Caroline Jones’s book marks a welcome departure from the dominant narratives of ‘postmodernist criticism’. The book’s originality lies in the way in which Jones’s ‘critical history’ of Greenberg’s modernism endows the increasingly popular genres of sensory history and the history of emotions with a new level of theoretical sophistication. In disentangling Greenberg’s discipline of aesthetic perception, Jones completes one important chapter in the otherwise missing history of modern sensibilities. Her book thus confronts one of the central paradoxes of art history today: the discipline’s elemental affiliation to the notion of sensibility and related concepts of visual ‘sensitivity’ (the art historian’s professional apparatus of choice) seems to block rather than promote reflection on discourses of sensibility as objects of historical study in their own right. In contrast, drawing on anthropology, philosophy and criticism, as well as an impressive array of different histories including those of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, literature, science, technology and politics, Jones places Greenberg’s formalism within the realm of sensory politics, treating visibility as ‘a living category of being’ (276) that is inseparable from broader models of knowing, economies of emotions and, ultimately, systems of subject-formation. In Jones’s highly textured investigation, the biographical genre (which she detests) is transformed into a new realm of ‘bio-graphy’, literally meant as the retrieval of life through writing, which, in this case, also amounts to an enlivened form of writing energized by the singular effects of supernumerary and minute detail. This is why this book, although it could definitely have been much shorter, could never have been short.

The book is divided in three sections – ‘statements’, ‘visibilities’ and ‘regimes’ – each of which focuses on a different area of Greenberg’s formalism. In the first section, Jones undertakes the minute retrieval of all those vulgar materials of sensory experience through which Greenberg was constructed as a modern subject, viewer and, most importantly, art critic. Among other topics this section introduces one of the central theses of the book, exploring in detail how his first job as customs officer may have shaped his bureaucratic yearning for administrative clarity in art.1 This section also reveals the crucial role that Greenberg’s nervous breakdown as a conscript played in hardening his nascent formalism after his return from the army. The embedding of Greenberg’s formalism within its specific contexts of science and philosophical criticism – both traditional and contemporary (from the Russian formalists to American intellectuals such as Irving Babbitt) – allows us to understand Greenberg’s yearning for a more disciplined and anti-literary definition of art. Jones convincingly shows that formalism had originally been a much less conservative choice (less abstract and regulatory) than it would later become in Greenberg’s hands. However, a macro-historical genealogy of formalism beyond the boundaries of Jones’s study would highlight the normalizing elements that Greenberg inherited from previous formalist models. These include similarly ‘optical and art-based’ systems of sensory regimentation, which, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, social elites had developed in opposition to alternative ‘materialist’ and synaesthetic theories of art.2

Jones also examines in depth the central Greenbergian notions of positive and objective painting, which she roots effectively in contemporary philosophy. The positivist uses of abstraction by the Vienna positivists emphasized the importance of isolating the truth-value of propositions by applying rigorous criteria of verification. Such schemes enthused Greenberg, and they provide fascinating insights into the scientific tropism of his aesthetic vocabulary. If, according to positivist science, scientific precision, objectivity and consistency dictated that a phenomenon or a problem be ‘resolved in exactly the same kind of terms as that in which it is presented’ (138), then art should also be measured and judged according to rules inherent to the object, rather than extra-visual forms of reference (narrative, figuration, or subjective emotions).
The core aspiration of Greenberg’s abstract formalism, i.e. the verification of the truth of (abstract) modern art, and his toolkit of related principles (self-referentiality, self-reflexivity, autonomy, medium-specificity and counter-figuration) find here a convincing field of explanation. Behind this scientific veneer, the sleights of hand (and paradoxical slippages of terms) involved in Greenberg’s pursuit of objective standards become amusingly clear: objectivity in art criticism leads to the notion of painting as a bare material object, which in turn also leads to non-objective, i.e. non-figurative, abstract painting. Moreover, in this section, Jones also shows how Greenberg’s principle of self-referentiality emerged as a hostile response to a range of subjectivist methodologies in art history (which he preferred to call ‘Germanizing’), as well as opposing other competing adaptations of positivist science to art, such as Ernst Gombrich’s externalist psychology of perception.

