

National Memory, Primitive Emotion and Gender Metaphor: Tracing the Origins of Barnett Newman's Creative Ideology

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Abstract: Barnett Newman returned to the origins of art history and the history of artistic creation. Through expressing the experiences and emotions of the Jewish people, he elucidated the close relationship between his work and post-Holocaust memory, exploring the national narratives and cultural implications inherent in abstract forms. Primitive artistic forms and the experiences of early humans with the external world played a significant role in Newman's creative philosophy, conveying a transcendent perception resonant with primal emotions. Additionally, Newman's works reflect the complexities of gender identity and the conflicting struggles of self-perception and bodily experience. His art holds unique significance and value in challenging conventional perceptions, initiating pluralistic dialogues, and exploring gender metaphors. Centered on Newman's creations and discourse, this study elucidates the sources of his creative philosophy, captures the artist's creative intent, and offers a glimpse into the process by which modern individuals, amid tragic circumstances, seek and construct self-awareness and modern identity.

Keywords: Barnett Newman, Abstract Expressionism, New York School, Modernism, Jewish Culture

1. Introduction

Abstract Expressionist artists expressed their concerns about the identity, spirit, and fate of modern individuals through their creations and participation in artistic movements. Barnett Newman, a key figure among them, regarded the examination of the subject as a pathway to transcendence and the sublime. Grounded in Color-field painting, Newman explored the essence of visual abstraction and the expressions of spirituality, the psyche, and the unconscious. Newman once stated, "It was impossible at that time to paint the kind of painting that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello. ... So that we actually began, so to speak, from scratch, as if painting were not only dead but had never existed." [1] In 1972, Dore Ashton remarked in *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* that Newman's ideas "partook of the submerged American tradition of anarchism that considered the only true grounds for true liberty 'disconnection, disunion, individuality.'" [2] Rejecting the European tradition of imitation, Newman regarded aesthetic experience as a channel to reflect on the operations of consciousness. His work embodies a pursuit of the eternal and the mysterious shared in the collective human perception and experience. Newman's exploration of modern individuals' subjectivity and identity highlights profound anxiety and confusion under the influence of his era. Tracing the origins of Newman's creative philosophy aids in

deepening our understanding of the intent behind modern abstract painting and provides insight into the construction of selfhood and modern identity within contemporary culture.

2. Tracing the Roots of Newman's Artistic Ideology Matrix

2.1. National Memory: Identity Exploration and Historical Echoes

The Holocaust, in which millions of Jews were massacred by the Nazis, remains a foundational narrative of Jewish identity. This atrocity left an indelible mark on Jewish history and had a unique and irreplaceable impact on the Jewish people. The traumatic history of the past imposed an enduring crisis on the Jewish nation, compelling Jewish intellectuals in America to confront their Jewish identity and its distinctiveness. Harold Rosenberg noted that identity is a crucial theme in contemporary Jewish life, and for Jewish artists, it is addressed "in an especially deep and immediate way." [3] This issue, however, is not solely about the Jews; it reflects a universal condition of the 20th century. Identity, as an abstract construct, seeks to rationalize the chaos of individuality and the emergence of specific circumstances into a recognizable entity. Yet, the history of the Holocaust exists beyond the limits of both language and visual representation. Jewish artists had to seek the testimony of this national history and national sentiment, and think about and reconstruct the identity of the self that had always been unclear and difficult to maintain.

At this time, many art critics focused on the work of Jewish artists, discussing the emergence of postwar Jewish cultural phenomena and their contribution to American modernism. In 1966, Harold Rosenberg asked in *Is There a Jewish Art?*, "Is there a Jewish art? First they build a Jewish Museum, then they ask, is there a Jewish art?" [3] Early Jewish abstraction drew from the Second Commandment of Judaism, which prohibits the making of graven images. The turbulent history of the Jewish people heightened their concern with identity. War, genocide, and migration fostered a preference for non-figurative expression, which extended into artistic practice. Clement Greenberg observed: "There is a Jewish bias towards the abstract, the tendency to conceptualize as much as possible, and there is a certain *Schwarmerei*, a state ... at the sensuous and sentimental data which others take for granted." [4] The use of abstraction disrupted the status of traditional narrative art.

