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The Aims of Art Criticism

Abstract

Criticism of the arts is a major part of our cultural life. Critics decide to a large extent which films and plays get seen and which books get read, and criticism commonly affects our experience and evaluation of paintings, poems, music, the urban environment, fashion, and much else. Philosophers and other theorists of the arts have long disagreed, however, about what the aims of art criticism are. Is the point of criticizing an artwork to evaluate it, to explain or interpret it, to modify our responses to it, or to achieve something else besides? In this paper, I argue for a new answer to this question. I argue that art criticism has a constitutive aim. Part of what makes a remark or a piece of writing an instance of art criticism is that it ought to (be such as to) achieve this aim. My view, I shall suggest, incorporates what is right about the other principal suggestions that have been made about criticism's aims (for instance, by Arnold Isenberg, Arthur Danto, and Noël Carroll), while avoiding their shortcomings. It enables us to see what unites the various things critics do.

Criticism of the arts takes many forms. It includes reviews of films, television programmes, plays, and music; academics' interpretations of literature, painting, sculpture, and conceptual art; and various descriptions of artworks, such as many of those in museum and gallery catalogues. Criticism is a major part of our cultural life. It has a significant influence on how we evaluate and experience artworks, and on our decision about whether to experience certain works at all.

A venerable question in aesthetics, the subject of essays by Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and others, concerns the function of art criticism. Is the point of criticizing an artwork to evaluate it, to modify our response to it, to interpret or explain it, to describe it accurately, or something else besides? Criticism can certainly involve all of these activities. Does one of them give unity and point to the others?

There is no consensus among philosophers about the answer to this question. Critics themselves are also divided about it. A recent survey of visual-arts critics found that 62% place "a great deal of emphasis" on accurately describing artworks, whilst 27% place a great deal of emphasis on "rendering a personal judgment or opinion on the works being reviewed"¹. Critics have lately been undergoing something of a crisis of confidence about the aims of their discipline. Recent publications bearing despondent titles such as "A Quiet Crisis",

¹ A. Szántó, *The Visual Arts Critic: A Survey of Art Critics at General-Interest News Publications in America*, ed. J. Simons, Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program, New York 2002, p. 27.

What Happened to Art Criticism?, and *Critical Mess* reflect this disquiet². Some critics, such as Raphael Rubinstein, argue that lack of clarity about the aims of criticism (especially about the role of evaluation in criticism) has prevented many from developing the skills of a good critic³. Rubinstein even argues that this has resulted in the production of more mediocre art, as artists are not being challenged by enough good criticism.

Revisiting the question of the aims of criticism is therefore a timely exercise. In the first two chapters of my book, *The Critical Imagination*, I develop and defend an answer to this question⁴. I use this to explain the role of imaginativeness in criticism. Here, I shall present a summary of my account of criticism's aims.

The question of what the aims of criticism are can be understood in different ways. There are, I suggest, at least two things we might want to know when we ask what the aims of criticism are. First, we might simply want to know what makes a piece of criticism good as criticism. What does good criticism achieve, in virtue of which it is good as criticism? Second, we might want to know what the constitutive aims of criticism are, if it has any. It is common today for philosophers to make claims about the constitutive aims of such things as belief, assertion, and action. It would be interesting to know if criticism of the arts has a constitutive aim.

I argue that criticism does have a constitutive aim. Part of what makes something an instance of art criticism is that it ought to achieve (or to be such as to achieve) this aim, and any instance of criticism is defective as criticism if it does not achieve (or is not such as to achieve) this aim. It may not be defective as something else (e.g., as an essay), but it is defective as criticism, if it fails to achieve it.

I also argue for a view about what makes something good as criticism. Not all criticism is defective if it fails to (be such as to) achieve this other aim. But achieving this aim makes a piece criticism good criticism. In this paper, however, I shall only explain why I hold that criticism has a constitutive aim.

In the first section of this paper, I shall say why I reject other candidates for constitutive aims of criticism. Some of the writers I discuss, it should be noted, do not explicitly claim that their view is a view about criticism's constitutive aims. I am considering only whether the aims they discuss are constitutive aims of criticism. In the second section, I shall present an account of what it is to appreciate artworks. The aim of criticism I identify relates to appreciation. If we establish relatively modest claims about appreciation, I argue, we can identify a constitutive aim of criticism. I do this in the third section.

1. Rival Views

Monroe Beardsley argues that the primary aim of criticism is to help the critic's readers choose which artworks to experience. Critical activities such as

² R. Rubinstein, "A Quiet Crisis", in: *Art in America*, 91 (2003), pp. 39-47; J. Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2003; *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice*, ed. R. Rubinstein, Hard Press Editions, Stockbridge, MA 2007; J. Elkins, M. Newman (eds.), *The State of Art Criticism*, Routledge, New York 2007.

