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## American Art Criticism between the Cultural and the Ideological (II)

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### Abstract

For the past 150 years, American art and art criticism have undergone important cultural and ideological transformations that are explanatory both of their historical evolution and of the possibility of being divided into several stages. In my interpretation, art criticism cuts across the historical evolution of art in the United States, according to the following cultural and ideological paradigms: two predominant cultural ideologies of art between 1865-1900 and 1960-1980, respectively; two other aesthetic and formalist ideological shifts in the periods between 1900-1940 and 1940-1960, respectively, and one last pluralist approach to the arts after 1980. Even if this conceptualisation of art criticism in America might seem risky and oversimplifying, there are conspicuous and undeniable arguments supporting it. In a previous study published by *American, British and Canadian Studies*, I provided conceptual justifications both for the criteria dividing the cultural and the ideological within the overall assessment of American art by art critics and for the analysis and interpretation of the first two important temporal periods in the field of art criticism, 1865-1900 and 1908-1940. The present study continues by analyzing the cultural and ideological stances of American art criticism after 1940 and argues for certain paradigmatic shifts from one period to another.

**Keywords:** American art criticism, cultural art criticism, ideological art criticism, Clement Greenberg

### Introduction

In a recent study (Gherasim 93-107) intended to highlight “the sublimation” of the American fine arts within the exercise of art criticism,

I divided the overall approach in the field into five temporal stages, following a subjective consideration of each period as being markedly culturally or ideologically-oriented, as the case may be. According to this criterion of assessment, I argued for a predominantly cultural approach to both the fine arts and art criticism in the first period, 1865-1900. By and large, the main focus of art critics on American art had been characterized by attempts to induce awareness and to educate the large public about the distinct cultural field of fine arts. Moreover, this education also meant connecting American art and artists with the great European tradition and guiding the public along the basic notions of understanding and evaluating artworks. If one adds the fact that many noteworthy American museums and art institutions were founded in this period, the reasons why it might be characterized as substantively cultural become evident.

During the second period, 1908-1940, I put forward some arguments supporting the idea that the educational stance of art criticism in the United States in the first period turned into a predominantly aesthetic and professionalized orientation of the field, especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The two international exhibitions of 1908 and 1913 marked the inclusion of United States art and artists in the world of art and strengthened the “aesthetic dialogue” between American art and the masters of European art. Until 1940, art and art criticism in the United States continued to delve into the great vocabularies of artistic expression and American artists strove to find their own voices in the realm of fine arts. Overwhelmingly, I assessed this period as the first ideological turn in the United States’ art and art criticism.

### **The second ideological turn of American art criticism, 1940-1960**

American art criticism between 1940 and 1960 represented one of the best-defined segments of this field, as it attained a crystallisation of its fundamental options and the establishment of more profound interactions between art and writing. A possible ideological subdivision of art criticism of this period into three parts is plausible considering first, the

fulfilment of the aesthetic project of modernity, later on – midway through this period – the ever more present interference of the political in the field of art, and, finally, the formulation of arguments that assert the climax and the decline of a privileged moment of artistic expression in the United States (i.e., abstract expressionism).

The defining feature of the first stage within these decades is marked by the personality of one of the most important American art critics, Clement Greenberg: from 1942 to 1949, Greenberg was the foremost voice in the field of American art criticism in *The Nation* magazine. Even since his debut, Greenberg seemed to be driven by an acute need to clarify a possible continuity between the American avant-garde art and the most recent expressions in art at the beginning of the fifth decade. Thus, the ideological programme of the avant-garde anticipated some developments in the arts that were likely to be connected to the definitive decline of the aesthetic canon of modernity; this fact should be grasped in the context of the complete exhaustion of artistic expression resources peculiar to modernity whose crisis and dissolution was accelerated by the avant-garde (Greenberg, “Collected Essays” 28; Fried 217). Greenberg’s formalist and historical understanding of contemporary arts prompted him to highlight stylistic similarities between the arts of the present and traditional arts, to distinguish continuities and influences, and to establish some fundamental characteristics of the new orientations (Greenberg, “Brushes with History” 201-202, 203-205, 207-208, 208-210, 210-212, 212-214, 214-216).

