

Modernism and the retreat from form

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The History of aesthetic modernism has often been written as the triumph of form over content, the apotheosis of self-referentiality over the representation or expression of anything external to the artwork.¹ The critical discourse accompanying modernism has likewise been preoccupied with formal issues, whether approvingly, as in the case of writers like Roger Fry, Clive Bell and the Russian Formalists, or not, as in that of most Marxist critics. For the latter, the very term »formalist« became, as we know all too well, a convenient term of abuse, with opponents like Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht ingeniously concocting ways to pin the label on each other.² No less heated has been the discussion, extending at least as far back as Simmel, of the putative links between the formal abstraction of modern life as a whole and its aesthetic counterpart. Modernity, in short, has sometimes seemed coterminous with the very differentiation of form from content, indeed even the fetishization of self-sufficient form as the privileged locus of meaning and value.

In what follows, I want less to overturn this conventional wisdom than problematize it, by pursuing the trail of what can be called a subordinate tendency in aesthetic modernism, which challenged the apotheosis and purification of form. That is, I want to explore what might be called a powerfully anti-formalist impulse in modern art, which can be most conveniently identified with Georges Bataille's spirited defense of *informe*.³ In so doing, I also hope to provide some insights into the complicated relations between modernism, the contest over the hegemony of form, and what I have elsewhere called the crisis of ocularcentrism, the denigration of vision especially virulent in 20th-century French thought.⁴

1. See, for example, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 19; or Suzi Grablik, *Progress in Art* (New York, 1976), p. 85.
2. See the essays collected in *Aesthetics and Politics; Debates Between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*, ed. New Left Review, Afterword Fredric Jameson (London, 1977).
3. Bataille, »Formless,« in *Visions of Excess; Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis, 1985). The article first appeared as an entry in the dictionnaire critique in *Documents*, 7 (December, 1929).
4. Martin Jay, »In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in 20th-century French Thought,« in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (London, 1986: »The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,« *The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric*, ed. Paul Hernadi (Durham, N.C., 1989).

Before entering the obscure and labyrinthine territory of the *informe*, let me pause a moment with the concept, or rather concepts, of form to which it was deliberately counterposed. Although this is not the place to hazard a full-scale investigation of the multiple meanings adhering to that term, it will be useful to recall five different senses that have had a powerful impact in the history of aesthetics.⁵ First, form has been identified with the composite arrangement or order of distinct parts or elements, for example the disposition of shapes in a painting or notes in a melody. Good form has in this sense generally meant proportion, harmony and measure among the component parts. Second, form has meant what is given directly to the senses as opposed to the content conveyed by it, how, for instance, a poem sounds rather than what it substantively means. Formal value in this sense has meant sensual pleasure as opposed to a paraphrasable core of significance. Third, form has signified the contour or shape of an object, as opposed to its weight, texture or color. In this sense, clarity and grace are normally accorded highest honors. Fourth, form has been synonymous with what Plato called Ideas and Aristotle entelechies, that is, with the most substantial essence of a thing rather than its mere appearance. Here formal value has carried with it a metaphysical charge, suggesting the revelation of a higher truth than is normally evident in everyday perception. Fifth and finally, form has meant the constitutive capacity of the mind to impose structure on the world of sense experience. Kant's first Critique is the *locus classicus* of this notion of form, with its attribution of *a priori* cognitive categories to the human intellect. Although Kant himself did not attribute comparable transcendental categories to aesthetic judgement, later critics like Konrad Fiedler, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wöllflin did seek universal formal regularities governing aesthetic as well as epistemological experience.

The modernist apotheosis of form has at one time or another drawn on all of these meanings. Thus, for example, the denigration of ornament in the architecture of an Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier or the Bauhaus meant the holistic elevation of structural proportion and measure over the isolated fetish of component parts. Similarly, the stress on the musical sonority of poetry, typically expressed in Verlaine's famous injunction to wring the neck of eloquence, indicated the apotheosis of form as sensual immediacy over mediated content. The autonomization of line and figure in the abstract paintings of a Mondrian or Malevitch likewise indicated the triumph of contour over texture or color, as well, of course, as over mimetic, narrative or anecdotal reference. In the case of a painter like Kandinsky, the liberation of abstract form was defended in the name of a religious essentialism that evoked

5. Here I am drawing on the excellent essay by W. Tatarkiewicz on »Form in the History of Aesthetics« in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. II, ed. Philip P. Weiner (New York, 1973).

Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysical notion of substantial form. And finally, there has been no shortage of modernist artists who characterize their work as the willful imposition of form on the chaos outside them, and perhaps inside as well.

If, however, much of modernism can be interpreted as the hypertrophy of form in many or all of its senses, there has been from the beginning a counter-impulse within modern art which has resisted it, a refusal to countenance the differentiation and purification characteristic of modernist aesthetics in general. It is important to note, however, that this resistance has not taken place in the name of one of form's typical antonyms, such as content, subject matter or element. It has not provided the materialist antidote to self-referentiality that a Marxist like Lukács so fervently craved. Rather, it has preferred to define itself, if it deigned to submit itself to definition at all, in negative terms, as deformation or, more radically still, as formlessness. Instead of privileging ideal formal beauty, it has sought to valorize baseness and ignobility. In the place of purity and clarity, it has favored impurity and obscurity.

Here, of course, there have been precedents, as the history of the grotesque as an aesthetic concept demonstrates.⁶ But what gives the modernist turn against form its special power is its linkage with a widespread critique of visual primacy, of the ocularcentric bias of the Western tradition in its most Hellenic moods. The link between form and vision has, of course, often been emphasized, ever since it was recognized that the Latin word *forma* translated both the visually derived Greek words *morphe* and *eidos*. Thus, for example, Jacques Derrida has observed in his critique of form and meaning in Husserl that »the metaphysical domination of the concept of form is bound to occasion some submission to sight. This submission always would be a submission of *sense* to sight, of sense to the sense-of-vision, since sense in general is the very concept of every phenomenological field.«⁷ Even linguistic notions of form carry with them a certain privileging of vision. According to the American deconstructionist David Carroll, the structuralism of Jean Ricardou and the Russian Formalists, »stresses the *visibility* of linguistic operations in the determination of the form of the novel. Form is constituted by the visible operations of language at work in the novel – the frame of all frames.«⁸

The link between form and the primacy of vision is most obvious when the term signifies clarity of outline or luminous appearance, but it also lurks behind certain of the other meanings mentioned above. Thus, for example, the

6. For a subtle account of its implications, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, 1982).

7. Jacques Derrida, »Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language,« *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1972), p. 158.

8. David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago, 1982), p. 191.

identification of form with the proportion among discrete elements often draws on the visual experience of symmetrical commensurability. So too, the belief that form signifies essential truths draws on the Platonic contention that Ideas exist in the »eye of the mind.« Although it is of course true that form can be applied to aural, temporal phenomena, such as sonatas and symphonies, the capacity of the eye to register from a distance a static and simultaneous field of ordered regularity means that it is the primary source of our experience of form.⁹

If this is the case, it might be expected that an aesthetic modernism that privileged formalism would also be favorably inclined towards the hegemony of the eye. And as the influential school of criticism identified with the American art critic Clement Greenberg demonstrates, this expectation was not disappointed. For Greenberg spoke glowingly of the »purity« of the optical as the defining characteristic of the modernist visual arts, even sculpture.¹⁰ In literary terms, the same impulse may be discerned in Joseph Frank's celebrated defense of the idea of spatial form in modern literature, which sought to undo Lessing's distinction between the atemporal and temporal arts.¹¹ And it should also be remembered that one of the cherished hopes of Russian Formalist criticism was precisely, as Jameson has noted, »the renewal of perception, the seeing of the world suddenly in a new light, in a new and unforeseen way.«¹²

However valid these characterizations of the dominant tendencies may be, and they were never entirely uncontroversial, uncontroversial, they fail to do justice to the subaltern tradition of formlessness that also must be accorded its place in the story of modernism. One avenue of entry into this alternative impulse can be found in the role of so-called primitive art in the early development of modernist aesthetics. In most accounts, it is recognition of the abstractly formal properties of that art which is given pride of place.¹³ Indeed, it was precisely the discovery in primitive artifacts of a universal »will-to-form« in Riegl's sense by critics like Wilhelm Worringer, Roger Fry and Leo Frobenius that allowed their elevation into the realm of the aesthetically valuable.