One of the most compelling aspects of the book as a whole is the persistence with which it scrutinizes the organization, embodiment and reception of the sensory regimes specific to modern formalism. Most significantly, Jones rightly demonstrates that Greenberg’s invocations of intensity and sensation are linked to the disciplines of his positivist formalism. And they obey an inexorable metaphorical logic: for Greenberg, the sensations of abstract painting have to be concrete, irreducible and robust in proportion as they are required to be scientifically rigorous as internal forms of evidence for the measurement of the truth of painting. It is in fact the intensity of sensations that increases their ability to act as facts (visual data) (178–9). Just as the slippage from objectivity to object was facilitated by the notion of positive painting, so the (physical) power of sensations in Greenberg assumes evidentiary status that attests to the (scientific) rigour of the new painting. As Jones goes on to show, Greenberg’s favourite species of sensation is a localized (visual), concrete (embedded in the materials of painting), pure (anti-figurative) and amplified (rigorous) species of sensation, designed to produce not prodigious excitements in the old vitalist mode but rather a positive supersensate self of intense detachment (117 and 119). This arrangement presupposes a specific kind of subjectivity with increased capacities for localized sensitivity minus the emotion, for body intensity minus the body (‘eyesight alone’) (114). Clearly, this model of intensity is not about expression(-ism), but rather about the sensory efficiency (74) proper to a viewing subject which is reconceived as ‘precise, focused, laser-like’ (141). This is the Greenbergian trope of artistic experience that Jones calls ‘disembodied’ (for lack of a better word), while emphasizing its hybrid and singular nature as a firmly anti-idealist and anti-spiritual type of disembodiment that ‘had to be performed in the world’ (151) and with the body. And this body obeyed the same normative biological ambitions of formalism – ‘a higher standard of living as personal hygiene’, in Greenberg’s own words (165; 158 and 170).

Following similar principles, Greenberg’s project produced a neat and clean history of European formalism and a comparably sterilized canon for the evolution of American modernism that kept its competing ‘extremes of hygiene and scatology’ apart.

The second section (‘visibilities’) explores Greenberg’s reading of Pollock’s work and especially the formative role that his painting played in re-making Greenberg’s abstract formalism as a whole. This, in turn, produced a new Pollock, the Athenian and controlled figure that replaced the irrational rebel of contemporary criticism. It is a testament to Jones’s ambition that she chooses to engage in the task of clarifying Greenberg’s relation to Pollock by referring to a painting about which the art critic never wrote: the Guggenheim Mural (1943). The argument addresses the critical role of ‘self-evidences’ in the operations of visibility:† Greenberg found the civilized Pollock where nobody else had seen it – right in front of everybody’s eyes, on the very surfaces of his painting. The experience of the large, gross-motor but highly repetitive movements recorded in the Mural marks, for Jones’s Greenberg, a grand form of corporeal automatism, which was also the trope of industrial automation (232–3). Even more ambitiously, Jones shows how Greenberg’s ‘discovery’ of the industrial Pollock was entangled with popular iconographies of regimented bodily movement in contemporary time-lapse industrial photography, as well as with contemporary Taylorist regimes of labour efficiency.

The most important argument in this section emerges from Jones’s detailed reading of the ways in which Pollock’s painting served as a testing ground for Greenberg’s ideal of disembodied vision (274). Jones describes a whole series of visual operations, such as formal and sensory atomizations, displacements and prosthetic supplantations, through which Greenberg’s model of disembodiment was anchored in specific visual examples, and was
‘experienced as enriching’ (266). Moreover, Jones finds in Greenberg’s enthusiasm for Pollock’s painting further instances of the ties between the critic’s notion of passion and his ascetic regimes of affect: Pollock offered a great example of how excessive regimens of sensations can be usefully controlled and exploited (rather than inhibited) (263); or, better still, they can be channelled back into life ‘as we live it at present’ in order to vitalize it (278–81). The energy of Pollock’s painting acted as a vital restorative to the efficiency of industrial labour widely seen at the time to be threatened by ‘dull horrors’, ‘invariance’ and ‘fatigue’ (291, 300). At a more psychological level, this ontology welcomes experiences of violence and trauma as necessary steps in the visual re-ordering of the self (250). As therapeutic ways of feeling a ‘cosmic synchrony with his age’ (292), Greenberg’s desire to enfold reality in a desperate attempt to immunize himself from it, encrypt a perversely homeopathic (and agonistic) desire for mastery and well-being (279–80).

