

# The Intersection of Abstract Expressionist and Mass Visual Culture—An Historiographic Overview

Gregory Gilbert

Department of Art and Art History, Knox College, 2 East South Street, Galesburg, IL 61401-4999, USA;  
ggilbert@knox.edu

## 1. Introduction

Of the major modernist movements in the 20th century, Abstract Expressionism long retained its canonical status as a radical avant-garde detached from a broader mass culture. Decades after the preeminence of the New York School, scholars and critics continued to promote its aura of purist detachment and uncompromising bohemianism. As late as 1990, virtually no examples of Abstract Expressionism were included in the landmark exhibit “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture” at the Museum of Modern Art (Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990). While the exhibit highlighted new scholarly views on the interrelationship of high and low visual culture, the omission of Abstract Expressionism served to reinforce entrenched art historical assumptions concerning its aesthetic autonomy.

Much of the presumed artistic purity of Abstract Expressionism can be attributed to the early critical writing of Clement Greenberg, most famously his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, first published in *Partisan Review* in 1939 (Greenberg 2000). Although the essay predates the actual emergence of Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg’s role as a major critical advocate of the movement in the 1940s and 1950s aligned his restrictive formalist views with its artistic intentions. Since there has been voluminous analytical writing on Greenberg’s essay, I will only briefly review some of its key critical arguments. In relating the origins of the modernist avant-garde to the late Realism of Manet and early Impressionism, Greenberg analyzed the growing social and political disaffection of modernist artists in the late 19th century, in particular their alienation from capitalist culture and lack of engagement with bourgeois politics. Abandoning direct involvement with revolutionary politics, Greenberg argued that their adversarial position was being expressed purely through the progressive formal traits of their art, which rejected the conservative academic norms and conformist values associated with bourgeois artistic and social institutions. This continued commitment to advanced artistic values led to the formation of a radical non-objective abstraction in the early 20th century, which Greenberg promoted for its vestigial political meanings and functions. A central polemical concept of Greenberg’s essay is his reliance on the dichotomy between a true avant-garde art and modern kitsch, which he associated with all forms of mass visual culture including popular illustration, advertising and Hollywood films. He historically traced kitsch to the creation of a pseudo high art in the late 19th century, which was a simplified, commodified form of avant-garde art that could be more easily appreciated by a petty bourgeois audience aspiring to higher forms of cultural consumption. However, according to Greenberg, as part of the radical strategies of the modernist avant-garde, the emphasis on the purity of the medium and the signifying ambiguity of abstraction prevented it from being appropriated for capitalist commercial or propagandistic purposes, an ideological posture that was later ascribed to Abstract Expressionism.

In contrast to Greenberg’s strict oppositional division between the avant-garde and commercial culture, other alternative theoretical views have been developed. A prime example is Thomas Crow’s essay “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts”, which draws heavily from Meyer Schapiro’s articles “The Social Bases of Art” and “The



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Nature of Abstract Art” that were published in the *Marxist Quarterly* in the late 1930s (Crow 1996). In using Schapiro’s ideas, Crow does contrast them with the premises of Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. He stresses that Schapiro also saw the formation of the artistic vanguard in the late 19th century as resulting from the artists’ alienation from radical collective politics, a condition that would remain until a new, socialist society was achieved (Crow 1996, p. 14). While Schapiro acknowledged the social and ideological restrictions of capitalist mass society, he also asserted that avant-garde and commercial culture historically existed as interconnected cultural spheres that share certain expressive values. This led Crow to posit the cyclical phenomenon of the avant-garde carving out a subcultural space to challenge the hegemony of mass culture, which initiates the process of capitalism appropriating and commodifying modernist styles in order to expand its markets and maintain its hold on the popular imagination. The avant-garde has responded by taking low cultural imagery to either jolt itself into inventing new vocabularies or to mount a critique against the commercial sphere, resulting in a repeated, ongoing pattern of borrowing and exchange (Crow 1996, pp. 35–36). It is important to point out that Schapiro and Crow maintained that this exchange involved divergent, resistant values that also resulted from the limited social and expressive freedoms within middle-class life, particularly in the realm of leisure. As opposed to Greenberg’s theories, Crow’s formulation provides a more complex view of the dialectical, symbiotic relationship between high and low culture, a framework which can be applied to Abstract Expressionism.

