Mark Rothko and the Development of American Modernism 1938–1948

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‘. . . negation is inscribed in the very practice of modernism, as the form in which art appears to itself as a value . . . that negativity does not appear as a practice which guarantees meaning or opens out a space for free play and fantasy . . . but, rather, negation appears as an absolute and all-encompassing fact, something which once begun is cumulative and uncontrollable; a fact which swallows meaning altogether . . . We have an art in which ambiguity becomes infinite, which is on the verge of proposing — and does propose — an Other which is comfortably ineffable, a vagueness, a mere mysticism of sight.’


‘Abstract art cannot be disposed of by a simple-minded evasion. Or by negation. We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it. Where to? I do not know. Yet it seems to me that the wish to return to the imitation of nature in art has been given no more justification than the desire of certain partisans of abstract art to legislate it into permanency.’


‘It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes . . . But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.’

Mark Rothko, speaking at the Pratt Institute.

This article is an attempt to consider and draw attention to an early ‘moment’ in the career of Mark Rothko, a conjunction roughly spanning the ten years between 1938 and 1948, and as such involves a conscious shifting of scrutiny away from the ‘classic’ or paradigmatic painting produced in the 1950s and 1960s — the celebrated ‘floating fields of colour’ in such works as Untitled (1954) or Orange, Red And Red (1962). I shall argue here that the basis for Rothko’s later, characteristic paintings can be found by examining the historical and political context in which he found himself from the late 1930s to the late 1940s and by considering the works of art which he produced during those years. In that ten year period it is possible to track the path Rothko followed from an (always ambiguous) commitment to a pictorial realism found, for example, in his Subway (1930s) (Fig. 1), to the adoption of what is commonly accepted as his ‘abstract’ format, with his painting Multiform (1948) (Fig. 2). This decade contains, then, the works of the ‘break’, when Rothko, as he himself said in 1958, ‘with the utmost reluctance’ found that ‘the figure could not serve’ his purposes.

The 1950s saw the rise of the Abstract Expressionist artists to institutional and critical dominance in America. This process will be discussed shortly, because Rothko is generally understood both as lone genius and as exemplary ‘colour-field’ painter. The elaboration and institutionalisation of Modernist theory as a critical orthodoxy occurred during the 1950s and 1960s and, therefore, in the 1940s the enveloping of Rothko’s works and ideas in various forms of Modernist explanation was still to occur. Indeed, Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic committed to the support of artists like Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis in the post-war period, can be found in 1940 vacillating towards, but not necessarily arriving at, an abstract newer Laocoön. Although it is possible to agree that ‘Modernism’ (with a capital ‘M’) has a very basic generic consistency as a cluster of theories, ideas and aphorisms (‘art-for-art’s sake’, the belief that modern art is made for no particular social purpose, that it exists and should be judged ‘on its own terms’), this cluster is no monolith or statute: ‘Modernism’ draws on a myriad of philosophical bases, with theoretical

Fig. 1. Mark Rothko Subway, c. 1936. Estate of Mark Rothko.
reflexivity ranging from the rhetorically 'rigorous' (Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting') to the rhetorically loopy (Hilla Rebay's anticipation of the 'harmonic convergence' — God was a Modernist — in her article 'The Beauty Of Non-Objectivity'). In relation to Abstract Expressionism and Mark Rothko's paintings, three reasonably distinct forms of Modernism have been presented and still hold critical sway. Clement Greenberg believed that Art should develop in an almost 'scientific' or 'clinical' way: modern paintings should examine themselves as material forms and procedures, not produce 'images' of the world, but refer to themselves as unique and irreducible forms of material, cultural and cognitive creation. Greenberg's 'technical', almost puritanical disregard for pleasure as a necessary component of his critical activity also debared any fanciful concern for the metaphysical or spiritual dimension of Art.1 Harold Rosenberg, in an influential article first published in 1952, stressed the production process of those he called the 'action painters', arguing that as a vital form of creative activity the act of applying paint involved both temporal and spatial dimensions and was therefore intimately related to the basic existential conditions of human beings. Following Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical direction elaborated within the tortuous pages of Being And Nothingness, Rosenberg saw the painting activity as necessarily related to the possibilities of human creation and hence central to the weighty concept of freedom.8 As will be shown in what follows, freedom became for Rosenberg, for Rothko himself and for many other Modernist critics and later historians, defined essentially in a negative way: freedom from politics, freedom from having to represent the world and freedom from what Thomas B. Hess has called 'the collective ethos or style'.9

Apart from these two fairly specific positions, which shared at least the idea of separating the activity of painting from that which was regarded as extraneous, a broader admixture of Modernist writings has seen Rothko’s paintings as abstract works which raise, embody or imply mystical, metaphysical or transcendental themes: the life of human beings in relation to questions of The Infinite (God, Life/Death, etc).10 This is certainly the more popular articulation of Modernism, elaborated in exhibition catalogues, coffee-table monographs and newspaper and television programmes. Within this plethora of eulogues, however, it is significant to note that elements drawn from Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s seminal essay have some place, and again tend to stress the nature of Rothko’s painting as an autonomous process and product. As a teeming pond of ideas, then, Modernism constitutes the dominant mode of understanding modern art and Rothko’s work. Though diverse and in no sense a coherent or intended project, Modernism is the explanatory model or paradigm on which most critics, curators and art historians draw to describe and evaluate Rothko’s paintings and those of other Abstract Expressionist artists.

