

## **Rethinking New Objectivity in Alfred Barr's Chart of Modern Art in 1936** **By Niloofar Gholamrezaei, Ph.D. Candidate at Texas Tech University.**

### **I- Introduction**

Historically, modernism refers to the different artistic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, several sets of definitions have shaped the ways in which one defines modern art<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the most dominant definition of modernism derives from Alfred Barr's catalog, "Cubism and Abstract Art" (fig 1). Barr wrote the catalog for the major exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art", curated by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1936 (MoMA: Cubism and Abstract Art). The show along with the catalogue were meant to present the modern art (MoMA: Cubism and Abstract Art). In the catalog, Barr wrote a concrete history of modernism (Platt, 293). His definition can be considered as one of the first systematic historiographies of modern art (293). In his catalog, Barr identifies the modern art movement as a linear removal from realism toward abstraction (293). According to the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr's narrative "continues to shape the Museum's presentation of modernism to this day" (Cubism and Abstract Art). Therefore, his definition of modernism has been promoted by the MoMA as the definition of modern art and has remained an influential way of defining modernism.

However, such historiography was embedded within certain ideologies and propagandas related to the political condition of its time (Platt, 284). Thus, Barr's notion of modern art contains limitations and problems and needs to be challenged. Among various problems in Barr's definition of modernism is his exclusion of some artistic movements and trends that did not fit his model, or which contradicted his definition of modernism.

New Objectivity, or *Neue Sachlichkeit*, is one of such artistic movements excluded from Barr's chart of modern art. According to Barr, modern art abandoned representation of external objects and moved toward abstraction. The painters associated with the New Objectivity retained the Traditional Western mode of representation of external objects in their paintings. These painters thus contradicted Barr's model of modern art and were consequently excluded from the modern art movements represented in Barr's catalog.

It is important to note that historical events after 1936 reinforced Barr's definition of modernism, particularly the Nazi exhibition of Great German Art Exhibition in 1937. In this exhibition, the Nazis supported Western classical style as a tool of propaganda promoting fascist ideology (Esslinger, 324). Therefore, fascism's support of classical art and hostility to the modern art reinforced Barr's definition of modernism as a rejection of representation and the move toward abstraction (Platt, 290).

In what follows, I re-consider New Objectivity's relation to modernism. In challenging Barr's model of modern art which excluded New Objectivity from the modernist movements, I argue that New Objectivity, in its position as a 20<sup>th</sup> century representational art movement was indeed a modernist trend. Furthermore, the New Objectivity's relation to the classical painting was distinctive with classicism promoted by Nazi fascism in the interwar period. As such, in questioning established understanding of modernism based on Barr's definition, I aim to contribute to an alternative definition of modernism.

## **II- Alfred Barr's Definition of Modernism and His Position Toward the New Objectivity**

American art historian, Alfred Barr, was the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York from 1929-43 (MoMA: Alfred Barr). In 1936, he organized an exhibition of modern art at MoMA called "Cubism and Abstract Art" (MoMA: Cubism and Abstract Art). In the exhibition, he organized about 400 works of art in the way that demonstrated his concept of modern art (Platt, 285). In 1936, Barr wrote his famous history of Modern art in the catalog of the modern art exhibition in which he defined modernism as a linear move from realism toward abstraction.

At the beginning of the catalog, Barr laid out the underlying ideology that shaped his narration of modern art. In this secession, he compared two posters, one abstract and the other one realistic. He titled this section "Contrast-and Condescension" (Barr, 10). According to him, the posters were to advertise the *Pressa*, an international printing show in 1928 Germany (10). The posters reflected the image of Cologne Cathedral and the Exposition Tower, one in a realistic manner and the other one in an abstract way (10).

Barr compared these two images by stating that the realistic images is banal while the abstract one is progressive (10). According to him, the realistic imagery was meant for the American audience in 1928 but the abstract one for German "progressive" audiences (10). At the end of his comparison he mentioned that in 1936, Nazi Germany favored the realistic representation while the American audience was the progressive ones who appreciate the abstract design (10).

Barr's comparison signified to important points in his ideology while writing about modern art. That is, for him, realism was equal to banality, and abstraction meant progress. Moreover, Barr implied that his contemporary America was the host of the modern art by favoring abstraction, and the exhibition was intended to reflect that. On the other hand, Germany stood for the banal and ordinary world of realistic imagery.

Accordingly, for Barr, the show, Cubism and Abstract Art, was the representative of the modern art. Indeed, in the chart and the catalog of the show abstraction was shown as the goal of modernism (Platt, 284). In the chart, he systematically pictured a linear historical evolution of art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from representational forms to formalism and abstraction.

