

A Comparative Study of Form in the Modern and Postmodern Eras

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of art, the concept of form has consistently been regarded as crucial in assessing works of art. The current research seeks to analyze the concept of form during the modern and postmodern periods using a descriptive-analytical approach in order to identify the standards for evaluating works based on form and to investigate the development of form and its features in these periods. The findings suggest that in modernist works, form was depicted as an independent and refined structure, whereas in the postmodern period it has evolved into a multifaceted, intertextual, and polyphonic network. This implies that the visual aspects of the artworks, which have been shaped by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, now prioritize the simplicity of modernist design and the interpretive significance of postmodernism. Moreover, the connection between form and history is noticeably distinct in the two eras. During modernism, the progression of art history followed a straightforward and advancing path, whereas in postmodernism, numerous storylines and cultural influences have taken its place.

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Introduction

"Form" holds a significant position in art history as a fundamental concept that plays a crucial role in organizing structure and connecting the means to the meaning of a piece of artwork. In contemporary times, the shape of a work was frequently viewed as a reflection of the work itself and a standard for assessing its artistic worth. Through emphasizing the qualities and autonomy of form, artists of the modern era aimed to distinguish their creations from outside influences and societal stories, instead finding artistic merit in the inherent design of their works. In the postmodern era, the idea of form is used for referential games, reproduction, and representation. This change reflects structuralist and poststructuralist theories on art analysis, which view artistic meaning and value as fluid and constructed through interaction with texts, culture, and the audience.

Form in modern art

The concept of formalism in contemporary art focuses on the idea that the form of a work of art is self-contained and separate. Clive Bell and Roger Fry introduced the initial form of formalism in the early 1900s. Bell argued that the aesthetic experience when engaging with art is not dependent on the subject matter, but rather on the interplay of lines, colors, and shapes within the artwork. According to Bell (1914), art is defined by the organization of forms rather than the specific content being portrayed. Fry also stresses the same idea and believes that aesthetic experience is separate from the meaning and social purpose of the artwork (Fry, 1919). The value and significance in this method come from the arrangement of visual elements within the artwork, rather than from any external subject matter. The Formalists, who held this view, argued that art should not aim to depict or narrate anything, but rather strive to elicit a pure and aesthetic experience by harmonizing visual components like color, line, shape, and space.

In the middle of the 20th century, formalism theory became more organized thanks to Clement Greenberg's writings. Greenberg believed that modern painting should emphasize aspects like the flatness of the canvas, color, and composition that set it apart from other art forms. He believes that paintings become more pure in terms of media when they distance themselves from literary or sculptural influences (Greenberg, 1960).

The concept was articulated in the artworks of artists like Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and Mark Rothko. Mondrian utilized basic geometric shapes and primary hues to represent an inherent, universal structure, whereas Rothko's compositions featured expansive areas of color that evoke a spiritual and contemplative sensation devoid of external storytelling or visuals. In both instances, the form serves as the meaning rather than a method of conveying meaning.

Form from the perspective of postmodernism

Postmodernism can be seen as a direct reaction to modernist ideals, particularly the concept of formal purity and the autonomy of art. While modernism believed in the self-sufficiency and self-referentiality of the artwork, postmodernism challenged this autonomy, demonstrating that no “form” exists in a vacuum; rather, every form derives meaning within a network of texts, references, and cultural and historical contexts (Lyotard, 1979).

In the 1970s and 1980s, theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson spoke of the crisis of grand narratives and the collapse of the concept of a single truth. Lyotard argued that with the end of grand narratives, no single intellectual or aesthetic system could dominate art and culture in the postmodern world. Consequently, postmodern art, instead of seeking authenticity or purity, turned toward plurality, polyphony, and play with levels of meaning (Lyotard, 1979). In this context, “form” is no longer an intrinsic carrier of meaning; rather, it becomes part of an intertextual network that references other forms, images, and prior narratives. Fredric Jameson termed this condition the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” characterizing it by features such as pastiche, depthlessness, and the erosion of the boundary between high art and popular culture. According to Jameson, postmodernism pulled art away from the depth of meaning toward the surface of signs, transforming form into a free play of signs within the system of cultural consumption (Jameson, 1991).

