



A Fertile Ambiguity: The Case of Art Criticism

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Abstract

Whether approaching dawn or twilight, current art criticism is in a phase of profound change, generating many questions about its multidisciplinary essence. By confronting past and present Western writings about art criticism from philosophers, art historians, art sociologists, and artists from the 18th to the 21st century, this article gives a general overview of the various definitions of art criticism for students or lecturers unfamiliar with the subject. By examining the discrepancies and similarities between different theories, the aim of this article is to compare the various historical origins of art criticism and to highlight questions concerning the philosophy and methodology of art critics, so that we may examine the present and future relevance of art criticism in the art world.

1. Introduction

Jean-Baptiste Dubos, Jonathan Richardson, Denis Diderot, John Ruskin, Charles Baudelaire, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Michael Fried, Barbara Rose, Lucy R. Lippard, and Roberta Smith... by no means exhaustive, this list evokes famous and respected Western art critics from the 18th to the 21st century. The “death of art” has been announced many times by Hegel, Adorno, or more recently by Donald Kuspit, and in his book, Hans Belting raises the question of the end of art history. Logically, Michael Kaiser took the next step in his 2011 article published in *The Huffington Post*, titled “The Death of Criticism or Everyone Is a Critic.” Nowadays, voices are emerging regretting the loss of the importance and relevance of art criticism. One such voice is Jerry Saltz, who affirms that “at no time in the last fifty years has what an art critic writes had less effect on the market than now” (as quoted by Frost, 2019, p. 3). Sharing this idea, Gérard-Georges Lemaire states that art criticism “survives to this day, but sees its role diminished, torn between journalism and poetry. It has lost its prestige and scope for action. Critics are replaced by curators or by theorists who claim to miss this sphere of aesthetics. One could say that the art criticism of which we have witnessed the evolution since Denis Diderot's time no longer exists, or if it still exists, then it is merely a shadow of its former self” (Lemaire, 2018, p. 22, author's translation). Nevertheless, this judgment is not unanimous. Other academics rejoice in this situation, such as the philosopher Fabrice Midal, who reminds us that Rainer Maria Rilke already warned us in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Read as little as possible of literary criticism. Such things are either partisan opinions, which have become petrified and meaningless, hardened and empty of life, or else they are clever word games, in which today one view wins, and tomorrow the opposite does” (as quoted by Midal, 2007, p.18, author's translation). Following Rilke's thoughts, Midal's words are even harsher, claiming, “I have momentarily forgotten [Rilke's] wise advice and paid for my mistake through some hours of insipid reading that have eaten away the few salutary resources in me. But I have recovered from it” (2007, p.18, author's translation).

Given this complicated situation, how can we analyze or compare the ins and outs of art criticism writing about modern and contemporary art? Is it conceivable to have one indivisible art criticism methodology? Or is a plurality of methodological approaches more advantageous? In order to have a better understanding of this topic, this article—

which emerged from comparative and qualitative research carried out in France of four 19th and 20th century art critics¹—will insist on articulating what characterizes art criticism, particularly examining the thoughts of Jean Dolent, an art critic well known in his lifetime but, nowadays, known to only a few researchers. Nevertheless, a multitude of other references will also be considered to broaden the debate on more contemporary horizons, mainly using scholarly research of the topic. By confronting past and present Western writings from art critics, philosophers, art historians, art sociologists, and artists, the purpose of this article is to give an overview of the origin, characteristics, and evolution of art criticism to enable us to examine its present and future relevance.

In the first part of this article, I will examine the different possible definitions of art criticism, writings about art criticism, and the relationship between art criticism, art history and other fields, while highlighting discrepancies on the topic. In the second part, I will focus on a historical approach, specifically probing the plural histories of art criticism by establishing a comparative study of its origins. Later, I will highlight questions concerning the philosophy and methodology of art critics, and the issues that arise from these topics.

2. Criticism and Art Critics: The Problem of Explanation

2.1 Art criticism defined

In her book *Seven Days in the Art World*, cultural sociologist Sarah Thornton features an interview with Peter Schjeldahl, chief art critic for *The New Yorker*, in which he explains that the purpose of art criticism is “to give people something to read” (Thornton, 2008, p. 157). Even though art criticism is, for Ralph A. Smith, “unquestionably one of the most troublesome terms encountered in discourse about art” (Smith, 1966, p. 299), this field is mainly accepted as consisting of any writings about artworks, because, as highlights Dore Ashton, “someone who can talk about can also, if he is endowed with that impulse, write about” (as quoted by Houston, 2013, p. 3). Facing the confusion that can sometimes exist in defining art criticism, it is appropriate to begin simply by