Consequently, in the exhibition, Barr excluded some artistic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that did not fit his model. These included those whose artistic styles and tendencies reflected classical elements or representational art, as these forms contradicted his definition of modernism. Shortly after Barr's exhibition and the publication of his catalog, the Great German Art Exhibition debuted in 1937. This exhibition showed the Nazis interest in Western classical art and their hatred of the modern art. The 1937 Nazi exhibition on German art essentially reinforced Barr's definition of modern art, with the result that more and more people took Barr's definition for granted.

## **III- Nazis Classicism**

The Nordic viewer was to lose track of time, place, and distance (Sandra Esslinger, 324)

During the interwar period, as the New Objectivity artists were incorporating the old tradition of representation into the pictorial space of their paintings, other artists also showed additional tendencies toward Western classical elements. Indeed, after the first World War, different directions of interest in Western traditional art emerged.

One example indicating such interest in classical elements was the Nazis' "Great German Art Exhibition" in the House of German Art in 1937 (Esslinger, 324). The Great German Art Exhibition was intended to show the pure German *volk* culture in direct opposition to the avant-garde art (324). According to Sandra Esslinger, the exhibition tried to present an ideal German identity (324). In its adoption of identity tropes from different times and places in Western history and art, the exhibition intended for the viewer to lose his or her sense of time and place (324). The identity of German art presented in the show was an ideal one (324). The exhibition integrated German folk culture, classical elements, and Catholic ceremonies (321). Esslinger states that the Nazis' ideal form of art was a mixture of "nineteenth-century and Romantic art dominated by Classical styles (324)." Moreover, the Nazi exhibition sought to adopt an art form intended for the masses (324). The Western tradition of representation better matched this intent than the art of avant-garde, which the Nazis deemed more difficult for the popular culture to comprehend.

Notably, the Great German Art exhibition occurred concomitantly with the Degenerate Art Exhibition, which presented the avant-garde art of the time but was intended to depict modern art as inferior to ideal forms presented at the Great German Art exhibition (324). As such, the exhibition was curated and designed to promote Nazi propaganda presenting modern art as a low and corrupted art of "others," necessitating the ideal German citizen's return to the high art of the classical era (337).

#### IV- **New Objectivity and Modernism**

In Europe after WWI, fascist regimes, mainly Hitler's, adopted traditional modes of representation to promote their ideologies and propagandas. In this context, Barr's statement that placed representation in an opposite position of modernism seemed true. Based on such assumption, then, one could conclude that New Objectivity was also not a modern artistic approach. However, in what follows I aim to re-consider such conclusion and propose that the New Objectivity was indeed modern, and was distinct from the Nazis' interest in representational art.

The New Objectivity artistic tendency developed approximately in 1920 (Peters, 27). The New Objectivity emerged in the aftermath of WWI, and derived from an exhibition by the same name in Mannheim, Germany in 1925 (Michalski, 28). However, the movement was not restricted only to Germany, but also developed in other parts of Europe (Peters, 28). The New Objectivity was initially perceived as a part of the Dada movement (27). However, it gradually became a reaction to the radical shifts of modernism and avant-garde in 1910 (27). The New Objectivity's artists responded to the chaotic condition of their time and reacted against contemporary artistic trends, particularly Dada and Expressionism (30).

The New Objectivity reflected a mentality characterized by "skepticism, curiosity, and rationality (30). Often, the theme of New Objectivity paintings reflected the corrupted political and social life of Post-WWI Germany (30). In contrast to Dadaist and Expressionist artists, the painters of the New Objectivity tried to cultivate a stronger and more recognizable relation to reality and external objects (115). Thus, they considered that the traditional Western mode of representation could realize their intentions. In their paintings, they mostly constructed stable and concrete structures, compositions, and clear and detailed representations of forms.

My question regarding the position of New Objectivity within the modernist movement seems to be a problem of definition of modernism. That is, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions that an artistic trend should embody to be considered as modern art? Does the New Objectivity possess such a condition? If we reject Barr's model of modern art, what alternative

definition of modern art can encompass all the broad and diverse ranges of artistic movements and ideas in the 20th century? Interrogating the position of the New Objectivity within the modernist movement invites a reassessment of modernism itself. In challenging Barr's model and reconsidering the New Objectivity, I focus on a particular aspect of modernism: that of *time* in modern art.

Pam Meecham and Paul Wood in their book, *Investigating Modern Art*, explain how life in Europe underwent dramatic changes in the nineteenth century with the transformation into new modern cities and beings (6). Such transformation in urban life became a further concern for artists (6-9). In this context, artists strove to represent modern life in their paintings (7-9). The tendency of representing modernity led to concerns and discussions about representation itself (9). That is, as the world changes, so should the modes of representations (6-11). According to artists of the time, art could not remain the same in a world in which life was rapidly changing, bringing about new and different experiences and ontological understandings of the world (6-11). A significant characteristic of modern art was the shift from representing external objects to instead engaging formal properties and using technical manipulation to present new ontological truth and experience in the modern world (11-13). Such obsession also points to the idea of modernism in Barr's standpoint.

