

# Why Has Aesthetic Formalism Fallen on Hard Times?

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## 1. Introduction

Nick Zangwill has done more than any person recently to resuscitate aesthetic formalism.<sup>1</sup> I say “resuscitate” because formalism has not been in favor for several decades. Zangwill writes that “Aesthetic Formalism has fallen on hard times. At best it receives unsympathetic discussion and swift rejection. At worst it is the object of abuse and derision.”<sup>2</sup> The reasons many today believe aesthetic formalism is not viable have been the subject of discussion since the pendulum swing away from New Criticism, via the work of William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, Clement Greenberg, André Levinson, and Heinrich Wölfflin. Most of these reasons have been discussed thoroughly, and those that I will review here that have been discussed I will spend little time reconsidering. I believe, though, that there are a few more reasons why formalism has fallen on hard times, reasons that have not been much discussed, or at least not directly. They are the subject of this article.

While the history of aesthetics includes many formalists, some of a variety much less modest than the sort with whom Zangwill keeps company, I want to use as a baseline definition of formalism Zangwill’s own. His definition of a formal aesthetic property begins with “the intuitive idea that formal properties are those aesthetic properties that are directly perceivable or

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<sup>1</sup> Within the last few years, Nick Zangwill has revived interest in aesthetic formalism in a series of articles. One, Nick Zangwill, “Feasible Aesthetic Formalism,” *Nous* 33, no. 4 (1999), pp. 610-29, lays out his positive case for formalism, making use of the Kantian model of free and dependent beauty as a departure point. A second, Nick Zangwill, “In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 201 (October 2000), pp. 476-93, takes on a major position in opposition to his own, that of Kendall Walton as expressed in Kendall Walton, “Categories of Art,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), pp. 334-67. And a third, Nick Zangwill, “Defusing Anti-Formalist Arguments,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40, no. 3 (July 2000), pp. 376-83, offers just what the title suggests.

<sup>2</sup> Zangwill, “Feasible Aesthetic Formalism,” p. 610.

that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.”<sup>3</sup> He defines a formal property this way: “Formal properties are entirely determined by narrow nonaesthetic properties, whereas non-formal aesthetic properties are partly determined by broad nonaesthetic properties.”<sup>4</sup> And concerning narrow nonaesthetic properties, he states that “the word ‘narrow’ includes both sensory properties, non-relational physical properties, and also any dispositions to provoke responses that might be thought of to be partly constitutive of aesthetic properties.”<sup>5</sup> Zangwill defines himself as a modest formalist and, as the immediately preceding quotation suggests, he allows as appropriate to the constitution of an object’s aesthetic character more than a less modest formalist (like Clive Bell) would.

Since my aim in this article is to shed light on why aesthetic formalism has fallen on hard times, I am obliged to keep the discussion fluid enough to account for the breadth of formalism as an historical movement in aesthetics—or more specifically, three movements in the history of aesthetics: (1) formalism of the objective Platonic-Aristotelian variety; (2) formalism focused on securing freedom for artworks from social, religious, and moral criticism, as we find in the work of Roger Fry, Stuart Hampshire, and famously advocated by Oscar Wilde; and (3) formalism focused on delineation of what properly counts as an aesthetic property. This article is not a critique of Zangwill’s formalism. Indeed, he has made a variety of moves, consonant with being a *modest* formalist, to account for some apparently relational properties as relevant to an aesthetic appraisal of objects, and this results in rendering his view far less a candidate for rejection than earlier views. Let’s begin by reviewing some of the more popular reasons for the rejection of aesthetic formalism.