Beginning with revisionist postmodern art history in the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars began to question a variety of modernist values and ideologies, particularly those that insisted upon the sacrosanct division between the avant-garde and mass visual culture. This revisionist thinking was particularly influential within the field of Abstract Expressionist studies during these years and resulted in the innovative Marxist scholarship of Serge Guilbaut, T.J. Clark and Michael Leja. This initial major shift in reconsidering the mass culture context of Abstract Expressionism is summed up in Leja’s remark that “Art history has assigned New York School painting an aggressively transcendental and highbrow classification, which has isolated that art from the contemporary popular cultural forms with which it had so much in common” (Leja 1993, pp. 110–11). Guilbaut’s groundbreaking study, entitled *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), examines the popularization of Abstract Expressionism as part of its use in Cold War propaganda (Guilbaut 1983). Leja’s book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1993) analyzes the relationship between Abstract Expressionism, film noir and the mainstream trend of popular psychology in the 1940s (Leja 1993). As the academic mentor of Guilbaut, Leja and Crow, Clark’s teaching and scholarship was influential in spearheading the growing interest in the positioning of Abstract Expressionism within a capitalist political and cultural milieu. In his essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism” (first published in *October* magazine in 1994), Clark writes of Abstract Expressionism as “vulgar,” which he defines as having an overblown pictorial intensity that reflects the cultural sensibility of the petty bourgeois (Clark 1999b, p. 379).

Over the past several decades, there has been an ongoing trend of scholarship that has argued against the avant-gardist exceptionalism of Abstract Expressionism, analyzing its relation to popular culture from a variety of methodological perspectives. Below, I have provided an historiographic overview of this diverse literature, covering such topics as advertising, comics, wartime media, popular film as well as the mass media reception to and commercial appropriation of Abstract Expressionism. This overview confirms how deeply embedded Abstract Expressionism became in mass visual culture during the 1940s and 1950s and highlights the variety of mainstream cultural responses towards the movement as it gained wider public attention. It also reveals important aesthetic, philosophical and ideological distinctions in the way the artists themselves engaged with mass cultural sources.

## 2. Summary of Mass Culture Content in Abstract Expressionism

Prior to an overview of specific topics, it is important to provide a preliminary summary of the varied scope of mass cultural content related to Abstract Expressionist art. De Kooning's works were the first to be singled out and discussed by art critics. In his 1972 landmark article "Pinup and Icon," Thomas Hess studied the American avant-garde's fascination with the commodified image of the naked female form, in particular the pinup (Hess 1972). The heyday of the pinup was the 1930s through the 1960s, but the genre first gained widespread popularity during World War II amongst American fighting forces. However, the pinup did not fully enter the domain of high art until De Kooning's *Woman* paintings of the 1950s.

Hess argued that De Kooning was motivated to appropriate pinup imagery for a variety of artistic and cultural reasons (Hess 1972, pp. 228–30). In formal terms, he regarded the pinup as a readymade compositional form, freeing him to experiment with radical abstract structural and spatial properties. In addition, De Kooning equated the generic traits of the pinup with the anonymous character of urban commercial environments, a major theme in his works of the 1950s. He was also aware of the pinup as a prime example of the sexual debasement of women that was made acceptable by the reiteration of visual clichés. However, he was drawn to the disturbing sense of how the humanity and erotic energy of the female subject had been repressed through these same pictorial conventions, which he subverted through the threatening, assertive presence of his figures. His stylistic and symbolic experimentation with the popular schema of the pinup served to reinvigorate his commitment to painting. After the purist abstraction associated with the movement, De Kooning's bold reference to modern commercial imagery made his controversial return to figuration seem even more shocking and vulgar, particularly to formalist critics like Greenberg. While art historians have often claimed that the *Woman* paintings were also inspired by cult statues of ancient goddesses, Kent Minturn has argued this is a misconception as De Kooning loathed the Abstract Expressionists' nostalgic reliance on archaic symbols for expressing the modern human condition, insisting his images were derived from popular culture (Minturn 1999, p. 286). Hess also noted that David Smith's notebooks from the 1940s include cutout pinup images, which may have inspired oblique symbolic forms in some of his abstract sculptural works (Hess 1972, p. 235).

The later scholarship of Kirsten Powell on De Kooning pursued his interest in the theme of urban landscapes, which were filtered through images associated with modern commercial media and are most apparent in paintings like *Gotham News* (1955) and *Easter Monday* (1956). In her article "Resurrecting Content in De Kooning's *Easter Monday*," Powell discusses how the painting contains an enigmatic series of scattered newspaper images which were transferred to the wet pigment. These collagelike images include a refrigerator advertisement and advertisements for Schrafft's Easter candies as well as popular historical and science fiction films like *Alexander the Great* and *World Without End*. In most previous writing on the painting, these images were discussed as purely formal elements that provided passages of tone and texture to a gestural surface (Powell 1990, p. 88). In her detailed iconographic reading of the painting, Powell argued these media images were added to refer to the biblical narrative of Christ's resurrection, such as the ad for Easter candy and the theme of everlasting life associated with the movie *World Without End*. She supports this religious interpretation through De Kooning's drawings from 1938 and 1950 which deal with scenes of Christ's crucifixion and entombment (Powell 1990, p. 100). In the article's conclusion, Powell ultimately speculated that De Kooning's reference to this hallowed Christian theme through banal commercialized imagery was a means to question the continued relevance of older systems of belief in the modern scientific age. More compelling is her interpretation that it was used to possibly parody the self-important profundity of other Abstract Expressionists' search for the spiritual through purist abstraction. In making this comment, Powell aligned De Kooning with a younger generation of Neo-Dada artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, artists who

