THE ORIGIN OF ART CRITICISM AND WHAT REMAINS OF IT TODAY

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ABSTRACT

After initially framing the contemporary crisis of art criticism in neo-Adornian terms, the article offers a review of the historical and philosophical foundations of art criticism coming mainly from the perspective of Jena Romanticism. Based on the latter, it traces a sound distinction between art criticism and other kinds of discourse about art. Finally, it makes critical comments on art journalism and contemporary discourses that favor public mediation in lieu of reflection, but that have nevertheless occupied the social space of art criticism.

Keywords: Art criticism; Reflection; Romanticism.

It has been more than two centuries now since the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel wrote that “a critic is a reader who ruminates”, and “hence, should have more than one stomach” (Schlegel, 1997, p. 23). There were two important ideas here. The first was that a critic should not be defined by his institutional or erudite authority. Every reader – or art spectator – can be a critic. The second idea was that the sole condition for becoming a critic is to entertain a relationship with the work to be criticized comparable to the relationship between cows and food. Cows ruminate food. Their digestive process is slow and complex, forcing them to digest their food several times. This would be a metaphor for how a critic should respond to works of art or to culture as whole. Criticism, here, is not the disapproval of something, but a reflection upon it. The critic should be in no hurry in this reflection, for each work of art has its own time or form and calls for a singular careful consideration.

Friedrich Schlegel was a leader of the art and critical movement that became known as Early German Romanticism, at the end of the 18th century. The way he defines art criticism makes one wonder what remains of it today. On the one hand, the development of digital communications technology increased the participation in criticism. There are new powerful means to communicate about art, as well as channels to circulate them in the culture without the need of institutional mediations. This could mean that we are able to critically reflect upon works of art. However, on the other hand, contemporary society, and these digital technologies of communication – such as social media – are always rushed. Critic Jonathan Crary called this stage of late capitalism “24/7” (Crary, 2014) because it urges everyone to be available and productive 24 hours per day and 7 days per week, leaving no room for contemplation. This imperative is worse because digital communication is immediate. It seems that the rumination part of art criticism is doomed to fail. It is not easy to reconcile the rush of contemporary life with the time demanded by art.

This is not a new problem. “It is true that, to practice this way of reading as *art*, one needs something precisely that is much forgotten in our times”, wrote Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century, and “for which it is indispensable to be almost a cow, and not a ‘modern man’: *ruminate*” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 15). The German philosopher used Schlegel’s metaphor of rumination, to point out what would be the best way to read or experience a work of art. But he also comments on something that was not yet present in Schlegel’s time: the pace of modern life could impact our ability to ruminate. If criticism relied on this capacity of rumination, then we would face a historical challenge. Well, more than a hundred years after Nietzsche, no one can say that things have slowed in the 21st century. On the contrary, everything – from travelling to communication – has become even faster. This is to acknowledge that, while the Internet, social media, and smartphones open an opportunity for new gestures of participation or democratization in criticism, they also call for immediate responses that may very well push back the reflective moment of rumination that is crucial to criticism.

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There is yet another question. It has to do with the increasing integration of art and market. One has only to recall how the philosopher Theodor Adorno approached the "culture industry" in the 20th century. It is well known how Adorno characterized a historical stage of capitalism when even works of art – supposedly submitted as an aesthetic existence, not an economic one – became objects for consumption. Art is no more an autonomous field relatively free from (contamination by) other interests. The difference between the logic of art and the logic of money is erased. Now, culture could be part of industry, with no shame or embarrassment. It is all business. Although this Adorno's thesis is well known, it is not often that attention is given to its consequence in art criticism. But Adorno is clear about this, and the consequences could be radical. Critical thinking about art would be doomed to disappear.

> Art exercised some restraint on the bourgeois as long as it cost money. That is now a thing of the past. Now that it has lost every restraint and there is no need to pay any money, the proximity of art to those who are exposed to it completes the alienation and assimilates one to the other under the banner of triumphant objectivity. Criticism and respect disappear in the culture industry; the former becomes a mechanical expertise, the latter is succeeded by a shallow cult of leading personalities. (Adorno, 1993, p. 20).