## **2. Reason One: Cognition-Inspiring Aspects of Twentieth-Century Modern Works of Art**

By and large, modern art does not lend itself to formalist critique; for many works, there is little of significant value to be found in them—like Readymades, Dada, and Pop Art—when viewed from such a perspective. So to the degree to which art theory should follow art, formalism, at least as a critical approach, gives way in the twentieth century to what for my purposes I call “contextualism.” “Contextualism” is the view that some non-formal properties, specifically, properties that provide an appropriate context (or

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 611.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

contexts) within which an object or event may be considered, are relevant to the constitution of that object's or event's aesthetic features (and so to its aesthetic merits).<sup>6</sup>

There are certainly those who advocate viewing objects such as Marcel Duchamp's Readymades from a formalist perspective, finding the aesthetic value of such works to lie in their formal aesthetic properties and crediting Duchamp with seeing in the ordinary aesthetic qualities more aesthetic merit than an audience more concerned with the functionality of Duchamp's "finds" sees. Unfortunately, this perspective seems at odds with Duchamp's own artistic processes. Not to take anything away from his skill as a great painter, the challenge for which he has become famous is the elevation of ordinary objects to the status of works of art. If the objects he chose had hidden aesthetic depth, his challenge loses its heat. It becomes lukewarm and unworthy of the attention Duchamp (and others like Warhol and Rauschenberg) attracted. To consider a Readymade in line with Duchamp's artistic processes—but moreover to consider a Readymade in the context that affords it the greatest value, the greatest command of attention—is to view it not formally but rather as inspiration for cognition.

### 3. Reason Two: Representational Aspects of Works of Art

Formalist critical approaches are, at least *prima facie*, unable to account adequately for the value of artworks when that value is tied to the representational content or aspects of those works.<sup>7</sup> This is a species of a larger problem: formalism does not seem to have a place for properties of a relational nature. If we believe that a case for the aesthetic merits of an object (art or otherwise) includes reference to properties that speak to the representational relation between that object and some other, formalism does not have a place for this. The same can be said of historical relations.<sup>8</sup> If we

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<sup>6</sup> This is discussed in David Fenner, *Art in Context* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Kivy, "Science and Aesthetic Appreciation," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1991), pp. 180-95. On pp. 192 and 193, Kivy writes that "the beauty of a scientific theory, like the overall artistic success of a realistic painting, is a function also of its representational success, which is to say, its truth. . . . Once formalism is given up, the claim that, in theoretical sciences, the beautiful can never prevail over the true loses all appeal, if not all sense, for, of course, there never is a contest between beauty and truth in theoretical science, understood as the attempt to represent nature. It cannot represent nature beautifully, in the fullest sense, without representing it truthfully."

<sup>8</sup> I include with historical relations "genetic" aspects of a work, that is, aspects connected to the artist and the context of her creation of the work.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

believe that the historical context of a work is relevant to a case for the aesthetic merit of that work, and aesthetic merit is evidenced on the presence of aesthetic properties, then one might claim that the aesthetic properties “possessed” by the object in question transcend those “directly perceivable or that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.”<sup>9</sup>

### **4. Reason Three: Expressive Aspects of Works of Art**

It is unclear that aesthetic formalism will adequately capture properties that are expressive in nature. Zangwill makes provision for this, but for other formalists, this problem is the same sort possessed by representational and historical considerations.

The point regarding the rejection of formalism on the grounds that it does not capture expressive properties might be broadened. Some artists in creating their works may well mean to express perspectives on particular social issues, religious issues, or issues having to do with ethnicity, race, and gender. It is likely that objects viewed with these perspectives in mind, when these perspectives were meant to be expressed by artists through their works, will result in richer or at least deeper experiences for audience members. On many occasions, though, in the absence of knowing an artist’s intentions (or sometimes in spite of knowing them), an audience member may inform her viewing act with a social-, religious-, ethnic-, or gender-oriented, etc. perspective, and the result may be a richer and/or deeper experience. My point is that if we limit expressive properties only to those actually (and consciously) expressed by the artist, then we may need another category here, one for audience perspectives focused on properties of artworks that are much like artist-intended expressions.

### **5. Reason Four: Aesthetic Properties and Critical Practice**

The number one concern of today’s aesthetic formalist is to advance an argument that would delineate in tight and enduring ways what counts as an aesthetic property and what does not. Zangwill writes:

I assume as a fundamental principle that aesthetic properties are determined by nonaesthetic properties. . . . Once we admit this thesis, there is then an issue about *which* nonaesthetic properties determine aesthetic properties. . . .

