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**Question Presented by Thom Didato –**

*Option 3- Is the doctrine of medium specificity intellectually valid? Why or why not?  
How have multimedia responses challenged this doctrine?*

**Answer by Vaughn Whitney Garland -**

Many of the primary debates in the visual and literary arts over the past century have been inspired by the function of the author and the tools or materials by which art is made. The debate that focuses on the material that comprises the object's uniqueness is often referred to as the doctrine of medium specificity, or Greenbergian Formalism. Like the ongoing conversations about authorship, those concerning medium specificity have been heated, misinterpreted and misquoted. It is not accidental that during the mid-twentieth century, when Americans were exposed to horrific events, including war, that medium specificity emerged as a theory that posited the possibilities of essentialist philosophies.

Unlike the debate about authorship, one figure has taken the brunt and backlash of the critiques and theoretical fortifications the theory of medium specificity has created: New York art and literary critic Clement Greenberg. With his concept of Formalism, Greenberg, who started writing in the late 1930's, posited the ideas that would become emblematic of media specificity. For most of the latter part of the twentieth century, Greenberg's ideas have caused much commotion in academia and personal studios, forcing some artists to take sides in order to address the position of their own material

choice for production. What is rarely discussed in academic studio seminars is that Greenbergian Formalism, and the larger debate about medium specificity, comes out of a long conversation that highlights the privileging of materials. Greenberg's ideas are part of a long line of historical defenses on the true nature of art. This line reaches as far back as the doctrines of art have existed. This is why, even looking past Greenberg's Formalism, it is significant we address medium specificity – to use as an historical marker that sheds light on the dialectics of Modernity and the development of art history itself. Furthermore, while later multimedia responses have entrenched and further challenged Greenbergian Formalism, and medium specificity, I do not see that these responses challenge the validity of medium specificity. The responses to Greenberg and the theories others have created in response to Greenberg, and medium specificity, have served to instigate additional directions and ideas on aesthetics.

Greenberg's voice in this debate was, at the time, forceful, vibrant, and even demanding, catching the ears and eyes of the art world. But, even though Greenberg's ideas seemed like an overnight sensation, his philosophy on medium specificity was not at all a bombshell, nor a revelation. In fact, this debate had been ongoing since the development of an art historical critique. Even from the moment the forefathers of art history described what it meant to be an artists, they were addressing the trades and tools of the creative process. Like Greenberg, these historical figures, in essence, developed rules and formulated concepts to address beauty, style, history, and aesthetics. However, even though it is within the larger theoretical and historical context, Greenberg's Formalism has been vilified. What Greenberg sought was to inspire a group of people to become possible caretakers of the future high arts: the avant-garde. The purity of the

material would stand as a indicator of the avant-garde because of its association with specialized training, high culture, and wealth.

By addressing and championing the avant-garde, Greenberg sought to attack mass culture's effect on the arts. Greenberg believed that mass culture was at fault for the fall of intellectuality, aesthetics, style, and taste. However, Greenberg was not the only person who constructed a dire critique about mass culture and the need for an avant-garde guardian of high culture. Theodor Adorno, a German music critic who fled from Germany in 1939, engaged in similar debate about the purity of music through a critique on the effects of mass culture. Adorno, even before Greenberg, initiated the modern dialectic on purity by discounting Jazz music all together as a symbol of mass commercialism. Both, Greenberg and Adorno pushed for an avant-garde that would control, heighten, and police the purity of the high art media. Since much of mass culture, which Greenberg and Adorno called "low culture," sought "imitation," Greenberg looked to "form" as a way to give high art back to the avant-garde.

I will argue that Greenberg was neither out of line nor revolutionary when he wrote his thesis on Formalism. Instead, he continued on a path that would have inevitably lead to a direct discussion on material purity. I will also suggest that even after he obstinately critiqued painting, the avant-garde, and mass culture, Greenberg continued to change his ideas. Even when artists took Greenberg's formalism to the physical and theoretical limits, Greenberg, and his followers, saw these formal works as non-art. Greenberg, and some of his followers like Michael Fried, rejected art movements like Minimalism even when they aesthetically represented Greenberg's own philosophy.