This shift in perspective is clearly visible in the works of Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton. Warhol, by repeating images of consumer culture (such as Campbell’s Soup cans or Marilyn Monroe’s face), erased the boundary between “artistic form” and “industrial form.” Here, form no longer signifies authenticity; instead, it represents the endless repetition and reproduction of signs—a form that derives its meaning from representing things circulating within media culture (Warhol, 1980).

On the other hand, Jean Baudrillard, with his concept of “simulacra,” demonstrated that in postmodern society, representations replace reality itself. In such conditions, form is no longer a tool for reflecting reality but becomes the constructed reality itself; what is seen is merely a “simulation” of reality (Baudrillard, 1981). In other words, postmodernism erases the belief in the distinction between form and content, or sign and meaning.



Figure 1. Andy Warhol, Campbell Soup I: Chicken Noodle, 1968, color screenprint on paper, 88.9 × 58.7 cm.

Consequently, while modernist artists sought to purify the medium from external impurities, postmodernism turned this very mixture and hybridity into a source of creativity. Postmodern artists, utilizing intertextuality, references to art history, collage, irony, and play, created a form that, instead of relying on coherence and purity, is grounded in fragmentation, diversity, and polysemy (Hutcheon, 1989).

Characteristics of Form in the Modern and Postmodern Eras

As mentioned, in the modern era, form was regarded as a pure and pristine structure, whereas in the postmodern era, it transformed into a realm of intertextual play, polyphony, and referentiality. This shift in perspective can be explained by examining four core characteristics: self-referentiality, medium purity, intertextuality, and polyphony.

Self-reference

In the modern era, a defining characteristic of form was its tendency toward self-referentiality. This means that instead of representing the external world, the artwork refers to itself and its own internal structure. As Greenberg (1960) articulated, modern art gradually became more “self-conscious,” striving to reveal the “intrinsic properties of its own medium.” Painting was no

longer tasked with imitating reality; rather, it had to display the “essence of painting”—namely, flatness, color, texture, and the process of seeing.

This self-reference is also evident in modern literature; for instance, in the works of Joyce or Proust, the text speaks about its own writing, and the narrative form itself becomes the subject. Such a tendency signifies aesthetic introspection and the pursuit of art’s independence from the external world.

Medium Purity

From the perspective of modernist theorists, each art form must focus on its own specific medium-purity properties. In this regard, Greenberg argued against the imitation of one art form by another. Consequently, modern painting moved away from the illusion of three-dimensional depth and narrative, turning instead to the flat canvas, pure color, and abstract form (as seen in the works of Mondrian and Pollock). In music, composers like Schoenberg followed the same logic of “medium purity” by discarding traditional harmony and focusing on pure sonic structure. This perspective aligns fundamentally with the idea of the autonomy of form from content: form is treated as a self-sufficient reality that derives its meaning and value from within itself, rather than from representing external reality.

Intertextuality

In opposition to modernist purity, postmodernism dismantled the closed boundaries of the artwork through the concept of intertextuality, first introduced by Julia Kristeva. In the 1960s, inspired by Barthes and Bakhtin, Kristeva asserted that every text is a “mosaic of quotations”; no text is created in a vacuum, but rather exists in an endless dialogue with other texts, signs, and discourses (Kristeva, 1980).

In other words, in postmodernism, the artwork does not refer to itself but rather to other texts and cultural signs. Postmodern artists employ quotation, appropriation, repetition, and pastiche to construct meaning. For instance, in the works of Sherrie Levine or Cindy Sherman, the original image is reproduced to challenge the concepts of “authenticity” and “artistic ownership” (Hutcheon, 1989). In such a context, form is no longer pure but emerges from the intersection of multiple cultural and textual layers; meaning is generated through the interaction among these texts, rather than within a closed structure.