Before we enter the third section of the book (‘regimes’), Jones surveys the ultimate hardening of Greenberg’s optical regimes from the 1950s onwards, in particular through his championing of colour field painting and post-painterly abstraction and his increasingly rigid assaults on figuration, expression and pictorial values. At this juncture, Jones’s analysis of Helen Frankenthaler’s painting in the 1950s aims to show both the influence of Greenberg’s master discourse of pure ‘opticality’ and its limits. Thus figural, associative and pictorial residues in Frankenthaler’s work are sensitively retrieved as testament of more visceral engagements with the body than Greenberg would have allowed. In the face of such evidence, Jones celebrates figuration as the unintended but unavoidable underpinning of abstraction.

The problem of the Greenbergian effect on art history is one of the central themes of the book’s final section. Postmodernism’s Greenberg is at the centre of fraught questions about the professional and social politics of our discipline today. Jones discusses the critic’s negative reception in the 1980s and his persistent ‘demonic allure’ (347) ever since as the effect of a group of highly influential historians associated with the October journal (Jones’s ‘central strategists’ within the broader field of ‘critical postmodernism’). As for Jones, the group’s denunciations of Greenberg’s politics paradoxically reinforced, rather than subverted, the normative significance of his formalist pronouncements. Through repeated cycles of Oedipal aggression and filial piety the critique by centralized postmodernism of Greenberg’s episteme bred another hegemony, whose historical role in stemming the tide of increasing heterogeneity in the 1980s art-worlds is analysed in detail by Jones. And if the central strategists ‘reconstructed an old centre to attack, and then occupy’ (378), they also needed a new figurehead (a new good father to destroy the Oedipal father), whom they found in Walter Benjamin. The originality of Jones’s propositions here lies in the unexpected contiguities that she detects between Benjamin’s and Greenberg’s approaches, most particularly their shared metaphysical conviction regarding the intrinsically revolutionary nature of ‘formal qualities alone’ (368). Jones thus questions the continuing influence of this doctrine of the ‘medium’s inherent criticality’ because she sees it firstly as a problematic re-enactment of the lacerated Oedipal father’s cultural ‘defensism’ (375–7). Secondly, she criticizes it as a central factor in the abstract, diluted and ‘global’ politics of the October circle in the 1980s (as distinct from the local, explicit, and active politics of more ‘representational’ types of peripheral postmodernisms) (356, 378–80).

The closing chapter – one of the richest and most far-reaching in the book – situates Greenberg’s ‘modernist sensorium’ of the bureaucratisation of the senses within the broader sensory history of the 1950s. Greenberg’s notion of ‘eyesight alone’ is shown to have participated in similar technological developments of sensory atomization in the realms of smell (chemistry, perfumes) and sound (hi-fi, fm radio or jazz music). Fascinatingly, Jones shows that Greenberg’s desired separation of the senses was not only impossible (Greenberg’s ‘acoustic’ appreciations of Mondrian’s Boogie-Woogie series testify to this) (403), but that perhaps this separation was not, in the end, the most important aspect of his project. Rather, and this is perhaps one of the most compelling general arguments of the book, sensory bureaucratisation is productive and holistic. Control of each sense always lays the foundation for the regulation of another, thus participating in a broader project of modern sensibility: the ‘syn-aesthetic’, or inter-sensory, administration of the self and its immediate sensory materials. Even more importantly, Jones’s Nietzschean denunciation of this disciplinary process as clearly impoverishing does not preclude precious insights into its positivity as well as its necessary embedding in structures of pleasure and emotion. From auditory
to visual culture, Jones’s analysis traces principles of organization similar to those regulating Greenberg’s aesthetics. Predominant among them is the conviction that properly atomized and concentrated sensations, experienced separately by single senses, sharpen and maximize the pleasure and efficiency of each organ (408–9). Sensory specificity tied the idea of narrowed and channelled perceptions with the ambition of an optimal self, who, as the aggregate result of his optimized single senses, vibrates with a new intensity (434–5). In a final remarkable twist, Jones traces the implications of Greenberg’s regimenting forms of sensory regulation and self-discipline all the way into his mental breakdowns during the 1950s, as well as the anti-Freudian and equally bureaucratic models of psychotherapy through which he sought to heal himself and regain control.

