

A Tale of Two Criticisms

Modern art criticism is twice born, having been shaped by the mutual influence of two opposed yet interwoven critical traditions. One lineage is that of Enlightenment criticism, instigated when a certain Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne arrogated himself the right to judge the French Salon in the name of the Public with his 1747 pamphlet *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France*.¹ The other is that of Romantic criticism, for which we do not have quite such a clear and convenient beginning. What Romantic criticism is, or could be, is scattered across the early writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and others in their circle, around 1800.

The different natures of these beginnings, their differing degrees of publicness, are themselves significant. In La Font's time, the idea of a general public for which, and in whose name, one writes was still new and subversive. To claim that one had the right to judge the productions of French painters was an attack on the absolutist state and its king (an academy patron); to find the art sponsored by him severely wanting was also to suggest, however implicitly, that the system that produced such art was lacking. Soon, Johann Joachim Winckelmann would draw complex analogies between the nature of Greek art and the political freedom enjoyed by the classical Athenians; such reasoning was by no means uncommon. Small wonder that Denis Diderot, who would become the most important Enlightenment critic of art, published his Salon reviews not in print, but in the hand-copied *Correspondance littéraire*, which was sent to select subscribers or "correspondents."

Enlightenment criticism passed judgments in the name of a public that it had to posit, or forge, in the first place,

and such judgment had a moral dimension that was not always implicit: Diderot attacked François Boucher as a man whose conception of art could be only lowly, his imagination having been dragged down by the cheap prostitutes in whose company he spent his time.² Romantic criticism radically reconceptualized the work of art. Far from having to obey “eternal” rules posited by the critic in the name of the public—rules that regulate the representation of suitable subjects in a manner that is morally edifying and ennobling—the work of art is now seen as establishing its own shaky rules, which the critic tries to reconstruct. In Jacques Rancière’s words, the era of early Romanticism marks the moment when the work of art comes to be seen as an “object of thought”—not merely in the passive sense, but as an object that is itself a manifestation of mute thinking, of intuitive theory. Positing an incommensurable rationale of its own accord, the work of art confronts the viewer with a tangled knot of reason and its other, of *logos* with *mythos*.³ This means that the relationship between the critic and the work is stood on its head: struggling to do justice to the work of art, which, if successful, is a law unto itself, the Romantic critic himself becomes the object of an implicit judgment by the work of art. Will he (at first, the critic was, of course, almost always a “he”) do justice to its inner workings, or fail the test and have recourse to irrelevant criteria? While the risk of failure is thus a very real one, the Romantic critic also aims higher than his Enlightenment counterpart: at its most ambitious, Romantic criticism not only sought to do justice to the work of art’s inner workings, but also to raise its idiosyncratic logic to a plane of greater self-awareness.

In his famous dissertation on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920), Walter Benjamin argued that the task of art criticism as conceived by the

early German Romantics is to elevate the work of art to a higher plane of reflection; Friedrich Schlegel referred to his own essay on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the *Übermeister*.⁴ Yet we are not dealing with a linear Hegelian process in which the obtuse manifestations of Spirit in the work of art are liberated from their sensuous shackling by being raised to the sphere of pure reason; instead, we are dealing with an ironic, endless dialectic—an endless series of reflections. This is criticism as critique: “‘Criticism’, in its Enlightenment sense, consists in recounting to someone what is awry with their situation, from an external, perhaps ‘transcendental’ vantage-point. ‘Critique’ is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from the inside, in order to elicit those ‘valid’ features of that experience which point beyond the subject’s present condition.”⁵

A crucial example of the Romantic criticism of visual art is Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim’s 1810 text on Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea*, *Verschiedene Empfindungen vor einer Seelandschaft von Friedrich, worauf ein Kapuziner*, which takes the theatrical form of a series of written sketches of scenes in which visitors to an exhibition comment on the work in ways that, above all, emphasize their education and worldly preoccupations—and say preciously little about the work, except for the myriad of different approaches it seems to generate and to frustrate.⁶ When Heinrich von Kleist radically reworked the text’s introduction for his newspaper *Berliner Abendblätter*, he wrote that looking at the painting, with its unprecedented emptiness and *Uferlosigkeit* (unboundedness), made him feel like his eyelids had been cut off.⁷ While this might suggest the possibility that the painting is at fault—that the artist has pushed things too far, beyond the bounds of what can be called art—it is telling that Kleist, like Brentano

and von Arnim, resisted the temptation to jump to conclusions. After all, a painting's apparent deficiencies may be unknown qualities, and the critic needs to be on his guard.

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These two opposing concepts and practices of art criticism (for in each case we are dealing with a concept that is put into practice, or a practice that generates a concept) have largely dominated art criticism for more than two centuries. This is not to deny many crucial changes that have taken place. In fact, understanding modern art criticism in terms of a dialectic of Enlightenment and Romantic criticism can benefit the analysis of such transformations—and enable us to see some aspects of the contemporary situation with greater clarity.