¹ “Comparative Study of Four Figures of the French Art Scene in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries in France: Jean Dolent, Gabriel Séailles, Roger Marx and Félix Vallotton”, Faculty of Fine arts, Chiang Mai University, 2015.

accepting that, for the most part, and despite the evolution of print and digital media, one experiences art criticism through the act of reading. American aesthete Morris Weitz (1916-1981) presents art criticism as “a form of studied discourse about works of art.... designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art” (Weitz, 1964, p. vii). These keywords are also echoed by Edmund Burke Feldman, who states, “the chief goal of art criticism is understanding. We need a way of looking at art objects that will yield a maximum of insight into their meanings and merits” (Feldman, 1992, p. 469). According to art historian James Elkins, “art criticism can be provisionally defined as writing that evaluates art” (Elkins, 1996). Although generic, comments from Weitz, Feldman, and Elkins enable us to better discern two objectives of art criticism : namely, the *understanding* and *evaluation* of works of art. In the 2014 *Dictionnaire de la critique d'art à Paris (1890-1969)* [*Dictionary of Art Criticism in Paris (1890-1969)*], Claude Schvalberg uses Albert Desdner’s 1915 definition of art criticism: “I mean by art criticism the autonomous literary genre whose object it is to examine, evaluate and influence contemporary art” (Schvalberg, 2014, p. 17). If the first two terms, *understand* and *evaluate*, follow the thoughts of Weitz, Feldman, and Elkins, the use of *influence* denotes a precise objective of the art criticism which is enunciated by Baudelaire or Schjeldahl: Art criticism is not neutral but passionate and partisan. By incorporating this element of *influence*, we also better understand the regrets of Jerry Saltz in his commentary cited above. Art criticism has the ability to educate viewers by introducing the aesthetic question of “taste” and by revealing what is good and what is not. However, this very ability raises another question: The word *influence*, which can carry a negative connotation, makes one wonder what powers this might imply from the standpoint of elitism or manipulation of a consumer market. This ambiguity introduces an ethics to the role of the art critic in relation to the art market, collectors, and artists. To illustrate this point, Schjeldahl, in a 1994 article for *Artforum*, used atypical images to depict the nature of criticism: “A critic who feels no anguish in relating to artists is a prostitute. A critic who never relates to artists, fearing contamination, is a virgin. Neither knows a thing about love” (Schjeldahl, 1994, p. 6). This remark is meaningful because it notes where the art critic must stand in relation to the world of art and artists, and follows an established sociological argument, setting a standard perspective in which the art critic must be a sort of tightrope walker—somewhere between “prostitute” and “virgin.”

2.2 The diversity of art criticism writings

To study art criticism, art historian Dario Gamboni, “analyze[d] the structure and the evolution of the ‘fields of art criticism’ in France at the end of the nineteenth century with the help of a tripolar scheme defining antagonistic conceptions of art criticism associated with the divergent social types of authors, publications and publics” (Gamboni, 1993, p. 38). Gamboni then continues his argument using the research of Catherine Lepdor, based on a synchronic study of the modes of describing artworks in France in the late 19th century. To the first two poles found by Lepdor—*scientific* and *literary*—a third one was added by Gamboni, a *journalistic* pole, developed especially in daily newspapers by professional journalists (Gamboni, 1991, p. 10). Similar to Gamboni, Elkins evokes writing and its legitimacy to question the nature and fields concerned by criticism. In the chapter “On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism” from his 2008 book *The State of Art Criticism*, Elkins summarizes his own classification of art criticism—which he had previously theorized in his 2003 book *What happened to art criticism?*—as a hydra, fitted with the traditional seven heads, representing the current art criticism fields: catalog essay, academic treatise, cultural criticism, conservative harangue, philosopher’s essay, descriptive art criticism, and poetic art criticism (Elkins, 2008, p. 80). This is not to say that James Elkins’s hydra metaphor is narrow-minded. On the contrary, in his explanation Elkins perceives that “the seven heads swerve and blur together, and sometimes it seems there are many more, or else just one conglomerate Babel” (Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 80).

To art historian Michael Orwicz, what constitutes art criticism writing is even more open, as he includes “exhibition reviews, catalogue entries, articles, essays, monographs, historical studies, dictionary entries, museum guides, travel accounts, caricatures, poetry, biography, fiction, and personal correspondence, all of which draw, to varying degrees, on the disciplines of aesthetics, art theory, art history, philosophy and literature” (Orwicz, 2014, p. 200).