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<sup>9</sup> Zangwill addresses historical relations in “In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism,” and so this reason for rejecting aesthetic formalism may only apply to his predecessors and not to him.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

Which nonaesthetic properties are aesthetically ‘relevant’?  
This is where the issue of formalism should be located.<sup>10</sup>

I suggest that two motivations are behind this central concern: (1) the formalist simply wants to capture what it is we essentially mean to talk about when talking about the aesthetic character of an object, and (2) the formalist wants to do this in part so that conversations about the aesthetic merits of works of art are both meaningful and do not degenerate into individualistic relativism. The latter is predicated on the former. If I can say what counts as an aesthetic property, and can then use my observation “that such-and-such a work of art has such-and-such an aesthetic property” as evidence for my claim that this work is aesthetically good, then conversations about aesthetic merit can be productive. If I cannot even cite what counts as an aesthetic property of a particular work of art, then there is no conversation—at least no productive one—to be had. When I offer my take on a work of art, I mean to recommend my take as the right one. If my companion does not agree with me, I would like the opportunity to try to persuade my companion that I am right. To do this, I want to offer a case based on evidence, but if there is no way to say in an authoritative (or at least commonly agreed-upon) way what counts as evidence—that is, what counts as an actual aesthetic property of the object under consideration—then I do not get the opportunity I want. Aesthetic formalism offers me a clean way to establish what counts as the evidence that I can cite in making my case.

This characterization of how we use the citation of aesthetic properties was perhaps best articulated and defended by Monroe Beardsley:

The alternative that remains is to say that a distinguishing feature of A-qualities [aesthetic qualities] is their intimate connection with normative critical judgments—or, more explicitly (though still tentatively and roughly), that an A-quality of an object is an aesthetically valuable quality of that object. On this proposal, what guides our linguistic intuition in classifying a given quality as an A-quality is the implicit recognition that it could be cited in a reason supporting a judgment (affirmative or negative) of aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Zangwill, “Feasible Aesthetic Formalism,” p. 610.

<sup>11</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, “What Is an Aesthetic Quality?” *Theoria* 39 (1973), p. 61.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

Alan Goldman says that this connection with aesthetic value places aesthetic properties in line with their most popular linguistic use as a justification for a particular broad aesthetic-evaluative claim about an object or event. He writes:

Aesthetic properties are those which contribute to the aesthetic values of artworks (or, in some cases, to the aesthetic values of natural objects of scenes). . . . We might conclude that works of art are objects created and perceived for their aesthetic values, and that aesthetic properties are those which contribute to such values.<sup>12</sup>

In order to complete Beardsley's account, we next must look at what he believes to be of aesthetic value:

"X has greater aesthetic value than Y" means "X has the capacity to produce an aesthetic experience of greater magnitude (such an experience having more value) than that produced by Y." Since this definition defines "aesthetic value" in terms of consequences, an object's utility or instrumentality to a certain sort of experience, I shall call it an Instrumentalist definition of "aesthetic value."<sup>13</sup>

Beardsley explains "greater magnitude" this way:

First, an aesthetic experience is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon heterogeneous but interrelated components of a phenomenally objective field—visual or auditory patterns, or the characters and events in literature. . . . Second, it is an experience of some intensity. . . . But this discussion already anticipates the two other features of aesthetic experience, which may both be subsumed under *unity*. For, third, it is an experience that hangs together, or is coherent, to an unusually high degree. Fourth, it is an experience that is unusually complete in itself. . . . [B]ecause of the highly concentrated, or localized, attention

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<sup>12</sup> Alan H. Goldman, "Properties, Aesthetic," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995). See also Alan H. Goldman, "Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Value," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 23-37.