This article is an attempt not only to locate historically and politically the conjuncture which saw the development of the negative models of freedom implied in Modernist criticism, but also to explain Rothko’s rejection of figuration and his adoption of the abstract style with which he is now dominantly associated. It will become clear that these two developments are closely related, though I want to stress their particular historical contiguity rather than any necessary or a priori theoretical articulation. The transcendent, metaphysical and universalising qualities attributed to Rothko’s paintings, and recently eulogised by past and present writers in the catalogue for the Tate Gallery Rothko exhibition, must also be seen as the products of a very particular historical and social moment in the history of the American avant-garde.11 That ‘transcendence’, so exalted by Modernist historians and critics, was the transcendence of a particular political and ideological conjuncture, where what was at stake was the possibility and desirability of art and artists being explicitly and organisationally engaged in political struggle and debate. The attraction of this transcendence to the middle class has been well characterised by T. J. Clark:

The bourgeoisie has a small but considerable interest, I believe, in preserving a certain myth of the aesthetic consciousness, one where a transcendental ego is given something appropriate to contemplate in a situation
Rothko’s career, rather than being rehearsed ad nauseam as a triumphant spiritual achievement, can be seen as a retreat from the ruins of the Socialist and Communist opposition in America in the late 1930s and from the final victory of corporate capitalism as the motor of American social and historical development. The chauvinistic celebration of American Abstract Expressionism by Modernist critics and historians and of Mark Rothko’s location within that, in the context of the Cold War and the U.S. economic, political and military dominance of the ‘Free World’, was a direct contradiction of what we know of Rothko’s and Jackson Pollock’s political beliefs, which had been anti-nationalist and hostile to the interest and dominance of capitalist society. To attempt to recover the specific politics of that ‘moment’ in the 1940s and to relate the culture and politics of the Depression to that of the Cold War may enable us to understand the historical reasons why the idea and dream of the ‘unhistorical’, the ‘timeless’ and the transcendental became so appealing to a generation of previously politically-committed artists in America. The so-called ‘Triumph of American Painting’, announced by Irving Sandler in 1970 was, in fact, the triumph of the critical and institutional dominance of Abstract Expressionism, both as an ‘official’, ‘high’, Modernist American style and as the latest paradigm for a universal and international modern art movement. One necessary condition for this was the economic, political and military ascendancy of the United States after the Second World War, which permitted the inauguration of New York City as the international capital for the avant-garde and the hub of modern art’s production, economic exchange, institutional exhibition and critical legitimation. The dominance of American Abstract Expressionism, produced through such crucial facilitating agencies as the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Guggenheim Museum and the dealing galleries of Betty Parsons, Sam Kootz and Sidney Janis (who all handled Rothko’s work during the 1940s and 1950s) involved what might appear to be a paradox. On the one hand, Abstract Expressionism was hailed as a distinctly American art, brought about by the terminal ‘decline of cubism’ and therefore of European artists. On the other hand, it was also celebrated as the development of a Modernist style and sensibility independent of any particular nation. It was seen both as the glorious flowering of an indigenous tradition of American Modernist artists and as the latest instantiation of the trans-national avant-garde. Paradoxical also is the presentation of the Triumph of American Painting both as an undeniable Zeitgeist, a teleological imperative, and yet also as a happy and unexpected result of the collision of circumstances. Emily Wasserman represents this latter emphasis well:

In the early 1960s it would have been farfetched to believe that within fifty years a distinctly American art would be accepted and admired by an international audience.

What was implied in this process of the acceptance, by Europe, of the arrival of American Abstract Expressionists as the next authentic generation of Modernist artists? ‘Acceptance’ means both ‘to take willingly’ and ‘to concede’. The acquiring of ‘consent’ can be a messy business. The concept of hegemony developed by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci entailed the process of securing consent, through both rhetorical persuasion and coercion, for a particular idea or end. Laws are proposed as reasonable (worthy of respect); yet in the absence of compliance they must be enforced. For Gramsci, hegemony was a political process through which a particular social class ‘nationalises’ itself; when a set of specific economic, social and ideological values and beliefs belonging to a particular class, whose material interests they serve, are generalised as ‘national’ or ‘universal’ interests within a particular society. In replacing or dominating the values and beliefs of other classes, those that are generalised become hegemonic: represented and believed to be ‘in the national interest’ and constituting what Gramsci called a ‘common sense’. This is what happened to American Abstract Expressionism, the ‘New York School’ and Mark Rothko’s paintings: propagated by MOMA, the catalogues and books of art historians, the writings of critics, the sales pitch of dealer galleries, and, as recent historical research has shown, the tacit economic support of C.I.A. backed agencies like the arts magazine Encounter and the more open patronage of the U.S. State Department. Abstract Expressionism was represented as the paradigmatic high Modernist style of the ‘Free West’ after the Second World War. Counterposed to the censorship and stylistic banality of Soviet Socialist Realism enforced by Stalin after 1934, the paintings of Rothko, Pollock, de Kooning and Newman became ‘weapons of the Cold War’, vehicles for cultural diplomacy and signs of ‘cultural democracy’. The involvement of the C.I.A. is discussed in detail by David and Cecile Shapiro:

Abstract Expressionism became the style most heavily dispensed by our [the U.S.] government, for reasons that were in part explained by Thomas W. Braden in a 1967 article that appeared under the title ‘I’m Glad The C.I.A. is Immoral’ in the Saturday Evening Post . . . Braden, executive secretary of the Museum Of Modern Art for a short period in the late 1940s, joined the Central Intelligence Agency as supervisor of cultural activities in 1951, and remained as director of this branch until 1954. Recognising that congressional approval of many of their projects was as likely as the John Birch society’s approv-
ing Medicare', he became involved with such organisations as the Institute of Labour Research and the National Council of Churches as fronts in the American Cold War against communism here and abroad ... Braden, possibly taking his aesthetic cue from his Museum of Modern Art years, supported the export of Abstract Expressionism in the propaganda war ... Backed by money available to the C.I.A. and supportive of Abstract Expressionism, Braden's branch became a means of circumventing Congress and sending abroad art-as-propaganda without federal intervention.20

In this respect the paintings and individualistic statements of the Abstract Expressionists were made to form part of the U.S. 'cultural Marshall plan', an ideological offensive designed to complement the industrial and financial intervention which the U.S. orchestrated to prop up and eventually dynamise the capitalist nations of Western Europe against the threats (and promises) of Soviet communism.21 Represented as the 'universal Free Style of the West', the large agitated canvases of Jackson Pollock or Rothko's floating fields of colour became emblems of the freedom of liberal American society: beacons of individualism, unfettered activity and creative risk, proposed as possible only in a true democracy.

That the U.S. Government involved itself in various open or tacit ways with the rise to institutional and critical dominance of Abstract Expressionism is now relatively well-known — this revisionist period in the historiography of Abstract Expressionism was largely confined to the mid-1970s. The New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer, also predictably, launched an attack on the writers who addressed the relationship between the U.S. State and Abstract Expressionist artists and on the editorial board of Artforum magazine, where Max Kozloff and Eve Cockcroft's articles appeared. Kramer's riposte, entitled 'Muddled Marxism replaces Art Criticism at Artforum', though predictable, was too vociferous a polemic.22 A handful of articles in an arts magazine, and even the publication of Serge Guilbaut's lengthy book in 1983, was unlikely to destabilize critical and institutional orthodoxy — as the Tate Gallery's recent exhibition and catalogue demonstrates. And in any case, the revisionist argument left intact the Leitmotiv of Abstract Expressionist and Modernist critical orthodoxy in general: the belief that the value of these works of art can be established absolutely independently of the circumstances within which they were produced and gained critical support and acclaim. If value (or 'quality') is, within Modernist terms, logically unrelated to social or historical explanation — save with a formalist genealogy which links a Rothko painting with a Mondrian or a Matisse from earlier generations of artists who are seen as constituting the Modernist pantheon — then adding a few (perhaps) surprising determinations involving the C.I.A. or the State Department unsettled not one iota the certainty of the recognition of quality and in Rothko's case in particular, the 'mystery' of his paintings.23 Rothko's paintings seem to exude polysemy, their ontological and epistemological significance ineffable; where have they come from? What does their dense opacity represent? Rothko's post-war paintings, read through the prisms of either Harold Rosenberg's existentialist aesthetic or Clement Greenberg's rigorous formalism still remain — to most — mysterious and unyielding; meaningful and meaningless; profound and vacuous; active and immobile; an opening and a closure. Rothko's well-known reluctance to show his paintings, partly because he thought critics, through their writings, tried to 'fix' and close their significance, can be explained more adequately by examining the political and historical context wherein Rothko (and other Abstract Expressionists) opted for, were propelled toward and came to accept the type of abstract painting with which he and they are now identified. In the context of New York between 1938 and 1948 can be identified the circumstances which led Rothko to say, in his statement entitled 'The Romantics Were Prompted':

The familiar identity of things has to be pulverised in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society enshrines every aspect of our environment.24

What were the finite associations and the familiar identity of things which Rothko wished to see pulverised? Are they to be understood as comfortably unspecific, an abstract rejection of an abstract social and historical world, or as minutely tangible and related to be situation artists had found themselves in from the mid-1930s onwards?

