

EVALUATIVE STANDARDS IN ART CRITICISM: A DEFENCE

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To a superficial consideration, art criticism might appear as a profession of a parasitic nature, nourishing itself on what is produced by others: by artists. In fact, however, the relation between artistic practice and its criticism is more adequately conceived of as a sort of symbiosis. For, while it is true that criticism depends on and presupposes the existence of its objects - that is, works of art - on the other hand nothing would prevent good art from being equated with and contaminated by bad art if critics ceased to draw a distinction between the two.

Critics judge and evaluate works of art. Moreover, we expect critics to provide us with guidelines for engaging in criticism ourselves, and thus to give us general critical standards. According to these presuppositions, what would be a critical argument's premises, if the critical procedure is compressed into the schematised formula of an argument to the conclusion that a present artwork is either good or bad? It seems that one premise must cite a quality, or a number of qualities, of the work in virtue of which the critic ascribes a value to it. For the argument to be complete, the second premise must posit a general standard to the effect that works of art exhibiting the qualities cited in the first premise are correspondingly good or bad; or, at least, that these qualities contribute to or diminish the work's value.¹

The schematised argument provides what we expect from a critical judgment: an evaluative standard as a general guideline for evaluating works of art, and a demonstration of its application to an individual work.

¹ This schema of critical arguments corresponds to both M.C. Beardsley's and A. Isenberg's reconstructions. See Beardsley 456ff., Isenberg 131ff.

However, the idea I have so far treated as a natural assumption and elaborated into a sketch of the critical procedure — the idea that critical judgments are supported by reasons derived from general standards — has been contested by a number of theorists. In the 1950s and 60s, analytical authors such as Frank Sibley, Arnold Isenberg, Stuart Hampshire and Margaret MacDonald argued against this account of criticism, and contemporary philosophers committed to the analytical tradition, like Mary Mothersill, take up their arguments. In the following I want to consider and try to contest three different objections against the conception of criticism sketched above, all of them occurring in the writings of the authors just listed.

1. Throughout their writings, the authors just listed convey a picture of the practice of art criticism which is, in its essential features, alike. I shall try to give a sketch of this picture.

First, it should be noted that it is biased towards pictorial arts: paradigmatically, the practising critic is represented as being confronted with a *painting* or a *sculpture* which he is to describe and evaluate. This is not a deficiency yet, for the account is usually taken to apply *mutatis mutandis* to other forms of art as well. But, as we shall see later, the paradigm of visual art might possibly support certain prejudices which would appear less plausible in the light of examples taken from other artforms.

The critic's task is represented as twofold. First, the critic points out and directs the non-critical spectators' attention to *perceptible* features of an artwork in the presence of and with direct reference to the work. Second, he claims these features to be either good-making or bad-making. Obviously, the natural conclusion to draw from these assumptions is that the latter claim is supported by an evaluative standard to the effect that a work's possessing the perceptible property *F* is a sufficient condition for having — or lacking — aesthetic value. But the conclusion is unwelcome, for it is incompatible with the observation that it seems impossible to find a single valid standard stating the possession of a perceptible property as a sufficient condition for aesthetic value.

The incompatibility is now dissolved by the following claim: features of an artwork cited in critical evaluation are not properties or qualities which could possibly reoccur in other works of

art and support an analogous evaluative judgment; rather, they are *individuals*. The critic picks out the features he cites to support his evaluative judgments not by descriptions or general terms, but by indexicals.

It is not merely claimed that the terms referring to features cited in the critic's argument are general terms which are defined ostensively and can possibly reoccur in a number of analogous evaluative judgments about different works of art; such as, for example, colour predicates. Rather, the terms refer to features which are properties but, at the same time, individuals; they are, as it were, 'individual-properties'. Arnold Isenberg expresses this claim by stating that a study of the terms referring to the features cited in critical reasoning to support evaluative judgments 'would probably result in the introduction of an idea analogous to that of the proper name (or of Russell's 'definite description') but with this difference, that the entity uniquely named or labelled by this type of expression is not an object but a quality' (Isenberg 144). The same idea is expressed in Mary Mothersill: 'The critic speaks as we do, but his words serve what one might call an 'ostensive' function' (Mothersill 339)...The phrases [the critic] uses are designed to draw our attention to particular 'qualities' which are (in the case of painting) visual but which have no non-indexical names' (Mothersill 338).