Greenberg’s formalist criticism contrasted with Harold Rosenberg’s experientialist vision, this controversy representing a sound ideological confrontation in the American art criticism of the sixth decade. Rosenberg, who was rather a political activist than an art critic of Greenberg’s stature, was the promoter of a new aesthetic ideology arguing that artistic practices should be seen as performative instances in keeping with the essence of contemporary society, rather than as new theoretical and methodological directions continuing the tradition of past art. Rosenberg’s main writings became programmatic for a new approach of art which, probably more so than other cultural fields, should be characterized by the constant obsession with innovation and the refusal of

any conformism with traditional art. Art criticism should report the artists' activities as illustrative for the clarification of present social and political transformations instead of providing theoretical explanations of the contemplative or magisterial accomplishments of individual masterpieces. As a consequence, according to Rosenberg, art criticism was authentic only if it borrowed the action-oriented language of artistic practices (Jumonville 135-140). Undoubtedly, both Greenberg's formalist criticism and Rosenberg's activist experientialism were primarily aimed at the first artistically homogeneous and original art current in the United States, namely abstract expressionism. Despite a controversy at the end of the fifth decade between Clement Greenberg and the British art critic David Sylvester on the real impact, significance and originality of abstract expressionists (Greenberg and Sylvester 227-232), art critics and art historians generally agree that the American artists belonging to this current were its dominant representatives. The label applied to this current, "abstract expressionism was a term applied by the critic Robert Coates in 1946 to a number of New York-based artists whom Harold Rosenberg decided, six years later, to call 'action painters'. Greenberg came up with his own rather clumsy name of 'American-Type' painting in 1955" (Harris 48).

Greenberg's ideological art criticism was related to the interpretation of modernism, according to his presupposition that the climax of this period in art history was connected to a two-stage movement, the first indicating a distancing from the kitsch that the bourgeois society promoted at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the second criticizing the avant-garde's defence of art's content autonomy from social and political connotations. Greenberg postulated a conception of art for art's sake and, consequently, the autonomy of the aesthetic, which might be the reason why commentators emphasised his essentially apolitical, albeit ideological, formalism (Tekiner 31-33). Still, his disdain of politics is questionable if one considers Greenberg's political commitment to the Trotskyite socialist left in the second and the third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even if, in the post-war period, he grew progressively disenchanted with socialism. Moreover, Greenberg ceased his collaboration with *The Nation* for political reasons, as a result of a

1951 lawsuit, in which Greenberg was required to explain his statement that the publication promoted only contributions intent on popularising Soviet ideology. This is but one significant occurrence of the post-war ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union with important repercussions on the phenomenon of art and art criticism: interestingly enough, one could find in the pages of the magazine a text by Richard Nixon – the then vice-president of the United States – arguing in favour of the authorities' decision to destroy a work by one of the well-known American artists of the time, Anton Refregier, suspected of a pro-Soviet representation of Californian history on the walls of a post-office building in San Francisco. This action was typical in the context of the McCarthyist witch-hunting fever that the United States experienced in the 1950s.

Art criticism in *The Nation* did not die after 1950. In 1955, for instance, artist and theorist John Berger published an important article that categorically rejected a widespread conception of post-war cultural criticism, according to which the true nature and meaning of contemporary arts would require the formulation of an essential qualitative distinction between elitist art and mass art. In Berger's view, cultural snobbery would be the unfortunate successor of the old social snobbery. On the one hand, taking the form of pretentiousness, irrationality and obscurity, the elitist conception in art lacked a positive and realist spirit; on the other, by favouring entertainment and superficial satisfaction, mass or commercial art could not attain a qualitative level capable of refining the intellect, of morally educating people in the spirit of tolerance, pacifism and equality. Nevertheless, the set of elitist objections could not be supported since high quality art did not appear to have contributed to the cultural emancipation of the individual except in a hypocritical manner by assuming a false introspection, megalomania, pure sensitivity and other abstractions (Berger 256-261).<sup>1</sup> This approach is illustrative for the fact that the roots of the conflict opposing the canons of traditional art and the modes of artistic expression suitable for the masses had existed even before the rise of pop art.