For Adorno, there would be no place for art criticism anymore. This hypothesis was carried even further by Nicholas Brown in the article "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capital". The article's title paraphrases the famous essay by Walter Benjamin from the 1930s, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility". But the framework and tone are closer to those of Adorno. His argument is that, in so far as works are made only and absolutely addressing the market, there is no range of meaning to be interpreted. Art criticism would become pointless in our stage of capitalism. Deprived of autonomous existence to face society, art would no longer give to criticism anything to say. Of course, Brown is not claiming that we should long for a time or a place when or where art was completely free from any social circumstances, but he is arguing in favor of a dialectical relationship between art and capitalism. The tension between aesthetic works and market products would allow criticism to reflect upon both art form and social context, for the meaning of the works would not be determined beforehand as commodities in the economic system (Brown, 2012). It's not an innocent way of conceiving autonomy as if art could be isolated from history. It's a critical way of conceiving it as a friction within the social system.

However, there lies a historical deadlock. The most important art to produce this tension with and within the market was the one made by avant-garde. Modernism was a negative horizon against the market, at least to some extent. Even Adorno trusted that some radical works – such as Schoenberg in music, Samuel Beckett in theatre or Kafka in literature –

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could resist the all-encompassing force of capitalism. Hermetic works tried to close themselves from consumerist capture. By doing so, they resisted, trusted in a kind of autonomy that was not alienated from the world, but a way of approaching it. But we are no longer in the age of Modernism. In this sense, the historical shift between Modernism and a Post-Modernist culture would be, accordingly to Brown, the shift between an incomplete subsumption of art under capital and a complete one. In the terms of Fredric Jameson, we are living in a stage of capitalism when the distance that enabled art to gain its critical power is being abolished (Jameson, 1991). In that context, maybe we should consider what the avant-garde can tell us about the meaning of words like “criticism” and “art”, in order to examine its conditions today.

Even if we are to engage in the question of avant-garde, I should first note that it is not with the purpose, of course, to “discover” the perfect definition of art criticism. It has been observed, with great perspicacity, that the metaphysical and ontological question about “what” art criticism is could be be shifted to another one, about “where” art criticism is (Lister; Milevska; Gielen; Sonderegger; 2015). This would allow us to consider the places where art criticism is found. I would add that it may be important also to ask “when” art criticism is found. In this context, returning to Friedrich Schlegel and German Romanticism in the 18th century is crucial to understanding more precisely when art criticism was born and how it is challenged by today’s historical circumstances. This may contribute to systematizing the historical evolution of art criticism, for German Romanticism was responsible for the first philosophical formulation of the concept of art criticism itself, as Walter Benjamin pointed out (Benjamin, 1999, p. 60). Criticism is understood not as a determinative judgment about a work of art or as a mediation between art and public. Rather, it is a reflection that intensifies the poetic of a work. This romantic definition raised already with a style and with the intentions of what would be later called vanguard.

The word “vanguard” comes from the military. It refers to troops that are at the forefront in a combat situation, opening the way. Literally, the word relates to space. It means taking new territory as one advances. This space, however, would also be occupied by those who come afterwards, so vanguard also concerns time. In a cultural sense and in art, vanguard designates, by analogy, those who are ahead of their time. Criticism operates in the present but is already introducing the future. The critical nature of Modernity had the task of taking forward the denial of a past and carrying us into the future. However, if Modernity is the age of criticism, as Friedrich Schlegel says by the end of the 18th century (Schlegel, 1970, p. 532), vanguards were so modern that they criticized criticism, challenging the linear progressive notion of time, criticizing even the dream they aspired to. This ambivalence has already been observed by Octavio Paz regarding Romanticism, whose relation “with modernity is at the same time filial and controversial”, since it is “a child of the age of criticism, changing is its foundation, birth certificate and definition” (Paz, 1993, p. 37).

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Vanguard ruptures, therefore, are driven by the need for change because they feel a confinement in prisons that divert art, criticism, and life from their potential. The lack of freedom is what is at stake. For the romantics, this seemed like prison: Neoclassicism to art, systems for criticism and the bourgeoisie for society. It was necessary to find other possible paths. To walk them required facing a challenge of approximating art and life, a crucial gesture as much for the romantics as for vanguardists that came later. In his most famous fragment, Friedrich Schlegel declares that Romanticism wanted to "make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical" (Schlegel, 2000, p. 64). This aspect foreshadows the vanguard critical character of the aesthetic movements of the 20th century, since it points to a tension: searching for liberty that the autonomy of art brings to creation (away from illustrating religion, history, or politics) and, at the same time, overcoming the isolation of art in relation to social life.