The accompanying cost of this gesture, however, was the decontextualization of these works, which robbed them of any ethnographical value as objects of cultural practice. Generally forgotten as well as their ideological appropriation

9. On the relation between vision and form, see Hans Jonas, »The Nobility of Sight,« *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago, 1982).

10. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1965), p. 171.

11. See, for example, Frank, »Spatial Form in Modern Literature,« in *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, N.Y., 1982).

12. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, 1972), p. 52.

13. See, for example, Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986).

in the later context of Western imperialism.¹⁴ Instead, their purely formal qualities were differentiated out from the entanglements of both their contexts of origin and reception, and then elevated into instances of a putatively universal aesthetic. As such, they could then provide inspiration for a modernist formalism, which was equally indifferent to its contextual impurities.

Although only recently have critics made us all so aware of the ambiguous role of primitivism in the origins of modern art, their critique was already anticipated in the counter-current that we have called modernist formlessness. In particular, it was implicit in the very different appropriation of the exotic by the French Surrealists, who never forgot the ethnographic dimension of the objects that could also be valued for their aesthetic significance.¹⁵ The circle around the journal *Documents* retained the emphasis on the sacred, ritual and mythic function of the artifacts, which they had imbibed from their readings in Durkheim and Mauss and their contact with fieldworkers like Alfred Métraux.

Foremost among them was Georges Bataille, who combined his interest in the sacred aspects of primitive culture with an appreciation of Dionysian frenzy and violent sexuality, derived from Nietzsche and Sade, into a full-blown defense of the virtues of transgression, heterogeneity, excess and waste. Among the most explicit values to be transgressed, according to Bataille, was the fetish of form in virtually all of its guises. In his 1929 entry on *Informe* in the *Documents* »dictionnaire critique,« he claimed that dictionaries really begin when they stop giving meaning to words and merely suggest their openended tasks instead. »Thus, « he continued, »formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.«¹⁶ Whereas conventional philosophers always try to place the world into categorical straightjackets, assigning everything a proper form, what they tended to forget is the conflict between constative meaning and performative function. »Affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless*,« Bataille concluded, »amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.«¹⁷ The »saying« of something so outrageous is not a truth claim in its own right, but rather an assault on all claims to reduce the world to formal truths.

14. For recent discussions of this issue, see Hal Foster, »The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art,« *October*, 34 (Fall, 1985), pp. 45-70; and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

15. See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, chapter IV. It should also be noted that the Surrealists were keenly aware of the context of reception of primitive art, as they were among the most vociferous critics of French imperialism in the 1920's.

16. Bataille, »Formless,« p. 31.

17. *Ibid.*

For Bataille, the problematic hegemony of conceptual and aesthetic form was explicitly linked to the ocularcentric bias of Western metaphysics.¹⁸ Distinguishing between two traditions of solar illumination, he identified the first with the elevating Platonic sun of reason and order, which cast light on essential truths, and the second with the dazzling and blinding sun which destroyed vision when looked at too directly. The myth of Icarus, he contended, expressed this duality with uncommon power: »it clearly splits the sun in two – the one that was shining at this moment of Icarus's elevation, and the one that melted the wax, causing failure and a screaming fall when Icarus was too close.«¹⁹ Whereas traditional painting reflected the Platonic search for ideal form, modern painting, most explicitly that of Picasso and Van Gogh, had a very different goal: »academic painting more or less corresponded to an elevation – without excess – of the spirit. In contemporary painting, however, the search for that which most ruptures elevation, and for a blinding brilliance, has a share in the elaboration of decomposition of forms.«²⁰

Bataille's plea for the decomposition of form was expressed as well in his valorization of materialism, albeit one very different from that posited by traditional metaphysical or by Marxist dialectics.²¹ Rather than a materialism of the object, his was a materialism of the abject. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, »*Informe* denotes what alteration produces, the reduction of meaning or value, not by contradiction – which would be dialectical – but by putrefaction: the puncturing of the limits around the term, the reduction to sameness of the cadaver – which is transgressive.«²² Refusing to turn matter into a positive surrogate for spirit or mind, he linked it instead to the principle of degradation, which he saw operative in the Gnostic valorization of primal darkness.²³ As a result, it was impossible to mediate between matter and form, as, say Schiller had hoped with his »play drive,« to produce a higher synthesis. The materialism of *informe* resisted any such elevating impulse.