One of Greenberg's philosophies that many artists, critics, and art historians

fought against was an essentialist approach to “form.” Formalism is an interpretation of an subject that places emphasis on an object’s form as that bearer of the subject’s meaning. Additionally, Formalism built an assumption that subject inevitably follows its own developmental logic and can be viewed as a independent agent that does not need external validation or signification. Simply put, for form to be measured by its essentialists value, the subject, “form,” could be inscribed through its superiority of the purity of material. This is what Greenberg Formalism reveals. Greenberg presented that painting’s form rested on it being a flat surface structure and that “flatness” of paint addressed the presence of the material. The guiding principle to Greenberg’s Formalism is that in order to show the superiority of paint one must show paint’s purity as a material. Paint is paint and the flatness of paint is the unique property of the material. The flatness of a painting was also a way of showing its “Modern” quality, which relies on the dialectical debate between what is and what is not. For modern painting, what was critical was that the painting reveals something truthful about itself. As an extension of high modernism, and likewise for Greenbergian Formalism, one way of reveal the true nature of the painting is its structure. Greenberg believed that what got in the way of the painting’s true being was that the painting hid behind its illusion, imitation, and representation. Greenberg calls this the “pictorial” and or “realistic” nature. For Modern art, and to delineate medium specificity, the “paintness” of paint became, for Greenberg, the example in which to describe flatness:

Each art had to determined, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure... Thereby each art would be rendered ‘pure’, and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. ‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism

in the arts became one of the self-definition with a vengeance... Realistic, Illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting- the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment- were treated by the old master as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly... It was the stressing, however, of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art.<sup>1</sup>

In the article, *The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity*, Mary Ann Doane suggests that not only is medium specificity about the materials but how those materials produce a dialogue within themselves, and of themselves. This dialogue, which she suggests is a “negation,” recalling both Hegel’s and Marx’s notions of “becoming:”

We tend to think of a medium as a martial of technical means of aesthetic expression (painting, sculpture, photography, film, etc.), which harbors both constraints and possibilities, the second arguably emerging as a consequence of the first. The potential of a medium would thus lie in the notion of material resistances or even a matter/materiality itself as, somewhat paradoxically, an *enabling impediment*. The juxtaposition of negativity and productivity is crucial here. A medium is a medium by virtue of both its positive qualities (the visibility, color, texture of paint, for instance) and its limitation, gaps, incompleteness (the flatness of the canvas, the finite enclosure insured by the frame). From this point of view, even in a medium invoked as the support of an effect of the real, the spectator’s knowledge is continually reaffirmed by the limitation of the medium, which prevents the production of a complete illusion.<sup>2</sup>

Negation, for Hegel, was the process by which one may find truth. This process was referred to as “becoming” and represented the way a subject may better be defined and may better find the true characteristic that is unique to it. That realization of true “selfness” is what is called a synthesis. In order for a synthesis to occur, a realization of the negative answer to the original proponent, a thesis and an antithesis must be posited. This means that one must define the subject and then seek the subject negation in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Greenberg 1962, 2

<sup>2</sup> Doane 2007, 130

better understand the true qualities of the subject. This process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is the process on which Hegelian Dialectics rests. Hegel calls this process of becoming, “mediation.”

For mediation is nothing beyond self-moving selfsameness, or is reflection into self, the moment of the ‘I’ which is for itself pure negativity or, when reduced to its pure abstraction, *simple becoming*. The ‘I’, or becoming in general, this mediation, on account of its simple nature, is just immediacy in the process of becoming, and is the immediate itself. Reason is, therefore, misunderstood when reflection is excluded from the True, and is not grasped as a positive moment of the Absolute. It is reflection that makes the True a result, but it is equally reflection that overcomes the antithesis between the process of its becoming and the resolute for this becoming is also simple, and therefore not different from the form of the True which shows itself as simple in its result; the process of becoming is rather just this return into simplicity.<sup>3</sup>

One of the key ways to address the negation of the subject is to look at how it is made. This is a critical point for Hegel but becomes a more important directive for Marx. When used by Hegel, the antithesis of which is asked is one of spirit, not exactly material. But, in many cases this spirit does take on material form, at least the general characteristics observed in the subject as unique attributes. Here, Hegel calls attention to the characteristics of different art forms as independently unique to their own discipline. In the chapter “Divisions of the Subject,” Hegel describes how painting is different from the other art forms like architecture and sculpture.