Since the features of an artwork which a critic points out in order to support his evaluative judgments about it are individuals, his judgments are neither based on, nor an appropriate basis for deriving, general standards. Thus Isenberg concludes: 'the critic is not committed to the general claim that the quality named Q is valuable because he never makes the particular claim that a work is good in virtue of the presence of Q ' (Isenberg 139).

The idea of an individual-property or a property-individual is quite paradoxical. But according to its opponents, this is not a reason for rejecting it. Truly, the idea is paradoxical, their tenor seems to be; but only judging from the paradigms of ordinary language and argument. We should abandon those when concerned with critical judgment about works of art and accept that the aesthetic sphere is essentially different from all other kinds of reasoning and judgment we are familiar with.

This line of argument might give rise to urgent worries about philosophical quietism: only Wittgenstein-disciples are not suspicious about a philosophical method frankly abstaining from

explanation and argument and giving way to description. But complaints about a lack of explanation can only arise on the basis of agreement on the facts one would like to have explained. However, I think that the account of critical judgment I have sketched should prompt us to disagree in many respects.

Its major deficiency is that it only takes into account the *perceptible* qualities of artworks. It is true that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to find, in all critical reasoning, a single general standard stating perceptible features as sufficient conditions for aesthetic value; a standard of the form 'non-garish colours and medium-sized format make a painting good'.

But things might look more promising when we turn our attention to qualities which *supervene* on the perceptible properties of an artwork. According to M.C. Beardsley, there are three objective qualities which support the ascription of aesthetic value to an artwork: unity, complexity and intensity.² These qualities are not directly perceptible, but a work possesses them in virtue of certain perceptible properties.

However, it would be premature to think that Beardsley has found the ultimate set of properties relevant for aesthetic evaluation. Adopting Beardsley's selection, we will be facing a dilemma. If, on the one hand, we interpret the terms 'unity', 'complexity' and 'intensity' in an innocuous — that is, non-normative — sense, the attempt to base general evaluative standards on them will face a number of compelling counterexamples. To mention just one: the style of the late Beethoven and, even more, Schubert, is characterized by a tendency for simplification and reduction of the musical material. Nevertheless, we would like to ascribe their late works at least as great in aesthetic value as their earlier ones, and not only in spite of, but precisely because of their complete lack of complexity in some parts. Examples of this kind — similar ones can be construed for the other two qualities — seem to compel us to accept not only that unity, complexity and intensity are not necessary conditions for a work's value, but even that their absence may, in particular cases, enhance the latter.

The other horn of the dilemma is to try to escape this problem by giving the three terms a stronger interpretation, such that, for instance, absence of complexity on a 'lower level' may

² See Beardsley 456ff

even enhance the work's complexity on a 'higher level', while higher-level qualities are the ones which count for aesthetic evaluation. However, it is not obvious what the talk of different levels amounts to other than simply a distinction between the descriptive and the normative level: 'complexity', when ascribed on the 'low level', is a descriptive term, but when ascribed on the 'high level', a normative one implying appraisal. But this way of interpreting the terms is, obviously, question-begging. It merely restates, rather than explains, the facts we are puzzled by: that both complexity and lack of complexity may, on different occasions, enhance a work's value.

But I think that the dilemma must not discourage us. A first and tentative answer to it is that even if Beardsley's selection of properties relevant for aesthetic evaluation is not a convincing one, it might still be possible to find other, non-perceptible qualities supporting general evaluative standards. However, it is plausible to assume that every possible candidate we might consider will be facing the same dilemma again. As a more substantial answer, I thus suggest that complexity, unity and intensity — and, for the same reason, other possible candidates for qualities relevant for aesthetic value — can support both positive and negative evaluations because every property relevant to an artwork's evaluation is a property the work has in virtue of its relation to other works. Complexity, for instance, is praiseworthy if an artist brings it about by developing, elaborating and refining certain artistic techniques or rules of composition manifested in earlier works by the same or a different artist. But likewise, simplicity can be valuable, for instance if it states, like in some of Beethoven's or Schubert's late works, a conclusion to and return from a musical tradition favouring complexity and development.

Whatever properties will eventually feature in our evaluative standards, we should expect them to be relational properties. Both Beardsley, and his opponents who wish to restrict the critic's attention to the perceptible properties of an artwork, are wrong in holding that an artwork's value depends primarily on its inherent properties.

To return once more to Beardsley's opponents. There is one way in which their restrictive view of criticism may gain plausibility: as a normative claim emphasizing that criticism should not be elitist or hermetic. The results of criticism, it might be argued, should be open to view and comprehensible to everyone. Thus it is inappropriate for a critic to support his evaluative

judgments by anything but what is obviously perceptible in an artwork.