<sup>13</sup> Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 531.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

characteristic of aesthetic experience, it tends to mark itself out from the general stream of experience, and stand in memory as a single experience. . . . One aesthetic experience may differ from another in any or all of three connected but independent respects. . . . I propose to say that one aesthetic experience has a greater magnitude—that is, it is more of an aesthetic experience—than another; and that its magnitude is a function of at least these three variables.<sup>14</sup>

I mentioned above that the formalist may be motivated both by a concern for explicating aesthetic character and by using that explication as evidence for aesthetic value claims. It seems to me that Beardsley's articulation of what counts as an aesthetic property speaks directly to these matters. Beardsley's entrée to the topic is critical aesthetic practice, actual lived critical aesthetic practice. Although Frank Sibley taught us that this is a one-way dynamic,<sup>15</sup> Beardsley reminds us that when we make evaluative judgments about aesthetic objects, we evidence these judgments by citing aesthetic properties that the object possesses. Current accounts now involve the subject—Sibley, Beardsley, and probably most twentieth- and twenty-first-century aestheticians agree with this—but essentially the evidencing of our aesthetic evaluations is borne by the citation of the object's aesthetic properties. And these, of course, are evidenced by the object's possession of certain nonaesthetic (base) properties.

What is at issue concerns the size of the set of appropriate and relevant nonaesthetic properties. The formalist limits her set to those dependent directly and exclusively on the object's narrow nonaesthetic properties. But it strikes me that if we take seriously the Beardsleyan project of delineating what counts as an aesthetic property on the basis of its use in actual critical practice, we have to confront two things. First, we take into account the inductive, particularist nature inherent in the Beardsleyan approach. And, second, by following the approach, we recognize that typical critical aesthetic practice today—*New Yorker* criticism, as an example<sup>16</sup>—does not follow a formalist approach.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 527-29.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), pp. 421-50.

<sup>16</sup> That is, *New Yorker* criticism today. In the past, the *New Yorker* certainly had its share of formalist critics. My favorite example is Arlene Croce, the dance critic.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

When it comes to his focus on aesthetic experience and his discussion of its nature, it is easy to see Beardsley's Deweyan roots. Aesthetic experience is a sort of bedrock in Beardsley's aesthetics, and his discussion of it has a marked psychological tone. Determining the character of aesthetic experience according to its psychological character implies that the project must be particularist and inductivist (and the results contingent and open to future empirical influence). This same feature is present in Beardsley's delineation of aesthetic properties. They are based on actual critical practice, and as such, they cannot be, through a priori means, delineated in any way that will result in a closed set of all and only aesthetic properties.

This is further complicated, for the formalist, by taking stock of actual critical practice. The vast majority of critics writing today include in their aesthetic evaluations of objects and events ascription to the objects of aesthetic properties that go beyond those based on narrow nonaesthetic properties. This seems necessarily the case when we are talking about so many of the objects of twentieth-century art that are virtually unrecognizable as art without involving external considerations, including objects from Duchamp, Warhol, Rauschenberg, and many others. This may drive the aesthetic formalist to say that the art objects (relevant to this discussion) created by these artists do not have marked aesthetic characters, and that a distinction between art objects and aesthetic objects is now required (and so, to boot, Beardsley's subsumption of the former under the latter will not work anymore). Even granting this distinction to the formalist, the plain typical reality is that even when focused on what we intuitively see as aesthetic objects, and when focused on what we intuitively take to be the aesthetic aspects of these works, critics will include in the evidence for their evaluations citation of nonaesthetic properties as relevant that are not exclusively narrow. Only by having a preconceived view of aesthetic properties can we begin a priori to parse out the properties reported in aesthetic experiences into aesthetic ones and nonaesthetic ones. Beardsley's project, on the other hand, is particularist: aesthetic properties are those that "could be cited in a reason supporting a judgment . . . of aesthetic value."<sup>17</sup> What reasons may be offered, what properties cited, may well be expected to differ, subject to subject, experience to experience, object to object, critic to critic.

Zangwill says that "without 'a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space' we cannot appreciate a work of visual art," which he translates as "without an appreciation of the aesthetic properties determined by two-dimensional design and the representation of three-

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<sup>17</sup> Beardsley, "What Is an Aesthetic Quality?" p. 61.