As can be seen in the cases of Elkins and Orwicz, art criticism is not influenced by the genre of a writing, but more generally encompasses any possible form of writing. Nevertheless, this vision is not widely shared.

2.3 Ambiguity of art criticism, art history, and other fields

In his 1991 article, Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine borrows André Richard's definition of art criticism, "the system of judgment to the artworks, the rules...by reference to which one affirms the aesthetic judgment," considering that within such a definition is "poorly understood, in these circumstances, the difference between art criticism and aesthetics, history of art, and with all types of reflection on art" (Leduc-Adine, 1991, p. 93, author, Trans.). Leduc-Adine here emphasizes an important point: If the definitions or standards used are insufficient or different, then how is it possible to establish distinctions between the various writings in the field of art (aesthetics, art theory, art criticism, and art history)? According to him, it is important not to amalgamate different types of writings because each discipline retains its own identity. In his 1956 article "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," Weitz believes that each of the theories of art—formalism, voluntarism, emotionalism, intellectualism, intuitionism, organicism—failed to settle a definition of the nature of art (Weitz, 1956, p. 27). Should we then think that aiming to reach a widely-accepted definition of art criticism is impossible? Perhaps. As an example of these different ideas, let us consider the view of Orwicz, who considers that art criticism is understood by scholars as "simply an evaluation of visual art [that] can also denote any commentary on a work of art, contemporary or past" (Orwicz, 2014, p. 200). Opposing this idea of time frame, Eleni Gemtou, who specializes in art history and its relationship to the sciences, uses the issue of time to establish the basic difference between art history and art criticism:

[It] concerns not only the recentness of their objects, but also their objectives: the art historian studies the works of the past and, by using hermeneutical methods constructs systems on a historical and theoretical base, while the art critic is interested in contemporary art, which he analyses and interprets with the aim of evaluating it critically. In this sense the work of the art critic functions as an important tool and a basic substructure for future historians.

(Gemtou, 2010, p. 2)

This point seems essential since it places the art critic in the contemporary world and leaves the past to the art historians. The French art historian Charles-Philippe de Chennevières-Pointel in *Lettres sur l'art français en 1850* (*Letters on French Art in 1850*) revealed the dichotomy that specialists were trying to establish between the approaches of art criticism and art history. He defines critical journalists as "judges of contemporary art" and the objects of criticism as "painters and sculptors with whom one rubs shoulders every day, like living masters. He contrasts the amateurs of ancient paintings, of old prints of great masters, of masters of the past, with the amateurs of exhibition by living artists" (Leduc-Adine, 1991, p. 94). This idea of temporality is also shared by Leduc-Adine (1934-2015), who explains that *art criticism* is

an art history shorn of history, that is to say, with no real expansion in the past; critical judgment, which is also a foundation of the history of art, is in this case only about a very restricted synchronicity, say, taking into account in most cases, the artistic production of the year, that presented at the Salon. The content criteria that separate the history of the art from the "art critic" are indeed based on their temporal affiliation: historicity vs contemporaneity.

(Leduc-Adine, 1991, p. 94, author, Trans.)

This extract from Leduc-Adine once again highlights disagreements between scholars when defining art criticism. Nevertheless, to differentiate the disciplines of art history and art criticism in this way should not suggest that they are two sides of a coin that can never be united. Elkins cites a strange but relevant example in Michael Fried's introduction of *Art and Objecthood* in which Fried states that "he works both as a critic and an historian, and the place where the two practices meet is sometime in the early 1960s: when he writes about art before then, it appears as art history, and when he writes about more recent art, it's art criticism" (Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 139). Elkins shows another opinion of these when he defines two fundamentally antithetical usages of art criticism: "on the one hand, art criticism is understood as an historical practice,

embracing writers from Pliny or Vasari to the present; and on the other, it is taken to be a way of writing that is potentially independent from historical conditions” (Elkins, 1996). Based on various ideas, aesthetician Weitz and art historians Elkins, Gemtoux, and Orwicz share different thoughts that are more complementary than conflicting. Nevertheless, the diversity of approaches tends to complicate the readability of a definition of art criticism. This situation is not a surprise, because in his reference books *Criticizing Art, Understanding the Contemporary* (2007) and *Why is that art? Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art* (1999), Terry Barrett insists on the fact that “there is no reliable history of art criticism and no universally accepted definition of it. Some scholars of art explicitly conflate art history and art criticism, allowing no differences between the two, while others believe that art criticism subsumes art history” (Barrett, 1999, p. 13). If it is difficult to determine a definition of art criticism that is unanimously accepted, a view of the origins of art criticism may help develop a better understanding of it.