also employed readymade mass imagery to reject the outmoded symbolic language and transcendental mystical aspirations of Abstract Expressionism (Powell 1990, p. 99).

Throughout the article, Powell does acknowledge the enigmatic nature of these media images, whose meanings are open and ambiguous, a quality that is enhanced by the random collagelike structure of the painting itself. Paired with the newspaper fragments, *Easter Monday* can perhaps be understood as a larger commentary on the indeterminate signifying character of visual signs, including those within mass visual culture. It needs to be kept in mind that at the time De Kooning was executing works like *Easter Monday*, the popular media critic Marshall McLuhan had analyzed the complex signifying structure of modern advertising in his book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951). McLuhan's mode of analysis diverged from Greenberg's pronouncements on the retrograde visual simplicity of kitsch, stressing that commercial imagery was frequently based on novel and multivalent modernist forms like collage, which enhanced its consumer allure.

In addition to De Kooning's use of collage, other prominent Abstract Expressionist artists employed the medium, most notably Robert Motherwell, who first adopted collage in the early 1940s and remained devoted to it throughout his career. With regard to mass visual culture, Motherwell produced an important series of World War II collages that incorporated wartime imagery from a variety of mass media, a practice which will be discussed more fully below. In the 1950s, he began to utilize a broader array of commercial materials that included cigarette wrappers, wine labels, pages ripped from books, fragments of postal envelopes and other ephemera to chronicle the quotidian details of his personal and artistic life. Such daily experiential content reflects the artist's study of Pragmatism and its emphasis on empirical and social reality as the primary basis of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry. Major recent publications on the cultural content of Motherwell's collages include Katy Rogers's essays in the 2012 catalogue raisonné on the artist, as well as my own scholarship (Flam et al. 2012; Gilbert 2004). Daniel Haxall has also produced significant scholarship on Abstract Expressionist collage, focusing on the lesser-studied collage oeuvres of Esteban Vicente and Anne Ryan, both of whom incorporated mass cultural references into their works through various kinds of printed ephemera (Haxall 2009; Haxall and Sullivan 2011).

Mona Hadler has been one of the more active scholars contributing new research on the engagement of avant-garde artists in the mid-twentieth century with popular culture. Focusing on the topics of jazz, comics and boxing, her work has examined how the mass cultural interests of the expatriate Surrealists in the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s led to similar concerns in the early New York School. In her article, "David Hare, Surrealism and the Comics," she discussed how the New York avant-garde's involvement with comics can be traced to the Surrealists' fascination with the absurdist and transgressive humor of *Krazy Kat* (Hadler 2011, p. 102). In addition to David Hare (whose career straddled Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism), De Kooning had also been an avid follower of the strip. The comic book industry originated in the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s as part of a thriving pulp fiction market. Comics provided creative freedom to artists, encouraging them to explore unconventional, imaginative narratives and to experiment with new expressive idioms. The artistic potential and popular appeal of comics influenced several of the Abstract Expressionists like Philip Guston, David Smith and Franz Kline to begin their careers as comic illustrators. In fact, in the 1920s, Smith and Guston had both been enrolled in the correspondence course of the Cleveland Art School, which was renowned for training thousands of comic artists (Hadler 2011, pp. 102–3).

Hadler's article "Baziotés, Surrealism and Boxing: 'Life in a Squared Ring'" examines how the cultural trope of the boxer was especially intriguing to the Abstract Expressionists, especially to William Baziotés. This interest had originated with the Surrealists, who viewed the boxer as an anarchistic primal figure battling against social authority (Hadler 2013, p. 119). The popularity of boxing surged in the United States from the 1920s through the 1940s. Baziotés had seriously pursued the sport of boxing as a young man and later identified with the cultural figure of the boxer as a combative individualist and heroic loner



