

Discuss these quotations relating to Art and Society :

“ To appreciate a work of art we need to bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to the world of aesthetic exaltation.”

Clive Bell, *The Aesthetic Hypothesis*, 1914, in Harrison, C. & Wood, P. *Art in Theory*, Blackwell, 1992, pp 113-6

“ ... the meaning, nature and history of art are directly related to the meaning, history and nature of society. The prerequisite for the perception and evaluation of contemporary art is an intellect directed at the knowledge of facts and of correlations with real life and all its convulsions and tensions.”

George Grosz & Wieland Herzfelde, *Art is in Danger*, 1925, trans. Gabriele Bennet, in Lucy Lippard, *Dadas on Art*, New Jersey, 1971, quoted in Harrison, C. & Wood, *ibid.*, pp 450-2

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Fig 13, Cézanne, P. (1906) The Gardener Vallier in the Tate Collection, tate.org.co.uk

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What is the relationship between art and society? This essay will examine the content of modernist artworks in relation to form (line, colour, medium) and political engagement.

Before the horror of the Great War in 1911, the English art critic Clive Bell declared...

To appreciate a work of art we need to bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to the world of aesthetic exaltation. (Harrison, C & Wood, P, 2003 p109).

Bell believed that art should not be saying anything about the society we live in. By 1925, Europe was coping with the aftermath of the war and the German painter George Grosz held a very different view. He said...

the meaning, nature and history of art are directly related to the meaning, history and nature of society. The prerequisite for the perception and evaluation of contemporary art is an intellect directed at the knowledge of facts and of correlations with real life and all its convulsions and tensions." (Harrison, C & Wood, P, 2003 p470).

Grosz believed that art should be engaging with society. I will be looking at some of the ideas held by pre war art critics Bell, Fry and Greenberg and the practices of the artists in the New Objectivity movement in Germany after World War One.

Clive Bell and the critic and painter Roger Fry were members of the Bloomsbury Group and the Early British Modernist movement, defenders of the avant-garde. In 1910 and 1912 they organised two exhibitions introducing Cézanne, Van Gogh and Seurat to the British public. 'For Fry, Cézanne was the great and original genius and for Bell he was 'the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form, a person who 'in so far as one man can be said to inspire a whole age...inspires the contemporary movement' - Post Impressionism. (Harrison, C Modernism, p45)

Thirty years later, the American art critic Clement Greenberg once more defended the avant-garde, championing Mark Rothko and Abstract Expressionism, Post Painterly Abstraction and Colour Field Painting.

Bell, Fry and Greenberg strove to explain modern art to the general public. They were proponents of Formalism and developers of the aesthetic theory of Significant Form. 'Formalism focuses on the qualities of colour, brushwork, form, line and composition. The visual aspects are more important than its narrative content or relationship to the visible world'. (Wilson, S & Lack, J. (eds) 2008. p82). Significant Form is a particular combination of these 'qualities' and stir our aesthetic emotions. (Art by Clive Bell, 1914 at <http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancam>). These ideas were developed from the 18th Century European philosophers views of taste and beauty. Immanuel Kant believed that the aesthetic is experienced when a sensuous object stimulates our emotions, intellect, and imagination.' A beautiful object appeals to our senses, but in a cool and detached way and its form and design allows it to have 'purposiveness without purpose', beauty is a 'free play of imagination.' (Freeland, C. 2001 p10)

Bell classed art that used form to suggest emotion or convey information, as 'descriptive'. He stated

Portraits of psychological and historical value, topographical works, pictures that tell stories and suggest situations, illustrations of all sorts, belong to this class ... they may be excellent but as a work of art worthless...because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us. (Bell in Harrison, C & Wood, P. 2003 p108)

Post-Impressionist and Abstract Expressionist artworks varied in subject matter and style. Artists responded to new ideas, techniques and ways of expression and art critics had to explain this avant-garde to the public. Bell and Greenberg's Formalist view that colour, brushwork, form, line and composition were more important than content worked as a common denominator for all and defined the qualities that the artists created in their work.