Jews' affinity for conceptualization allowed them to carve out a place in the art world. The Jewish experience of displacement and suffering led to a break from traditional norms and constraints in continuity of place and history. Exile and persecution left the Jewish people oscillating between confusion and anxiety, yet also endowed them with wisdom and sensitivity. They preserved the intellectual tradition of Jewish scholars while participating in American modern life. For Barnett Newman, his dual identity as both a Jew and an American informed his work. Newman's paintings represent a crossroads between subjectivity, emotional expression, and modernism. His works serve as intermediaries evoking empathy, providing a referential perspective for the Jewish diaspora in America. Newman's modernist production strategies explore Jewish identity and the concept of place. His use of large-scale color fields to express emotional intensity, vertical lines, and evocative titles conveys resonant meanings and metaphors. These elements construct a system of remembrance and emotional expression for humanity post-catastrophe, encompassing complex cultural, ethnic, and religious content.

Avram Kampf argued: "If there were a Jewish art, Newman's work would be regarded as its most authentic and classic expression." [5] In Newman's creations, the lines that contrast the large color fields with the background colors form an ambiguous expression, and the intuitive compositional logic and the formal object images are erased. His works disrupt the gaze of viewers accustomed to European traditions of representational painting, stripping away familiar references and leaving language and imagery impoverished in the face of chaos, alienation, and disorientation. Newman stated that "the Second World War had revealed the face of terror. For him, what remained was a

specter of tragedy that had to be torn to shreds if life was to flourish once again." [6] His works suggest a grand narrative of Jewish suffering, offering society legitimacy through the universalization of visual abstraction. Faced with the extreme scenes of war, ethically transgressive violence, cultural ruptures, and epistemological anxieties, the Jewish people often turned to religious meaning and generalized religious experiences to address internal loss. Newman's works reveal the coexistence of identity issues and the concept of difference. They further contemplate the finitude of human beings as subjects, ensuring that individuals do not lose themselves amid the uncertainties and instability of existence.

In Newman's "zip" paintings, vertical stripes create a critical point between chaos and order, implying both physical absence and spiritual dislocation. The unity of the subject is weakened, projecting a profound visual and conceptual language. The straightforward imagery of the "zip" serves as both a material channel and a spiritual medium for viewers, transforming a silent and passive other into an object capable of dialogue with the subject. Though seemingly framed by history, society, and national identity, the symbols Newman created metaphorically represent absolute wholeness. They signify continuity and self-sufficiency, enabling viewers to confront emotions of terror and suffering, reflect on their position, and search for meaning. These works transcend Jewish identity, embodying a universal stance that, inspired by a sense of identity and will, seeks to overcome the horror and alienation troubling modern humanity. They metaphorically envision a world that longs for reconstruction.

2.2. Primal Emotions: From Ancient Civilizations to Modern Expression

The primal spiritual impulse, intellectual concepts, and metaphysical understanding form the fundamental experiences of engaging with the external world. Early humans' simple, direct, and more perceptual cognition of the world created a new interpretive framework for the modern era. This framework projects the examination of the self onto the discourse of primitive humanity—a system established and solidified outside the constructs of modern society—aiming for authentic, genuine expression. Individual and collective memories serve as materials for receiving information and forming opinions, shaping visual and cognitive processes themselves. Barnett Newman's treatment of themes such as void, origin, and transcendence reveals his spiritual and primal characteristics. According to Serge Guilbaut, Newman sought to create a space where a new Western subject could emerge, constructed from the juxtaposition of anarchist beliefs and Northwest Coast Indigenous identities, thereby legitimizing his opposition to the social system in which he lived. [7] By exploring the spiritual dimensions of collective memory, Newman believed the symbolic process experienced during perception could reoccur in the spiritual realm, offering modern humanity a way to navigate its existential dilemmas.

Newman frequently visited collections of African, Northwest Coast Indigenous, and pre-Columbian artifacts, as well as archaeological sites of prehistoric Native American mounds in the Southwest and Midwest. He gained significant insights from these ancient artifacts and archaeological discoveries. He also organized exhibitions of Northwest Coast Indian art at Betty Parsons' New Gallery, showcasing the works of Indigenous peoples from the Pacific Northwest of Canada and southern Alaska. Newman argued that understanding primitive art was a prerequisite for appreciating modern art, as the creation and use of abstract symbols were dominant in primitive art. Newman asserted: "The New York art public found that these arts held for them a personal message. They were no longer the historical curiosities of a forgotten people, the crude expression of a primitive, undeveloped people. Rather, they were the sublime creation of highly sophisticated artists with the same doubts, the same wonderings, and the same searching for salvation, that same indomitable courage which activates men of spirit today. Here indeed was the expression and preoccupation with the problems of our own spirit." [6] Michael Leja analyzed Newman's work, stating that Newman

perceived a profound continuity between "modern man" and his so-called cultural ancestors. Both shared an awareness of immense forces and the direct presence of fear. Newman's "zips" evoke the void, symbolizing the primitive fear and helplessness in the face of uncontrollable, ineffable forces—emotions akin to the postwar Jewish struggle with anxiety and uncertainty over identity. Primitive humans faced bewilderment and confusion amidst the complexities of the external world. Their art, like modern art, assumes the primal spiritual impulse as a fundamental function, projecting modern reflections onto temporally and spatially distant "others" to legitimize critiques of social systems while ensuring interpretive safety and feasibility.