However, that norm cannot possibly be valid for forms of art other than visual. The elements of a piece of music relevant for its critical evaluation are never directly perceptible, because they exist temporally: to grasp them, perception must be assisted by memory and conceptualising thought.³ It is at this point that the favoured paradigm of visual art might lead to endorsing a false general view of criticism.

To conclude, even if there are no standards in criticism stating perceptible qualities as reasons for evaluative judgments, it does not follow that there are no evaluative standards at all. For it is not only an artwork's perceptible qualities which are relevant in criticism.

2. A second objection to the use of general standards as providing reasons for evaluative conclusions about artworks goes back to Kant. Kant expressed resolute refusal to yield to the alleged power of critical reasoning: 'if anyone reads me this poem, or brings me to a play, which, all said and done, fails to commend itself to my taste, then let him adduce Batteux or Lessing, or still older and more famous critics of taste, with all the host of rules laid down by them, as a proof of the beauty of his poem ... I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or any arguments about the matter. I would prefer to suppose that those rules of the critics were at fault, or at least have no application, than to allow my judgment to be determined by a priori proofs' (quoted from Mothersill 115).

The first thing to note in Kant's quotation is the equation of aesthetic value and beauty; this is a crucial step in the arguments I am now going to consider.

Kant emphasizes the inability of even famous and established critics to prove to him that a poem or a play is beautiful. If he did not find the work 'to commend itself to his taste', he would rather take the critic's reasoning to be faulty than accept its conclusion, he declares.

³ An idea which I shall not elaborate at this point is that the same holds true in fact for properties of pictorial works of art as well: one might claim, for instance, that in order to grasp the significance of colours in impressionist paintings, one has to see them as having evolved from the way colour is used by pre-impressionist painters.

An object — be it natural or artistic — is beautiful only if it elicits a feeling of pleasure in its spectator. If an artwork's value is identical with its beauty, the critic's enterprise to convince us of a work's value — or lack of value — amounts to the attempt to convince us to be pleased, or not to be pleased by the work. However, whether one is pleased or not is not a matter of reason, but of feeling. Hence one is justified in not accepting, like Kant, the critic's proofs for an artwork's beauty if their conclusion contravenes one's own response to it. 'The final standard ... is the direct response to a work of art; the judgment of personal taste, and this may contravene all canons', as Margaret Macdonald puts it (McDonald 119).

According to this argument, an artwork's value is necessarily related to a feeling of pleasure in its spectator, for its value is identical with its beauty. One might reply that in that case it should be easy for a critic to come up with general rules governing the ascription of value to artworks. He would merely have to investigate for a large number of artworks unanimously judged beautiful which specific features of theirs are pleasure-arousing and derive a general law from the result. However, the present argument goes, such a law would fall short of a genuine standard for critical reasoning. For even if we were in possession of a well-established, induction-based law stating that certain features of artworks tend to be pleasurable, no critic could use it in order to *convince* someone who fails to be pleased by an artwork exhibiting these features. In the face of his contravening reaction, the law would have to be changed, rather than his reaction in face of the law.

Thus even if our appreciation of works of art was law-governed, these laws could never be used as reasons in critical arguments.

It should be noticed, first, that the present argument is only effective in combination with the strong thesis that the spectator's pleasure in the artwork is *constitutive* of its beauty. If the pleasure was merely a contingent side-effect of perceiving a beautiful work, it would in fact be possible to acknowledge a work's beauty, and the critic's arguments in favour of it, without being pleased. Let us grant the strong 'sentimentalist'-thesis for the sake of the argument.

Furthermore, let us grant that aesthetic value is identical with beauty.⁴

What about the second premise: is it true that one can never be moved by reasons to be pleased by a thing?

Not obviously. A person may be convinced to be pleased by something she used to be indifferent to if she is pointed out that it serves one of her interests, or serves to satisfy one of her desires in a way she was not aware of before. This is true at least if being interested in something, or being motivated to do it, is a sufficient condition for being pleased by it. However, a defender of the present argument will be quick to reply that in that case the pleasure would be not immediate, or directed at the thing itself, but mediated by an interest or desire. Aesthetic pleasure, by contrast, it is argued, is taken in an object independently of its capacity to satisfy an interest or desire; it is, as Kant puts it, disinterested. Therefore, even if one can be convinced to like something when learning about its capacity to satisfy a desire or serve an interest, this does not disprove the claim that one cannot be moved by any possible reason given by a critic to take *aesthetic* pleasure in it.