At the end of the 1950s, art criticism in the United States marked the achievements and the artistic significance that abstract expressionism

brought along during its short, but tumultuous existence. At the beginning of the 1960s, art critics recorded the fact that the American school of abstract expressionism had already become extinct. In the language of art critics, its prominent representatives – Gorky, Pollock, de Kooning, Newman and others – adopted an ideological and stylistic conception of art that could indicate the preference for large-scale works and the careless application of the brush on surfaces, the absence of an immediately intelligible meaning and of an intrinsic theory of the artwork, and the preference for vacuum. In contrast to realist painting in which the artistic creation derived from a premeditated concept, non-objective or abstract painting was addressed less to aesthetic feelings and more to one's vital emotions and graphic sense (Porter 267-269, 271-273). Art criticism noted that later generations of abstract expressionists in the United States put to work two concurrent ideologies of painting – hard-edge painting and color-field painting – in their attempt to save the movement both from derision and from the technological contamination of art.

#### **Cultural revivalism: American art criticism, 1960-1980**

Art criticism in the United States between 1960 and 1980 became reflective of the theoretical assumptions of the radical cultural turn imposed by the onset of postmodernity. It encapsulated a peculiar type of writing applied to a specific cultural fact in which the signs of overcoming modernity were markedly and immediately visible. Indeed, post-1960 art was a discontinuous phenomenon in relation to similar artistic goals from previous decades, so that new creative options, alongside a critical aesthetic commitment, came to represent post-war world realities in the age of arresting technologies. Post-1960 art criticism emerged within a caesura caused by the transition from the crisis of late modernity to its total failure. From an aesthetic standpoint, in the period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, late modernity fine arts signified a distancing of their expressions from a canon referring to precise and coercive theoretical rules peculiar to the Renaissance tradition of the great masters. In parallel, art criticism followed a path whose

starting point in late modernity was an ideological commitment to the contents of art by the avant-garde programmes, went through a period when it emphasised humanist individualism as a mode of interpreting and understanding art's intentionality, and, eventually, reached a point of describing the art phenomenon as an illustrative statement for the autonomy of the aesthetic. In the United States, this climax of modernity was marked by Clement Greenberg's art criticism; although, especially after 1950, there were a series of critical options that drew attention towards the inevitable dissolution of the aesthetic programme of abstract expressionism, art criticism still had to wait another decade in order to record the definitive exhaustion of the resources of artistic expression specific to abstract expressionism and, simultaneously, the end of late modernity in art.

A postmodern vision in American art criticism – and not only there – signalled the presence in art of some decisive changes characteristic of new forms of expression: the pastiche and the irony directed towards the conventions of past art, the emergence of allegories, the use of elements specific to mass culture, the employment of original figurative modes such as the fragmentation and the multiplication of artistic productions, the conception of the human body as a preferential component or as an agent of artworks, and the reaffirmation of the political significance of artistic expression (Harris 200-202). In the period between 1960 and 1980, the prominent representatives of art criticism who highlighted primarily the manifestations of American pop art were Max Kozloff and Lawrence Alloway. The writings of the two critics in the pages of *The Nation* provide a comprehensive coverage of the art phenomena of the time, so that mentioning their most important critical contributions might be explanatory for what I would call the revival of the cultural.

By and large, contemporary aesthetics characterized the American art of the seventh and eighth decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a phenomenon whose defining feature would be an essentially performative vision on art; several commentators pointed at the theatricalisation of art in this period,<sup>2</sup> so that the predilection for improvisation, accident and actionalism became the essential condition for the possibility of expression in art. This original direction in the art of the time was visible within several stylistic

procedures such as happenings, comics or graffiti art. In the case of happenings, attempting a distinction between Claes Oldenburg's and Allan Kaprow's art, the British art critic – who lived and worked in the United States after 1961 – Lawrence Alloway argued that the latter's works were happenings by exploiting a momentary situation that called for the direct intervention and participation of the viewer in producing the work of art. Accordingly, the meanings of happenings referred to the role of direct and non-reflexive action, as well as to giving up any form of control through decision by the artist; essentially, the happening is pure production and activity (Alloway, "Happenings" 343-346). The comics were dynamic sequences of disparate episodes in which the unity of the whole prevailed to the detriment of its components; their stylistic features were rather insignificant, while the aesthetic message of the artistic production was addressed to an immediate and non-critical judgment of taste from the public; the topics of comics hint at mass fashion and were irreverent to aesthetic canons (Alloway, "Comics" 362-364). Finally, graffiti art tried to endorse the visual and performative potential of written forms, highlighting a non-conventional expression of personal freedom, of a primitive individual energy associated, more often than not, with acts of vandalism (Alloway, "Graffiti" 390-392).