Polyphony and polyphonic representation

The concept of polyphony was first introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels. According to him, in polyphonic works, diverse voices and conflicting viewpoints coexist without being resolved into a single unified narrative (Bakhtin, 1981).

This idea expanded within postmodern art and culture, becoming a foundation for representing cultural and identity plurality. Unlike modern narratives, which centered on a single “central voice” (such as the author’s or an omniscient narrator’s), postmodernism, by breaking from the center, opened space for marginal voices, minorities, and alternative interpretations.

In the visual arts, this polyphony manifested through the blending of styles, the fusion of traditional and modern elements, and the simultaneous presence of contradictory signs. Postmodern form moved away from modernist coherence, evolving into a composite of diverse voices, styles, and narratives.

Consequently, form in postmodernism shifted from a “closed and pure structure” to an “open network of references and voices.” This transformation reflects the transition from the modernist logic of unity to the postmodern logic of plurality and discourse.

Evaluation Criteria: Pure Aesthetics and Formal Fluidity

In art history and aesthetic theory, a fundamental shift occurred from modernism to postmodernism regarding the criteria for evaluating artworks. While modernism valued works based on “pure aesthetics” and formal autonomy, postmodernism replaced these with “formal fluidity,” “plurality of interpretations,” and “openness of meaning.”

Pure aesthetics in the modern era.

The foundation of modern aesthetics rests on the idea of art’s autonomy, emphasizing the work’s independence from social, ethical, and political contexts. This concept originates in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy. Kant defines beauty as a “purposiveness without purpose,” meaning art should not serve an external goal (moral, religious, or political) but should arise solely from its internal form and harmony (Kant, 1790). As Gimpel argues, every art form must seek purity and highlight its own inherent and medium-specific qualities. Within this framework, artistic value derives not from meaning, content, or social message, but from the internal quality of the form and the harmony of its parts with aesthetic principles.

For instance, painting should focus on the flat surface of the canvas, color, and form rather than imitating reality or narrative; in music, value lies in the purity of sound and melodic structure; and architecture emphasizes material honesty and geometric order. Thus, the criterion for evaluation in modernism is internal, formal, and aesthetic: each artwork is judged by its own internal formal laws, not by its function or meaning.

According to Adorno, modern art, by distancing itself from the external world, creates the possibility of critiquing that world from within (Adorno, 1970). This ultimately leads to a form of aesthetic elitism, as such art is often difficult for the general public to understand and remains detached from everyday life.

Formal fluidity in the postmodern era.

In contrast, postmodernism, by rejecting aesthetic purity and autonomy, shifted the criterion of value from the internal form to the process of meaning-making, cultural context, and audience interpretation. Form is no longer a fixed, pure structure; rather, it is fluid, hybrid, and context-dependent.

Jean-François Lyotard (1979), in *The Postmodern Condition*, explains that in the postmodern era, there is no longer a single, universal criterion for the “beautiful” or the “valuable.” Instead, artistic value emerges from the play of differences and the plurality of narratives.

Instead of “pure aesthetics,” postmodernism arrives at an aesthetics of plurality and openness. In this view, the artwork becomes a platform for dialogue among diverse discourses and interpretations.

The postmodern artwork is an “open work”; its meaning emerges through an endless interaction between signs and the reader, rather than within a closed formal structure (Eco, 1962).

Consequently, the criterion for evaluating a postmodern work lies not in “coherence,” but in its flexibility and capacity to generate diverse meanings. Form can be multimedia, intertextual, and hybrid; its value resides in its potential for dialogue with other texts and contexts, rather than in structural purity.

In this context, even beauty becomes a relative and cultural concept; a work may not be “beautiful” in the traditional sense, yet hold significant discursive or critical value. For instance, the works of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst derive their worth from their critical engagement with consumer culture or mortality, rather than from conventional formal beauty.

Consequently, the shift from pure aesthetics to formal fluidity reflects a move from aesthetic absolutism to cultural relativism. In postmodern art, form is no longer the ultimate criterion of value; rather, it serves as a platform for meaning reproduction and reader participation in the interpretive process.

