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## [HILTON KRAMER: AN APPRECIATION](#)

Thomas Lawson

**IN PREPARATION FOR THIS** short article I read through a tremendous bulk of the art criticism produced by Hilton Kramer over the last twenty-five years. What a task. I remember occasionally enjoying one of his more outrageous diatribes against Modern art or one of its presenting institutions while nursing a hangover on a Sunday morning. But it is one thing to enjoy a sour laugh when you have a sore head, and *The New York Times*, Kramer's old forum, is the only entertainment to hand; quite another to go methodically through the collected works. Suffering through such relentless pettiness masquerading as serious intelligence can give you a much worse headache than any amount of hard liquor. And this without even looking at his book reviews and other broader works of cultural criticism.

Aside from its ability to amuse, irritate, and cause a sore head in the reader, does Kramer's criticism have any merit? The answer is, not much—certainly not much of a lasting kind. Oh, he will make it into the history books no doubt, in the footnotes, much like those Parisian critics of the last century whose intemperate misunderstandings instruct us as we read our histories of Impressionism. But there will certainly be no reason to look to Kramer's writing for any useful insight into the art produced in America since he started publishing art criticism in the mid '50s, for he has none to offer. His observations are for the most part trite, obvious, and topical, his fulminations predictable, his rhetoric repetitious and ultimately boring.

Kramer is, or rather was, an excellent critic for the newspaper; the regular format often Fridays and Sundays, provided the best possible framework for his kind of superficial criticism. Kramer and the *Times* were a formidable combination. There, on a regular basis, he could press the authority of his opinions on those who were unable or unwilling to think for themselves; there his forceful mediocrity found its most congenial home.

Since leaving the *Times* two years ago to run his own magazine, pretentiously called *The New Criterion*, Kramer's voice has become more shrill as he has worked to develop the uncertain

fortunes of an intellectual journal into an equivalent power base. Lacking the insight or consciousness to develop a coherent theory (or even a convincing view) of Modern and contemporary art, and divorced from the mass media context in which that lack could be paraded as a strength, the utter shallowness of his position is becoming crystal clear. The fact is, Kramer has never understood the new criteria artists have been developing since he started working. He has never felt comfortable with Modernism itself, preferring the work of lukewarm Modernists like Milton Avery and anti-Modernists like Fairfield Porter to anything produced by more advanced artists.

It is revealing that *The New Criterion* does not generally publish reproductions of the work discussed in its pages. Lack of money is an easy explanation, but many small magazines more poorly funded than Kramer's are able to run pictures. A more likely reason is to be found in his claim of the enterprise's high seriousness, and in his distrust of sensory information. Pictures would be somehow frivolous, they might infect the purity of the text; worse, they might allow the reader to open the presented argument to closer scrutiny. The lack of even the shadowy referent provided by black and white reproduction bespeaks Kramer's desire to control the manner in which his writers' assertions are read. There is nothing to distract the reader, nothing to suggest a different understanding. For Kramer deplors difference.

In part to avoid the necessity of discussing the distinctions within and the particularities of current art practice, in part to align himself with the topography of power under the Ronald Reagan administration, Kramer has devoted his energies these past two years to an attack on those institutions that have allowed the varied voices of experimentation and dissent in this country to be heard. Invoking a never-defined standard of quality, he portrays himself as a champion of true culture unmasking the foolishness and faddishness of a sinister group of critics bent on overthrowing the values of the republic. Much of what he says about the specific instances he isolates of the writing of the unreconstructed left appears to hold true, as would a counterattack listing specific lunacies of the radical right. The point is that Kramer's assault on the left is charged with a heated rhetoric that does little to forward a rational analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of our civilization. It is an assault that claims the privilege of being disinterested, but is driven by a desire to appease the very special interests of the neoconservatives, as they are commonly called.

The workings of Kramer's mind, like those of other fire-eating neoconservatives such as Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and Samuel Lipman, have been dulled by a fierce anticommunism which reduces all opponents to the status of Soviet dupes. The virulent polarization of left and right in the postwar years (which grew out of an earlier American isolationism) and the ensuing rout of the left have given the culture and politics of the American mainstream a one-dimensional quality that baffles most Europeans. We have seen socialist-inspired welfare states develop in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Britain, and West Germany. We have seen socialist governments come and go in these countries. We have even seen the Communist Party participate in the governments of France and Italy and help overthrow a dictatorship in Portugal. We have not seen any of these countries become a Soviet satellite, nor have we seen any of them become an apologist for Soviet policy. What we have seen is that the standard of living for ordinary working people in some of these countries is now higher than in the USA. Nor has the standard of cultural life been diminished; indeed, one might argue that the level of cultural production is higher in

Europe now than it is here. In America, where debate is all too often reduced to a competition of patriotisms, dissent from the wishes of those whose interests are bound up with capital accumulation is simplified into unpatriotic nay-saying, and from there quickly comes to be seen as a species of Soviet propaganda. As a result, progressive ideas often aren't even discussed—they are simply labeled Marxist, for once one's opponents are so labeled they may as well appear in clown suits for all the serious attention they will receive.