Mary Mothersill is sympathetic yet critical to the Kantian position. Kant merely stipulates that aesthetic pleasure is different from the pleasure of achieved interest and gratified desire, but he does not give a plausible explanation for it, she claims. But she agrees that 'by hypothesis, there is a difference; what we need to discover is wherein the difference lies' (Mothersill 325).⁵

⁴ The most obvious response to the present argument would be to simply reject the premise that aesthetic value is identical with beauty. It would be easy to support this line of argument with reference to actual examples of artworks, or to general tendencies in the history of art. We only need to look at the period of Romantic art in order to find works which are all but comforting and pleasant for the spectator, and intended to be so by their creators: ugliness, distortion, perversion, disease are prominent features in Romantic art. And obviously, looking at contemporary art, it will be difficult to find works apt to comfort us and serve as sources of pleasure. However, we cannot convince a philosopher defending the claim that aesthetic value is identical with beauty by simply citing alleged counter-examples. For how should we counter their possible retort that they *are* in fact pleased by the works we point out, and that we will fail to genuinely esteem them if we are not? Therefore, it is more promising a strategy to yield to the present premise and proceed as above.

⁵ I disagree with Mothersill's Kant-exegesis. Kant does give an elaborate explanation of the specific nature of aesthetic pleasure; although one Mothersill, like many contemporary commentators, might not be willing to accept. According to Kant, aesthetic pleasure arises from aesthetic judgment which is of a specific nature.

In ordinary cases when we judge an object to be a source of pleasure, our judgment is a means to register that the object at hand has a certain property — we do so by applying a concept to the object — which is apt to satisfy a desire or match an interest of ours. By contrast, if our pleasure is aesthetic, it is the

To provide what she is asking for, Mothersill refers to the conception of criticism we discussed in section 1, as she finds it in Arnold Isenberg's writings. To recall, according to that account, it is a critic's task to direct our attention by means of indexical terms to the 'individual-qualities' or 'quality-individuals' of a work of art. He does this in order to direct our attention to the work's aesthetic value or beauty. Thus when we appreciate the work's value and take pleasure in its beauty, we thereby take pleasure in its 'individual-qualities'. In contrast, if an object pleases me because it serves an interest or satisfies a desire of mine, it does so in virtue of an ordinary property or quality which is referred to by a general term. Thus what distinguishes aesthetic from ordinary pleasure is that it is directed at a certain kind of object, more correctly: an individual-quality.

Mothersill's account is not satisfying, and for the same reasons she employs against Kant: the stipulation of the mysterious hybrid 'property-individual' as the object of aesthetic pleasure merely restates, rather than solves, the problem of identifying the specific feature which makes pleasure aesthetic rather than ordinary.

To solve the problem remains a challenge. As long as it has not been successfully accomplished, the premise that reasons cannot convince us to take pleasure in an artwork is not valid — for in order to validate it, it must be restricted to aesthetic pleasure, and thus complemented by a viable distinction between ordinary and aesthetic pleasure. Thus we can remain with the claim that a critic can convince us with reasons to appreciate an artwork, even if the pleasure we take in it is constitutive of its value. Being shown, by a critic's arguments, that an artwork serves an interest or satisfies a desire of ours, we may come to take pleasure in it even if we did not before.

judgment itself — 'the mere judgment about the object' (Critique of Judgment, §3) — which causes it. Aesthetic judgments are sources of pleasure not because they register something pleasant to be present in an object, or a pleasant object to be present, but because it is a pleasure to make them. They are not, as Kant emphasizes in a number of different formulations, *directed at the object*.

This may sound barbaric to the ears of many: are we now trying to subordinate art to practical purposes? Should we not protect it from that fate and keep its value untainted by practical interest? These questions point us towards the next section. But the offhand reply I want to make is that the suspicion of barbarism might be less suggestive if one supposes it is out of our cognitive interest in and desire for learning the truth that we appreciate art.

3. The final objection I wish to consider is due to Stuart Hampshire in his 'Logic and Appreciation'. Hampshire takes into account an important point that we have neglected in the debate so far: the perspective of the artist who creates the work of art which will subsequently be an object of the critic's judgments. Artistic creation is essentially different from problem-solution, Hampshire argues. An artist does not start out from a general problem — for instance, the task to create 'something beautiful' — to then go on and create a work as a solution to that problem; rather, he starts out from the plan to create one individual work. The artist does 'not set himself to create Beauty, but some particular thing' (Hampshire 162). In that sense, a work of art is *gratuitous*: it is not meant by its creator to serve any purpose other than its own existence, any 'purposes which lie outside' (Hampshire 162).