One of the overall aims of Jones’s sensory politics is to restore ‘the chaos of undifferentiated sensations’ and ‘see life in more holistic terms’ (433–5).

In Greenberg she has evidently found a challenging and worthy foil. Among the most valuable aspects of such an agenda is Jones’s incisive retrieval of the material pleasures in which the ‘crippling effects’ (the disciplines and fragmentations) of formalism and the ‘modernist sensorium’ are anchored (xxvii). Indeed, bureaucratization establishes itself as a gratifying (if not fulfilling) process, at least for its operators. Paradoxically, ‘analysis’ and ‘atomization’, which Jones takes to task for their asceticism, also played a crucial role in generating the bizarre yet productive delights by which the forces of bureaucratic culture are fuelled. In addition to the Enlightenment’s excitement in the labour of particularization and super-abundant detail in art and in science, it is precisely such unique examples as Jones’s own micro-analytical book that reveal the far-reaching possibilities inherent in the ‘age of detailism’ in which we are all still entangled.4

Art History’s Riddles: Formalism, Aesthetics and the Bio-politics of Aesthesis

One the most remarkable aspects of Jones’s book is the expansive historical contexts in which it places Greenberg’s formalism and theory of abstraction. In this way, it manages to affect as much the understanding of Greenberg’s enterprise as that of the historical formalisms by which his project was inevitably conditioned. I will leave aside Jones’s curious decision to trace the traditions of abstraction from which twentieth-century formalism drew back to early modern philosophy or logic, rather than to the more appropriate field of eighteenth-century visual abstraction, extensively discussed in the polite and neoclassical literature on art and natural knowledge.5

The central question of Jones’s book – formalism’s historical function as a disciplinary technology of the self – could have benefited from such a comparison, especially since Greenberg’s episteme actually shared with such early models of visual abstraction a similar desire to gentrify, regulate and enliven the economy of the viewing experience.

Jones’s perspective on economies of affect and their operation may bring new solutions to chronic problems surrounding another kind of formalism, which is even closer to the discursive possibility of Greenberg’s model: Victorian aestheticism. Historiographically speaking, the momentous implications of Greenberg’s view of modernist abstraction for the study of aestheticism are still resonating today. Following Greenberg, canonical narratives of modernism have abused Victorian aestheticism and defined themselves in visceral opposition to it. Yet in the last couple of decades, there has been a consistent attempt by a number of historians to restore the credibility of Victorian art by drawing on Greenberg’s own system of modernism while denouncing its author. Jones’s point about the enduring ‘demonic allure’ of Greenberg’s formalism is here spectacularly confirmed and her approach can fruitfully mediate this discussion.