One of the key examples for understanding modernist form is the work of Piet Mondrian, particularly his painting *Red, Blue, and Yellow*.

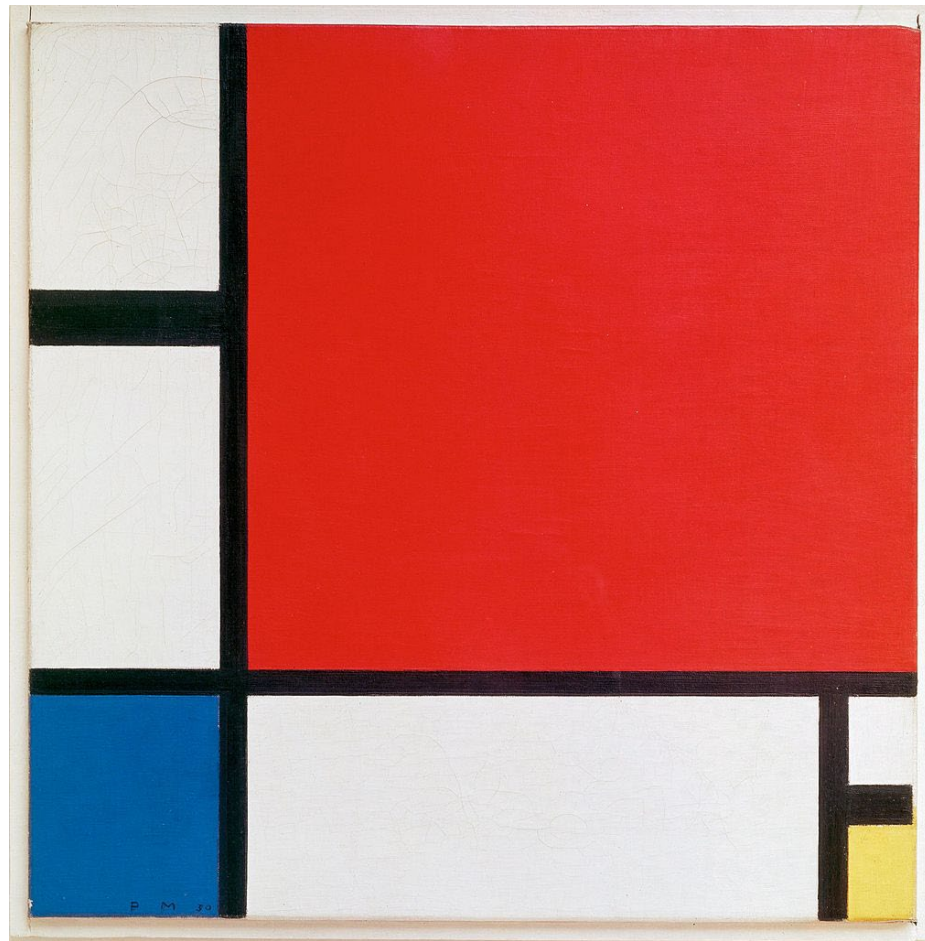


Figure 2. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1930, oil on canvas, 46 × 46 cm (Kunsthaus Zurich).

In this work, Mondrian employs a grid of vertical and horizontal black lines alongside primary colors (red, blue, yellow) to achieve a universal order and visual purity. Here, form is not a tool for representing the external world, but rather an expression of the internal, abstract structure of cosmic order (Mondrian, 1937). This piece embodies the modernist formalist perspective: each medium must remain faithful to its inherent qualities. In painting, these are the “flat surface” and the “combination of color and line,” not the representation of external reality. Consequently, by eliminating perspective, volume, and shadow, Mondrian attains a kind of “medium purity,” where form refers to itself, and meaning emerges from within the visual structure of the work.