On the one hand, critical autonomy granted art a freedom for aesthetic inquiry, since it was no longer subjected to external controls. On the other, this autonomy threatened to become isolated, distancing art from these other spheres of life. This was a problem at the core of the vanguard, according to Peter Burger (2008). They didn't just go against a preceding style or artistic manifestation, but rather approached the place occupied by art itself within bourgeois society, since this place was either set apart from people's lives or reduced to entertainment (in that sense, art and criticism were bounded). This was a problem that, years before the vanguards of the 20th century, the early German romantics confronted. Schlegel asserted that a philosophy of art should start "with the autonomy of beauty, with the proposition that it is and must be separated from that which is true and that which is moral and have the same rights as them" (Schlegel, 2000, p. 92). He continues, here, with the modern idea of aesthetic autonomy established by Kant in the 18th century (Kant, 1995): that beauty should be separated both from truth (which is a subject of knowledge) and from good (which is the subject of morality). Only then can beauty gain its aesthetic freedom, and consequently art may exercise its critical experimentations without coercion. Soon after stating this modern division, however, Schlegel adds that, if there lies the foundation of the philosophy of art, it nevertheless "would end with total unification".

The tension that would become a trademark of vanguards was already present in German Romanticism. If art owes to its autonomy the possibility of criticizing the society of which it is part, since it is independent from it, at the same time criticism questions the marginal social position that art occupies. Except that, if art joined the social environment, it risked being absorbed by it and losing its critical distance. But the point here is that the reality joined by art would supposedly already be transformed by that critical aesthetic contact. For now, art criticism would be crucial, working in a space that of course is not outside society, but that operates inside it forcing a new reflection. This criticism does not aim in a complete system that solves all puzzles or meanings. To make that clear, German Romanticism practiced

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art criticism in a very particular way of writing: fragments. They even developed a theory about fragments.

"A fragment", Schlegel said, "has to be like a small work of art, completely separated from the surrounding world and perfect and complete in itself, like a porcupine" (Schlegel, 2000, p. 82). The fragment is comparable to a work of art because of the separation from the surrounding world and the completeness in itself. It possesses critical autonomy – which is strangely compared to a porcupine. As in this animal, the fragment defends itself from the intentions of predators that, coming from outside, wish to attack it. It is the quills of the fragment that do not let it (as a work of art) be explained by external categories. It defends itself, thus, from the implementation of definitive concepts about itself. Whenever a fragment is attacked, its predators would end up with a face full of quills. This is where autonomy communicates with life. Predators like aesthetics prejudices, ready-made philosophical categories or bourgeois society institutions end up with quills in them, in other words, are contaminated by something that used to belong only to the works and fragments. Closed within itself, the fragment, like the porcupine, projects itself outwards. It is the project of art criticism. The art of writing in fragments intended to protect itself from the surrounding world and, at the same time, to communicate with it, even though this communication, as the metaphor shows, was a violent one. The discourse that was named art criticism emerged from this context and took the fragmented form of the essay.

When art criticism was born, its form was the essay. It did not have the form of prescriptive poetics, whose contents were norms for the manufacture of good works in accordance with the Greco-Roman tradition (cases of Horace or Boileau, for example). It did not have the form of biographies, whose contents were the lives of great artists, such as those of the Renaissance (the case of Giorgio Vasari). It didn't take the form of the system, whose content was a general idea of art (Hegel's case). It was the form of the essay, whose content was the analysis of works of art, that gave critical discourse its specificity (the case of Friedrich Schlegel). Boileau's treatise on rules of composition of beauty, Vasari's account of painter personalities or Hegel's system determining the truth of art are not exactly art criticism. Respectively, treatise, history and system are adequate ways to talk about rules, individual biographies, and the truth in general.