Apart from the numerous problems of theoretical and historical specificity involved in the application of Greenberg’s mantras of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity to Victorian art and aestheticism, one need only turn to the sensory and bio-political differences between the two paradigms of aesthetic sensation to understand their disparities. Jones’s Greenberg and his project of sensory bureaucratization were, for example, openly hostile to the type of kinaesthetic, synaesthetic and holistic models with which the aesthetic movement sought to describe the micro-embodiment of fine sensations and other phenomena of artistic reception. Likewise, Jones’s reading makes abundantly clear that Greenberg’s energetic formalism could have no sympathy for aestheticism’s temperate bio-economical rules of sensory operation. The materialist animation of ideal beauty may have been a paramount concern for writers such as Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, but this vitalization of beauty
and idealism aimed at what Alex Potts has called ‘a stilled vitality’ (a low-intensity economy of ‘serenity’ and orderliness ‘structures of harmony’) designed to stem the malignant energies of ‘pain-giving activities’ and the ‘helter-skelter of impulse’, which, as Jones showed, animated Greenberg’s Apollonian formalism at its very core. Ultimately, I would like to suggest, modernist formalism (from its earliest variations of ‘expressive objectivity’ in Meier-Graefe’s writings to Greenberg’s positive regulation of ‘eyesight alone’) rejected aestheticism’s artistic programme not because of some kind of misunderstanding that we can correct today, but rather because it understood aestheticism all too well. Better still, a broader conflict between two competing configurations of material life with their own specific emotional economies is evident here. Such divergences at the economical level of sensation – its embodied distribution and differing intensities – clearly demonstrate the need to supplement the theoretical analysis of different historical formalisms (and other art historical phenomena) with a critical and interdisciplinary history of their sensory and (bio-)political components.

In disentangling Greenberg’s model, Jones’s study implements the appropriate kind of amplified approach to interdisciplinarity, which is essentially historical (rather than theory-oriented). That is, it brings art history in contact with other histories and multiplies the contexts and texts in relation to which artworks are studied and experienced. More importantly, all this is achieved without losing sight of the vivid immediacy of the material at hand and the need for strong visual engagements with it. In this sense, Jones’s book comes at a very interesting moment in the discipline’s history, when a growing scepticism regarding current art-historical practices tends to favour a vigorous retrenchment into such standard notions as the primacy of the visual or the specificity of the art object. All too frequently, such discussions tend to pit aesthetics against history, the priority of the ‘object’ or ‘the visual’ against the reductiveness of texts and socio-historical explanation, ‘art writing’ against historical determinism. In all of these cases, the resurgence of the visual is set against the constrictions of ‘context’ and the verbal. Although there are many meaningful disagreements among the supporters of this appel à l’ordre (which remain to be discussed more fully), the anxieties that they express seem to cohere around a common impatience with the often predictable ways in which research agendas are set and pursued in the discipline today. Interestingly, the growing tendency in art history to highlight the need to return once again to the visual and the object is comparable with the resurgence of sensory-based models of analysis in other disciplines, as well as with parallel criticisms in the broader field of philosophy and the humanities against the disembodiment and desensitization of contemporary thinking. All of these different trends speak of an exasperation with a period in our common history when there seems to be too much language, too much context, too much interpretation and too little of the old and vital hardness of the world. The realization that the ‘world is riotous with language’ feeds the need to give a ‘chance to those senses anaesthetized by language’, to be ‘cured of knowledge’, while restoring its ‘vital quality’. It is the re-affirmation of something powerful beyond language which I believe best emblematizes the continuities between the pursuit in art history of the materiality of the ‘object’ and, elsewhere, of the ‘senses’.