It [painting] employs as a medium for its content and for the plastic embodiment of that content visibility as such in as far as it is specialized in its own nature, i.e. as developed into colour. It is true that the material employed in architecture and sculpture is also visible and coloured; but it is not, as in painting, visibility as such, not the simple light which, differentiating itself in virtue of its contrast with darkness, and in combination with the latter, gives rise to colour. This quality of visibility, made subjective in itself and treated as ideal, needs neither, like architecture, the abstractly mechanical attribute of mass as operative in the properties of heavy matter, not, like sculpture, the complete sensuous attributes of space, even though concentrated in organic shapes. The visibility and the

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel 1979, 12

rendering visible which belong to painting have their differences in a more ideal form, in the several kinds of colour, and they liberate art from the sensuous completeness in space which attaches to material things, by restricting themselves to a plane surface.

What I would like to call attention to is Hegel's use of particular words to describe the characteristics of paintings. What I find significant is that these are the same words, and even attributes given by Greenberg in his twentieth-century philosophy on aesthetics. First, the use of "plastic" for Hegel is a way to isolate the picture plane illusion with its subject, to separate the image being portrayed as an illusion or imitation. Hegel also uses "plastic" to mean all representative arts. In Greenberg's first published article "Avant-garde and Kitsch," he presents imitation as an old characteristic of painting, and one that he viewed shared a role with mass culture. Hegel's use of space, plane, and surface also alludes to the pictorial composition and particularly the structure of the painting. Here, the flat "surface" is a key attribute to painting for both Hegel and for Greenberg and gives it a characteristic that is not shared with sculpture or architecture. The use of the word plastic also creates a dominant effect from which all art subsides. For Greenberg, and even for Hegel, painting shares in that dominant feature.

Yet, separation of mediums, materials, and attributes did not start with Hegel, nor did the concept of imitation and illusion. These conversations and characteristics draw back even further. Considered the father of art history, Johann Joachim Winckelmann defined the terms we use today in relation to the practice and critique of art. In his work *On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, Winckelmann instructs the reader, and the artist, that the best way to learn about art is to imitate the Greek artists, and the works they left behind. Winckelmann believed that in order to find truth one must look back to the source of beauty. For Winckelmann that notion of beauty first

appeared in the art works of the Greeks, “there is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients.”<sup>4</sup> One of the works Winckelmann turned to in order to present the aesthetic and philosophical concepts of beauty was the Greek sculpture *Laocoon*. Winckelmann focused on *Laocoon* because of its unyielding expression on suffering. For Winckelmann that particular show of suffering was the true form of pain, and thus pure expression captured by the ancient Greeks. *Laocoon* had turned into a symbol of artistic purity, grace, and strength. “In *Laocoon* sufferings alone had been ‘parenthyrsos’; the artists therefore, in order to reconcile the significative and ennobling qualities of his soul, put him into a posture, allowing for the sufferings that were necessary,”<sup>5</sup> While Winckelmann’s notoriety as the father of art history continues, his reliance on Greek sculpture, and specifically *Laocoon*, has been an area of continued contention. What is so worrisome in Winckelmann’s art history is that he rests everything on the ideals of the Greeks and makes characteristics out of classical ideals far away from his own time.

Another art historian who would look to the Greek sculpture *Laocoon* was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In the work, “*Laocoon: An essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*”, Lessing continued to alienate the art disciplines, this time by forming distinction between painting and poetry. Using the comparison from Winckelmann’s *Laocoon*, where the sculpture took on mythological connotations and degrees of narrative -- instead of physical abrasions to display suffering -- Lessing objected to Winckelmann’s combination of the story with the sculpture, the image with the poem. Lessing put forth a separation between painting and poetry and suggests that each has their own function

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<sup>4</sup> Winckelmann 1972, 61

<sup>5</sup> Winckelmann 1972, 78



and their own properties. To draw a clear division between the two Lessing posits painting with space and poetry with time.