However, criticism speaks about the work of art. Its content are not norms that a work must comply with; nor the author's psychology and adventures of his existence; nor the general philosophical concept to which it would be subjected (although it may even include some of that). Its content is the work itself. Walter Benjamin, in his 1919 thesis on Romanticism, called this criticism "immanent" (Benjamin, 1999), due to its refusal to transcend the work, that is, to explain it by external parameters: aesthetic rules, individual subjectivities, philosophical systems. To practice this criticism, Benjamin himself wrote essays. They were tasks placed in front of each work of art.

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Historically, therefore, criticism is a relatively recent stage in discourses about art in the West. It was only born in the 18th century. It represented the modern detachment of the tradition founded in ancient Greece with Aristotle's *Poetics* – which extended to Horace and Boileau, in French Classicism in the 17th century. The intention of formulating universal rules for works of art to be judged was abandoned. Criticism did not turn, however, to the alternative at hand at the time, namely, the humanism of an author like Vasari who, in the 16th century, wrote about art highlighting artists, more than their works. Finally, criticism also preserved itself from the construction of a system, like the one Hegel would build in the 19th century, where art is a figure of the absolute spirit, but with less contemporary importance in its own present time than philosophy.

Modern authors such as Lessing and the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and August, made this kind of revolution in thinking about art and in its concrete realization as writing. At the end of the 18th century, they wrote fragments and essays reflecting on works of art. They were not interested in finding universal and timeless rules for the achievement of a good work, that is, a work that met ancient ideals of harmony and balance. They did not intend to find the beauty outside of history. They valued other effects of art, other than the beautiful: intensity, interest, surprise, potency, strangeness, curiosity. Works could be appreciated for having that. They did not want to explain them by the subjectivity of the authors, unlike a late vulgarization of Romanticism. They intended to think about the presence of those qualities in the works themselves, analyzing them without becoming mere examples of previous philosophical concepts.

The early Romantics did that by underlining the modern doubt in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; or the Portuguese patriotism in Camões' poems, some of them translated into German by August Schlegel; or the irony of *Don Quixote*, by Cervantes. They didn't stop, however, with authors who were dead in their time, that is, who were already in the past. They wrote about their contemporaries, a fundamental gesture of criticism. In this case, the efforts were directed above all to Goethe, whose ingenious literature formulated an image of the formation of modern man. The *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe's novel, was said to be a literary trend analogous to the French Revolution (Schlegel, 2000, p. 83). And yet Homer's ancient poems were also criticized by Romanticism. Criticism should encompass the ancient, the modern, and the contemporary.

In this context, it remains to point out a discourse on art that, although confused with criticism, is distinguished from it. So far, I have mentioned three discourses on art that are not exactly criticism: classical prescriptive, humanist biographical and idealist systematic. Closer chronologically to us, however, is a journalistic discourse with the goal of saying good or bad things about works of art, to recommend them or not to the reader. It is guided by the principle of mediation. It assumes that art is difficult and needs translation for the public. Their authors, faithful to the media's understanding of themselves, assume the mission of explaining the works to the audience.

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The resulting discourse on art in journalism is rarely critical, for a simple reason: its concern is not to intensify the work it speaks of, but rather to make it intelligible to an unlearned audience. There are several problems with this posture. The first is the condescension to the reader or viewer. The main thing, however, is the tacit assumption that the effort to understand the work is, somehow, unnecessary (as if it was not an intrinsic part of it) in the individual aesthetic experience. This role is not that of criticism, at least not in its strongest sense. It is the role of cultural journalism, which has its place in our society, but should not be confused with criticism. Of course, there is no ontological law that forbids criticism to appear in a daily newspaper, but there are historical, economic, and cultural reasons that make it difficult to happen.

In a sense, the same is valid for all new technologies of the 21st century. The participation through Internet, social media or smart phones is not previously guided by any essence. People who blog can produce texts that are different in their natures. Everyone is now familiar with how we can find mere comments, hate speech, complaints that resemble letters by consumers not happy with what they bought, resentful words incapable of admiration – all that, and much more, is on the Internet. There is no reason to believe that digital communication technologies do not include that kind of reaction. But is that the whole truth? Can we not perhaps find this type of discourse spreading out all over, even outside the Internet? If that is the case, we may ask another question: criticism – as the effort to intensify what is at stake in a work of art – is being transformed with those new tools? How they relate to the task of art criticism?