(Hadler 2013, pp. 121–22). Boxing also served as a metaphor for Baziotes's own artistic practices. He is quoted as saying "Boxing to me means life in a squared ring," a comment that evokes the rectangular space of the canvas as an arena for enacting creative battles, an apt metaphor for the masculine aesthetics associated with Action Painting. His painting *Untitled* from 1936–1939 depicts an expressively simplified muscular figure raising an enlarged fist in what appears to be a pugilistic stance. This image reflects symbolic parallels between the prize fighter and the Abstract Expressionist artist as solitary figures engaged in strenuous acts of psychic and physical struggle. Baziotes's creative identification with boxers demonstrates the pervasive force of popular tropes in shaping the cultural values and identities that bridged low and high social spheres during the period of Abstract Expressionism. This is similar to Pollock's fixation on the persona of the modern artist and his own enactment of the Action painter as a cultural rebel in publicity photos published in popular media like *Life* magazine, which seem patterned after film rebels portrayed by Marlon Brando.

### 3. Abstract Expressionism and the Mass Visual Culture of World War II

One of the most important topics regarding the alignment of Abstract Expressionism with mass visual culture is the dominance of World War II within all forms of media during the early years of the movement. Wartime imagery in Abstract Expressionist art serves as significant evidence of this intersection, but much of it is represented through highly abstract forms and signs whose sources and meanings need to be identified and decoded. As a means to cater to a public demand for news on the war, all forms of mass media greatly expanded during the 1940s, resulting in the nascent power of media in American society to determine public perception of reality (Fussell 1989, p. 165). Much of this media coverage was part of an extensive propaganda campaign managed by the American government as a form of morale culture that was aimed at cultivating patriotic support for the war effort (Roeder 1993).

The 1985 exhibition catalogue *Flying Tigers: Painting and Sculpture in New York 1939–1946* was one of the first publications to more fully address wartime content in Abstract Expressionist art (Lawrence et al. 1985). The exhibit was held at Brown University's the Bell Gallery and much of the research was conducted by graduate students in a seminar taught by Kermit Champa. With the entry of the United States into the war in 1941 through its end in 1945, the American public was bombarded with images of warfare that appeared in newspapers, picture magazines and cinematic newsreels. In the introduction to the catalogue, Champa asserted that the prevalence of war imagery in the artists' works did not represent a particular political or ideological statement, but was instead a kind of socio-historical "seepage" stemming from this media barrage. While one can disagree with this viewpoint, it is not surprising that the political crisis of the war pervaded the consciousness of the Abstract Expressionists and was visually encoded in their works. As discussed in *Flying Tigers*, much of their abstract imagery evoked the massive physical destruction of war as seen through battle maps or aerial photographs of bombed landscapes. Such works include Pollock's *Burning Landscape* (1943), Hoffman's *Untitled* (1943) and Baziotes's *The Parachutists* (1944). Many of these works feature abstracted weblike patterns that either symbolize the universal sense of the violent entrapment of war or the actual infrastructure of modern warfare, whether barbed-wire fences or submarine nets in harbors (Lawrence et al. 1985, p. 9). Many of the catalogue essays and entries stressed that the radical modernist flatness innovated in early Abstract Expressionist art can be linked to new visual paradigms in wartime media, in particular the prevalence of a disorienting lateral perspective associated with aerial photography in the war.

In my article "Robert Motherwell's World War II Collages: Signifying War as Topical Spectacle in Abstract Expressionist Art," I wrote extensively on the media imagery that appears in Motherwell's war collages, in particular *Joy of Living* (1943) (Gilbert 2004). This work was first recognized as a war subject by Robert Mattison in his 1987 published dissertation on Motherwell's early works (Mattison 1987, p. 80). The collage suggests an abstracted

aerial view of a battlefield, which is indicated with a fragment of a military combat map; it also contains several large black geometric shapes that enhance the disquieting, somber tone of the work. As part of the extensive media coverage of the war, it was common for newspapers and magazines to print such combat maps to track the battles of the allied forces in various war zones. In addition, these maps frequently featured areas of black to represent the expanding victories of the Fascist armies (Gilbert 2004, p. 321). The collage also contains a series of expressive abstract elements such as ripped paper fragments and passages of red pigment to evoke military violence and bodily wounding, constituting a potential critique of the government's strict media censorship of American war casualties.