One crucial transformation of Romantic criticism was its historicization and politicization. Romantic criticism was always latently historical; after all, the modern art is a problematical object of thought precisely because modern art has lost its self-evident, conventional status. However, in the later 1920s Walter Benjamin concluded that Romantic critique had given way to a reductivist and ahistorical form of “immanent” criticism, and in order to counter this he proposed a Marxist notion of strategic criticism. This dialectical criticism shares with the immanent approach “the refusal to judge work according to given criteria,” since “there is no position from outside the work from which the critic may judge it,” as Howard Caygill put it. “The critic must find the moments of externality within the work—those moments where it exceeds itself, where it abuts on experience—and to use them as the basis for discriminative judgment. Strategic critique moves between the work and its own externality, situating the work in the context of experience, and being in

its turn situated by it.”⁸ Radicalizing romantic criticism, this kind of dialectical critique sees the work of art as incomplete insofar as it can never fully resolve the historical contradictions it articulates more or less successfully.

It is worth recalling that Clement Greenberg's art criticism emerged in the context of the Marxist critical project that was the Partisan review of the late 1930s. However, in Greenberg's case the project of thinking through art's contradictions under industrial capitalism soon morphed into something else—into the justification of one kind of modern art as superior. In concluding his 1940s essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Greenberg stated:

*I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art. To argue from any other basis would require more space than is at my disposal, and would involve an entrance into the politics of taste—to use Venturi's phrase—from which there is no exit—on paper. My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid ones through eternity. They are simply the most valid ones at this given moment.*⁹

The tensions running through this dense passage would never be resolved by Greenberg; if anything, the circularity of his reasoning became ever more pronounced. On the one hand, he deferred to History—to a reductivist, closed version of the historical dialectic. On the other hand, his specific value judgments were increasingly justified with summary references to his superior eye, his experience; supposedly the outcome of the same historical process that created the art he judged, Greenberg's personal taste was thus supposedly attuned to history and to art, and in that sense immanent. However, in the course of the 1960s, as Greenberg

increasingly rejected much of the more interesting new art, Greenberg came to look more and more like an old Enlightenment critic, passing judgment in the name of laws that had little to do with the art. In the early 1960s, Greenberg's historical model had appealed to young critics, many of whom wrote for *Artforum*, but by the end of the decade the more ambitious of these critics saw the limitations of Greenbergian formalism quite clearly. Rosalind Krauss documented this process in a number of texts, including "A View of Modernism" in the September 1972 issue of *Artforum*.

Greenberg was frustrated by development that art criticism took in 1970s and 1980s; he faulted critics for replacing the question "Is it good?" with the more neutral one of "what does it mean?"¹⁰ Of course, Greenberg had extremely limited definitions of both "quality" and "meaning"; whereas for Greenberg these are different, the younger critics followed Benjamin in practicing a form of criticism that sought to judge not *ex cathedra*, but by thinking through a work's inner logic in its historical context, and if necessary beyond its limitations. The journal *October*, founded in 1976, was the most important medium for this project; its title signaled a return to an avant-garde model that has first been obscured by Greenbergian Modernism, and that faced further threats from the market-driven pluralism that emerged in the 1970s, leading critics such as Rosalind Krauss to abandon *Artforum* in favor of a project dedicated to a new version of "strategic criticism"—one dedicated to Benjaminian "discriminative judgments" rather than Greenberg-style pronouncements on "great art" and "minor art."

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October's historiographical and theoretical achievements can hardly be overstated, but how successful was

this project as strategic, dialectical criticism? After all, such criticism does not conceive of itself as existing in a vacuum; it is part of the historical process. In the case of *October*, the journal's revolutionary (Eisensteinian) title sits in an odd contrast with its status as an academic journal. If strategic criticism survived in *October*, it is perhaps largely as a potentiality rather than as an actuality.

Meanwhile, most art magazines publish a debased version of Romantic critique. The Romantic "completion" of the work of art is turned into a theoretical virtuoso performance that above all seems to aim at strengthening the author's position on the market. The specialist criticism published in magazines and catalogues functions as market-driven romanticism that uses infinite reflection to avoid arriving at some sort of judgment; it finds its counterpart in the increasingly beleaguered reviews in newspapers and other mass media, which often amount to a debased Enlightenment criticism that offers judgments without reflection. When art magazines publish top tens and "best of" lists, it would appear that what matters is less what is being said, and more that something (of whatever nature) is being said about a certain artist or show—by a certain critic or curator. And is the same not true of newspapers? While the space allotted to reviews has been decreasing over the past ten to fifteen years, papers have increasingly taken to "translating" the content of a review into three or four out of five stars and publishing lists of "shows worth seeing." In the latter case in particular, judgment has been reduced to the mere act of mentioning.¹¹

One might conclude, as Boris Groys has done, that "yes/no" or "plus/minus" judgments are anachronistic and ineffective.¹² The only form of judgment that still functions, Groys argues, is "one/zero" criticism; the judgment lies in the decision to write about an artist or show, or not.