³ See R. Rubinstein, "A Quiet Crisis".

⁴ J. Grant, *The Critical Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

explanation and evaluation are undertaken for the purpose of guiding readers' decisions about whether to listen to certain pieces of music, to look at certain paintings, to watch certain films, and so on⁵.

Beardsley's claim is certainly a plausible account of many reviews, which form a large part of criticism. However, I reject this as a constitutive aim of criticism, primarily because it is a poor model of much academic criticism. Much academic criticism is written for those who have already chosen to experience the work being criticized. Indeed, much of it is written for specialists, and would be of little use to someone trying to decide whether to experience the work. This is not necessarily a defect of the criticism.

Arnold Isenberg, among others, has argued that the aim of at least a large class of critical remarks is to cause readers to perceive certain features of the work⁶. Many statements whose truth might seem to support an evaluation instead function to cause perception. In Isenberg's example, a critic describes the outline of the figures in an El Greco as forming a wavelike contour. The critic's favourable evaluation of the El Greco, Isenberg claims, is clearly related to this description. But it is not right to think that the truth of the evaluation is supported by the truth of the description. Rather, the description serves to cause the reader to perceive a certain feature of the El Greco, and perceiving this feature caused in the critic a feeling expressible by his value judgement.

There are several problems with Isenberg's position, and I cannot enter into all of them here⁷. It is certainly true that some critical remarks have the function of causing perception. Critics quote lines of poetry to get us to read them, and they sometimes explicitly instruct their readers to look at features of a work. But not all criticism has this function. Criticism can serve to cause belief rather than perception (e.g., belief in an interpretation), and can be written about works that can no longer be perceived (e.g., a theatrical production that has finished its run) for the benefit of readers who never perceived them, without being defective on account of this. Isenberg's insistence that "reading criticism, otherwise than in the presence, or with direct recollection, of the objects discussed is a blank and senseless employment"⁸ is demonstrably untrue.

A natural view is that the aim of criticism is to provide well-grounded evaluations of a work. Noël Carroll has recently defended this position⁹. Carroll holds that "criticism, properly so-called, is not merely a matter of evaluating an artwork—of giving it a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Critics are expected to supply reasons—indeed, good reasons—in support of their evaluations"¹⁰. In Carroll's view, "evaluation is an essential feature of criticism such that if a piece of discourse lacks explicit or implicit evaluation, it would not qualify as criticism"¹¹. Carroll's principal argument for this claim is that it enables us to explain how criticism differs from comparable

⁵ M. C. Beardsley, "What Are Critics For?", in: *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. M. J. Wreen, D. M. Callen, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1982, pp. 147-164.

⁶ A. Isenberg, "Critical Communication", in: *Philosophical Review*, 58 (1949), pp. 330-344.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of Isenberg, see J. Grant, *op. cit.*, chapter 1, section 2.

⁸ A. Isenberg, "Critical Communication", p. 337.

⁹ N. Carroll, *On Criticism*, Routledge, New York 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 43-44.

forms of discourse about art. An economic historian of art, for instance, might do many of the things critics do: she might, for example, describe and analyze Rembrandt's tendency to have large swaths of black in his paintings. She might explain that he used black to maximize his profit margin, since this allowed him to paint more canvases quickly¹². The claim that criticism provides evaluations, on the basis of such operations as description and analysis, explains how criticism differs from discourses about art that include the same operations.

Carroll is right that critics can and do provide reasoned support for evaluations of artworks. He is also right that it is desirable for an account of the aims of criticism to explain how criticism differs from comparable forms of discourse about art, such as art history. It is not true, however, that providing a reasoned evaluation is a constitutive aim of criticism.

First, some criticism provides interpretations and elucidations of artworks without explicit or implicit evaluation. A convincing explanation of why Hamlet procrastinated would be excellent criticism. But if it did not include an implicit or explicit evaluation of the play, that would not necessarily be a defect.

Second, some good criticism provides unsupported evaluations. Samuel Johnson says of *Othello*: "The scenes from the beginning to the end are busy, varied by happy interchanges and regularly promoting the progression of the story; and the narrative in the end, though it tells but what is known already, yet is necessary to produce the death of Othello"¹³. Johnson does not support his claim that one good thing about *Othello* is that the scenes regularly promote the progression of the story. But this does not make his criticism defective. It is hardly necessary to give a reason in support of the claim that this is a good thing about the play. It would have been necessary to provide support for the claim that promoting the progression of the story was a *bad* thing about the play. And it would be a defect if Johnson's evaluation were incorrect or implausible, or if Johnson were not himself justified in evaluating the work as he does. But his criticism is not necessarily defective on account of not giving reasons in support of this evaluation¹⁴.