The baseness of matter as opposed to the nobility of form was tied as well by Bataille to the recovery of the body, which had been suppressed by the

18. Although this is not the place to pursue the relation between visuality and conceptuality, it should be mentioned that not all theorists have found them synonymous. Theodor Adorno, for example, places visuality on the side of sensuality and juxtaposes it to the conceptual dimension of art. See his discussion in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London, 1984), p. 139f. He notes that the term »visuality« was used in epistemology to mean a content that was then formed.

19. Bataille, »Rotten Sun,« p. 58.

20. *Ibid.* For Bataille's appreciation of Van Gogh in these terms, see his »Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,« in *Visions of Excess*.

21. According to Rosalind Krauss, *informe* meant the undoing of the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter, not the privileging of one over the other. See her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 53. This undoing, however, was more in the nature of a deconstruction than dialectical sublation.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

23. Bataille, »Base Materialism and Gnosticism,« *Visions of Excess*, p. 47.

exaltation of the cold, spiritual eye. It was, however, a grotesque, mutilated, headless body, a body whose boundaries were violated and porous, that he most valued. For Bataille, the waste products of the body, normally hidden and devalued as dirty or obscene, were closest to the experience of sacred excess and ecstatic expenditure realized in primitive religion. Here no measured proportion among elements, no sensual pleasure unsullied by violent pain, no sharply defined outlines, no revelation of essential ideas shone forth. Instead, formal beauty was consumed in the flames of a symbolic conflagration like that of the potlatch ceremonies of American Indians, whose conspicuous consumption of wealth he so admired.²⁴

So too, form in the Kantian sense as the imposition of structure by a constitutive subject on the chaos of the world was utterly absent in Bataille's theory. His idiosyncratic concept of sovereignty meant the loss of willed control by a homogeneous agent and submission instead to the heterogeneous forces that exploded its integrity.²⁵ The »acephalic« (headless) community he sought was based on the ecstatic sacrifice of subjectivity, individual and collective, not an act of conscious choice.²⁶ It was also the opposite of merely formal democracy, which produced only a sterile and lifeless simulacrum of political freedom.

Bataille's own writing can also be read as instantiating a principled resistance to the subjective imposition of form. Thus, Denis Hollier has claimed that »perhaps Bataille's work gets its greatest strength in this refusal of the temptation of form. This refusal is the interdiction making it impossible in advance for his works ever to be 'complete,' impossible for his book to be only books and impossible for his death to shut his words up. The transgression is transgression of form ... the temptation of discourse to arrest itself, to fix on itself, to finish itself off by producing and appropriating its own end. Bataille's writing is antidiscursive (endlessly deforms and disguises itself, endlessly rids itself of form). «²⁷

It would be easy to offer other examples of Bataille's critique of form and link them with his no less severe attack on the ocularcentric bias of Western culture. What is of more importance, however, is to establish the existence of

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24. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1988), p. 63f.
 25. For a helpful account of the varieties of sovereignty, erotic, poetic and political, in Bataille, see Michele H. Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore, 1982), chapter III.
 26. Acéphale was the name of the group Bataille helped form at the Collège de Sociologie in the late 1930's, which published a review with the same name. It referred to the headless body he found so attractive. For a sympathetic analysis of Bataille's notion of Community, see Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y., 1988).
 27. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: the Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 24.