While cultural norms shaped human concepts and behavior, modern art is neither a replica nor an imitation of primitive models but creates its own symbols within modern contexts. In *Painting and Prose/Frankenstein*, Newman remarked that the hallmark of modern painting is its focus on its primal function, using painting as a critical tool for human expression. Modern painting transforms primal forces into contemporary language, creating a sensory domain through primitive perception. In the 1946 introduction to the catalog for an exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian art, Newman observed that American abstract artists employed pure formal abstract language infused with thought and emotional content. They did not mimic primitive symbols but were "creating a living myth for us in our own time." [8] Primitive experiences, rooted in pre-industrial societies, reflected closer interactions with nature and more direct contemplation of spiritual forces, profoundly influencing abstract, pure visual language in art. In *The Tiger's Eye* magazine, published by Betty Parsons Gallery in October 1947, Newman's article *The First Man Was an Artist* explored the concept of the "first man." He argued: "The aesthetic act always precedes the social one," arising from humanity's eternal philosophical query: "What?" The artist is a creator and a provider of intellectual discourse, and it is precisely such a wandering identity that Newman has chosen. Similarly, the presentation of Newman's works seems to be peaceful and compassionate, an emotional and empowering relationship. He stripped away the irrelevant themes, did not deliberately show conflicts and oppositions, but instead tried to create a powerful and resonant symbol, aiming to concentrate ideas and meanings, unifying rather than dividing the works, which is a common and universal expression of humanity.

Similarly, Newman's works project a sense of serenity and compassion, embodying an emotional and empowering relationship. He stripped away extraneous themes, avoiding overt conflict or opposition, and instead sought to create resonant, powerful symbols. These symbols unify rather than divide his works, offering a universal, shared human expression. Abstract Expressionism's forms can also be interpreted as grappling with the anxiety of individuality, defining artistic creation as the primal act of the "first man." The muted dark tones, modulated lighter colors, splashes of paint, and marks left by palette knives and masking tape create an emotional field accessible through intuition. They explore human self-reflection and primal intent, revealing abstraction through the interplay of composition and form within the paintings. Newman's series work sought coherence and completeness, resisting viewers' inclination to interpret them as subjective projections intended to provoke. His works serve as liminal spaces that bridge one place or state to another, reaffirming the boundaries and limitations of experience while inviting engagement with the nuances of reason versus irrationality and order versus chaos.

2.3. Gender Metaphors: Social Gender and Cultural Reflections

The rise of fascism and the outbreak of war in the 1930s and beyond brought a wave of European artists to the United States, along with the ideas and practices of European modernism. Meanwhile, the American mainstream sought new forms of art to shape a fresh socio-cultural and ideological image. For artists who had endured the ravages of war, individual experiences heightened their metaphysical focus on identity and emotional experience. They urgently required an implicit means to express their radical politics and personal feelings, conveying anxiety, fear, and fragility.

Concurrently, the development and self-renewal of modern art propelled artistic forms toward abstraction, allowing attitudes and emotions to be communicated through universally non-traditional and non-representational methods.