Arthur Danto holds that the aim of criticism is to explain how and why each artwork is good in its own way¹⁵. Explanation of facts about a work's value, and of other explananda, certainly plays a significant role in criticism. But again, this is not something that all criticism ought to achieve. Take, for instance, certain kinds of criticism that provide plausible or correct evaluations without further explanation. Some entries in *The Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music* simply rate recordings on a scale of one to five stars without further explanation¹⁶. Such criticism is very simple, but not necessarily flawed. It can be very useful to know a qualified music critic's considered verdict on a recording.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

¹³ S. Johnson, "Selections from the Notes to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays", in: *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen, Penguin, London 1989, p. 247.

¹⁴ There is more to be said about these kinds of counterexample. See J. Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23.

¹⁵ A. C. Danto, "The Fly in the Fly Bottle: The Explanation and Critical Judgment of Works of Art", in: *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2005, p. 361.

¹⁶ I. March et al., *The Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music 2010*, Penguin, London 2009.

A fifth view is that the constitutive aim of criticism is to enable the critic's readers to appreciate the work better than they would be likely to without having read the criticism. This view is close to the truth. In fact, I argue in *The Critical Imagination* that aiding appreciation is an aim of criticism in that achieving this can make a piece of criticism good as criticism. It is not, however, a constitutive aim. Criticism written for those who have not experienced the work might describe a film as disturbing, funny, clichéd, and so forth. This information might not enable those who see the film to appreciate it any better than they could without the criticism. It might be *obvious* to those who see the film that it is disturbing or clichéd. But it is not necessarily a problem if the criticism tells us these things.

2. Appreciation

My claim is that, although aiding appreciation is not a constitutive aim of criticism, communicating facts of certain kinds about appreciation is. To specify the kinds of fact I have in mind, I must provide an account of what it is to appreciate art.

One very basic claim we can make about appreciation is this. Appreciating a work involves responding in appropriate ways to aspects of a work, and often involves responding in appropriate ways for appropriate reasons. We can thus distinguish three basic factors in appreciation: responses, objects of those responses, and reasons for those responses.

Appreciating a work can involve several kinds of response. First, there are perceptual responses. Appreciating a jade carving, for instance, can involve looking at the smoothness and translucence of the stone. Second, it can involve cognitive responses. Discussing Milton's style, Johnson notes that Milton seems to "use English words with a foreign idiom. ... the disposition of his words is, I think, frequently Italian; perhaps sometimes combined with other tongues"¹⁷. Appreciating Milton's style can involve noticing that he uses words in this peculiar way. Third, it is worth distinguishing what I call 'cogitative' responses. These are responses that involve thinking, imagining, or acquiring or confirming beliefs. For example, in Dante's *Inferno*, it is unclear whether Ugolino, one of the damned, ate his own children. Borges suggests that Dante wanted us to suspect that Ugolino did this, even if we cannot know whether he did it¹⁸. This is a cogitative response that appreciating the *Inferno* can involve. Fourth, appreciation can involve emotional or affective responses. Appreciating *Oedipus Rex* can involve pitying Oedipus, assuming we can pity fictional characters. Finally, there are responses involving desire, which I call 'conative' responses. Taking an interest in the facial expression of a person in a portrait involves desiring to continue looking at it, and being engrossed by a story involves desiring to continue reading it. Appreciating a work can involve having such responses to it.

¹⁷ S. Johnson, "Milton", in: *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, ed. R. Lonsdale, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 112.

¹⁸ J. L. Borges, "The False Problem of Ugolino", in: *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. E. Weinburger, trans. E. Allen, Penguin, London 2001, pp. 277-279.

If a response is one that appreciating a work can involve, I call it an 'appropriate' response to that work. The word 'appropriate', as I am using it, indicates only that appreciating the work can involve having this response. I do not mean anything else by it. I am not, for example, using 'appropriate response' to mean 'merited response'. I also do not mean 'response it is possible to have to a work'. There are responses that appreciating a given work cannot involve, even though it is possible to have these responses to it. For instance, perhaps it is possible for some people to find Oedipus's suffering amusing. But appreciating the play cannot involve having this response to his suffering: insofar as a person is amused by his fate, she is not appreciating the play. Perhaps appreciating the play could involve this response if the play were very badly written. But as things are, amusement is not, to use my terms, an appropriate response to the play.