3. The Uncertain Origins of Art Criticism and its Histories

Lawrence Alloway defines art criticism as “a genre of writing that may not yet have a methodology, but it does have a history” (as quoted by Bradnock et al., 2015, p. 128). Undoubtedly it is more judicious here—as Elkins proposed for his *Stories of Art*, in allusion to *The Story of Art* of Ernst Gombrich—to think of this history of art criticism as plural. Indeed, whoever may be interested in this subject, scholars or not, will face many challenges in coming to a single history of art criticism because, as the German historian and art critic Albert Dresdner (1866-1934) considers, art criticism is “in a border area between science and art, between art and literature, between history and theory of art” (Bartha-Kovács, 2012, p. 82). Unsurprisingly following this thought, Kerr Houston writes that “the history of art criticism can be told in various ways, depending on the criteria we employ” (Houston, 2013, p. 24). According to Elkins, who shares Houston’s idea, “there is no reliable history or philosophy of art criticism, and virtually no literature on its concept or nature” (Elkins, 1996). If there is no overall agreement, what hypotheses have scholars put forth about the origins of art criticism?

The two seminal books on the history of art criticism, *Dizionario della critica d'arte* [*Dictionary of Art Criticism*] by Luigi Grassi and Mario Pepe and *History of Art*

Criticism (1936) by Lionello Venturi, are representative of a tendency to “make no distinctions between art history and art criticism and few between art history, art criticism, and philosophical writing about art” (Barrett, 1999, p. 14). Following their ideas, “Grassi and Pepe begin their history with Plato, and Venturi begins his history two centuries later... with Xenocrates” (Barrett, 1999, p. 14). Those starting points were not haphazard but were carefully chosen. Venturi's *History of Art Criticism* calls the distinction between art history and criticism a “grave error,” and explains that “if a fact referred to is not considered as a function of judgment, it is perfectly useless” (as quoted in Elkins, 1996). At the beginning of his article “The Concentric Critique: Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* and the Paradigm of Style in Croce and Vossler,” Ricardo De Mambro Santos recalls Venturi's introduction to his *History of Art Criticism* in which he refers to the work of Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur* (1924):

Taken as a catalogue raisonné of written sources of art history from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century one could not have expected anything better. One can find in it very good yet fragmentary insights and judgments pertaining to the sphere of art criticism, due to the fact that the author was more interested in the historical data than in the critical values.

(De Mambro Santos, 2009, p. 1)

Similarly, Luigi Grassi and Mario Pepe's *Dizionario della critica d'arte* contains a brief entry on art criticism, noting that it is inseparable from historical writing (as quoted in Elkins, 1996). As an example of another classification, but still with the same idea, Pierre-Henry Frangne lists four types of criticism: “The interpretative and philosophical criticism...from German Romanticism.... The historical criticism which has existed since Vasari and which is found in German Romanticism.... The criticism of taste as it unfolds since Diderot and as it was theorized by David Hume...[and] the criticism...of tradesmen, that is to say artists who from within their activities seek rules that are rules of manufacture or theorists who seek to produce a poetic” (Daniellou & Naessens, 2015, p. 10). In contrast to Frangne, Grassi, Pepe, and Venturi, French philosopher Jacques Darrulat

highlights the idea that “in Antiquity the discourse on art is mostly philosophical (Plato and Aristotle) and rhetorical (Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian). In the Middle Ages, it is essentially theological, and is inspired by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius” (Darriulat, 2007, author, Trans.). Here we find a major difference between Pepe, Grassi, and Venturi, who include in their history of art criticism Plato and Cicero—philosophers that, as we have seen, are excluded from art criticism by Darriulat. The latter then proceeds to his demonstration, reaching the point which interests us particularly: “What we call art criticism, that is to say, the critical judgment of works of art, did not really develop until the sixteenth century” (Darriulat, 2007, author, Trans.). This answer is relevant because, on the one hand, Darriulat gives us a dated indication—the 16th century—and on the other hand, he puts forward the idea of critical judgment. One must understand that there were writings about art before, but without critical judgments they could not be accepted as a part of art criticism history. Thereafter, Darriulat develops this argument because, for him, art criticism becomes an autonomous genre under the influence of three factors:

[F]irst, the independence of the cities, proud of their traditions and cultures, will encourage chroniclers to extol the virtues of local artists.... Second, the rivalry between the artists in the race for princely patronage will lead to better definition of the merits of their art, and distinction of theirs from those of others.... Third and last, the censorship of the church, after a period of tolerance, will lead to a more rigorous definition of the rules of art, and to clarification of the boundaries of proper and improper arts.