In brief, by rejecting any reference to traditional aesthetic norms and fundamentally pointing to the expectations, daily behaviours, emotions and common sense of the large public, the occurrences of pop art in the United States became expressions of the controversial mood and cultural pattern of the age. The only probable ideological ingredient of this peculiar approach in the field of fine arts resided in the radical negation of any canonical constraints. Alloway noted that the detractors of the new sensibility in art invoked the chaotic diversity of art manifestations and its stylistic incoherence ("The 1970s" 392-393). Among the significant art manifestations with undeniable cultural connotations in the eighth decade, Alloway enumerated photorealism, the new abstractionist current of "pattern painting," and the neoconservative current of "new image painting." However, the British critic overlooked the fact that, towards the end of the period, incipient manifestations of minimalism and conceptualism were already discernible in American art. Promoting a



more lucid criticism in comparison with Alloway, Max Kozloff – the art critic of *The Nation* between 1961 and 1969 and the 1963 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for criticism – argued that the new mode of artistic expression in the United States should be conceived as the artist's intimate nature, not as an artistic form having whatever stylistic value (Kozloff 323).

Synthetically, interpreting the probably non-exhaustive theoretical conclusions that two of the most important critics of this period – Kozloff and Alloway – reached by means of critical comments regarding the most important exhibitions at the time, the cultural characteristics of pop art, or the new realism, as it was called,<sup>3</sup> are: i) the overwhelming role played by everyday, mundane objects in the production of artworks; ii) the predilection for capturing a vivid, immediately recognisable reality lacking conceptual connotations; iii) the insinuation of the artwork between aesthetics and life, so that the aesthetically appropriable distance between them becomes insignificant; iv) the artist's essential irony manifested as an affirmation of the significant force of material objects to the detriment of artistic ideas or intuitions; v) the attempt to suppress the distinction between abstract art and representational art through a shift from the figurative and the mimetic towards quasi-literalism; vi) the value of entertainment as a mode of expression and artistic exploration of the world; vii) the affirmation of the role of accident and unpremeditated action to the detriment of the mode of execution and of the artwork as a finite product; viii) the large-scale reproduction of one and the same object with the purpose of producing an anticipated effect regarding the dynamism and metamorphoses of experience; ix) the indecisive character of expressing oneself through art, as the work of art emerges rather as an event or a dialogic mode among various objects pertaining to reality; x) the methodological orientation towards the successive framing of a banal motif within distinct contexts; xi) the essential non-distinction between ideas and execution, in the sense in which the essentially performative dimension of art is identical to the act of creation; xii) the affirmation of the symbolic role of technologies in the context of the depersonalisation of working techniques and carrying out industrial-type operations; xiii) the dissolution of the distinction between art and commerce; xiv) the

incoherence of the relationship between the parts and the whole or between means and ends; xv) the predilection for anonymity, banality and repetition.

### **Fusion and/or non-distinction? American art criticism after 1980**

Art criticism between 1940 and 1960 shifted its ideological focus on the fine arts in the United States in comparison with the previous period, 1908-1940: it was not so much the ideological postulate of artistic autonomy and the break with the burdensome European tradition by endorsing the momentum for a truly genuine national art, but rather a new ideatic conception of art that could be succinctly characterised as gestural, energetic and actional. The new ideology of abstract expressionist painting in the 1940s and the 1950s was less a battle with tradition than an audacious assertiveness regarding the American way of expressing something meaningful through art. After 1960, art criticism in the United States seized the integration of fine arts within the all-encompassing massification tendencies in the age of American popular culture of the time so as to reinforce its meanings and to strengthen its obsessions. Mirroring these new artistic orientations, art criticism in the United States in the 1960s anticipated what was later labelled “the cultural turn” (Jameson 19). Finally, the pluralism of arts after 1980 has made it impossible to label art criticism as either cultural or ideological: in the age of “anything goes,” postmodern deconstructivism, relativism and refusal of ideologies, art criticism in the United States has striven to remain responsive to the more and more chaotic dimensions and occurrences of art. According to one of the most prominent American philosophers and art critics of the time, no narrative could possibly be valid about the seeming irremediable disorder of the post-historical artworld (Danto, “Unnatural Wonders” 26).