In Clement Greenberg's 1940 article, appropriately titled "Towards a Newer *Laocoon*," he also turns to the lessons learned by Lessing's critique on Winckelmann and the renowned Greek sculpture. Greenberg states in this article that over the lifespan of the larger art culture, there has always been a dominant art, may it be pictorial composition; sculpture as we saw in Winckelmann's attachment to the Greeks, or literature, and music. For Greenberg, the problem with a dominant arts is that it takes on the roles and responsibilities of the other arts and shares these responsibilities through a fictitious ideal of ownership. Greenberg criticizes paintings failure to define itself when it was seen as subservient to literature. "Now, when it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper character and imitate its effects....Literature, for a number of reasons, had won the upper hand, and the plastic arts---especially in the forms of easel painting and statuary---tried to win admission to its domain."<sup>6</sup>

In order to manage a dominant art form Greenberg continue to give custody to a group of high culture elite he referred to as the "avant-garde." This group stemmed from an old combination of Parisian-like bohemian intellectuals, but relied on the wealthy American elite. This avant-garde would have both the refinement and knowledge of the high arts, along with the money to back up their interests. The arts, including the dominant arts, would then be able to rescue the arts from the demise of mass culture. One way to direct the avant-garde to do this was to rely on the form of the art object, not

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<sup>6</sup> Greenberg 1986, 24-25

the imitation. During this time imitation failed to be a high modern attribute because it was easily associated mass culture. The new high modernism attribute was material, flatness, surface, and space. This essentialist formalism allowed Greenberg to push his ideas further into the modernist's mindset, because it was backed up first on elitism, second on creating a new dominant art form. This is Greenberg's formalism and the height of medium specificity. “

At the first and most important item upon its agenda, the avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society. Ideas came to mean subject matter in general. (Subject matter as distinguished from content: in the sense that every work of art must have content, but that subject matter is something the artist does or does not have in mind when he is actually at work.) This meant a new and greater emphasis upon form, and it also involved the assertion of the arts as independent vocations, disciplines and crafts, absolutely autonomous, and entitled to respect for their own sakes, and not merely as vessels of communication. It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature. Which was subject matter at its most oppressive.<sup>7</sup>

Greenbergian Formalism has been taken even further by numerous followers of Greenberg. The most widely recognized follower of Clement Greenberg is Michael Fried, an American art historian. Fried extended Greenbergian formalism to comment on art movements like Minimalism of the late 1960. Fried called the objects that Minimalism artists created as “literalist.” Fried's anti-minimalist stance came about by his understanding of Greenbergian Formalism. Fried criticized Minimalist sculpture for causing too much “presence” with the viewer and thus required a performative act of the viewer-object engagement.

Other critics like Noel Carroll, an American philosopher who wrote on the philosophy of film, sought purity in their own disciplines. Carroll looked to the

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<sup>7</sup> Greenberg 1986, 28

filmmakers of the twentieth century as targets or examples of this new high art stance. Carroll sought out films that would display the essential nuances of its own material, the possible “filmness” of the time-based image. In his chapter “Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously invented Arts: Film, Video and Photography, Carroll takes a Greenbergian stance and asks for high art filmmakers to focus on those attributes which solely represent the process and material of film, and not be bogged down with those things where were more reminiscent of other art disciplines.

The major theme running through all of the arguments on medium specificity is “material.” In every way the material by which a work is made becomes paramount to the properties by which the work exists. While much of what Adorno and even Greenberg accomplishes with their dialectics on medium specificity is a critique on culture, the foundational edifice being used for both arguments stem out of Marxist philosophy. Even during the first stage of Greenberg’s critiques he relied on Marxism to comment on material and production. It was not until later in his writings do we see Greenberg retreat from Marxist philosophies.

Greenberg has been given credit for creating the debate on Formalism in the twentieth century, but is it significant to note that he and continues to be influence for the works that was created from his ideas or in opposition to his ideas. Some art movements that appeared shortly after Greenberg’s articles were published, were in direct opposition to Greenberg’s medium specificity. For example, the collaborative art movement *Experiments in Art and Technology* (EAT) of the 1960’s joined artist Robert Rauschenberg with engineer Billy Kluver in order to bridge media. This movement, which included the composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, and artist Andy

Warhol, broke down the barriers upheld and guarded by Greenberg and his followers, especially Michael Fried. The ways that EAT addressed the divides built out of argument concerning medium specificity could be seen in two way. First, EAT represented that they too could be considered vital enough as a modern art form. With an exhibition of contemporary art, music, performance, and technological collaboration at the Armory in New York, the first EAT event came off as a huge success. Here, technology and art brought together the same people that Greenberg deemed as his ideal art guardians. With EAT, the avant-garde were participants.