a similar inclination among other significant modernist figures. Armed with an appreciation of Bataille's defense of *informe*, several recent critics have provided us with the means to do so. For example, in her 1988 study of Rimbaud and the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross has examined the nature of class in his poetry and linked it to his celebrated call for the derangement of the senses with its explicit spurning of the Parnassian poets' dependence on the mimetic eye. In Rimbaud, as she reads him, »grotesque, hyperbolic, extraordinary, superhuman perception is advocated in opposition to what capitalist development is at that moment defining (in the sense of setting the limits) as human, as ordinary perception.«²⁸ The space that is prefigured in his poetry is not geometrically ordered or transparently lucid, a space peopled by formal groupings like parties or bureaucracies. It is instead a more tactile than visual space, an irregular field through which flows of energy and force pass without coalescing into visibly recognizable structures.²⁹ The word Ross chooses to describe Rimbaud's notion of class is »swarm,« which she compares positively to more traditional notions of a disciplined proletariat expressing its allegedly mature class consciousness by following the leadership of a vanguard party. »If 'mature' class consciousness partakes of the serial groupings like the party or state,« she writes, »then the movement of Rimbaud's swarm is much more that of the *informe* ('it has no form he give it no form'): the spontaneous, fermenting element of the group.«³⁰ For all his celebrated elevation of the poet into the role of *voyant*, Rimbaud's own work insisted on the importance of the erotic body as opposed to the spiritual eye, and resisted the differentiation of poetic form from everyday life. Just as he refused to be socialized through bourgeois formation, Rimbaud rejected the alternative art-for-art sake's socialization into aesthetic form. His notorious decision to give up poetry entirely in favor of living dangerously was thus already anticipated in the poetry itself, which Ross interprets as the antithesis of the life-denying aestheticism expressed in Mallarmé's fetish of the pure word.

No less exemplary of the modernist turn against formal purity was the remarkable experiments in photography carried out by the Surrealists in the interwar era, which have recently been interpreted in Bataille's terms by Rosalind Krauss. Examining photographers like Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai and Man Ray, she detected the trace of his, rather than André Breton's ideas on their work. »The surrealist photographers were masters of the *informe*,« she writes, »which could be produced, as Man Ray had seen, by a simple rotation and consequent disorientation of the body.«³¹ Even surrealist

28. Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 102.

29. The obvious influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on Ross's celebration of force over form is explicitly acknowledged (p. 67).

30. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

31. Rosalind Krauss, »Corpus Delicti,« *October*, 33 (Summer, 1985), p. 34.

painters like Masson and Dali, she argued, were in his debt: »It is to Bataille, not to Breton, that Dali owed the word *informe* with the particular, anamorphic spin.«³²

According to Krauss, the dominant modernist defense of photography's aesthetic credentials in strictly formalist terms, exemplified by champions of what is called »Straight Photography« like Edward Weston and John Szarkowski, was challenged by the surrealist introduction of textual and temporal interruptions into the pure image. »The nature of the authority that Weston and Straight Photography claim,« she writes, »is grounded in the sharply focused image, its resolution a figure of the unity of what the spectator sees, a wholeness which in turn founds the spectator himself as a unified subject. That subject, armed with a vision that plunges deep into reality and, through the agency of the photograph, given the illusion of mastery over it, seems to find unbearable a photography that effaces categories and in their place erects the fetish, the *informe*, the uncanny.«³³

Still another instance of the alternative modernist tradition of debunking pure, visible form can be discerned in its receptivity to the aesthetics of the sublime. Although the sublime is often more closely identified with Romanticism or Post-modernism than with High Modernism, no less a celebrant of its importance than Jean-François Lyotard has claimed that »it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms.«³⁴ Painters from Malevitch to Barnett Newman, he claims, instantiate what Burke, Kant and other theorists of the sublime meant when they stressed its striving to present the unrepresentable, its fidelity to the Hebraic injunction against graven images.³⁵ »To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible:« Lyotard writes, »this is what is at stake in modern painting. But how to make visible that there is something which cannot be seen? Kant himself shows the way when he names 'formlessness, the absence of form,' as a possible index to the unrepresentable.«³⁶ Although modernism, as opposed to the postmodernism he prefers, is still nostalgic for the solace of presentable form, it nonetheless exemplifies for Lyotard the ways in which art can disrupt the clarity and purity of formal beauty. In so doing, it reveals the workings of inchoate, libidinal desire, which explodes through the deceptively calm surface of both figural and discursive representation.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

34. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 77.

35. For Lyotard on Newman and the sublime, see his »Newman: The Instant,« in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford, 1989).

36. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 78.