Working in Provence, Cézanne saw 'nature in terms of coloured touches that follow each other according to a law of harmony... painting is classifying one's coloured sensations.' (Fig 1) (Buck, S. 'et al' 2008 p39) Whilst in Holland, Van Gogh developed a personal colour symbolism in which for example, yellow suggested happiness and optimism. (Fig 2) (Sturgis, A & Clayson, H. 2000 p227) In Paris, Seurat experimented with colour and line to create colour, light effects and emotional responses. He used a palette of pure colour, painting tiny dots of complimentary colours on to a flat coloured background. (Fig 3) (Cunningham, A 2002)

In New York, Rothko explored his own interpretation of space and colour, painting broad bands and luminous areas of colour that seemed to suspend on the canvas. Large subtle, peaceful combinations of yellows, reds, greens and browns overlapped, taking your eye to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the compositions. (Fig 4) (Poli, F. 2008 p49). Morris Louis poured lines of pure colour across the painting, stressing the painting's flatness and leading the eye across and out of its surface. (Fig 5) (<http://www.tate.org.uk>) 'Frank Stella (1936) freed his work from every trace of expression, using painters rollers and limited symmetrical lines' (Fig 6) (Poli, F. 2008 p384). Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) poured and dripped paint onto colossal canvases, layered colours into exciting whirling marks. Pollock described them as 'energy and motion made visible.' (Fig 7) (Graham-Dixon, A. 2008 p502)

These artists make no comment on the social, political or moral issues of their time. They chose calm and peaceful compositions e.g. chair, apples and bottle, nature, relaxed social entertainment and ethereal shapes. They strove to create beauty in their work. Brush marks were visible and they used the paint to shape their work. Their colours are harmonious; light is warm and patches of colour work together. They draw you into their exploratory world of colour, line, and form and transport you 'from the world of man's activity to the world of aesthetic emotion.' (Bell in Harrison, C & Wood, P, 2003 p107).

Eight years after Bell's Post-Impressionist exhibitions, Europe was reeling from the Great War. Germany had been defeated, Emperor Wilhelm II abdicated and a democratic republic was established. The Weimar Republic lasted until Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers Party came to power in 1933. Germany was in an economic recession due to massive war reparations, hyperinflation, no goods to trade and a devalued mark. There was high unemployment and French and Belgium troops occupied the industrial areas suppressing social unrest and workers strikes. The voluntary armies of the Fascists right and the Red Guards of the Communist left clashed violently. Street fighting, corruption and prostitution were endemic. Businessmen, industrialists and capitalists profiteered. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimar_Republic http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_II,_German_Emperor)

This was the reality for the German graphic designer and painter George Grosz. His society was in chaos, anarchic and amoral. In 1916, he painted *Dedicated to Oskar Panizza*. (Fig 8) An endless street of buildings toppling in all directions and a riot of Cubist figures with masks like faces. The neon sign says 'Dancing tonight' next to a coffin. Grosz's explained his modern dance with death as

A strange street by night, a hellish procession of dehumanized figures mills, their faces reflecting alcohol, syphilis, plague... I painted this protest against a humanity that had gone insane. (Wolf, N. 2006 p42)

What a contrast to Bell's and Fry's pre-war England and Greenberg's booming America. For young German artists like Grosz, Dix and Schad, the international art movements along with Brucke, Blauer Reiter and Expressionism had become unrealistic portrayals of their society. Grosz's scepticism of the idealistic concept of the happy, liberated worker undermined his Dadaist beliefs... 'It was complete insanity to believe that 'spirit' or people of spirit ruled the world.'

As their society had changed, so art had to change. In 1925 he wrote, 'There were no more laughing matters, there were more important problems than those of art; if art was still to have a meaning, it had to submit to those problems'.

(Harrison, C & Wood, P, 2003 p467-8)

In the Eclipse of the Sun 1926, (Fig 9) Grosz paints Hindenburg, the German President, in conference with a group of capitalists, one of whom is offering him weapons and railway engine. A blinkered donkey – the German public feeds on the popular press and a prisoner rots beneath an oubliette. In the background the sun is being totally obscured by the dollar on which the German economy, soon to be ruined again by the New York stock market crash depended. (Whitford, F (1997 p16)

In Pillars of Society 1927, (Fig 10)

he depicted the representatives of the ruling class - press publishers, nationalists, monarchists and clerics - as a class of brainless and amoral people and held them responsible for the reactionary spirit, the hypocrisy and warmongering in Germany. (<http://www.moma.org/collection/artist. George Grosz>)

Grosz questioned how artists could ignore change and social problems. In his opinion, these artists

work instinctively and aimlessly, like Nature, which, without visible purpose, gives form and colour to crystals, plants, stones – and everything that exists... the painter is to be nothing but a creator of form and colour... these artists stand silent and indifferent... they work in vain through ignorance and ineptitude. (Harrison, C & Wood, P. 2003 p468).