The existentialist 'freedom' and 'risk', celebrated by Harold Rosenberg, had been grasped more accurately by Clement Greenberg as a situation of alienation. Writing in 1948, Greenberg argued that isolation, alienation, naked and revealed to itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced ... Isolation is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art in America.25 This was a position close to the one Rothko also adopted in 1948:

The unfriendliness of society to his activity is difficult for the artist to accept. Yet this very hostility can act as a lever for true liberation. Freed from a false sense of security and community, the artist can abandon his plastic bank book, just as he has abandoned other forms of security.26

'Society' meant for Rothko two specific things. The two senses indicate what could be called the double alienation which he felt in the period 1938 to 1948 (and after). In the late 1930s, Rothko, employed on the New Deal Federal Art project, an active member of the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress against Racism and Fascism, holding socialist-anarchist beliefs, was involved in a prolonged argument with and against the organised...
Left's advocacy of socialist realism as the proper stylistic vehicle for revolutionary painting, as dictated by the Comintern and represented in America by the editorial position of Art Front, the newspaper of the Artists' Union. Within this radical political and artistic 'society' of left-wing groups and affiliations, Rothko found himself, along with other artists, profoundly at odds with Stalinist political and cultural orthodoxy. Ten years later, in 1948, along with Pollock, Newman and Gottlieb, Rothko was apparently transfixed by the threat of worldwide nuclear annihilation and by the gathering momentum of anti-subversive hysteria in America. The very possibility of speech, of painting — of adequate referential communication at all, in this context — was felt to be jeopardized. Pollock's drawing War (1946 or 1947) was one of the last works before his celebrated 'drip' period, which contained any recognisable imagery or conventional spatial composition. Between about June 1947 and April 1948 Rothko painted Number 18, de Kooning Painting and Pollock Number 26A, 1948, paintings in which the referential or iconic content of representation was expunged. In 1947 the U.S. State Department's Office of Education had announced its 'Zeal For American Democracy' programme; in August the American Federation of Teachers produced pamphlets showing how to understand and counter 'the strategy and tactics of world communism'. At about the same time J. Edgar Hoover and Tom Clark, the U.S. Attorney-General, organised the so-called 'Freedom Train', a patriotic museum-on-wheels touring the nation, to coincide with the coming election in 1948. The day that Congress debated the implementation of the Truman Marshall Plan, the National Guard conducted a practice bombing raid on Washington, a 'lobbying' technique designed to make the military's viewpoint on the matter of U.S. security obvious. Guibaut argues that although Rothko's and Pollock's work was non-figurative, it was intended to be expressive of a subjective state: anxiety about the state of the world in the nuclear age. Loathing the groups of artists who had moved towards a totally uncritical support for the U.S. Government during the Second World War and the national chauvinism mounting after the war in America, Rothko's resort to the use of titles referring to ancient myths for his paintings from Antigone (Fig. 3), in 1941, was part of a strategy for attempting to transcend the oppressive contemporary political and ideological context. Rothko's sense of personal oppression was expressed in what amounts to a plea in 'The Romantics Were Prompted': 'It really is a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again.'

At about the same time as Rothko wrote this, René d'Harnoncourt, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, announced that he regarded modern art as the foremost symbol of American Democracy — a symbol of 'infinite variety' and 'ceaseless exploration'. The sense of immobility, constriction and muteness which Rothko and others felt was being presented by d'Harnoncourt and later by many other critics, curators and historians, as an index of the health, vitality and optimism of the now most powerful nation-state on earth. It is no coincidence that the hegemony of high American modernism and its internationalising critical doctrine celebrating the fecund creativity of U.S. democracy was accompanied by the simultaneous hegemony of Arthur Schlesinger's political-liberalism and the structural-functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons, which extolled the virtues of integration and harmony, with the American nation-state again represented as the culmination of world history and civilisation. D'Harnoncourt's article perhaps represents the first institutional validation of modernism's critical hegemony in the United States, the validation which was to empower materially — through the dealing and curatorial practices of museums and art galleries — the belief that Abstract Art equaled Freedom.

If the coupling of Modernism with American nationalism through the vehicle of Abstract Expressionism represents a paradoxical state of affairs, given the avant-garde's historical claims to neutrality and even open hostility to national chauvinism, the situation was further confused by the fact that while d'Harnoncourt was celebrating Abstract Expressionism's essential 'democratic' nature, other members of the government, such as Congressman George Dondero, were condemning abstract art as 'shackled to communism'. The idea that modern art was alien and therefore subversive had been a belief held consistently by art critics and artists going back to the first showings of European modernism in America before the First World War. In 1949 Dondero vowed to 'wreck any organisation if it had any communists among its members, even if they are unidentified' and he planned to 'clean up the entire field, including the jury system'. The U.S. Government's formal investigation of Communist
activity in America, which had started with the Fish Committee in 1931, had always been intimately tied to the investigation of cultural organisations. The Dies Committee, which became the House Un-American Activities Committee after the Second World War, investigated communists who were reportedly active in the New Deal Federal Music, Theatre, Writing and Art Projects in the late 1930s, and became especially active after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. Those investigations and 'public identifications' (prosecutions being impossible, as being a member of the Communist Party was never made illegal) of supposed subversives within the Federal Art Project — of which Rothko was an employee — eventually contributed to the discrediting and abolition of the Project in 1942, although it was effectively destroyed as national scheme in 1940.36