The second way EAT accomplished to comment on the establishment and continuance of medium specificity was that EAT, too, looked to their own tools as a way of constructing characteristics uniquely particular to their mediums. Here, EAT stepped past these characteristics, while still recognizing their material function, and decided to join those characteristics with other media. The realization of their own medium, by both artist and engineer, allowed EAT to place emphasis on their medium and place them in a different context. Since technology was not considered to be a characteristic of art making, and art not a characteristic of using technology, the artists and engineers present in EAT felt that this was a perfect reason to combine art and technology. In essence, EAT was a way for artists to look outside their own media and allowed collaboration to occur. In this collaborative process, bridging art and technology, the role of the artist was shared with that of the engineer. This synthesis allowed the tools of each discipline to also become ways to address new concepts within other disciplines. In the article *Gyorgy Kepes, Billy Kluver, and American Art of the 1960s: Defining Attitudes Toward Science and Technology*, Anne Collins Goodyear argues that the social and cultural climate

around the arts, especially in opposition to Greenberg, led to collaboration in Billy Kluver's EAT group. "The intellectual and cultural climate of the 1960s had been indelibly marked by the perceived need to bridge the gap between the "two cultures," as C.P. Snow famously termed it, of the arts and humanities on one side and the sciences on the other"<sup>8</sup>

In the same article Goodyear comments on the crossing of boundaries of academic circles, exemplified by Gyorge Kepes' *Center for Advanced Visual Studies* (CAVS) at MIT. The MIT venture with science and art gave the process of art a scientific influence. With Kepes leadership he steered his CAVS program to the disciplines of sciences while still focusing on the making and production of the object. In CAVS artists worked as if they were in a laboratory, they created work as a scientist creates new hypothesis. Kepes' interest in this laboratory type of system for the arts was a direct influence of his time spent at the Bauhaus school, where the arts were treated as a academic workshop.

In this environment, Kepes' proposal for a Center intended to bring artists, engineers, and scientists together met with ready success. Yet if CAVS was an outgrowth of the cultural climate of the 1960s, it also reflected long-standing interests developed by Kepes over the course of a forty-year career. It was to be the realization of Bauhaus ideals in the second half of the twentieth century, but an enterprise that expanded on the goals of its model.<sup>9</sup>

Another collaborative group, the Black Mountain College, located in the mountains of North Caroline during the middle part of the twentieth century was managed by John Andrew Rice. Rice was the son of a Methodist minister and college president and became a leading voice on education in America. During his time at Black

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<sup>8</sup> Goodyear 2004, 615

<sup>9</sup> Goodyear 2004, 617, 618

Mountain College Rice employed the advanced principles of American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey to establish a new type of educational system that led to one of the most renowned and remarkable arts education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, artists would engage with their work and the work of their colleges in a collaborative endeavor. Unlike the EAT program, Black Mountain was an academically run school, with classes, seminars, lectures, presentations, and group activities. Rice, while working against the strictly watched notions of modern education and institutional discipline, inevitably made a significant stand against the purification of art and education.

As we have seen by the examples above Greenberg's Formalism was not an overnight sensation that took a brief second of genius, evil or not, to create. In fact, medium specificity took hundreds of years to refine, it went through several distinctive transitions and needed new light, new philosophies like the Hegelian Dialectic and Marxism to push it forward. Greenberg was not a man who just appeared with a strict rule of law on the art world out of nowhere. His ideas were not sudden, nor even that radical. What is vital to understand is that Greenberg's ideas were a stage in an ongoing conversation, a comment on the abilities and responsibilities of art disciplines. While the way Greenberg wrote his thoughts on papers might have been overly definitive, flamboyant, and dynamic, should we fault him for wanting a little drama to make his ideas talked about in a wider context with more people? It is true that many people do not like Greenberg's philosophies; I myself can say I have had my problems with him. What is not sufficient is to say that he deserves vitriol or downright dismissal. Greenberg is one of the most recognized art critics of the Twentieth century and needs to be

addressed with more examination. The reason why we should continue to care to talk about him and medium specificity are found in the complex vastness of issues that have defined art since people started writing about it. Greenberg knew media specificity, not because he invented it, but because he did his homework. Additionally, media specificity does not end with Greenberg.

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