(Darriulat, 2007, author, Trans.)

The three arguments of Darriulat’s explanation are relevant in the way he contextualizes the creation of art criticism within its social, political, and religious background. Subsequently, many other scholars will study and implement various approaches to this view.

As Houston explains, "Until the mid-1700s, the majority of people in Paris and London never had a chance to view most of the paintings and sculptures produced by their country's leading artists [and that it was only in 1737] that the Academy began to plan an annual exhibition...open and free of charge to all members of the public" (Houston, 2013, p. 26). Houston introduces an interesting point of art criticism not previously mentioned: the public. If people do not have access to art, it is difficult to imagine the existence of popular art criticism. The previous arguments focus exclusively on the writings about art, but do so without considering the public, the exhibition, and, in this sense, the accessibility of the artwork. Without wishing to schematize too much, it could be said that, during the period of the Enlightenment, European society evolved and, inevitably, art and writings about art did too, as is seen in the publications of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten or Johann Joachim Winckelmann. These questions about the origins of art criticism are still relevant today and "[i]t is highly significant that in recent times, many studies have emerged that question the validity of the assertion that it was in the eighteenth century that the art critic was invented, or asked the question whether art criticism fits rightly among literary genres" (Bartha-Kovács, 2012, p. 79, author, Trans.). Despite the ideas developed by Grassi, Pepe, Venturi, or Darriulat, the 18th century appears to be the beginning of modern art criticism, as perceived today by the writings of Abbé du Bos, Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, Jonathan Richardson, and, of course, Denis Diderot.

4. Defining the Art Critic

4.1 The philosophy of art critics

Famous during their lives, many art critics have now fallen into oblivion. Lifting the veil on their writings and their conceptions of art criticism offers a means of enriching the debate on this subject and allowing a better understanding of its complexity. In terms of French art critics, the approach of Jean Dolent deserves to be examined. Dolent did not actually consider himself an art critic, but rather an "art lover"—the chosen term in the title of his 1888 book, *Amoureux d'art*. As he claimed in his publication, "between the art critics and art lovers, there is more than one difference" (Dolent, 1888, p. 128).

The definition of professional criticism is, in fact, negative for him: “[The critic] turns his faults into rare qualities, and the qualities he lacks into abominable faults” (Dolent, 1874, p. 167). Reviewing the Salon of 1883, Dolent affirms in his first article in the *Journal des artistes (Journal of the Artist)*: “I’m not a purist, I’m not a critic, I am an art lover” (as quoted in Pinchon, 2010, p. 143, Author, Trans.). For many people an art critic is only a judge. Following this thought, the 1889 work of Austrian painter Gabriel von Max (1840-1915) represents his distrust of art critics by depicting *Monkeys as Judges of Art*. He is not the only artist who rejects judgments. Marcel Duchamp not only refused them but also expressed that “as much as possible I never try to judge or criticize anything,” and considered himself to be a “great enemy of critical writing” (Girst, 2014, p. 51). Like Marcel Duchamp or Gabriel von Max, many artists reject art criticism because it is perceived by them as negative. As it had been undermined by the Romantic generation, Dolent tried to rehabilitate the figure of the critic in the eyes of artists. Dolent considers himself “not part of that firing squad,” further stating that “if we can modestly limit our comments to what we ourselves know and artists ignore, the artist can draw some benefit from the commentary about the artwork” (as quoted in Pinchon, 2010, p. 187, Author, Trans.). Motivated by his desire to connect with artists, Dolent sent autographed copies of his book *Amoureux d’art* to the major artists mentioned in it. As described by Jean-Paul Bouillon, Dolent is an art critic who disappeared behind the artists in order to take the role of a discoverer and a vigilante (Bouillon, 2010, p. 256). Throughout his life, Dolent remained true to the principles he set out in 1869 when he defined his conception of criticism: “I will not teach the painter, I want to lead my four readers in the right places, that is all.... To the art critics, I leave to them the joy of discussing artistic jargon based on a few terms of anatomy” (as quoted in Pinchon, 2010, p. 186, Author, Trans.). Aware of these feelings, Dolent’s style of art criticism was intended primarily for artists, for whom long and scholarly descriptions were useless. A few decades later, art historian Lester D. Longman, gives a more flattering definition, insisting that the critic is someone who is

at home in the realm of ideas, who is trained in logical thought and comprehensive in his knowledge of the history of art, who is a *connoisseur* in at least one phase or period of art history, who is a close student of philosophy and in particular of aesthetics, who is sufficiently acquainted with the various media of the graphic and plastic arts to know how they operate, and who has an elementary knowledge of such allied arts as literature, music, and the drama.