As I discuss, the artists' use of media imagery represents significant cultural changes in perceptions of modern history that can be linked to the social effects of mass media. It also reflects important philosophical and ideological differences within the early Abstract Expressionist movement. The majority of the "Mythmaker" artists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman insisted upon their alienation from modernity, whose values they rejected in favor of a primitive consciousness they equated with an archetypal mythical conception of reality. Influenced by Jung's psychological theories of mental recapitulation, they equated the savagery of modern war with the elemental violence of the primordial and ancient past and their references to World War II were often based on pre-Classical Greek myths. A prime example is Rothko's *Omen of the Eagle* (1942) that was inspired by the Agamemnon trilogy and the legendary siege of Troy (Gilbert 2004, p. 324). The Mythmakers' embrace of ancient symbolic orders represents an idealist retreat from history and a disavowal of the political and social conditions underlying modern wartime culture. Challenging this mythical, transcendent perspective, Motherwell's and other Abstract Expressionists' topical media imagery reflects a distinctly modern world view of contemporary events, in particular the relation of social and military conflict to modern political and economic structures. It also reflects their awareness of the growing power of capitalist mass visual culture to shape perceptions of historical reality, which Motherwell acknowledged in 1944 by stating "The function of the modern artist is by definition the . . . expression of modern reality. This implies that reality changes to some degree. This implication is the realization that . . . reality has an historical character . . . . With Marx this notion is coupled with the feeling of how *material* reality is . . . ." (Motherwell 2007, p. 28).

In his 2015 study *Jackson Pollock's Mural: Energy Made Visible*, David Anfam has also discussed the influence of photographic war imagery on Pollock's famous 1943 *Mural*, executed for Peggy Guggenheim. The expansive work predates the artist's signature drip method, but it displays in nascent form his experimentation with radical all-over design and is composed of a repeated series of energetically curved biomorphic shapes that fill the canvas. Anfam has argued that one visual source for the flattened shapes overlaid with forceful linear strokes were numerous World War II photographs printed in *Life* magazine during 1943, many of which depicted abstracted aerial views of battle zones crisscrossed by tracer fire (Anfam 2015, p. 65). In addition, Anfam also cites the display of journalistic war photographs in the exhibit "Action Photography", held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, as an influence on Pollock. Such turbulent war scenes were displayed across the gallery walls in an extended mural format, inspiring Pollock to conceive of his own dynamic abstract imagery as a continuous rhythmic visual field in which perforated forms and forcefully arcing lines are violently conjoined with space. As discussed earlier, the new and disorienting scopic technologies of wartime media radically transformed traditional ways of seeing and representing reality in the 1940s, impacting the formation of Abstract Expressionist styles.

#### 4. Abstract Expressionism and Popular Film

A distinctive trait of Abstract Expressionist painting is its expansive scale, which art historians have most often related to the artists' involvement with the WPA mural art programs in the 1930s and their commitment to the democratic social ideals of a public art. However, the mural scale and pictorial innovations of their works can also be linked to

the expansion of capitalist visual spectacle, which included advancements in the optical technologies of mass film. As early as the 1930s, the Hollywood film industry began to develop new widescreen formats, such as the 70 mm “Grandeur” wide-screen process. The introduction of CinemaScope in the early 1950s greatly increased the dimensions and visual impact of popular film and catered to a growing public taste for epic historical sagas and panoramic westerns. In her early major study *Abstract Expressionism: A Cultural Reckoning*, Dore Ashton suggested that the Abstract Expressionists viewed film as a rival medium and that Pollock in particular sought to compete with the expressive scale of cinema (Ashton 1973, p. 36).

The Museum of Modern Art’s progressive decision to include film in its collection and programming in the 1930s under the directorship of Alfred H. Barr was largely responsible for overturning high culture’s long-standing contempt for cinema. It also encouraged avant-garde artists visiting the museum to consider the visual and symbolic relations between the fine and cinematic arts (Minturn 1999, pp. 272–73).

Of the various film genres in the 1940s, film noir was especially popular with the moviegoing public, with the production of over 150 such films from 1944 to 1948. It played a particularly significant role in the interplay of Abstract Expressionism with mass visual culture. Michael Leja’s and Kent Minturn’s scholarship constitutes the major work on this topic. The influence of film noir can be perceived in a variety of aesthetic and symbolic elements that were shared between film and Abstract Expressionism as a form of *peinture noir*, which Minturn has argued facilitated the popular reception and broad cultural acceptance of Abstract Expressionism (Minturn 1999, p. 296). He also asserted that it was partly responsible for shaping the modernist language of the Abstract Expressionists who were energized by daring new cinematic forms of visuality that were innovated within film noir. Pollock, De Kooning, Rothko and Kline were all avid filmgoers and were especially enamored with the dramatic plots and the striking, novel cinematography of film noir.