Another example is the works of Mark Rothko from the 1950s. In paintings like *Orange and Yellow*, form transforms into large, floating color fields that evoke a pure spiritual experience. Unlike narrative artists, Rothko sought “pure feeling” through form and color. Thus, modernist form, by shedding external signs, enters the realm of introspection and aesthetic purity (Greenberg, 1961).



Figure 3. Mark Rothko, Orange and Yellow, 1956, oil on canvas, 231.2 × 180.4 cm, Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York.

In contrast to the modern era, postmodern artists, by breaking down the boundaries of media, history, and style, transformed the concept of form into a realm of play and mutual reference. A prominent example of this tendency is Richard Hamilton. This work, one of the earliest Pop Art collages, combines advertising images, magazine cutouts, and elements of consumer culture to achieve an intertextual form; a form constructed from thousands of visual signs that derives meaning through references to popular culture and art history. Unlike Mondrian or Rothko, form here is no longer “pure,” but rather contaminated by history, media, and ideology (Foster, 1985).



Figure 4. Richard Hamilton, what makes today's homes so different and so appealing? 1956, collage, 26 × 24.8 cm.

This collage is one of the symbols of postmodern art, effectively demonstrating intertextuality, references to popular culture, and play with form.

This same feature can be observed in David Salle's works from the 1980s. His paintings combine unrelated images, visual layering, and references to both classical and modern art. In *Sextant in Dogtown* (1987), Salle creates a form of visual polyphony by juxtaposing images of the human body, animals, and historical paintings, aligning with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of textual polyphony. In these works, form no longer carries unity but rather reflects the plurality of meaning and the decentralization of the subject—key components that fundamentally define postmodern identity (Jameson, 1991).



Figure 5. “Sextant in Dogtown”, 1987, oil and acrylic on canvas, 244.3 × 320.7 cm (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

In a comparative view, we can say that form is no longer a fixed entity; rather, it undergoes complex interactions within historical and theoretical contexts, which form the basis for analyzing and interpreting artworks. In the modern era, form moved toward abstraction, purity, and self-reference, seeking independence from the external world. In contrast, in the postmodern era, through intertextuality, collage, and the play of signs, it returned to the world, shattering the boundary between “work” and “reality.” While modern form sought to find its essence, postmodern form demonstrated that no such essence exists; instead, what remains is an endless rotation of meaning within a network of historical and cultural references.

Conclusion

Artistic form in the modern and postmodern periods differs fundamentally not only visually and technically, but also in its nature, valuation, and relationship to history and meaning. In this view, form carries the work’s intrinsic meaning and value, maintaining a linear relationship with historical progress—where each new style or school represents the next step in the evolution of form.

In the postmodern era, form is no longer self-sufficient; it becomes fluid, intertextual, and polyphonic. Postmodern works, such as Hamilton’s collages or Salle’s paintings, combine diverse elements, reference pop culture and historical layers, and focus on the reproduction of meaning and audience interaction. Here, form serves as a stage for the play of signs and the plurality of meaning, abandoning the notion of linear progress or a single ultimate goal.

On the other hand, in the modern era, the value of an artwork stems from its aesthetic purity and internal formal coherence. Traditional criteria such as harmony, unity, and medium specificity determine its significance. In contrast, in the postmodern era, value lies in the work's ability to foster interaction, intertextual references, and the generation of multiple meanings. Form can be composite, pluralistic, and impure; its value resides in the openness and flexibility of meaning.

It appears that the transition from modernism to postmodernism coincides with a shift in aesthetic criteria, the relationship of form to history, and the production of meaning. Unlike modernism, which viewed form as an independent, pure, and purposeful entity, postmodernism transforms it into an open, polyphonic, and dynamic stage. This change in perspective is reflected not only in the form itself but also in how it is evaluated and experienced by the audience, as well as in its connection to history and culture.

In other words, form is no longer merely a visual structure but a tool for the play of meaning and multi-layered representation of history and culture. This shift defines the key distinction between the modern and postmodern eras, revealing that postmodern art, unlike modern art which focuses solely on form and structure, places greater value on semantic flexibility, audience openness, and interaction with history and culture.

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