One final instance of the modernist retreat from form can be found in music, where Schoenberg's bold experiments in atonality and *Sprechstimme* were not the only challenge to traditional values. Perhaps even more extreme examples of what might be called musical *informe* can be discerned in Futurist composers like Luigi Russolo, one of the founders of *bruitismo*.³⁷ Here noise, often that of the jarring world of modern technology, was explicitly privileged over tone. Acoustical phenomena without any discernable pitch replaced those which could be translated into visible notation on a traditional scale. Although Futurist composition was relatively modest in achievement, the increasing incorporation of noise into modern music is evident in works like Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1918) and Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1931). Here timbre and color usurped the role normally given to pitch, as they also did in the so-called *Klangfarben* of Schoenberg and Berg. The new importance of color, however metaphorical that term may be in the lexicon of music, demonstrates a certain congruence with the other phenomena we have been discussing, for it has normally been counterposed to visual form.

Other examples of the retrospective critical appreciation of *informe* in modernist art might be given as the conventional wisdom identified with Bell, Fry and Greenberg has come under increasing attack.³⁸ But it is now time to explore more closely the implications of this new appreciation. What are the stakes involved when we go from identifying modernism with the abstraction of form in all of its guises from content, matter, etc. to identifying instead it with contested field in which the opposite impulse is also at play? What has been gained by acknowledging the importance of formlessness as at least a significant counter current within modernist art?

First, what has to be made clear is that *informe* does not mean the simple negation of form, its wholesale replacement by chaos or the void. As Bataille contends, *informe* is not a positive definition, but a working term that functions by disruption and disorder. That is, it needs the prior existence of form, which it can then transgress, to be meaningful. Just as the grotesque operates by the disharmonious juxtaposition or integration of apparent formal opposites,³⁹ just as the sublime keeps the tension between presentation and unpresentability, so too the *informe* needs its opposite to work its magic. If not

37. For a brief account, see H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth-Century Music*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, 1970), chapter 3.

38. See, for instance, Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London, 1986); or the essays in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, 1984). In Mary Kelly's contribution to the latter, »Reviewing Modernist Criticism,« she discusses the importance of performance art in terms that recall Bataille: »The art of the 'real body' does not pertain to the truth of visible form, but refers back to its essential content: the irreducible, irrefutable experience of *pain*.« (p. 96).

39. According to Harpman, »most grotesques are marked by such an affinity/antagonism, by the co-presence of the normative, fully formed 'high' or ideal, and the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, 'low' or material.« *On the Grotesque*. p. 9.

for the powerful formalist impulse that so many critics have rightfully seen in modernism, the *informe* would not be so insistently summoned up to undermine it.

There are several possible ways to conceptualize and explain the tension between form and formlessness that we have been tracing. One is to assimilate it to a more timeless struggle between structure and energy, stasis and movement, the immutable and the ephemeral. Here we reenter the territory perhaps classically traversed by Lukács in his pre-Marxist work *Soul and Form*.⁴⁰ But whereas Lukács called form »the highest judge of life«⁴¹ and agonized over the inability of life, with all its chaotic energy, to measure up to that stringent tribunal, the tradition we have been examining in this paper has had the opposite reaction. For the celebrants of the *informe*, it is precisely the failure of life to remain frozen in formal patterns, with its material impurities purged and its baser impulses expelled, that warrants praise.

From a psychoanalytic perspective more in tune with this inclination, it would be fruitful to consider Lacan's celebrated analysis of the chiasmic intertwining of the eye and the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*.⁴² Here he provides a complicated explanation of the ways in which the subject is situated in a visual field split between an eye, which looks out on a geometrically ordered space before it, and a gaze, in which object »look back« at the body of the eye that is looking. Although modernist formalism sought to transcend the perspectivalist scopic regime identified with the eye in its most Cartesian version, it substituted a pure optically in which the tension between eye and gaze was suppressed.⁴³ The modernist formalism celebrated by critics like Greenberg thus forgot what those critics sensitive to the *informe* remembered: that the visual field was a contested terrain in which pure form was always disrupted by its other. That other might be interpreted in linguistic terms, as the interference of the symbolic with the imaginary, or as a conflict within the realm of vision itself, but however it be ultimately understood, it meant that modernism, indeed any art, could not be reduced to the triumph of pure form.

That Lacan's own analysis emerged out of the same matrix as Bataille's,⁴⁴ that he was himself fascinated with the sublime, as Slavoj Žižek has recently

40. George Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

41. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

42. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Allan Sheridan (New York, 1981).

