Greenberg makes two arguments (in separate articles). One is for the evolution of abstraction as the rightful descendent of Renaissance art. The other is for the value of mass culture (which he detests) in making the avant-garde accessible.

- “The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.” [the essential statement of Greenberg’s theory]
- Realism, he says, disguised art: we look at realistic paintings in order to see the subject; we don’t see the art – modernism, in contrast, brings your attention back to what makes the painting a work of art
- his question: the elements of a painting are shape, color, flatness, and pigment – are these limitations which should be disguised or qualities which should be asserted and acknowledged?
- The problem with modernism: this art doesn’t communicate with the masses, with its presumed audience
- does the artist want to do this? If it chooses not to communicate, then a rear-guard movement emerges which will choose to communicate and do so
- Greenberg then makes an argument in which he says that because the rear-guard is part of mainstream society, and because it inevitably borrows some of the tools used by the avant-garde, the avant-garde becomes more accessible

Rosenberg also dislikes mass culture but it plays a negligible role in his theory. The key to his theory is existentialism and although he is widely considered an important and influential critic, the implications of his theory make it almost impossible to judge art by any standards other than the act of painting.

- wants to dissociate abstract expressionism from European modernism which, by 1940, lacks the individualistic qualities of art it had prior to that time
- in the article on the American Action Painters, he treats the idea of the American as a symbol - a type of person who has no history and who therefore must act and live through his actions
- the action painter lives in the act of painting, which means that the encounter with the painting is the only thing that matters and the only way in which the painting can be judged