## Reason Papers Vol. 32

dimensional shapes, we cannot appreciate a work of visual art.” Just before this, though, he writes of this claim: “This, I maintain, is almost always true!”<sup>18</sup> I think the word “almost” there is crucial; it rightly allows for the possibility of differences in particular experiences. I agree with Zangwill’s general point about the centrality of turning first to formal aesthetic properties in recounting aesthetic experiences and in advancing aesthetic claims, but this seems a modest observation. What Zangwill wants to do, it seems to me, is to establish two things: (1) the indispensability, the necessity, of a formal aesthetic description of every aesthetic object (for which he does not want to invoke “tactical retreat”), and (2) the centrality of such a description to every aesthetic account, be it descriptive or evaluative of an experience. Let me repeat a quotation from above:

I assume as a fundamental principle that aesthetic properties are determined by nonaesthetic properties. . . . Once we admit this thesis, there is then an issue about *which* nonaesthetic properties determine aesthetic properties. . . . Which nonaesthetic properties are aesthetically ‘relevant’? This is where the issue of formalism should be located.<sup>19</sup>

If the aesthetic relevancy of nonaesthetic properties is the core issue, and if, following Beardsley and Goldman, we have aesthetic relevancy turn on the reasonableness of citing that nonaesthetic property as evidence for an aesthetic claim, then there is no way to circumscribe in any stable way exactly and precisely what nonaesthetic properties will aesthetically be relevant and which will not. Barring this, the two claims I mentioned directly above cannot be established. The best we can say is “it all depends on the subject’s description of her experience, or on what she chooses to use as reasons for her judgment.” This is not a particularly satisfying conclusion, but it seems inescapable.

In order for aesthetic evaluation to be normative, it must rely on the evidencing of claims, and this evidencing must go all the way down. But where “all the way down” ends up is not clear. The formalist believes it ends in narrow nonaesthetic properties, but if we use today’s typical critical practice to determine where we end up “all the way down,” the preponderance of evidence suggests that we do not have perfect reason to settle just on those narrow properties.

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<sup>18</sup> Zangwill, “Feasible Aesthetic Formalism,” p. 618.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 610.

### 6. Reason Five: Aesthetic Character and the Problem of Taste

Sibley famously argues that reductions of evaluative aesthetic claims will never result in arrangements of objective properties.<sup>20</sup> He discusses the importance of engaging “taste” in ascribing to objects aesthetic properties. To judge aesthetic objects requires the involvement of a subjective context,<sup>21</sup> the engagement of a set of skills on the part of the audience member. So we can ask: If all aesthetic evaluative activity requires taste, and the exercise of taste is “subjectively additive” to the object or event under consideration, then isn’t aesthetic judgment in its very nature an anti-formalist matter? (By “subjectively additive,” I mean that the subject imports something substantive to the establishment of the presence of a particular aesthetic property, something that is not present without the subject’s contribution.) If aesthetic evaluation, understood after the subjective turn of the eighteenth century and after Sibley, essentially involves the subject bringing to her evaluation of an object her “taste,” a thing essentially external to the object, then does this not mean that any formalism is incoherent on the grounds that no aesthetic evaluation can be performed in the absence of the incursion of the external set of skills we call the subject’s taste? If this were the case, then formalism should have entirely passed away with the arrival of Sibley’s work. If formalism survives the notion that all aesthetic evaluation requires the inclusion of taste, then what taste must do is simply to actualize an objective potential; what it does not do, if formalism is coherent, is “additively” to include subjective contributions, aspects of the subject essentially external to what is given in the art object or event.

But there’s more to be said. David Hume’s attempt, some people believe, to balance the subjectivity and incorrigibility of taste with a realist account of aesthetic judgment fails.<sup>22</sup> It fails on the probability that two equally well-disposed aesthetic judges might ultimately disagree about the merits of a given object. This is usually chalked up to a difference in taste. Here we are not talking about “good” versus “bad” taste, nor are we talking about the subjective faculty that allows us to recognize or actualize the

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), pp. 421-50.

