

Retracing Modernist Origins:

Conceptual Parallels in the Aesthetic Thought of Charles Baudelaire and

G. W. F. Hegel

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Whether heralded by Marshall Berman as "the prophet and pioneer" of modernity or singled out by Ihab Hassan as the harbinger of the "tradition of the new," Charles Baudelaire has come to occupy a place of privileged in the cultural pantheon of the modernist progenitors.¹ No other figure has become so synonymous, both as an artist and a critic, an author and a theorist, with the concept of modernity and aesthetic modernism. And no other has been claimed as such with the same degree of consistency by authors on the opposing ends of the methodological and ideological spectrums and across a range of disciplines. For Michel Foucault, Baudelaire was a thinker who most fully succeeded in capturing the peculiarity of the modern condition—who did for the modern period what Kant had done for the Enlightenment.² For Jürgen Habermas he was the first true modernist, the one who stood at the beginning of the development that eventually culminated in surrealism and dada.³ For Matei Calinescu, Baudelaire's concept of *modernité* constituted the "qualitative turning point in the history of modernity as an idea."⁴ By opposing the aesthetic and the social modernity, it brought into being the modernist tradition of the avant-garde rebellion. Within art history as well, art historians and art critics, from Clement Greenberg to T. J. Clark, have pointed to Baudelaire as an exemplary theorist and practitioner of modernism. In the last few years, this wholesale acceptance of Baudelaire as the canonical spokesman for aesthetic modernism in general and the early French modernist painting in particular was turned into a veritable dogma by two new textbooks on the nineteenth century art.⁵ Neither *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (1993) co-authored by Francis Frascina, Nigel Blake, Briony Fer, Tamara Garb and Charles Harrison, nor *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (1994) edited by Stephen Eisenman, challenged it. Despite efforts to provide an alternative reading of modernism, both seamlessly incorporated Baudelaire into their accounts without questioning fundamental assumptions behind the poet's art historical significance. Finally and most recently, David Carrier, writing from a highly self-conscious post-modern perspective, mystified the poet into a

Foster (1985) Rosenbergs's criticism rather than dismissing it, as do Polcari and the rest of the scholarly community. See "Gottlieb and Kline," *Art Journal* 55/1 (Spring 1996): 91.

5 "Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity," in *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity* (Fundacio Antoni Tapies, Madrid: Electa, 1994), 15. All subsequent references to this essay will be done so parenthetically within the body of the text.

7 "Kline's Colliding Syntax: 'Black, White, and Things,'" in *Franz Kline: Black and White: 1950-1961* (The Menil Collection; Houston, TX: The Houston Fine Art Press, 1994), 13. All subsequent references to this essay will be done so parenthetically within the body of the text.

8 Quoted in "Bibliography," *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity*, p. 176.

9 "Franz Kline: Turning Art Into Academic History," Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 179.

10 *Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 105.

11 *Franz Kline* (1985; New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), 63-64.

12 "Franz Kline and the Downtown Community: The Artists' Voice," in *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity*, p. 53.

13 *The Artists' Voice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 152. Excerpted in part in "Bibliography," p. 186.

14 The fact that Gaugh himself devoted an entire chapter in his 1985 monograph to these subjects should be evidence enough of the current state of the Kline literature.

15 "Nach Amerika zurück, mit Europe im Rücken," 58.

16 *Ibid.*, 60.

17 "Franz Kline: The Menil Collection," *Artforum* 33 (Dec. 1994): 79.

18 *Ibid.*, 78.

19 The only exhibition, before Foster's, to treat the color abstractions in any kind of systematic way was Harry Gaugh's *Franz Kline: Color Abstractions* exhibition in 1979 at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC. The review literature, however, devoted most of its space discussing how they didn't "stack up" with Kline's stereotyped black and white canvases.

20 Interview with Kuh, 152.

21 Kramer, "Franz Kline: Turning Art Into Academic Art History," *New York Times* (Oct. 6, 1968): sec. 2, 35.

22 Robert Natkin, "Kline & Co.," *Contemporary Art* 2/4 (Winter 1994-5): 38.