanne can only be justified as a development of one of the four stylistic features of modern art that his account does not do justice to – namely the emphasis on planarity.

The arguments in Chapter 5 centre on the interpretation of Cubism. Here, I introduce a discussion of Kantian criteria for understanding this tendency, and, on the basis of both analysis, and a phenomenology of specific Cubist works - by Braque and Picasso - show the general inappropriateness of such criteria. (Ideas from Deleuze are deployed in this context.) I go on to consider why the Kantian approach has been so influential, and then broach some more general principles for the interpretation of visual art.

Chapter 6 continues the critique of Kantianism, but in an unusual way. I begin by noting the significance of Duchamp – an artist whose importance is conceptual – as the creator of works whose main elements were not physically created by himself.

This seems either to eliminate the notion of style, or to displace it to the realm of choice and conceptualization, alone. The meaning of Duchamp's choices, and the relevance of Kantian ideas in this context, are then explored through a critique of Thierry de Duve's book *Kant After Duchamp* (MIT Press, 1996), and then a consideration of more recent art practice.

In Chapter 7, I continue my critique of Kantian analyses of modern art by offering a detailed analysis of Clement Greenberg's attempts to explain the planar emphasis of modern art, on the basis of a supposed Kantian 'infra-logic'. I argue that, amongst other factors, Greenberg does not negotiate the significance of individual style.

Having negotiated, critically, the alternative Kantian approach to Modern art, I return in my last Chapters to the phenomenology of style, as such. Specifically, I address a tendency that is unique to Modern art, namely abstraction.

As a starting point for this, in Chapter 8, I look again at Deleuze's theory of painting, and the ontological basis of the distinction between 'abstraction' and '*art informel*' which, for him, is fundamental to abstract art. I criticize Deleuze's continuing unwarranted hierarchies and essentialism, but extract from these, an important clue to the meaning of abstract art, as such.

This clue is explored in Chapter 9, through a very extensive development of ideas from Hans Hofmann, and Merleau-Ponty. The theory of modern art so developed, is one that does justice to what is distinctive about the meaning of abstract works, *qua* abstract. I end with a few remarks concerning the trajectory of this book, as a whole.