In art history, this ‘aesthetic’ or (the significantly different) ‘visual’ turn does not, however, always succeed in filling the void of powerful aestheses, not least because it often relies on a polarized perception of aesthetics and history. This may seem surprising given that art history as a field was produced by the productive synergies and tensions between the two. As Alex Potts has persuasively shown, ‘aesthetic apprehension’ (immediate, sensitive and vivid engagements with artworks) and ‘historical reconstruction of the context’ that shaped their making emerged as interdependent (though irreducible) projects at the very founding moment of art history, in Winckelmann’s work. Indeed, it was actually an additional plexus of interdisciplinary practices – physical, medical, environmentalist, philosophical, social, professional and ultimately political – that marked the very possibility of art history’s appearance as a way of feeling and a form of knowledge. Only sensitive practices of history can self-reflexively reveal the interactions between socio-historical discourses of sensibility and the kind of sensitivity (verbal and non-verbal) which is still part of our historical ontology today. Arguably, therefore, the old and fraught contract between history, aesthetics and life does not need to be broken, but rather fully understood and intensified. The choice between the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘historical’ does not have to be an either/or choice – neither does it have to be policed or turned into a question of primacy and hierarchy (‘the
priority of the work of art over its contexts’). Instead of more hierarchies and regimentations, art history may have a more dynamic future in experimenting with different modes of confluence, ‘con-templation’ or perpetual passage across and between the many irreducible planes of reality which define the nature and the works of aesthesis – be they social, political, aesthetic, artistic, scientific or other. In the same sense, the current methodological recourse to the sensorium and the senses does not have to be treated with the usual naïveté with which empiricism has traditionally been approached. Rather, as Michel Serres noted, such a reinstatement of sensation aims to reveal something from this ‘complex labyrinth of sense’ which strives ‘alternately towards the internal and external’ – towards, that is, subjects and objects, signs and things, explanation and energy, ultimately, history and aesthetics – while ‘vibrating at the limits of each’. This offers another entry into the true sublimity of historical experience for those at least who understand the aesthetics (the non-linear, non-instrumental, affective and transgressive aspects) not only of art objects but also of historical labour. Jones’s sensitive study of such complex ‘interferences’ as those generated by art phenomena across the wide domain of bio-political experience shows that this is a task well adapted to art history. And it may restore the field to the centre of the humanities where it belongs, rather than consigning it back to the blissful security of itself. Hence Jones’s ‘alter-topian’ perspective (433) ranks, in an increasingly melancholic academy, among the possible ‘reasons to be cheerful’.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Nikos Daskalothanasis for drawing my attention to Nicolas Calas’s early reference to the affinity of Greenberg’s descriptive criticism (and aversion to interpretation) with his ‘service at Customs’ and his bureaucratic drive ‘to free art from all that is superfluous in the description of merchandise’. See Nicolas Calas, ‘Description is not enough’, in Calas, Art in the Age of Risk and Other Essays, New York, 1968, 133–5, esp. 133.


5 The reasons cited by Jones for this omission are also misleading (99–100).


8 For Meier-Graefe’s bio-economical renunciations of aestheticism’s sensorium, see, for example, Modern Art, 2, London, 1908, 227–8.


13 Serres, Five Senses, 25.

Sensory Politics and Art History: Formalism and Modern Ways of Life. Aris Sarafianos. Art History > 33 > 1 > 192 - 197. Versions of Pygmalion in the Illuminated Roman de la Rose (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Douce 195): The Artist and the Work of Art. Marian Bleeke. Art History > 33 > 1 > 28 - 53. Primitivism and Modern Art. Formalism I: Formal Harmony. Formalism II: Truth to Materials. Fauvism + Expressionism. A View of Paris: The Life of Pleasure. Childbirth. Switzerland. In this branch of formalist art theory, the primary focus remains on the material qualities of the artwork, but instead of asserting that the artist’s goal is formal harmony, some artists and critics begin to talk about art as a means of understanding and displaying the properties of the materials of which it is made. Formalism's Other History eliminated from consideration-pass as cred- tice with an analysis of the role of art as a ible scholarly positions? Does Bois believe cultural practice that the full efficacy of art I found Yve-Alain Bois's defensive remarks in that the relations of form to the specific social activity could be assessed. If Bois believes that he as sites in themselves (Osip Brik, Shklovsky, formalism and its role within contemporary has isolated the pure "Idea" of modern form Bois) contrasting with a desire to see the art history; why he does a disservice to the as form, doesn't that contradict his own anti- symbolic discourse as inextricably bound to history of formalist-based critical. In art history, formalism is the study of art by analyzing and comparing form and style—the way objects are made and their purely visual aspects. In painting formalism emphasizes compositional elements such as color, line, shape, texture, and other perceptual aspects rather than iconography or the historical and social context. The historical origin of the modern form of the question of aesthetic formalism is usually dated to [4]. A formal analysis is an academic method in art history and criticism for analyzing works of art: "In order to perceive style, and understand it, art historians use 'formal analysis'. This means they describe things very carefully. As such, it is a basic tool for art historians and artists to understand the purely visual aspects of a work of art.