(Longman, 1941, p. 53)

Longman uses the word *connoisseur* to highlight the knowledge and taste of the art critic without specifying the nature of his job. Longman believes that criticism “is not a subject of study, but a resultant of studies; it is not negative and destructive but positive and constructive, else it is not criticism” (Longman, 1941, p. 53). Longman is, in this sense, following the ideas of Dolent.

In an interview with Sarah Thornton, Peter Schjeldahl insists that “to be a good critic, you have to be able to make a new enemy every week and never run out of people to be your friend” (Thornton, 2008, p. 157). The purpose of the art criticism of Schjeldahl can be easily linked to that of Charles Baudelaire, for whom art criticism “should be partial, passionate and political.”

Moving to more recent times, Dennis J. Sporre defends the idea that “Personal judgment may result from criticism, but criticism implies more than passing judgment. Criticism should be a detailed process of analysis to gain understanding and appreciation” (Sporre, 2006, p. 21). With this in mind, we will examine the theories of D.W. Gotshalk and Morris Weitz about the methodology of the art critic.

4.2 The process of art criticism

In his 1962 book *Art and the Social Order*, D.W. Gotshalk explains that the critical process has three phases: a genetic phase (studying the factors that have shaped a work of art), an immanent phase (studying the major features within the work of art itself; i.e., material, form expression, and function), and a judgmental phase (Smith, 1966,

p. 343). Gotshalk's analysis is interesting because he tries to associate each of these phases with a period of time, specifying that one phase or more tends to be dominant.

[During] the seventeenth century and the largest part of the eighteenth, the judgmental phase was dominant.... The classicist believed [that] the chief business of art criticism is to measure particular works of art by their conformity to these canons and laws.... In the early modern era, opposition to the prevailing classicist creed was to be found in the writers belonging to the so-called 'School of taste' and in Hutcheson, Hume and Kant.... During the next one hundred and fifty years, the heyday of modern romanticism, the immanent and genetic phases of art criticism received most emphasis.... Criticism should be a record of personal adventures among masterpieces, and the ultimate aim of the critic should be to create a work of art from works of art.

(Smith, 1966, pp. 358-359)

In light of Gotshalk's ideas, criticism evolved due to the alternation of periods of dominance of the three phases, highlighting in this way the diversity of art critics' methodologies. This thought is shared by Terry Barrett who explains that "In the language of aestheticians who philosophize about art and art criticism, and in the language of art critics, criticism refers to a much broader range of activities than just the act of judging" (Barrett, 2007, p. 2). Barrett explains himself by citing the works of Morris Weitz, who attempted to analyze various forms of art critique in order to develop a set of standards. For this, Weitz investigated what critics do when they criticize art by analyzing criticism of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* written throughout the ages.

[He] concluded that when critics criticize they do one or more of four things: They describe the work of art, they interpret it, they judge it, and they theorize about

it. Weitz drew several conclusions about criticism, most notably that any one of these four activities constitutes criticism and that judgment is not necessarily part of criticism.

(Barrett, 1999, p. 7)

Weitz's thoughts were published in his 1964 book *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Even if the words to describe the methodology appear different, the Feldman Method, widely used in universities, is similar. The four-step process for evaluating artworks (description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment) developed by Edmund Burke Feldman is probably inspired by Weitz. Using the same logic as the popular Feldman Method, French scholars Pierre-Henry Frangne and Jean-Marc Poinot use and explain this process in the following way:

Art criticism then, tangles up four main operations that generate its complexity but also make its specificity and interest. These four operations are those of description, evaluation, interpretation, and expression. In this necessarily plural discourse that is that of art criticism, none of these operations can exist purely or in isolation.

(Frangne & Poinot, 2002, pp. 9–10, author, Trans.)

Even though these four steps are not in the same terms expressed by Feldman, we find again here the same important idea—also expressed above by Sporre—that art criticism is a process that demands a concluding judgment and that each step in the process is valuable and necessary. In this sense, it is important to know which methodology is used. As Michael Prater recalls, “the formalist model of art criticism, introduced by Feldman (1967), is a favorite among art educators due to its simplicity... and clear objectives” (Prater, 2002, p. 12). However, other methods can also be used, such as the Broudy, Lankford, or Anderson methods. All of these methods of criticism have the goal of becoming the basic framework for examining the form and contents of a work of art. Nevertheless, Tia Blackmon demonstrates, in a pedagogical approach,

that even though these methods exercise various kinds of critical judgment that can be termed formalist, expressivist, instrumentalist, or some combination (2015, p. 19),² the element of judgment remains essential. And, ultimately, it is precisely this element that is at the heart of discussions on the apparent crisis of art criticism.