In postwar American painting, discourse surrounding Jewish masculinity was fraught with anxiety, fear, and prejudice. During Clement Greenberg's critical practice, Abstract Expressionism evolved into an aesthetic concept imbued with whiteness, nationalism, and masculinity, articulating a universal and transhistorical concept of the body. Barnett Newman, by dissolving conflicts arising from gender opposition, emphasized structural form and rational order, expressing an unconscious force, passion, and uncompromising individuality that bore traditional masculine traits. Newman's "zip" is a representative symbol of this force. Faced with a divided and conflicted self, Jewish studies scholar Paula Hyman observed: "Struggling to gain respect and power for themselves as men in a far from open larger society, male Jews defined an identity that not only distinguished them from women but also displaced their own anxieties upon women." [9] This anxiety and uncertainty about violent, irrational, and potentially uncontrollable unconscious male impulses needed to be addressed and resolved by the rational, conscious aspect of traditional masculinity. Newman, however, appeared to reject the traditional binary view of gender. He positioned himself in an ambiguous historical stance, using the deformed symbols of a torn, castrated, and alienated body to present a unified masculine discipline. As Stuart Preston of *The New York Times* suggested, Newman intentionally limited the emotional investment of self in his paintings, consciously using rationality as a tool to convey a more profound and convincing contemplation. Nevertheless, Newman's inner conflict in confronting his body and self made his works visually compelling, challenging human perceptions to their limits. Newman's transcendent symbols and their references to specific bodies can evoke anxiety and fear. Some scholars interpret them as reflective of historical prejudices and satirical critiques of Jewish men during that period, linked to Jewish customs such as circumcision. In American society, circumcision was often perceived as a distinctively Jewish practice, laden with metaphors of severance and separation, inscribing Jewish male bodies with notions of incompleteness, deformity, and feminization. Eric Kline Silverman noted: "While biblical circumcision surely celebrates male procreation, the ritual also asserts the primacy of the female body, and thereby dramatizes the paradox of biblical, and subsequent Jewish, manhood." [10] Through symbolic transformations of the alien body, Newman revealed the complex implications of gender identity in society. He expressed the contradictions and struggles of self-perception and bodily experience, embedding rationality, order, and precision in his work. These elements not only enhanced the depth and persuasiveness of his art but also guided viewers to examine gender issues from a more objective and detached perspective. Newman's reference to Jewish customs like circumcision, while potentially bearing historical bias and irony, also reflected his attention to identity and cultural traditions within specific groups. This engagement was not a simplistic critique or negation but an artistic exploration of the complex emotions and profound meanings embedded within.

Michael Leja argued that Newman's works lacked an overtly contradictory or unstable Abstract Expressionist creative process, nor did they disrupt rational logic, which hindered their ability to effectively evoke metaphors of self or identity, creating difficulties in interpretation. Conversely, Serge Guilbaut highlighted the tension between gender attributes in Newman's creations—the interplay of masculinity and femininity. He noted: "Domination is what Newman was against, but he was not against power per se. Through the verticality of the bar, he hoped to empower 'Man' to stand up. These paintings were successful in producing a picture able to speak directly to the spectator without the help of a third person, and successful also in giving, as Barnett Newman said, a 'place to the beholder.'" [7] Newman aspired for his paintings and sculptures to serve as landmarks, enabling viewers to locate themselves through his work. In this sense, Newman's art reflected the complexity of gender identity. Through his artistic creations, he sought to transcend traditional gender roles,

imparting new meanings to "humanity." Newman's art was not merely an exploration of color and form but a profound reflection on the human condition. His works challenged traditional perceptions of gender, power, and identity, inviting viewers to engage in a more open and pluralistic dialogue. Newman's artistic practice thus became an exploration of gender metaphors, transcending simplistic binary oppositions and touching upon broader human experiences.

3. Conclusion

In front of modern audiences, artists must navigate a range of cultural, institutional, political, and social intermediary symbols to construct a shared identity that transcends definitions of race, class, and gender. Modern abstract painting responds to this intermediary state, addressing the physical and psychological trauma encountered, incorporating it into the creative process, and assigning it a specific place within artistic understanding. The audience also becomes part of this construction of modern memory, evoking a cycle of retraumatization. The sources of Newman's creative philosophy reflect his attention to questions of nationality and identity, as well as his interest in primitive art.

The experiences of the Jewish people and the elements of religious mythology have created a resonant echo of trauma within human history and memory. In the visual rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, Newman offers a redemptive artistic approach to confronting suffering, confusion, and inner alienation. He constructs a highly reconciled metaphorical and symbolic system of post-Holocaust memory that is both a metaphysical exploration of religiosity and spirituality and a compelling interpretation detached from pure form and an illusory world. Through his works and discourse, Newman reveals the traumatic history of the Jewish people, the tragic and terrifying experiences of primitive humans, and the possible existence of creation myth elements. Ancient art shares the same instinctive and aspirational expressions as modern art. By showcasing primitiveness and the unconscious, Newman demonstrates the development of modern discourse and the construction of richly meaningful subjectivity. At the same time, the representation of Jewish masculinity in postwar American painting exhibits multifaceted complexity. Newman's works transcend traditional gender divisions, using alien symbols to explore new understandings of masculinity, introducing rational elements to stimulate reflections on gender. His creations also highlight the controversies surrounding gender anxieties and cultural customs involved in the construction of male identity. Overall, Newman's artistic practice surpasses simple binary oppositions of gender, offering a profound exploration of gender metaphors that engages with broader human experiences. His works reflect the complexity and plurality of gender identity, establishing themselves as a significant contribution to the modern discourse on identity, trauma, and the universality of the human condition.

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