He felt that their form of art was a lie. How could art create spiritual values when the fabric of society was rotting? 'The shooting goes on, profiteering goes on, hunger goes on, lying goes on; why all that art? Wasn't it the height of fraud to pretend art created spiritual values?' (Harrison, C & Wood, P. 2003 p467).

This is a totally different view to the Formalists.

These German artists replaced this fantasy with reality... 'A feeling of what was down to earth, feasible and real' (Michalski, S. 1994 p15). Art became representational and New Objectivity or Realism was born.

Otto Dix focussed on people, searching out striking personalities from metropolitan society, models from cafes, in the street and his friends. He painted Sylvi the journalist in 1926. (Fig 11) When he saw her he said

I must paint you! I simply must! ...You are representative of an entire epoch! A portrait of you would represent an epoch concerned not with the outward beauty of a woman but rather with her psychological condition. (Michalski, S. 1994 p53/54/56).

Christian Schads, 1929 *Agosta the Pigeon-chested Man and Rasha the Black Dove* depicts deformity and black identity. These subjects were soon to be banned under the Nazi Party. (Fig 12) (Graham-Dixon, A. 2008)

George Grosz's violent anti-war drawings, paintings and photomontages attacked the social corruption in Germany. He drew on his society – the capitalists, prostitutes, war profiteers, Prussian military caste and the middle class, depicting the violent excesses of every day life. In 1925 he said 'My drawings and paintings were done as an act of protest; I was trying by means of my work to convince the world that it is ugly, sick and hypocritical.' (Michalski, S. 1994 p28)

Grosz lived through a very frightening revolution, the rise of the Nazi party, anti-Semitism, political aggression, social oppression, intimidation and mass murder. Despite being prosecuted for blasphemy and insulting the army, he bravely used his satirical paintings and drawings to express 'his despair, hate and disillusionment' of German society (<http://www.tate.org.uk>). He considered himself an aggressive pictorial journalist and said that today's artist 'must give up

pure art' and choose 'between 'technology and class warfare propaganda'. Be an architect, engineer or advertising artist in the army and be part of an organization that develops industrial power and exploits the world. Or be a reporter and critic, a propagandist and defender of the revolutionary idea and stand up and fight for a better society. (Harrison, C & Wood, P. 2003 p470).

Grosz believed that art and society were inseparable. That 'the meaning, nature and history of art are directly related to the meaning, nature and history of society'. He believed that art must expose, it must make you see, think and remember. Art should say everything about the society we live in. (Harrison, C & Wood, P, 2003).

In 1911, Bell had no concept of the Great War to come. By 1925, Grosz had lived through the horror of that war and his society was in chaos. Just 14 years, but a world apart, these artists held totally opposing views. For Bell, art should say nothing about our society and must make us forget. Descriptive art is worthless. Good art is all about form, colour, line and the medium, not the content and it must trigger an aesthetic response in the viewer. Art is about the beauty of the art itself – the sublime. For Grosz, art must say everything about our society and must make us remember. Art is all about content otherwise it is aimless and the artist is silent and indifferent. Art must make you feel the emotion the artists intend and should be used as a savage, satirical attack on the human condition.

These two views personify the changes that the industrial revolution and modernisation brought upon western society at the beginning of the twentieth century. People's attitudes changed towards their perception of nature (Fig13), their society (Fig14) and how they interacted within it. Before the Great War, art was about itself but modernity created a more complex political and powerful arena resulting in two devastating wars and an irreversible change in social values. Artists responded and were driven to create a visual barometer of a pivotal social evolution.