The events in New York around the Federal Art Project, the Museum of Modern Art, the Artists' Union, the American Artists' Congress and the newspaper Art Front in the late 1930s provide the other context for understanding Rothko's social and political alienation. With the end of the Federal Art Project, most of Roosevelt's New Deal policies were superseded by national production for the war effort. It was emphatically this re-energisation of private corporate capitalism (especially weapons and munitions production, subcontracted by the U.S. Government), rather than Roosevelt's State-interventionist 'New Deal' policies, deployed during the 1930s, which led to the economic recovery and then supremacy of the USA after the war.37 The American Artists' Congress, of which Rothko was a member, had attempted to support both the Federal Art Project and what it regarded as the socialist 'state-managerial' aspects of the New Deal, while at the same time coming to terms with the dominance of Stalinism both in the Soviet Union and in the communist parties of western Europe and America. With Roosevelt's de facto capitulation to the power and interests of corporate capitalism and to the right-wing's mordant attacks on the New Deal's welfare programmes — and especially on the funding of cultural activity through the Federal Art Project — the American Artists' Congress was slammed as a Stalinist coterie and in 1940 split internally over the issue of support for the Soviet invasion of Finland, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Moscow show-trials of 'the Left Opposition', and a host of other issues with rocked the organised American Left.38 The support for Soviet socialist realist painting in America also came under attack: the political and artistic orthodoxy established by the Comintern, controlled from Moscow, was assailed both by the right wing and by the followers of Trotsky in America. There were strident calls for the 'return to the aesthetic', for the end of what was called 'social painting' and for the artist to create without constraining reference or adherence to politics, ideology, nationalism or anything else.39

This freedom, which the artist was supposed to experience as the authentic condition for the production of Great Art and which is still celebrated as the condition enabling Rothko to paint, was an extremely historical and relative sort of freedom. It meant the releasing of artists from the constraints of the Federal Art Project, the American Artists Congress and the American Communist Party. This 'release' was intended to return the artist to the so-called 'free market'; in other words, to the patronage of the corporations and entrepreneurs. This was the situation Rothko found himself in after 1940.

Rothko's political beliefs and affiliations in the late 1930s and early 1940s are still relatively terra incognita, though it is common for writers to refer to him as an 'anarchist' and even more common for committed modernist historians to point out his opposition to socialist realism.40 It is known that he was an active member of the Artists' Union, that he attended monthly meetings and agitated along with Jackson Pollock for the City of New York to build a municipal art gallery to show the works of federally employed artists. Rothko also attacked the newspaper Art Front because of what he saw as its slavish devotion to Stalinist cultural dogma. He was part of a dissident group within the American Artists' Congress which called for a greater diversity of debate on both political and artistic issues. Led by Meyer Schapiro, the Trotskyite art historian then teaching at Columbia University in New York, the group included other artists such as Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, Jose de Cret, Ilya Bolotowsky and the writer Lewis Mumford. On 4 April 1940 the American Artists' Congress passed a motion supporting the U.S.S.R.'s invasion of Finland. Large groups of artists and writers, both in and outside the American Communist Party, resigned from the Congress and Avery, Bolotowsky, Gottlieb and Rothko called for the creation of a new organisation. Two months later the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors was created and, in an inaugural statement, condemned any artistic nationalism as detrimental to the development of modern art.41 The split in the Congress was to some degree engineered and encouraged by Peyton Boswell, the editor of Art Digest magazine, who for some months had been pressuring those he regarded as the 'true liberals' to take control from those he called the 'art politicians'. Boswell singled out the artists Stuart Davis and Jerome Klein as 'Stalinists' and he claimed that the American Artists' Congress, under their leadership, compared with the Ku Klux Klan. Boswell linked together the production of 'experimental' and 'progressive' — by which he meant abstract — artists with their need for a 'liberal organisation' to look after their interests. This 'experimental' painting was defined as authentic art precisely because it excluded political reference. Boswell claimed:

The 'social democratic' paintings shown by the American Artists' Congress at their last exhibition might be just
that, but are they Art?... They may be ever so democratic, but are they Art?  

This was probably a position similar to that held by Rothko at about the same time, but Rothko's commitment, like that of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, was to a non-doctrinal, non-realist painting, intended by the artists to be emblematic of an anti-State capitalist and anti-totalitarian politics. It is likely that Rothko supported the arguments in the 1938 manifesto called 'Towards a Free, Revolutionary Art', written by Leon Trotsky and André Breton, aided by the Mexican artist and communist Diego Rivera. A year later, in August 1939, Clement Greenberg theorised this politico-aesthetic position from a neo-Trotskyite perspective, in his influential essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch.' In this he argued that abstract art and the avant-garde provided the only critical and progressive element in a world threatened by the triple poisons of capitalist mass culture, German Fascism and Soviet Stalinist Communism. Rothko's contempt for cultural orthodoxy, however, was not uniquely directed at doctrinal socialist aesthetics, although Modernist writers tend to present it this way. As co-chairman of the Cultural Committee of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote to the New York Times in June 1943:

We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless... Consequently if our work embodies those beliefs it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration, pictures of the home, pictures over the mantle, pictures of the American Scene, social pictures, purity-in-art, prize-winning potboilers, the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn-Belt Academy, buckeeyes, trite tripe, etc.