Kramer loves to use the Marxist epithet, especially if he can tie it in with the counterculture of the '60s. I don't know what happened to him during that period, but he bears a mighty grudge. I cannot think of any other self-styled critic of culture who uses "wow," "in," "with it," and other such formulations (always set off by quotation marks, of course) with such forced abandon. Maybe he feels he missed out on something then, resents it terribly, and has decided it was all stupid anyway. The mass-cult excesses of the '60s were often stupid (though it is worth remembering that excesses were also provoked by agents of the dominant culture, from Hollywood to the National Guard and Mayor Richard Daley's police). But Kramer refuses to deal seriously with the strength and variety of the intellectual possibilities opened up by black studies, feminism, and structuralism, to name but three products of the age which are far from stupid. An indication of the depth of this refusal can be found in his criticism of professors who teach on the ideas of Jacques Derrida; in an essay attacking the Modern Language Association, and in a subsequent interview, he suggests that reading Derrida is something akin to reading Cliff's Notes, and not nearly as healthy as reading "great books." Surely he could only hold such an oversimplified opinion if he had not read any of Derrida's admittedly difficult works.

Kramer is a lightweight as a critic, but within the confines of the art world his aggressive attempts to mock his ideological opponents, and others whose ill treatment is harder to explain, are stinging and powerful. As the Derrida example perhaps suggests, Kramer is adept at dressing partial information so that it appears to be complete and well-rounded. His favorite tactic is to accumulate, as evidence, a great pile of selected quotations. This accomplishes two things, for by carefully choosing and carefully cropping the remarks he selects for discussion he can reduce the most painstaking of arguments to a simpleminded declaration, and by ranging many such deracinated remarks together he can suggest the flood of barbarity he alone is in a position to stem. It is an old, fairly effective trick of the debating hall: highlight the weaknesses of the opposition (all the while pretending they are precisely its strengths), do all you can to inflate the importance of these features, and then knock them all down with a flourish. The added bonus is that this attention to examples gives the argument the look of scrupulousness, an idea Kramer hopes to foster by his repeated advocacy of "quality" and "standards." What precisely he means by these terms is never made clear—and how could it be? Precision is rarely possible when you are hacking away with a butcher knife.

Much more troubling than the manipulation of fact and information is the increasingly successful attempt by neoconservatives to impose a censorship through the purse strings, to ensure that their opponents cannot afford to speak out against them. Kramer now takes pains to mention just who it is who employs these Marxists he is so busy exposing. He also likes to mention the federal agencies and the foundations that have funded activities he finds unpatriotic. The cooling effect of such tactics cannot be underestimated. People were fired and projects stopped as a result of similar political pressure during the '50s, and it would only take a few more years of Reagan's

strident anticommunism to fire up another period of equally strident intolerance. Indeed, in their direct attacks on the grants procedures of the National Endowment for the Arts, Kramer and his publisher Lipman (who is a member of the Endowment's national advisory board) have already sought to limit the kinds of activities to be funded to those that match their notion of "standards."

Kramer cuts a fairly ridiculous figure as an intellectual, shaped as he is by the simplifying forces of the mass media. But that does not make him any less real as an enemy of progressive culture. At the *Times* he learned to play a few rhetorical tricks, and in the process lost whatever gift he might once have had for articulating complicated ideas. His once-complicated thought has turned Byzantine, and he now writes as though engaged in a tremendous struggle against a great conspiracy of silliness that would keep him out of the mainstream as it kept him out of the good times of the '60s. This is serious, for Kramer is not an embattled outsider, but a privileged, if somewhat marginal, member of the governing elite. The strenuousness with which he attacks his foes is amplified by his proximity to the channels of power, putting him in a position to do real harm. Art needs an atmosphere of tolerance, an openness to the not yet imagined, not yet projected, in order to survive and grow. That such a man as Hilton Kramer has attained the status he has bodes ill for the continued health of art in America.

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