Objects of appropriate responses include parts of the work, properties of the work, and its representational content. Appreciating a work does not, however, only involve responding appropriately to certain objects. Often, it involves responding appropriately to these objects for certain reasons rather than others. Appreciating the *Inferno* can involve suspecting Ugolino of cannibalism because he seems to allude to having committed cannibalism. But it cannot involve suspecting him of this for no reason. If appreciating a work can involve responding for a certain reason, I call that reason an 'appropriate' reason for that response. Again, I mean nothing more by 'appropriate' than this.

There are four points to clarify about this account of appreciation. First, not every response appreciation can involve is a response it must involve. Noticing that the disposition of Milton's words is frequently Italian is surely not a response that you *must* have to *Paradise Lost* in order to count as appreciating the poem. Rather, appreciating his work can involve noticing this. Second, I do not mean that having any one response appreciation can involve is a sufficient condition of appreciating the work. Suspecting Ugolino of cannibalism is clearly not enough to count as appreciating the *Divine Comedy*. Third, I do not mean that there is an appropriate response to every aspect of a work. A painting's being 8.51 inches high is unlikely to be a property to which there is any appropriate response. Fourth, I do not claim that there is an appropriate reason for every response appreciation can involve. Appreciating a beautiful work can involve admiring its beauty. But appreciating it would not (at least normally) involve admiring its beauty for some reason.

3. A Constitutive Aim of Criticism

Much more could be said about appreciation. Establishing even this much, however, allows us to identify a constitutive aim of criticism. I hold that it is a constitutive aim of criticism to communicate to the reader:

- (a) what appreciation can involve responding to; or
- (b) what responses appreciation can involve; or
- (c) what appropriate reasons for these responses there are.

Thus, for example, Johnson's observation tells us of a feature of Milton's style that appreciating Milton's work can involve responding to. In a famous essay on *Macbeth*, Thomas de Quincey discusses the peculiar horror he always feels at the knocking at the gate that follows Duncan's murder¹⁹. This is a critical remark, and not merely a report of his feelings, because he has identified a response that appreciating the play can involve having. And Borges, in the course of his essay on Ugolino, gives the reasons there are for suspecting him of cannibalism. Appreciating the work can involve suspecting Ugolino of this for these reasons.

Any criticism that fails to achieve this aim, I claim, is on that account defective as criticism. Note also that, although this aim is disjunctive, it is not a random disjunction. The components are united by the nature of appreciation. The aim is to convey something about what is involved in appreciating the work being criticized, and appreciating a work involves these three factors.

This account explains, I suggest, what unites a great variety of things critics do. Indeed, my account enables us to see the truth in the rival accounts I rejected.

A critic can convey what is involved in appreciating a work by describing, evaluating, interpreting, or explaining it. For example, much criticism consists of careful and accurate description of a work's appearance, as the survey of visual-arts critics I mentioned emphasized. The point of attributing the features attributed in critical description is to convey that those features are objects of appropriate responses, or to convey that the fact the work has those features is a reason for an appropriate response. Similarly, evaluating a work can achieve the constitutive aim of criticism I have identified. Appreciation can involve recognizing for yourself that a work has a certain value. It can also involve recognizing what is good or bad about the work, and responding in various ways to aspects of the work because they have a certain value. Explanation and interpretation, too, can convey what appreciation involves. Appreciating a work can involve seeing the truth, or the plausibility, of an interpretation or an explanation. To use one of Frank Sibley's examples, appreciating a painting might involve seeing that it has a unity of tone because it has a certain concentration of blues and greys²⁰.

Moreover, it is possible to achieve various other aims by achieving the constitutive aim of criticism I have identified. Conveying what appreciation of the work involves can be a way of helping readers appreciate the work better than they otherwise could. So too, it can be a way of helping readers choose which artworks to experience. This explains why criticism often serves to achieve these other aims, without committing us to the view that they are constitutive aims of criticism.

This account also enables us to explain how criticism differs from certain comparable forms of discourse about art. Art history, for example, need not achieve the constitutive aim I have identified. Discovering how long it took

¹⁹ T. de Quincey, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*", in: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, and Other Writings*, ed. G. Lindop, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, pp. 81-85.

²⁰ F. Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic", in: *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. J. Benson, B. Redfern, J. Roxbee Cox, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 36.

Michelangelo to paint each figure on the Sistine Chapel ceiling can be good art-historical scholarship. It is not, however, art criticism. My account explains why. The aim of this research is not to convey facts about appreciation of the kinds I mentioned. So it is not necessarily flawed as art history if it fails to do this. This is not to deny, of course, that the same thing can be both a piece of art criticism and a work of art history. But the aims it has in virtue of being criticism are different from the aims it has in virtue of being art history.

If this account is right, it is the notion of appreciation that clarifies the nature of criticism. It explains what gives unity and point to the variety of things critics do.