It remains to understand more precisely what the language of criticism is. This language has an experimental aspect. Criticism is an experiment with a work of art through which its reflection is awakened. It echoes the meaning of the word “experience” in chemistry. To criticize is to make an element of the work react in contact with the critic itself. It is like the extraction of an implicit potentiality that, with the critical question, emerges. It is not discovering the ultimate truth of the work, its essential meaning. It does not look for the ultimate or first truth of things, but to give new suggestions about them, to stimulate unusual articulations between them.

Criticism does not create anything; it always speaks of an already existing object formed in culture. Rarely does criticism deal with formless, direct, or raw life. It prefers the life that has already taken shape and form, especially through art. Thus, criticism is tied to what it talks about: phrases, books, films, paintings, songs, performances, plays, ideas, images, sculptures, or other works. This link, however, does not tie the essay only to the work. In its critical experiment, it can even, through the work, pose questions to life. The work is an opportunity for the critic to discuss an idea.

If works of art are not objects of science, that is, if they cannot be known with the certainty and precision of knowledge that refers to nature, then to speak of them it is necessary to find a form for which interpretation

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does not need this type of predicate. The essay was this form. It is tentative rather than assertive; suggestive rather than affirmative; speculative rather than informative. In the terms in which the philosopher Immanuel Kant classified judgments, criticism is more reflective than determinate. These characteristics constitute a pertinent way when one wants to carry out an experiment in the work of art. They constitute the language of criticism.

There is yet another feature that distances criticism of art from science of art. No criticism should attempt to completely consummate the meaning of a work, simply because the work itself does not have a complete meaning. The classical ancient ideal of art supposed the work to be perfect and finished, therefore complete and closed in itself. That is why, until the 18th century, there was no real art criticism: why talk about works that are already perfect? Any word could only disrupt the classical aesthetic experience. Schlegel said that, if we were to believe in mystic lovers of art, the only thing we could do in front of a work would be to exclaim "Oh!" (Schlegel, 2000, p. 29). For him, however, no work is considered perfect, hence the *raison d'être* of criticism. There is something to talk about. Not to judge whether the work is correct, to narrate the life of its author, to subordinate it to a philosophical system and to mediate its relationship with the public. But to unfold its reflection. Romantically, the poet Novalis said that the complete can only be enjoyed, but it's the incomplete that takes us forward (Novalis, 2001, p. 155). Criticism is a way of taking the work of art forward.

In taking the work forward, however, criticism never reaches an end. Works of art provoke more and more criticism, even contradictory among themselves. Nothing, in the form of criticism, requires its manifestations to be complementary or that they dispute which one is right. They can only be different, without comparison with each other, since each one is unique. Of course, we can find some criticisms better than others, but this is due to their potency and their interest, not their adequacy or correspondence to what the work really is. For the truth of the work is unfolded by the criticisms. The critic never discovers the ultimate meaning of a work. This meaning, which is never ultimate, is already carried out by the reflexive productivity of the practiced criticism. Each text or essay about a work of art is already the unfolding of its meaning. Criticism is the way of a historical process of unfolding of the work that is always open.

Walter Benjamin noted that this process of criticism can only be coherently represented through a plurality of critics who come one after another, if these are not empirical intellects but personified degrees of reflection (Benjamin, 1999, p. 76). It is not a certain individual or a subjectivity, then, that will carry out this process. It is the process of reflection that is carried out through criticism and critics. This process, in fact, began in the work, and was only continued by the experiment of criticism, which in this sense belongs to the work, and is the possible extension of it, that is, criticism, in the last instance, virtually belongs to the work.

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If we believe in that concept, the increasing participation that digital technology allows – with almost everyone being now able to contribute with their experiment on a work of art – may intensify criticism itself, at the same time, however, as it deconstructs traditional hierarchies we usually trusted in the past. As with almost everything there are two sides here. On the one hand, criticism can be dismantled inside a series of comments that have nothing to do with a process of unfolding a reflection on a work. It can be easily confused with capitalist propaganda in the market or superficial opinions in the web. But, on the other hand, criticism may amplify its sources, take more and more people as "personified degrees of reflection" and, by doing that, democratize and enrich its process. It is also possible that we are now experiencing both things at the same time. This time is our time.

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