4.3 Judgment: The failure of methodologies?

While there seems to be a consensus with this way of working, James Elkins condemns the fact that

In the last three or four decades, critics have begun to avoid judgments altogether, preferring to describe or evoke the art rather than say what they think of it. In 2002, a survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program found that judging art is the least popular goal among American art critics, and simply describing art is the most popular.

(Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 79)

According to the remarks cited above, it is important for art criticism not to be neutral. Already in his text “The Salon of 1846,” Baudelaire contends that art criticism should not be “a cold analytical type of criticism, which, claiming to explain everything, is devoid of hatred and love, and deliberately rids itself of any trace of feeling” (Baudelaire, 1981, p. 50). Similarly, in his book *Amoureux d’art*, Dolent engages himself in “a process of language dislocation that leads him to think and write art critique in fragments and snatches” (Pinchon, 2010, p. 194, Author, Trans.). Pierre Pinchon summarizes Dolent’s principles as: firstly, the rejection of the cold and technical commentary of scholars; secondly, the intent to praise in the most sensitive and fairest way possible using a language that is sincere although ironic; and lastly, the prioritization of the artist’s personality rather than the works (Pinchon, 2010, p. 186). If one analyzes Dolent’s style of art criticism, it is obvious that he holds a special place in the evolution of the field in the

² Feldman is formalist; Lankford and Broudy, formalist and expressivist; and Anderson, expressivist and instrumentalist.

latter part of the 19th century. Dolent condemns the romantics' stylistic devices and their spun-out prose. He said that this kind of art criticism was just a pretext for a stylistic revolt, which quickly loses the sight of the object of the writing and wanders into excessive description. Longman shares Baudelaire and Dolent's views, explaining that an art critic is not supposed to be "concerned with what is called technical competence, since this is nothing more than the ability to execute what one undertakes. A critic is not a technical adviser for immature artists and apart from this, one must assume that what is executed was intended" (Longman, 1941, p. 54). While we would tend to contextualize this descriptive vision nowadays, in the 19th century, art critics like Baudelaire or Dolent were already warning their contemporaries against this drift toward a cold, descriptive art criticism. At the time, it was probably more of a warning than a sign of a real phenomenon, since the real change seemed to occur during the second half of the 20th century. The reason is cited by Quentin Bell in his 1975 article "The Art Critic and the Art Historian," where he markedly points out that

With the advent of efficient methods of reproduction, the task of the critic gradually began to change. He became aware of the image as an alternative of his own descriptive powers... [Critics] need no longer describe in words that which, even in a poor reproduction, is evident; they tend to become commentators and theorists.

(Bell, 1975, p. 499)

Bell believed that description in art criticism would diminish or disappear with the rise of different types of reproduction, but, as Elkins highlights, this is not the case, and on the contrary, description seems to have ascended beyond judgment. And he is not the only one supporting this position. In the 2005 Art Seminar, Guy Brett reports, "I can't understand how one can believe themselves to be writing about something without judgment being implicated" (Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 155). In his article "La crise de la critique d'art," Margit Rowell discusses how "bad art criticism is either coldly explanatory, or confusing and unintelligible, but it is not strictly critical" (Rowell, 1968, p. 289, Author,

Trans.). We have just seen above that, according to Brett and Rowell, if a piece of art criticism does not express a judgment or is not critical, that is bad criticism. This is a very important remark: Good art criticism is not merely a narrative but must involve the substantial element of judgment.

Now, we must ask ourselves what reasons contribute to the weakening or disappearance of judgment in art criticism. Could it be a loss of values by which to judge a work? Or a fear of revealing bias? Because the reasons are varied, it is best not to generalize an answer. As we move forward, we must understand that judgment comprises not only personal opinion, but also informed arguments based on theory, which can inspire healthy discussion and debate among connoisseurs (such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg) or members of the general public. By conceiving the art critic as a tightrope walker, the concept of “enlightened cherishing”—a compromise between thought and feeling without dichotomizing the two—created by Harry S. Broudy (1905 - 1998), appears most adequate to define the way art critics proceed. Art criticism needs to have norms or a canon of its own understanding, and must also be passionate, finding an equilibrium between reason and feeling that combines in a powerful judgment.