In a way, this has been the *modus operandi* of Romantic criticism all along; after all, all only a good work of art demands and deserves textual “completion.” But one/zero criticism is hardly the triumph of Romanticism; if anything, it signifies the entropic collapse of both historical models. In Romantic criticism, the one/zero form of critical judgment was largely a side effect; what really mattered was to engage with those works that seemed to demand it. Now, however, the one/zero judgment has moved from the margin to the center, in the process not only transforming Romantic criticism, but also Enlightenment criticism: critics may still pass yes/no judgments, but these could now be seen as surface phenomena that distract the attention from the real judgment. The “no” of every negative review is negated by the fact that the review was published at all—by the fact that it is a “one.”¹³

To observe the features of the current textual landscape is a beginning, but it is not enough. That all forces seem to be aligned in favour of this form of criticism does not mean, as Groys seems to suggest, that there is no room for interventions in this critical regime. A fundamental problem of the current form of one/zero criticism is that its judgments remain implicit and thereby unquestionable. Surely it is an impoverishment of discourse if nobody is prepared to criticize an artist or project outright and put their own criteria to the test—to risk opening ourselves up to the criticism that we have not been attentive enough to an artwork’s complex logic, that we might have failed dismally to produce an *Übermeister*. However, I would argue that to continue the inherent and implicit work of reflection in a critical text is also to be attuned to the work’s contradictions and aporias, which may be more or less serious and detrimental to this work’s success. To practice “completionist” criticism, then, does not preclude value judgments, but these will be rather

different from those of Enlightenment criticism with its apparently fixed criteria. Especially in its historicized and politicized form, as Benjaminian strategic criticism, the practice of Romantic critique does indeed arrive at judgments—but these spring from taking the work of art’s logic (faulty as it may be) to a point where it goes beyond and against the work’s limitations, where it is confronted with other logics operating in its cultural and historical context.

Following Andrea Fraser’s suggestion that art criticism should be practiced as a site-specific activity, it seems to me that part of the job for a critic writing for art-world publications that tend to neutralize debate (magazines, catalogues) is to try and push reflection to the point of site specificity.¹⁴ This can also mean writing about artists one has serious doubts about—even if it may contribute to their status and increase their symbolic capital. This is a price that has to be paid for breaking the deafening silence. If writing in art magazines and catalogues needs to push reflection to the point where its interpretations become discriminative judgments, other forms of criticism need more reflection on the *a priori*s and aporias of evaluating art. It is probably too late in the day to worry about traditional newspaper criticism; more relevant is the Web, in particular, blogs. Here, site-specific criticism would mean capitalizing on the informality of the Web in a way that goes beyond proud displays of personal preferences. Media that are not traditional platforms for criticism of visual art can also be fruitful, and in establishing connections between different media, site-specific criticism may become truly strategic. Turning against the limitations of the media in question, such criticism may momentarily open up spaces for partisan reflection amidst the ones and zeros.

1. On La Font, see Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 7–11.
2. “Et que peut avoir dans l’imagination un homme qui passé sa vie avec les prostituées du plus bas étage?” Denis Diderot, “Salon de 1765,” *Salons*, vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 75.
3. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris, La Fabrique, 1998), 30–40.
4. Walter Benjamin, “Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik” (1919/1920), in Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., *Gesammelte Schriften I.1: Abhandlungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 67.
5. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), xiv. The distinction between criticism and critique is specific to the English language; German, for instance, knows only *Kritik*.
6. See the published version, with Heinrich von Kleist’s editorial changes, “Verschiedene Empfindungen vor einer Seelandschaft von Friedrich, worauf ein Kapuziner” (1810), at http://wendelberger.com/downloads/Kleist_Seelandschaft.pdf.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 62–3. Benjamin’s “Programm der literarischen kritik” (1929–30) is in: Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., *Gesammelte Schriften VI: Fragmente, autobiografische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 161–7. I am indebted to Esther Lieslie for pointing me towards this text.
9. Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), in John O’Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1940* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 37.

10. Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 237.
11. This development has been pronounced in the case of the so-called “quality newspapers” in the Netherlands and much less so in, for instance, Germany.
12. Groys recalls that, when he was writing for a newspaper, he “very quickly understood that people reacted only to the fact that I had written a text, that this text was published in the newspaper, had a certain length, was illustrated or not, and was or was not run on the front page of the *feuilleton* section. They absolutely didn’t react to what I wrote, be it description or evaluation, and they absolutely couldn’t distinguish between positive and negative evaluation.... I understood immediately that the code of contemporary criticism is not plus or minus; I would say it’s a digital code: zero or one, mentioned or not mentioned. And that presupposes a completely different strategy, and a different politics.” “Who Do You Think You’re Talking to? Boris Groys in Conversation with Brian Dillon,” *frieze* no. 121 (March 2009), 126–31.
13. Confusion over this issue abounds. Recently, an artist whose work I had dared to criticize in print sent an irate letter to the editor of the magazine in question, complaining that my remarks would undermine the market for his work in the US. I highly doubt that any negative judgment in the text would outweigh the effect, such as it is, of writing and publishing the text in the first place.
14. Buchloh, Benjamin, Hal Foster, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Rosalind Krauss, et al. “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism.” *October* no. 100 (spring 2002), 223.