The liberalism of Boswell, and later that of d'Harmoncourt and Schlesinger, was of a different order from Rothko's comprehensive rejection of both nationalist and regionalist aesthetics and politics. Similarly, Rothko also rejected and scorned the artists committed to what he regarded as 'aesthetic formalism', those belonging to the American Abstract Artists group, formed in 1936.

The institutional acceptance and critical validation of Rothko's post-war paintings was no automatic process, though it is often presented as such in standard histories of American art. The decline of 'social painting' and the appearance and then dominance of abstract art has been presented in Modernist retrospect as an inevitability. Yet what in fact characterised critical discourse in America during and even after the Second World War was a strong belief in what can be called 'democratic eclecticism': a resistance to stylistic prescription of any sort, seen as the particular evil of totalitarian societies. For a period between the dominance of 1930s 'social painting' and 1950s Abstract Expressionism, 'Good Art' was not identified in terms of stylistic regularities, formal devices or gestural predilections. 'Good Art' was considered to be defined in terms of the presence of skill and technique and could be identified in any style. Forbes Watson, the editor of The American Magazine of Art, argued in 1939:

The pure abstractionist, the bitter urban commentator, the man who goes back to the farm, may all be equally good and equally bad as artists.

Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, writing in the magazine Art and Artists of Today in June 1940, said that the choice of any one style would reduce America to the condition of Germany or the Soviet Union:

America is at the moment in a very healthy condition for the very reason that it has no one individual or group dominating it. In America, the artists still have freedom of expression and it is the one thing we must fight to retain.

Two years later, the City Art Museum in St Louis, Missouri, organised an exhibition called Trends in American Painting of Today. The catalogue author claimed to be able to identify no less than seven different styles in American Art: 'realism', 'romanticism', 'expressionism', 'fantasy', 'surrealism', 'abstraction' and 'primitivism'. This diversity was proclaimed as the defining feature of American art, an 'inescapable truth about the American painting', relating directly to the 'individuality' of the artist. Only months after the abolition of the Federal Art Project, we hear that the artist 'creates for his own sake and for those who follow him, but he does not paint for society's sake'.

There is, then, in the early 1940s in America, a critical discourse which oscillates between coupling and uncoupling political liberalism with abstract art: how a democracy should represent itself (to both its own citizens and to the outside world) is, for a while, indeterminate. Opposed to doctrinal socialist realism, abstract art can be represented as a symbol of freedom and choice. But at the same time, the articulation of U.S. democracy with abstraction is tempered by its linking with a diverse 'equality' of different styles of representation. The resistance to stylistic orthodoxy in America had also been a traditional resistance to the development of an indigenous Modernism: what Thomas Hart Benton had called 'Ellis Island Art'. American high culture in the mid-1940s is thus pulled two ways — back to the 'New Deal' and America's parochial, domestic self-examination and forward to the 'Great Society' of the 1950s and America's representation of itself as the sign of the Free World.

The Museum of Modern Art itself, the pantheon of European 'Moderns' in the 1930s, was not sure about the possibility of an authentic modern art emerging in America. Along with socialist organisations like the American Artists' Congress, MOMA
supported the continuation of the Federal Art Project and believed its abolition would be a serious blow to American culture.\textsuperscript{31} It can be argued, in fact, that MOMA actively ignored and discouraged American modernist artists in the 1930s. Excluding any indigenous artists from the Cubism And Abstract Art show in 1935 and leaving out the abstract paintings and designs submitted by federal artists — including some later Abstract Expressionists — for the New Horizons In American Art show the following year, the Museum's attitude provoked the American Abstract Artists group to picket and leaflet the institution in 1940. In the previous year, MOMA's Art in Our Time exhibition had presented nineteenth-century American artists, and a few from the early twentieth, along with works by Picasso, Braque, Léger and other European artists. As late as 1948 most critics preferred what was called a 'moderate' form of modern art — comfortably 'School of Paris'; Emily Wasserman's Best of Art index, which published selected works from among 50,000 considered, included not one from Rothko, Newman or Gottlieb. Artists who are now firmly located as primarily 'pre-war', such as Philip Evergood and Stuart Davis, were included instead.\textsuperscript{32}

While the American Abstract Artists group had been formed in 1936, Rothko had helped to organise another group called 'The Ten' in the previous year. This included de Kooning, Gorky, Pollock and Gottlieb. Known also as the 'Whitney dissenters', the Ten gained the reputation of being revolutionary outcasts, despising both the art establishment and the social realist left orthodoxy alike. Rothko's own 1930s canvases — those that survived the massive destruction of Federal Art Project work — show murky, rather indeterminate interiors and studies of attenuated figures, done in a loosely 'expressionist' mode and resembling, in mood, the urban-alienation scenes of Edward Hopper and the Soyer Brothers. A recurrent and popular theme at the time with New York artists was the subway scene (Fig. 4), showing alienated figures moving past or standing in doorways or station platforms. Like Interior (1932) (Fig. 5), they are as sombre and rectilinear as his post-war abstractions. Along with the artists Balcombe Greene and George McNeil, Rothko had agitated for Art Front to confront aesthetic debates more openly and especially to consider the issues surrounding abstract art. According to Dore Ashton:

Rothko loathed everything that smacked of social realism; fulminated against such favoured figures as Joe

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\textbf{Fig. 4.} Mark Rothko: Subway Scene, 1938. Estate of Mark Rothko.
Jones and William Gropper, whom he regarded as little better than cartoonists.53

Boswell, from *Art Digest* magazine, also argued, in December 1939, that the so-called ‘proletarian school’ was misled. In the pursuit of a proper understanding of Rothko’s rejection of realism the danger to avoid is that of collapsing his opposition into the political liberalism propagated by Boswell and later by generations of modernist critics and historians. Rothko’s political position at this time can be described as an anti-capitalist libertarianism, anti-statism and involving a rejection of Soviet Communism, German Fascism and American corporate capitalism.54

Rothko’s adoption of abstraction in his painting from 1948 onwards was not equivalent to the abandoning of ‘content’. As he argued in the *New York Times*:

> There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing ... This is the essence of academicism.55

Five years later, in ‘The Romantics Were Prompted’, he said that although his forms in paint ‘have no direct association with any particular visible experience, in them one recognises the principle and passion of organisms’.56 What can be called Rothko’s ‘aesthetic vitalism’, which is supported by the popular ‘modernist metaphysic’ through which his paintings are understood, can be seen from another position as a ‘content’ which denied a range of possible figurations. Backed into a corner, away from the dead ends of socialist realism and the dominant cultural forms of American capitalist society Rothko’s consent to and acceptance of what became his classic abstract painting, such as *Orange And Yellow* (1956), can be seen as the consequence of a radical negation of other, arid alternatives: ‘a strategy of negation and refusal ... not an unreasonable response to bourgeois civilisation’.57

With the decline in ‘democratic eclecticism’ in painting and criticism in America during the period 1938 to 1948 and the later institutional empowerment of a de-politicised ’aesthetic discourse’, Abstract Expressionism and Rothko’s paintings achieved dominance and paradigm status. Modernist theory, not as a formalist purism developed by Clement Greenberg in the 1960s, but as a heterogeneous, aphoristic, tautological, rambling, metaphysical, eulogistic hagiography achieved the level of a ‘common sense’: conventional, uncontentious critical and humanist wisdom, as deep-seated as our conviction that the earth rotates around the sun.

By 1939 Boswell was arguing that Europe had ‘tossed the torch of creative experiment to the long extended hand of American artists’. In February of the following year he announced ‘the return to aesthetics’: ‘that old Ivory Tower did have its points’.58 Art was to be for the Left, the Right and the Middle, and the middle class had the best taste in Art. Moreover, it had the buying power. National Art Week replaced the Federal Art Project in 1940 and in 1941 Thomas J. Watson, the president of I.B.M. corporation, took over as chairman. The artist Elizabeth Olds, speaking in an interview in 1973, said that it was around this time that artists began to ‘smudge out any part of their picture that represented a recognisable object. That would be illustration, they said.’59 As early as 1938 Channing Pollock, the art critic for *The American* declared:

> The true artist doesn’t want to be encouraged. He is an internal combustion engine. For every great artist produced by spoon feeding, I’ll show you 500 who found their own nourishment.60

In 1941, Rothko’s *Antigone*, the first of the Greek myth paintings, arguably began the flight from realist representation and set him on the road to the classic colour-field paintings, the transcendent pools of light he was to paint until his death in 1970. From archetype titles — *Omen Of The Eagle*, *Syrian Bull* — Rothko’s progressive expulsion of representational specificity was indexed through the designation *Untitled* and then by serial numbers and colours.

A time had come, Rothko said, when ‘none of us could use the figure without mutilating it’.61 The passing of the Federal Art Project and the passing of figuration in the work of Rothko and other American artists in the 1940s constituted a somewhat
ambiguous and empty 'triumph', both for thousands of artists who lost all economic security and for the Abstract Expressionists, those one-time dissidents, soon to be installed and institutionalised as the official, high-cultural producers of the ascendant American Empire.