But if an artwork is not meant to comply with a general standard, it is unfair to judge it by its fitness to do so. It is inappropriate to apply general norms and standards to artworks in order to compare and grade them. The urge to do so, Hampshire claims, stems from the wish to draw an analogy between aesthetic and moral judgment. While in moral judgments actions are judged by general moral standards, attempting to apply the same procedure to artworks means to be 'a moralist in criticism' (Hampshire 168), that is, to be a moralist where one should be an aesthete.

Hampshire's argument is powerful and beautiful, too, if one is allowed to apply aesthetic terms to a philosophical argument. For it emphasizes the dignified autonomy of art, averting attempts to instrumentalise it for unworthy purposes.

But precisely the effort to retain and protect art's very own dignity can easily and dangerously bring about the opposite result when it leads to regarding the sphere of art as detached and isolated from all other spheres of life, too dignified to interact with and influence

them in any respect. It is philistine, to be sure, to exploit art for commercial purposes, or propaganda, or for cheap emotionalising effects in movie soundtracks. But on the other hand, we will incapacitate, rather than dignify art if the only interest we take in an artwork is, in Hampshire's words, 'to hold ... [it] still in attention, by itself' and for its own sake' (Hampshire 166) — only that, Hampshire writes, 'would count as having an aesthetic interest in it' (Hampshire 167).

Part of the power of Hampshire's argument derives from the suggestive expression '*inside* and *outside* the artwork'. Only what is intended by the creating artist is *internal* to the artwork, Hampshire argues; anything else is *external*. But what is external to the artwork is alien to it. The artist does not intend the work to satisfy a general standard; therefore, to apply a general standard for evaluation is to apply an external, and thereby an alien or inappropriate standard.

Hampshire's view of artistic production seems to be quite naive. It is certainly not true that an artist never pays respect to general aesthetic standards and normative guidelines. Reflection is part of the productive procedure. But supposing that Hampshire is right — even then, I think, we could still legitimately apply a general standard to evaluate the work. For I would like to contest the idea that any feature of a work not intended by the artist who produced it is *external* in the sense of *alien* to his work, that is, not part of its essence.

An artwork is part of the history of art, and part of the history of the particular artform it is an instance of, whether its creator intends it to be so or not. It is necessarily part of that history because both the techniques and the material — that is to say, not merely the *physical* material, but the basic elements of artistic production, for instance scales, harmonies and chords in the case of musical composition — used by an artist in his creation are not invented by him from scratch, but bequeathed by art history. In virtue of its historical existence, an artwork stands in relation to a number of other works in the past and in the future which its creator cannot possibly be aware of.

It is the fact that every artistic creation in one form of art is an attempt to master material and techniques which are common to and have developed in the course of the history of all the preceding works of that form of art, which make it comparable to its predecessors and may even allow for the works' hierarchisation.

We can now see that the framework of 'problem and solution' is not as inappropriate to the sphere of artistic creation as Hampshire takes it to be. Even if an artist is not aware of it, his creation is a solution to a problem inherited from preceding works: the problem of mastering historically bequeathed material and techniques. Of course, some works try to radically break free from the history of art and purge themselves of everything possibly handed over from tradition. Confronted with new works of that kind, we are often at a loss when it comes to evaluate them. But not all works are like that; most are rightly regarded as part of a long history and rightly compared with the works constituting that history.

In short, the 'monadic' nature which, according to Hampshire, an artwork has, does not do justice to its historical existence, in virtue of which it shares inherited standards with other works. I agree with Hampshire that it is wrong to justify and evaluate artworks in light of practical purposes, and that to justify them in that way means not to do justice to their nature as artworks. To appreciate them in the right way, 'the spectator-critic ... needs to suspend his natural sense of purpose and significance' (Hampshire 166). But, as I have tried to show, he does not therefore have to abandon all general standards of and reasons for evaluation.

Critical reasoning is indispensable for drawing a distinction between good and bad works of art. I have considered and contested claims and arguments calling into question the view that a critic makes evaluative judgments on the basis of general reasons and standards. If my arguments are successful, we will be able to retain that view, at least in the face of the objections I considered. And retaining it is important, if our hope that criticism will provide us with guiding standards for judging works of art ourselves is not to turn out to be illusory.

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