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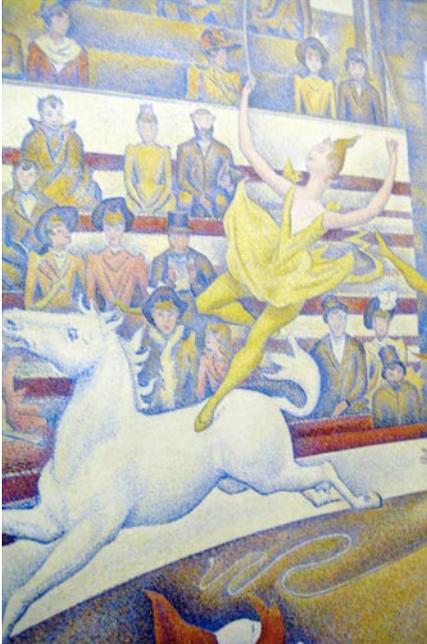


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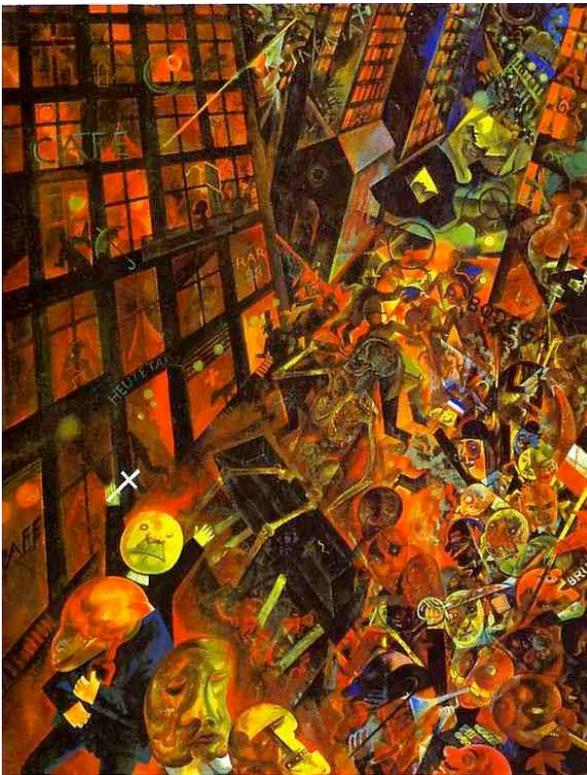


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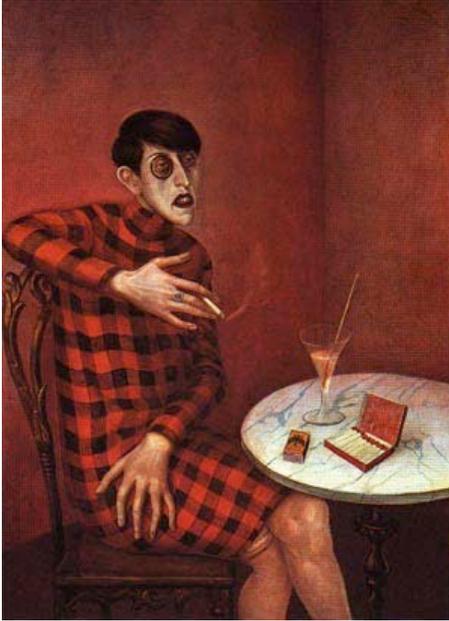


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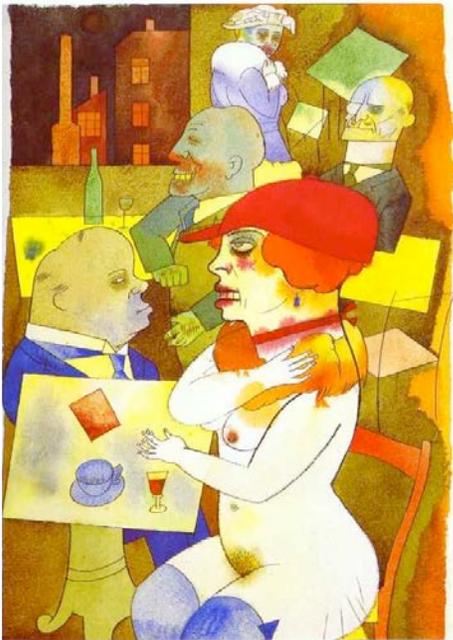


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