Notes

2. Also published in the above anthology, pp. 35–46.
4. See note 2.
6. First published as an exhibition catalogue for the Solomon R. Guggenheim collection of non-objective paintings, 1937. This is also included in the anthology Modern Art & Modernism, pp. 145–148.
7. Greenberg was little interested in the subjectivity of the artists he regarded as significant. This is perhaps illustrated by his statement at the end of the Open University ‘Modern Art & Modernism’ television interview when he observed that ‘Pollock was full of shit, like everyone else.’
10. One of the more interesting accounts within this rubric is Robert Rosenblum’s The Northern Romantic Tradition: From Friedrich To Rothko, Thames and Hudson, London, 1975.
11. Arguably, the Tate Gallery’s reproduction of critical articles by Robert Goldwater and David Silvester, written in 1961, demonstrates that not only Rothko’s paintings but also their ‘proper’ sensitive interpretation and evaluation are regarded as ‘timeless’ and unchanging.
13. As Pollock said in 1947: ‘The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the 1930s, seems absurd to me just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd ... the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country’; included in the anthology edited by H. B. Chipp: Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists & Critics, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968, p. 546.
15. This was the title of Clement Greenberg’s 1948 article, published in Partisan Review vol. 15, no. 3, March 1948.
23. The relationship between the works of Rothko and other Abstract Expressionist artists and the involvement of the C.I.A. is not a simple causal one. Attacks on the attempts to link the two have usually consisted in accusing those who assert a definite relationship of holding to a ‘conspiracy theory’ whereby the C.I.A. ‘planned’ or even commissioned artists to produce abstract paintings for covert use by the U.S. State. This is damagingly to caricature the accounts and arguments put forward by Cockcroft and others. For a difficult though enlightening discussion of the problem of causation in relation to works of art, see Art & Language: Portrait Of V. I. Lenin, in the anthology Modernism, Criticism, Realism, edited by Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, Harper & Row, London, 1984, pp. 145–169.
27. For an informative account of Rothko’s activities in the 1930s, see Dore Ashton’s About Rothko, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983.
28. See, in particular, the first three chapters of Serge Guilbaut’s How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom & the Cold War.
29. ibid., pp. 146–147.
31. Such a group of patriots was the Artists’ Council for Victory, established in 1942 who, according to their own claims, were ‘alive with patriotism which stirs their souls to produce their best works’.
33. See Arthur Schlesinger’s The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom, Riverside Press, Boston, 1962 and Anthony Giddens discussion of American structural-functionalist sociology in The Constitution of Society, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984. This is also discussed in Culture, Media, Language, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, Hutchinson, London, 1981: ‘This was the period — the 1950s — of ... massive dependence on American theories and models. But American sociology ... was systematically functionalist and integrative in perspective. It had abolished the category of contradiction: instead, it spoke of “disfunctions” and of “tension management”. It claimed the mantle of a science. But its premises and predispositions were highly ideological’, (p. 20).
34. Dondoro’s speech in the U.S. Congress is republished in H. B. Chipp’s Theories of Modern Art, pp. 496–497.
35. Dondoro was especially interested in investigating the newly established Artists Equity League and the artists David Fredenhall, William Hayter and Mitchell Siporin — all of whom had been involved with the Left in America during the 1930s.
38. For an account of this, see Daniel Aaron: Writers on the Left, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.
39. See Peyton Bowell, editorial, Art Digest, May 1940, ‘Shelving the American Scene’.
40. See Dore Ashton: About Rothko.
41. Their statement reads: ‘We condemn artistic nationalisms which negate the world traditions of art as the base of modern art movements.’
42. Art Digest, editorial, May 1940.
43. See the extract from this in H. B. Chipp: Theories of Modern Art, pp. 483–486: ‘The aim of this appeal is to find a common ground on
which may be reunited all revolutionary writers and artists, the better to serve the revolution by their art and to defend the liberty of that art itself against the usurpers of the revolution. We believe that aesthetic, philosophical, and political tendencies of the most varied sort can find here a common ground. Marxists can march hand in hand with anarchists, provided both parties uncompromisingly reject the reactionary police-patrol spirit represented by Joseph Stalin . . . '; p. 486. Barnett Newman's anti-capitalist position was expressed in a short statement in Art in America, 1962, when he said: 'Almost fifteen years ago [i.e. 1947] Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes.'

45. Reprinted in the Tate Gallery catalogue Mark Rothko, pp. 77–78.
46. For instance, see Barbara Rose: American Painting in the Twentieth Century, Skira, London, 1980, chapter three.
47. American Magazine of Art, December 1938.
49. 'Trends In American Painting Of Today', City Art Museum, St Louis, 1942, written by Perry T. Rathbone.
50. Benton had rejected Parisian modernism sometime during the period 1916–1920 and, along with Grant Wood and J. S. Curry, had formed what became known as the Regionalist movement in American painting, specialising in the sort of scenes which Rothko abhorred.
51. In a letter written by the president of MOMA, A. Conger Goodyear, to Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project, in early 1939.
53. About Rothko, p. 31.
54. There is no reason to suppose that this position changed in the 1950s or 1960s. Along with Pollock and other artists who had adopted oppositional stances in the 1930s, Rothko's post-war art can be seen as a continuation of his negation of political and social realities.
55. In the Tate Gallery catalogue, p. 78.
56. Ibid., p. 84.
57. T. J. Clark: 'Arguments About Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried', in The Politics of Interpretation, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell, 1983 and in the anthology Pollock & After: The Critical Debate, p. 82. At this point it is prudent to say that my account of Rothko's painting in no way presents itself as 'full' or 'complete' in terms of its sources which 'influenced' his work or the range of ideas which he 'rew' on — either before or after the war. It has examined Rothko's work as a series of negations and refusals partly in order to counter the banalities of criticism and praise which stress his work as an incessant parade of positivities.
58. Art Digest, May 1940.
60. In The American, c.1938, clipping found in the Archives of American Art, New York City.
61. In the Tate Gallery catalogue, p. 86.