4.4 Art critics today, or “everyone is an art critic”

Following the words of Joseph Beuys, “everyone is an artist,” and in this phase of democratization in art, we logically come to an apparent democratization of art criticism. Already in 1987, Feldman believed that “most of us think we are art critics” or at least “deliver critical opinions regardless of what we know about art or art theory,” because “a democracy encourages its citizens to believe their views on any subjects have equal weight, just as their votes count equally in politics” (Feldman, 1992, p. 467). Although the context is now different with the internet, art critic James Panero optimistically thinks that “today, online, everyone is a writer. Words have become a cheap bumper crop of little distinction. That’s a problem for the rarefied world of print. And now because of social networking, with its language of ‘Likes’ and ‘Fans,’ everyone is also a critic” (as quoted in Frost, 2019, p. 6). To think that everyone is an art critic is to consider that everyone is a connoisseur, that everyone has the knowledge and the experience necessary to formulate a judgment without going through the different formative phases beforehand. Reasoning like this is not wrong, but is very idealistic, because we know from the 1960s publications of Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Dardel that all are not equal

facing art and judgments of taste. But not all share the opinion of James Panero: Art critic Eleanor Heartney disagrees, describing online art criticism as a “Wild West” in “chaos,” where valuable criticism is hard to find (as quoted in Frost, 2019, p. 6).

One potential solution may be the education of both those who write and those who read reviews. Various scholars believe one of the reasons for this situation is undoubtedly “the absence of training and the lack of a methodology” (Rowell, 1968, p. 289), because “our educational system devotes very little time to developing a foundation for practicing criticism” (Feldman, 1992, p. 467), or “the fact that art criticism lacks specific training” (Gamboni, 1991, p. 11, Author, Trans.).

The place of art criticism in pedagogic institutions became an important subject in the 2005 Art Seminar and is discussed in the 2008 book *The State of Art Criticism*. According to Elkins, “the absence of art criticism in universities is partly, but not wholly, explained by the perception that criticism is perceived not to possess a hierarchy of knowledge” (Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 143) and that “contemporary art critics come from many different backgrounds, but...they were not trained as art critics in the way that people are trained as art historians, philosophers, curators, film historians, or literary theorists” (Elkins & Newman, 2008, p. 76). While Elkins managed to highlight a compelling point in the 2005 Art Seminar, nowadays many curriculums offer art criticism as an academic subject. The question now turns to the suitability of such an offering. Evidently, thus far the lack of an art criticism curriculum has allowed individuals of various fields to appreciate art from different perspectives against varied criteria. There always will be individuals who speak of the crisis or futility of art criticism, but this abundance of itineraries has enabled a wide range of criticism. Whether a PhD degree is meaningful or productive to the field of art criticism remains to be proven in the years to come.

5. Conclusion

Like art, art criticism has adapted to the religious, political, and social upheavals of time. The difficulty of clearly defining art criticism is essentially due to its nature as a multidisciplinary field open to literature, history, art history, or philosophy. But these ambiguities and divergences should not be seen in a negative light. On the contrary, numerous publications in recent years are proposing new hypotheses, indicating that in this field remains much studied and much to be rediscovered—such as certain authors

and texts that had temporarily disappeared from history, as Diderot had at one time.

Even though the history of art criticism has divergences, at its origin, modern art criticism (that based upon judgment) dates back to the 18th century. Not all writings on art can be considered criticism, as the art historian works in the past, while the art critic works in the contemporary world. As a better way to understand criticism, its “literary, academic or journalistic poles” have been well studied during the last 25 years, lifting the veil on the work of important art critics, such as Jean Dolent.

Though controversial and perhaps fictional, art criticism remains a major element of the art world that must offer judgments as the final step of its methodology. Maybe, as Chantal Mouffe’s political theory suggests, the loss of ideological cleavage in art criticism, as the field has begun to favor more descriptive forms, has caused the decline of its influence. Complementary to Mouffe’s thoughts, Canadian philosopher Alain Deneault evokes the risks of the mediocracy—this behavior of favoring centrist politics—which in the writings of art critics can be seen as description without judgment, rendering critics completely “tasteless.” New curriculums emphasizing art criticism multiply, but they should not replace the vital diversity of critics, which across a variety of fields ensures the quality and richness of criticism. An art criticism course that formats all students in the same way is perhaps more dangerous than an absence of criticism. At the same time, a formal course is a means of giving more people a chance to study the stories and methodologies of art criticism, and ultimately advance the field. Is such education and professionalization of art criticism really a way to solve the crisis of the art world? Or will it stifle an otherwise fertile ambiguity?

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