Nonetheless, if we accept Meecham and Wood's arguments, the necessity for the artist to connect his or her present experiences with what was happening in the modern world was the root and cause of the shift leading to the interest in form and abstraction. In other words, formalism, and abstraction initially derived from artists' desire for a spontaneous connection to the experience and representation of modernity and its rapid transformations. Such temporally spontaneous connection, therefore, was a core aspect of modernism, and was a more salient feature of modernism than modern art's tendency toward abstraction. That is, abstraction was just one response among competing alternatives for confronting changing approaches to time. Expression of time in modern art was temporal, in that it required the subject's awareness of her/his position in history or the time and place in which she/he existed. Such awareness, then, effected a particular mode of representation bearing an authentic connection to the context in which an artist existed.

Therefore, modernism's self-consciousness, initially, was not a consciousness of the materiality of the flat canvas, paint, and formal freedom and manipulation as Barr suggest. Rather, at a deeper level, modernism's self-consciousness was an awareness of experiencing a transforming world and finding the proper mode of representation that reflected the artist's need and connection to the time and place in which she/he existed.

As such, I argue that the New Objectivity's connection to the element of time conforms to that of modern art. Contextualizing the New Objectivity in its respective historical context and relation to Dadaism and expressionism illustrates the connection between New Objectivity and modernism.

The New Objectivity immediately followed Dada. Dadaism, a radical shift emerging in the aftermath of WWI, embodied interest in nihilism, attacking and rejecting all established cultural, social, political, and artistic structures (MoMA: World War I and Dada). The word Dada is indeed a nonsense word, and reflected Dada's interest in creating works and signs without meanings or significations for expressing nihilism and the radical rejection of rationality and civilization (MoMA: World War I and Dada).

The New Objectivity, on the other hand, attacked the chaos and radical nihilism that Dada was promoting (Peters, 28). The New Objectivity's critique of Dada and expressionism,

and its demands for order and a more transparent connection to reality indeed reflect the movement's awareness of its historical state. The artists of the New Objectivity consciously chose the Western traditional mode of representation as a response to the changing world around them. Therefore, the painters associated with the New Objectivity, in their historical awareness, chose a mode of representation they believed reflected their philosophy and a particular response to their era.

For instance, the New Objectivity painter, Otto Dix, reflected and protested the corruption and banality of his context (Price,7). His work was initially close to that of the Dadaism, but gradually became more distinctive (7). Comparing his early works with his works associated with New Objectivity reveals the significant shift in his career (fig. 3 and 4). His later works became more linear and reflected forms and shapes in a concrete way. In the painting, *Portrait of the Laryngologist*, one can see his tendency toward realistic and structural representations. While the work shows his influence by old masters' tradition of representation, it reflects his personal look toward the environment surrounded him. The portrait of the laryngologist embodies Dix deformation of the form and is different from the real sitter (MoMA: New Objectivity). The forms in the painting are highly clear as if the artist tried to resist his skepticism about what he saw around him by an over obsession with representing details and his personal observation of forms.

Therefore, based on a historical awareness, the New Objectivity painters criticized expressionism and Dadaism. In other words, they attacked what art had been and they brought an old mode of representation into the light of the present based on a temporally spontaneous connection to their era. They used an element from the past while still distinguished themselves from a classical era and recognizing their position within a historical discourse.

In contrast, the classicism in Nazi paintings does not have such connection to the present time. Indeed, Nazis' classicism is timeless. Elements from the past and perhaps other times, are mixed to create an idea, or an ahistorical ideal being, or identity. The painting, *The Four Elements*, is an example of such art (figure 2). In the painting, there is no sense of time and place. We cannot say where the figures are or who they are. The painting does not reflect the condition of its time and place. It is not meant to make a connection to the German identity or social contexts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, but rather an ideal one that is not gained from breaking from the past but retrieving the "pure" German identity by returning to an imagined past.

Therefore, while both the Nazis artists and of the New Objectivity rejected the aesthetic forms of the dominant modern art of the era, the significant distinction between the New Objectivity and the classical representational tendency promoted by Nazi regime was their respective approaches to time and temporality. A modern subject is defined by his or her awareness of her/his historical condition and breaks away from tradition to move toward a change. The New Objectivity can then be considered as modern art. New Objectivity painters used elements from the past to reflect and to respond to their contemporary condition, unlike Nazi ideological art which in its use of classical elements reflected ahistoricism by attempting to project an ideal identity rooted in an imagined past. That is the element of time differentiated the two and makes New Objectivity a modernist trend.