<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that I use the terms “subjective” and “objective” to denote locations of states or properties, not to denote either the state of reality/existence of those states/properties or whether claims about their reality/existence are true or false. These are separate matters and must be understood as separate to make sense of my claims. “Subjective” does not mean “individually relative” or “a matter of personal taste.”

<sup>22</sup> David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Four Dissertations* (1757), accessed online at: <http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r15.html>.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

presence of aesthetic properties as in the theories of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and in a slightly different way Sibley. We are instead talking about personal taste: some people like Mozart, some like John Lennon. Some people like David Lynch, some like David Lean. Some people like Kandinsky, some like Sargent. If it is an irreducible fact about human aesthetic sensibility that tastes vary, then this constitutes a very present and very real context through which we view aesthetic objects.

Goldman believes that aesthetic realism does not survive the inescapable fact of individual taste. He writes:

Another and far more obvious reason for the absence of principles with which to support aesthetic evaluation lies in irreconcilable differences in taste. It is an old cliché that what appeals to one person in art will not appeal to another. But if true, this in itself might block principles that would link nonevaluative to evaluative properties of works . . . .<sup>23</sup>

[T]he crucial point once more is that even fully developed and informed tastes can differ across ideal critics.<sup>24</sup>

Differences in taste even among ideal critics show that objective properties do not only count in one direction (Sibley thought they do). Even the same lines in the same work do not count only positively toward gracefulness; they may count negatively for other critics.<sup>25</sup>

[W]e must relativize aesthetic judgments to ideal (but still human) critics who share tastes.<sup>26</sup>

Sibley's taste is subjective but not additive, or at least it can be conceived in a way that the exercise of taste as a means of properly citing the aesthetic properties of an object does not involve the addition of something external, that the taste-function as Sibley describes it merely actualizes an objective potential. This is also consistent with what Beardsley and Hume

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<sup>23</sup> Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

say, but the sort of taste that Goldman talks about is indeed additive. It is additive in the sense that the subject contributes to the strength and to the relevancy of what nonaesthetic properties are focal in her description of the aesthetic properties of the object under consideration. Since the subject's taste ("taste" in the Goldmanian sense) changes the aesthetic evaluation of the object, it not only results, as Goldman says, in a rejection of aesthetic realism, it also results in a rejection of formalism.

Let me offer an example. I pepper my lectures in aesthetics with many examples from twentieth-century art. I talk about the New York School and about its importance to modern art, to American art, and to the development of art itself. One cannot talk about the New York School without talking about Jackson Pollock, especially his late, flat, purely abstract work. I do not hesitate to say how important this work is, but I never miss an opportunity to follow this up by talking about my aesthetic distaste (dis-taste) of Pollock's work from this period. I say that if I were at the Museum of Modern Art with a colleague, and that colleague were "pro-Pollock," she might well talk in aesthetically positive terms about the abstraction, the absence of focal points, the extreme balance we get in the drip paintings, the complexity, the order, the uniformity, and so forth. My reaction is to acknowledge all of these things and then say that these are exactly the properties one looked for in 1960s kitchen-counter laminates. The point of my silly example is to show that the aesthetic properties that my colleague cites as supportive of her case of the aesthetic merit of the work rest on nonaesthetic (base) properties that I will use in my negative case about the work. Where she sees a nonaesthetic property that grounds the correct identification of a positive aesthetic property, say order, I will see that same nonaesthetic property grounding the correct identification of a negative aesthetic property, say being boring. And perhaps more to the point, there are sure to be nonaesthetic properties that my colleague cites as important to her aesthetic case for the merits of the work, nonaesthetic properties that I find entirely irrelevant, and vice versa.

This is not a new point, and Goldman describes it more eloquently than I do. Scenarios like this clearly support the point that taste in the way that Goldman uses the word contributes an external context to the critical evaluation of (probably most) aesthetic objects, and an external context that bears directly on what counts as an aesthetic property and what does not, which nonaesthetic properties are relevant to the aesthetic character of an object, and which are not.