Main characters in film noir usually conformed to the typology of the modern antihero, such as unscrupulous private detectives, cynical policemen, grifters and aging boxers, who often existed in the dark, gritty margins of American urban society. However, it is first interesting to note that a fair number of film noirs featured artists as protagonists, a catalogue which includes *Bluebeard* (1944), *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945) (Minturn 1999, p. 283). In most of these films, the artist is dramatized as a mysterious and tormented creative figure, whose emotional instability often leads to tragic consequences. For the mass public, this romanticized persona of the bohemian noir artist became associated with the creative personalities of the Abstract Expressionists. Another dominant character type in film noir is the femme fatale, who is often portrayed in films like *Double Indemnity* as a corrupt seductress bent on using her erotic wiles to emotionally control and bring about the downfall of the male protagonist. Film scholars have argued that the ominous trope of the femme fatale reflects the masculinist fear associated with the more empowered gender and social roles of women in the postwar period. Minturn has linked the troubling sense of sexual aggression in De Kooning’s *Woman* paintings to the ubiquity of the femme fatale in film noir (Minturn 1999, pp. 285–88).

More significant for analyzing the formal affinities between film noir and Abstract Expressionism are the many psychologically charged symbolic motifs that appear in both visual forms. The most prominent of these elements include the labyrinth, web and vortex, which are featured in such films as *The Web* (1947), *Trapped* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950). In film noir, they are usually represented as abstract pictorial structures that are created through expressive patterns of light and shadow or cropped and distorted spatial perspectives. These same motifs are also prominent in Pollock’s drip paintings from the late 1940s and early 1950s and were no doubt inspired by film noir. A prime example is *Vortex* from 1947, which is based on a dynamic circular pattern of gestural drips that creates the sensation of being drawn into a vortex of churning forces. As Michael Leja explained in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, this kind of recurrent imagery in both Pollock’s paintings and film noir is used to signify the concept of modern

humans being ensnared and controlled by unconscious impulses and reflects the mass popularization of Freudian and Jungian psychological theories in the 1940s (Leja 1993, pp. 278–81). Leja has labeled this trend “Modern Man discourse,” which is represented by Harvey Fergusson’s *Modern Man: His Belief and Behavior* (1936) and Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* (1942). “Modern Man discourse” sought to refurbish and construct new models of the individual bourgeois subject that could account for widespread social and military violence in the modern era. Drawing from theories on the primitive unconscious, it tended to universalize human psychology, deemphasizing historical context, as well as the collective social, political and economic processes determining modern human behavior.

Hans Namuth’s film of Pollock painting produced in 1950 further strengthened the association of Abstract Expressionism with cinema, most especially Pollock’s artistic practices. The project (which also included numerous still photographs) was planned as a means to document in sequential detail Pollock’s innovative method of Action painting, a dynamic, ritualized process that lent itself to the unique spatiotemporal qualities of film. The most famous segment of the film depicts Pollock painting on a sheet of glass, which was horizontally suspended above the film camera, capturing his rhythmic movements and the intricate layering of gestural marks. The image of Pollock’s face visible through a web of black interlaced drips served to reinforce the connection of his paintings to film noir symbols of humans entrapped and driven by energetic, psychic forces (Minturn 1999, p. 281).

### 5. Mass Media Representation of Abstract Expressionism and Cultural Appropriation

During the 1940s and 1950s, the American public was intrigued by the radical aura of Abstract Expressionist art, resulting in varied representations of the movement within popular media that ranged from the informative to the more sensationalized. In many respects, Bradford R. Collins’s article “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–1951: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise*” stands as the major piece of scholarship to have challenged the standard view of Abstract Expressionism as a rebellious avant-garde fully detached from mainstream culture. Published in 1991, it also refutes the accepted notion that the movement was attacked and dismissed by conservative mass media, in particular its coverage in *Life* magazine (Collins 1991). Collins recounts how a number of Abstract Expressionist scholars, including Irving Sandler, Deborah Solomon and Stephen C. Foster, largely offered inaccurate accounts of *Life*’s articles spotlighting Abstract Expressionist art. They characterized its reporting as negative and derogatory, portraying the magazine as a conservative purveyor of populist kitsch. In contrast, Collins argued *Life*’s approach was mainly balanced and informative, assisting the American public with gaining appreciative insights on new artistic developments by presenting historical background and a sampling of critical opinions (Collins 1991, p. 288).

The popular reception of Abstract Expressionism began through articles in *Life* magazine. This included “A Life Roundtable on Modern Art”, featured in the 11 October 1948 issue, in which a panel of notable critics and scholars like Clement Greenberg and Theodore Greene debated the aesthetic merits and meanings of contemporary art, including works by Pollock, De Kooning, Gottlieb and Baziotes. While critical opinion on the panel was sharply divided, the article overall stressed that viewers needed to keep an open mind on understanding non-representational art by educating themselves on modernist artistic values, which emphasized the importance of individualistic formal and symbolic expression (Collins 1991, p. 286).