The phenomenon of art criticism has been characterised, in the context of postmodernism and the pluralist view regarding the specific modes of manifestation in contemporary arts, both by a refining of its methods and by attempts to overcome the minority status it traditionally

had in comparison to conceptual philosophical thought. One such attempt distinguishes between an assertive presence of art criticism and an aletheic one: the former is abstract, one-sided, inflexible, rigid, egological and exclusive, while the latter is multiple, contextual, inclusive, horizontal and interested. It goes without saying that the aletheic method of art criticism stands for one possible attempt to save what is meaningful when writing about art (Levin 68). At best, art criticism is intimately interconnected with a series of features and facts specific to the multiplicity of postmodern aesthetic experiences: 1) the style, originality, consistency and novelty of any artistic creation are specific markers of the art critical discourses that can be highlighted a posteriori, so that art criticism may translate the artistic production into a genuine aesthetic experience; 2) exhibitions are phenomena that art criticism regards as accomplishing the transition between the essentially private nature of artistic production towards the public dimension of aesthetic experience; 3) art criticism also emphasises the essential public-private tension with regard to the impact of technologies, machinism or consumerism on the motivations that originate the production of artworks; 4) the social meanings of artistic production are highlighted by art criticism as essential ingredients for the understanding of artistic productions in the context of explaining either the contemplative or the radical activist attitudes of the artist, thus generating specific modes of understanding the act of creation; 5) art criticism needs to solve the issue of artistic production regarded as a game, either within the limits accepted by an aesthetic canon or as a transgression of a widely accepted set of rules; 6) the conditions of producing a work of art – its actual making – also fall within the sphere of art criticism, as they allow the distinction between serialised productions that make use of advanced technological means and unique creations resulting from the artist's mastery and originality; 7) contextualism forms another privileged space for the affirmation of the intelligibility of artistic productions through the mediation of art criticism; 8) the intentionality that is the genesis of an artwork needs to be separated from the formal meanings external to the artwork by a critical exercise; 9) art criticism is aware of a certain degree of ineffability that accompanies any genuine artistic production, so that the miracle of artistic creation and aesthetic

experience could be preserved; 10) the profoundly professionalised nature of contemporary arts requires the critical consideration of the connections between the artist's intentionality and the professional art institutions that subsidize, advertise and promote the artistic production; 11) art criticism pays attention to the ever more diverse sources that generate artistic production considering the increasing complexity of contemporary ways of life; 12) despite its recent repudiation as a relevant aesthetic category, the quality of artistic creation remains one of the primordial references of responsible art criticism (Pozzi 131-144).

The art criticism references to post-1980 artworks enumerated above represent relevant criteria for a cognitive approach in the field; other analysis criteria should be added in order to achieve a more complex critical reporting of contemporary arts, beyond the cognitive approach. Noël Carroll draws attention to a series of methodological resources whose employment would bring art criticism closer to its chief mission – that of evaluating artworks: any veritable critical response to artistic events should accomplish an evaluation, something that is possible when one calls on a set of theoretical procedures that justify or argue in favour of adopting that conclusive evaluation. Thus, successful and meaningful art criticism is dependant on the accurate use of one – or many – of the following explanatory strategies: descriptions, classifications, contextualisations, clarifications, interpretations and/or analyses with the purpose of formulating an evaluation. According to Carroll, the cognitive method is strictly the support for an axiological clarification for aesthetic objects, while the evaluative task becomes the responsibility of any genuine art criticism: a complete critical act requires adopting one or several evaluative components, plus the evaluative one (Carroll 85). The theoretical strategies that form the basis of evaluation as critical endeavour about art should fulfil a series of requirements in order to represent adequate reasons in relation to evaluative criticism. Accordingly, the description should be as complete as possible, non-equivocal, relevant, adequate and undistorted; the classification needs to be rigorously categorial and should aim at establishing the specific differences of artistic productions in relation to similar ones, so that their belonging to a *genus proximus* should be non-equivocal; the