Artists may bring an aspect of the past into the light of the present based on their contemporary, present, or spontaneous need while recognizing their place within a historical discourse. New Objectivity, then, is an example of such alternative modern art.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the word 'modern' refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> century movement, modernism.

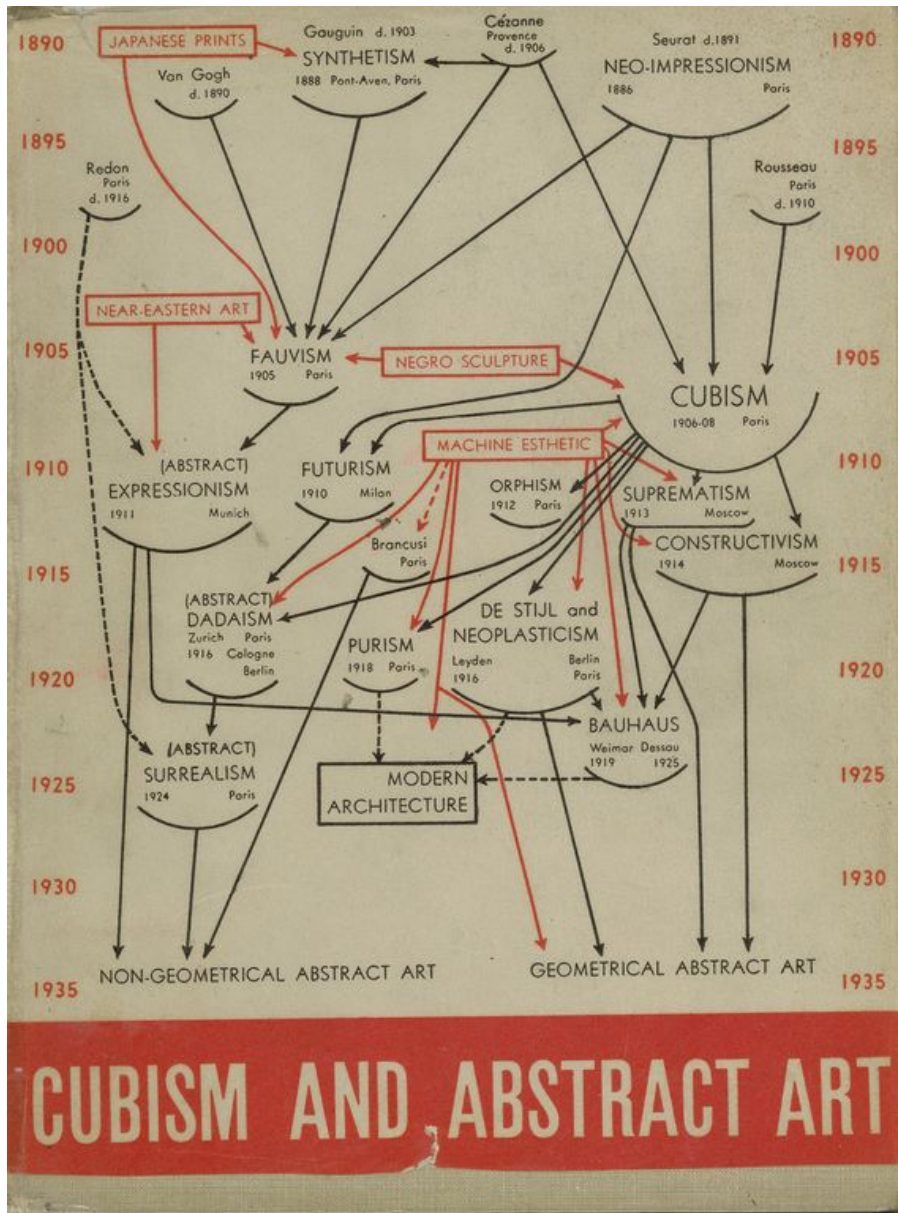


Fig. 1 Alfred Barr, Chart of the Modern Art, Photograph Courtesy, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1936





Fig. 2 Adolf Ziegler, *The Four Elements*, before 1937 the painting was hung above Hitler's fireplace. Photograph Courtesy: cited in The Guardian (Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937 review – What Hitler dismissed as 'filth')



Fig. 3 Otto Dix, *Metropolis* Oil and Tempera on wood, 1927-28

Photograph Courtesy: Cited in Peters, 180



Fig. 4 Otto Dix  
*Dr. Mayer-Hermann*, 1926

Photograph Courtesy: cited in MoMA (New Objectivity)



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