The following year in *Life*, Pollock’s work was showcased in an article with the provocative title “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?”. The article did reflect some perplexity towards the experimental nature of his abstraction and included some unfavorable descriptions, such as that he “drooled” paint. However, the article’s tone was largely respectful and recognized the innovative nature of his painting, offering positive reporting on his critical and financial success as an emerging, prominent art figure (Collins 1991, p. 289).



Another key *Life* article in the 15 January 1951 issue reported on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's inaugural contemporary painting competition, which was boycotted by fifteen of the Abstract Expressionist painters who posed for the now famous "Trascibles" group portrait that accompanied the article. Their protest was articulated in a group letter sent to the museum's president. In the photograph, many of the artists assumed postures and expressions communicating a sense of serious, high-minded resolve. The article and photograph were part of a combative public relations campaign launched by the artists against the museum for its elitist and conservative views towards contemporary American art, which favored figuration (Collins 1991, p. 292). During this period and into the 1950s, many of the Abstract Expressionists made statements advocating their position as part of a latter-day avant-garde that was hostile towards the conformist values of bourgeois culture. Dedicated to maintaining the advanced objectives of their art, this ideological and somewhat mythical position of radical detachment was echoed by the movement's chief critical supporters like Greenberg and Rosenberg. This rhetoric of alienated opposition has been repeated by numerous Abstract Expressionist scholars as being representative of the movement's true historical relationship to postwar American society. However, as Collins article makes clear, in actuality there were mutually beneficial forms of alliance between Abstract Expressionism and mass culture. While mainstream publications like *Life* sought to accommodate growing public interest in highbrow culture, a certain number of the artists welcomed the publicity provided by the popular press, which served to give their art greater cultural legitimacy, enhancing its marketability (Collins 1991, p. 298). Moreover, as the "Trascibles" article and group portrait make apparent, mass media representations of the Abstract Expressionists were also capable of persuasively reinforcing some of the movement's own constructed ideals of bohemian resistance. To be sure, this refutes some scholarly assertions that the artistic values of the movement were completely commandeered by capitalist mass media for its own commercial purposes.

While the Abstract Expressionist artists benefited from media exposure, it is important to acknowledge the more negative effects of the popular appropriation and mass cultural promotion of the movement. For example, although Hans Namuth's numerous photographs and film from 1950 were intended as a technical study documenting Pollock's painting process, they also served to popularize Abstract Expressionism with the general public through their expressive presentation of novel creative production. The film was shown at the Museum of Modern Art and at a film festival in Woodstock and these screenings were covered in mass media like the *New York Times* (Varnedoe and Karmel 1998). Namuth's photographs were also reproduced in 1951 in *Portfolio* and *Artnews*, both of which were more mainstream arts publications. Later in the decade, Namuth's photographs were frequently reproduced in popular media features on the artist in place of actually showing Pollock's artwork, portraying Abstract Expressionism as a performative act or as an entertaining spectacle. This includes *Life* magazine's ongoing coverage of Pollock using Namuth's photos with such articles from 1959 as "Baffling U.S. Art: What Is It About—Beginning of the Rebellious Career of Jackson Pollock" and "The Varied Art of Four Pioneers, Part II." For the mass public, the media imagery of Pollock's artistic persona and its commercial packaging became a substitute for the art itself and in many ways served to obviate the need for a deeper understanding of avant-garde aesthetics. An important example are the recondite Jungian meanings art historians have ascribed to Pollock's abstractions. In his article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch: Re-Thinking an Old Distinction and Its Fate," Donald Kuspit critically reflected on the commercialization of Pollock's art and the painter's complicity in that process, reaffirming Greenberg's damning avant-garde/kitsch binary. However, he also made recourse to Donald Winnicott's concept of the True Self in art, which suggests this self is radically unformed and in perpetual creative formation. In contrast, the artistic False Self accepts a state of being that conforms to a finished, conventional social product (Kuspit 2020). As further evidence of the larger populist appeal surrounding Abstract Expressionism and Pollock in particular, the fashion photographer Cecil Beaton posed a glamorous model in front of Pollock's all-over paintings

in a 1951 issue of *Vogue* magazine. The commercial appropriation of Abstract Expressionism reached its height with these photos, using Pollock's works as a provocative decorative backdrop for the high-class marketing of haute couture fashion. This example illustrates T.J. Clark's argument that capitalist culture always steps in to impose figurative or metaphoric tropes onto radical, willfully indeterminate forms of abstract art in order to give more representational potency to newly forming commercial or political interests (Clark 1999a, p. 308).