contextualisation needs to highlight precisely the circumstances of artwork production and manifestation, be it historical, institutional, intentional or social; the clarification and interpretation are critically achieved in the context of emphasizing the specific meanings of artistic productions, regardless of whether these are symbolic, pragmatic, historical (in the case of clarification) or linguistic, narrative, semiotic, pictorial or associative (in the case of interpretation). In some specific cases, the inter-correlation of two or more procedures might be needed in order to achieve appropriate evaluative results (Carroll 86-134).

In contrast to Carroll, Arthur Danto was sceptical that the possibilities of evaluating artworks would lead to a more adequate understanding of the artworld. Instead of providing guidelines and methods for various possible assessments of artworks, Danto used some notable distinctions between what I would term major and minor genres in art criticism which are discernible within his prodigious career as an art critic, starting with 1964 until his recent death, in 2013. The minor genres include, according to Danto, cultural art criticism (“The Philosophical Disenfranchisement” 80) and inferential art criticism – both causal and historical (“Beyond the Brillo Box” 50-53). The major genres point at semantic art criticism (“After the End of Art” 181-189), post-philosophical art criticism (“Embodied Meanings” 11-13) and post-historical art criticism (“After the End of Art” 47). Danto’s preference for the cognitive approach in art criticism contrasts with his pluralist and relativist views about contemporary arts. If Danto published extensively in the field of fine arts criticism, Carroll has been developing his writings in the context of expanding the incidence area of fine arts to include film and other artistic fictions.

Considering that the representative figure of the American pop art in the 1960s, Andy Warhol, pushed the limits of fine arts in post-history, Arthur Danto pointed at the problem of the historicity of fine arts (“Encounters and Reflections” 287). Postulating that two of the steady criteria which defined art history (i.e., the visual perception in art and the concept of beauty) became obsolete in the context of pop art and beyond, Danto concluded that all post-historical artistic movements (e.g., happenings, performative and installation art, Fluxus, minimalism,

conceptualism, internet and video art) lacked connections with the traditional canon of fine arts. Neo-expressionism, with its undue tentative of rehabilitating painting as expressive artistic representation, did not succeed either in surpassing the general anarchy of sense in light of the previous great narrative of art history and the essential non-distinction between artworks and their objectual counterparts in light of the plurality of artistic manifestations. According to Danto and others (see, for instance, Harrison 208-222), pop artists and their followers attempted to overcome the traditional distinctions between art and life and highbrow and lowbrow art, respectively, even if pop artists delivered essentially political and social messages through their artworks. In their language, art stood no longer for the representation of reality, but was one of its occurrences among others. Because of pop art's irreverence towards something pertaining to the artworld and its history, its messages remain fundamentally cultural, external to the artworld as such and purely reflecting upon the ethos of the age. Pop art merely anticipated the post-historical turn of fine arts after 1980, in the sense that it became impossible to detect a prevalent orientation of artistic meanings according to an internal consistency of the artworld. The movement of pop art not only contrasted with the ideological messages of its predecessors (i.e., avant-garde and abstract expressionism, which pushed forward the historical narrative of art due to their attempts to state something relevant about artistic traditions of the past), but also precipitated the post-historical turn. This study is rather silent in anticipating what remains to be done in the context of abandoning the possibility of historical interpretations according to certain conceptual perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Upon the conflict between highbrow and lowbrow in art, John Berger wrote: "Both these attitudes of appreciation are necessary to one another. If the first 'specialist' appreciation exists without the second, art becomes increasingly concerned with its own technical and subjective problems and so eventually sterile. If the second 'popular' form of appreciation exists without the first, art becomes only concerned with what is said ... and so ends up by being banal." (260).

<sup>2</sup> The conceptualisations in aesthetics that refer critically to the theatricalisation of art include works by Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss.

<sup>3</sup> Writing about the “new realism” in art, the critic Hilton Kramer believed that “it neither revivifies the moribund abstract language which determines all its internal decisions, nor does it succeed in conferring new meaning on the objects and motives of popular culture it seeks to utilize” (Kramer 298).

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