Please note that I have not left the formalist playing field. In my colleague's and my considerations of the Pollock piece, our assessments have only to do with the formal properties of, and formal relations within, the work. But as our divergent tastes bring certain nonaesthetic properties to the fore and push away others as irrelevant, we end up, while attending only to the

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

formal properties of the work, with radically different descriptions of the object's aesthetic properties. Formalism, because of personal taste, cannot deliver a stable account of an object's aesthetic properties, and so it cannot deliver a stable account of the aesthetic character of objects and events.

The formalist who may say that the above example not only does not show what I mean it to show but actually shows the reverse—insofar as my colleague and I only discourse about the formal properties of the Pollock work, and so thereby support the formalist's assertion that the aesthetic character of the work lies principally, perhaps exclusively, in its formal properties—misses the point I mean to make. First, it is a choice that I confine the example to discussion of merely the object's formal qualities, a choice I make for the sake of showing that a strictly formalist analysis will not capture in stable and enduring terms the aesthetic character of the work in a nonrelativist way. Second, were I offering a true account of my take on the aesthetic character of the work, I would also certainly count as an aesthetic property the absence of representational qualities. My colleague will use the absence of representational qualities as a reason to praise the work (perhaps moving into art-historical contextual considerations next), and I will use the absence of such qualities to criticize the work (as lacking anything like an engaging focus). Third, any serious critic hearing us discourse will think us uninformed; to discuss a mature Pollock work is almost certainly to include its art-historical context and significance, and I would wager that most critics would hold that, in the case of Pollock, a firm distinction between the aesthetic properties of the work and the (nonaesthetic) artistic features of the work is a mistake. The significance and importance of the formal properties of a mature Pollock turn on their art-historical context. Flatness is important, but it can only be seen as important contextually.

### **7. Reason Six: The Importation of the Subject**

The last reason I want to offer in answering the question, “Why has formalism fallen on hard times?” has to do with the history of aesthetic theory. I believe that the context of the historical development of formalist theories leads us to where we are today, that it explains why formalists (in both aesthetic theory and art theory) are in short supply now. Aesthetic formalism begins with Aristotle, continues through Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and on down to Shaftesbury. These formalists were objectivists and their theories offer formulas for the connection between the ascription of beauty and the presence of certain nonaesthetic base properties possessed by the object cited as beautiful. Formalism continues with Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Addison, and Immanuel Kant; these formalists adopted ontologies that were relational or mixed objective and subjective elements. Formalists of the twentieth century generally are not up front with their ontological commitments; they include Roger Fry, G. E. Moore, Clive Bell, Stuart

## Reason Papers Vol. 32

Hampshire, Melvin Rader, Eduard Hanslick, and José Ortega y Gasset. The formalism that was meant, for pre-seventeenth-century theorists, to underwrite aesthetic realism ultimately does not survive the subjective turn of the eighteenth century. Certainly, it survives in the short term, but as the subjective turn of the eighteenth century is what leads to the subjectivism in Sibley's account of the necessity of the exercise of taste in aesthetic property ascription, and as Hume and Sibley together lead to positions like Goldman's about the "contextually additive" nature of the exercise of personal or individual taste in determining the relevancy and strength of nonaesthetic properties in aesthetic characterizations of objects and events, I think it is fair to say that once objectivism goes, so too does the metaphysical ground that formalism requires to survive and to undergird realist agendas.

Twentieth-century formalists do not engage in much ontological discussion. Certainly, part of this has to do with different motivations from those before the eighteenth century. Twentieth-century formalists—Aestheticists and New Critics—had other fish to fry; they needed to protect the aesthetic quality of their arts from domination by external considerations focused on morality, politics, and the like. However, I think that part of the reason that twentieth-century formalists begin to give up talking about their ontological bases is because to do so is to have to walk a tightrope: to be subjectivist—as Kant and Beardsley are—but at the same time to be absolutists about aesthetic evaluation (and realists about the presence of the aesthetic properties that undergird evaluative claims). It was the eighteenth century that set the stage for the abandonment of formalism we see today. Kant may have been the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries' formalists' best friend, but I think that it was the subjective ontology that he employed that explains in large measure why formalists today are in short supply.