During the 1950s, the Abstract Expressionist style, along with Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, was also popularized in mass commercial culture by its use in advertising and modern illustration. This was due to the need for striking and unconventional visual branding to catch the attention of consumers inundated by numerous standardized products. In keeping with the individualism of modern art, the general public was also becoming wary of advertising claims and tended to place greater faith in the persuasive power of images, which relied on the consumer's own associative response. The pictorial complexity and emotional intensity of Abstract Expressionism made it a challenging style to adapt to many commercial art forms. However, the dynamic and spontaneous character of Abstract Expressionism was seen as having artistic affinities with the improvisational and kinetic liveness of early television broadcasts (Spigel 2008, p. 47). In her study *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television*, Lynn Spigel has noted that in the 1950s abstract art was a subject of popular fascination on television networks and was often featured in programs to provide visual excitement to viewers. In science fiction and horror programs like *The Twilight Zone* and *Thriller*, modern artists often suffered from aberrant visions and images derived from Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist art were employed to suggest fantastical, alternative modes of reality that deviated from the conventional objectivity of most televisual and photographic media (Spigel 2008, p. 44).

More lyrical forms of Abstract Expressionist art were sometimes used for commercial purposes, particularly as illustrations for recorded music albums. Due to the strong improvisational qualities of Abstract Expressionism, it was used to illustrate the covers of jazz albums. For example, a Pollock painting was used for Ornette Coleman's 1961 Atlantic LP *Free Jazz* (Hadler 1995, p. 248). One of the most prominent examples is the career of the Puerto Rican Abstract Expressionist Olga Albizu, whose paintings in the 1950s and 1960s were featured as cover art for a series of jazz and bossa nova recordings issued by RCA and Verve Records. As a female and Latin American artist in New York during these years, it was difficult for Albizu's art to gain critical recognition and to be shown in commercial galleries. As a result, it should be noted that the popular field of commercial mass art did provide an alternative cultural space that supported, in part, the work of certain marginalized avant-garde artists like Albizu.

## 6. Conclusions

As this overview indicates, despite Abstract Expressionism's longstanding reputation as a highbrow, transcendental movement, it has been aligned with a variety of commercial media. This historiographic survey has sought to highlight some of the differing responses and socio-cultural positions of the Abstract Expressionists in relation to mass visual culture. In the case of film noir and Pollock, the artist can be seen to have directly participated in the popular psychological trend of "Modern Man discourse," working mutually with film noir to visualize new forms of a conflicted bourgeois subjectivity. The works of De Kooning and Motherwell offer a contrasting example and serve to underscore important aesthetic, philosophical and ideological distinctions within the movement. In their referencing of media sources, these artists register their critical awareness of the growing power of mass media to determine perceptions of social reality, in particular changes in the understanding of modern historical consciousness, a viewpoint which conflicted with the more ahistorical and archaizing spiritual perspective of the Mythmakers. For certain Abstract Expressionists, modernity was increasingly associated with the formation of a new "scopic regime" in which reality was to be increasingly represented through mass

visual systems. Despite Abstract Expressionism's grounding in modernist abstraction, the movement formed simultaneously with this new popular and pervasive media culture. As Thomas Crow has stated, while the avant-garde and commercial culture have tended to be seen as opposed, "... the theory of one was the theory of the other. Additionally, in that identity was the realization, occasionally manifest and always latent, that the two were in no fundamental way separable" (Crow 1996, pp. 36–37).

During the 1940s and 1950s, there was also variance in the mass media reception of Abstract Expressionism and its commercial appropriation. As Collins's study on *Life* magazine's coverage of Abstract Expressionism has substantiated, there was relatively knowledgeable and supportive reporting on the movement in the mainstream press, encouraging the general public to develop an informed appreciation of avant-garde trends. However, some of the sensationalized marketing of the movement, especially publicity on Pollock, served to undermine a serious public understanding of vanguard art, allowing Abstract Expressionism and other modernist styles to be more easily coopted for expanded forms of consumer spectacle in the 1950s.

With the rise of revisionist postmodern art history in the 1980s, Abstract Expressionist scholars began to situate their work into new theoretical frameworks, incorporating rigorous study of the movement's relation to the social context and popular culture. However, it is a similarly propitious time in the field to revisit this question on the intersection of Abstract Expressionist and mass visual culture. Beginning in the past decade, new theoretical trends in art history have been reassessing the late modern canon in relation to issues of race, postcolonialism, globalism, gender and sexual identity. In addition, the interdisciplinary fields of media studies and visual studies are engaged in a far-ranging examination of the socio-cultural complexities of popular commercial culture. A more current wave of revisionist scholarship will bring new historical and conceptual insights to bear on the study of the mass media forces that surrounded and helped to shape the Abstract Expressionist movement.

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