43. Philosophically, perhaps the most important defender of this position was Maurice Merleau-Ponty in such essays as »Cézanne's Doubt,« *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston, 1964). Not surprisingly, he was frequently criticized by those like Lyotard hostile to the high modernist fetish of pure opticality.

44. For an exploration of Lacan's debts to the Surrealist movement in the 1930's, see David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London, 1988).

reminded us,⁴⁵ that he was deeply aware of the challenge to pure optically raised by the recovery of anamorphosis by critics like Jurgis Baltrušaitis,⁴⁶ means that his ideas were themselves indebted to the revaluation of formlessness that we are now trying to explain. One comentator, Joan Copjec, has in fact gone so far as to claim that »contrary to the idealist position that makes *form* the cause of being, Lacan locates the cause of being in the *informe*; the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field); the inquiry (the question posed to representation's presumed reticence).«⁴⁷ It may, therefore, be problematic to rely on him entirely for an explanation of the specific dialectic of form and formlessness in modernism. For his analysis of the eye and the gaze was aimed at uncovering the workings of vision in all contexts and for all time.

A more historically specific approach might usefully draw on Peter Bürger's well-known distinction between modernism and the avant-garde.⁴⁸ Whereas modernism remained within the institution of art, seeking to explore the limits of aesthetic self-referentiality, the avant-garde sought to reunite art with life, thus allowing the emancipatory energies of the former to revitalize the latter. The high modernist apotheosis of pure form, it might be argued, fits well into the first of these categories; the differentiation of the visible from the other senses, which we have noted as one of the central impulses behind formalism, corresponds to the differentiation of the institution of art from the lifeworld. The counter-impulse we have identified with the *informe*, on the other hand, is perhaps better understood as part of the avant-garde's project, in Bürger's sense of the term. That is, it calls into question the purity of the aesthetic realm, undermines the distinction between high art and base existence, and reunites vision with the other senses. Not surprisingly, Bataille and other defenders of *informe* would often argue for its political value as a way to realize the revolutionary potential of the unformed masses. Kristin Ross's celebration of Rimbaud's notion of class as a swarm is an instance of this impulse, which seeks to protect the proletariat from its form-giving representatives in the vanguard party.

All of these explanations help us make sense of the struggle between form and formlessness in aesthetic modernism, but the context in which I think it might most suggestively be placed is, as I have argued above, the crisis of ocularcentrism in Western culture. That is, with the dethroning of the eye as the noblest of the senses, with the revalorization of the »acephalic« body whose boundaries are permeable to the world, with the celebration of noise

45. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989).

46. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux* (Paris, 1969), on which Lacan draws in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 79f.

47. Joan Copjec, »The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,« *October*, 49 (Summer, 1989), p. 69.

48. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

and force over clarity and contour, the »will-to-form« that critics like Riegl saw as the ground of aesthetics has been supplanted or at least powerfully supplemented by a contrary »will-to-formlessness.«

From one perspective, all of these changes might be damned as complicitous with a dangerous counter-enlightenment irrationalism and libidinal politics. And in certain respects the charge may be valid, at least if the complicated dialectic of form and formlessness is forgotten and a simple-minded anti-formalism is put in its place. But from another point of view, there may be less cause for alarm. For may it perhaps be a mark of a kind of cultural maturity that we no longer tremble, tremble, as did Simmel or Lukács, at the »tragic« possibility that life and form cannot be harmoniously united? May we, in fact, conclude that the modernist stand-off between form and *informe* has left us with a willingness to tolerate a mixture of intelligibility and unintelligibility, bounded integrity and transgressive force, spiritualized ocularity and the messiness of the rest of our bodies, that betokens a less anxious age? Have we learned to accept limits on the form-giving constitutive subject, abandoned the search for timeless essence amidst the plethora of ephemeral appearances, and realized that the distinction between *ergon* and *parergon*, text and context, is not as fixed as it appeared? If so, the performative power of saying the »universe is something like a spider or spit« may have actually done some of its work, and the hope of harnessing the emancipatory (but not redemptive) energies of modernist – or in Bürger's terms, *avant-garde* – art for life may not be so vain after all.

