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The Social Basis of Art Criticism

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In this paper I propose to discuss what I consider a basic problem in art criticism. -- the possibility of reconciling divergent value judgments within the framework of a theory which is opposed to the notion of absolute and universal values. In selecting this problem I do not want to suggest that there are no other problems in art criticism, or that an ~~xxxx~~ evaluative criticism of the sort advocated here is the only kind of criticism. I am well aware of the many questions in criticism which are in need of solution; however, I believe that many questions, now heatedly debated, will be clarified in the course of my investigation, and I call the problem "basic" because a great~~xx~~ number of the discussions that arise in criticism are, in many instances, closely connected with, if not reducible to it. I shall introduce the problem by describing the concrete situation in which it arises. The situation which I have in mind is one in which two people who look a painting disagree in regard to its aesthetic value.¹ (For convenience' sake I shall call these people "percipients".) "Disagreement" in this context is defined as a divergence of opinions, interests, desires, attitudes, etc. on the part of the various percipients concerned in regard to an aesthetic phenomenon. In actual situations such divergencies are expressed by the fact that one person (percipient) prefers a still-life by Picasso to a nude by Renoir which is liked or approved of by another person (percipient).

Assuming that a certain amount of agreement in regard to the value, or disvalue, of certain forms of behaviour; situations, or objects,

is a necessary condition for the successful functioning of a socially organized cultural group, and assuming that art is subject to the general conditions of cultural behaviour (and not an extra-cultural phenomenon), it would seem that one of the tasks of art criticism is to clarify, mediate and, if possible, reconcile such divergencies as described above. The specific rejection of a theory of absolute and universal values, that is to say, the acceptance of a relational theory of value as the framework in which such mediation is to take place, should make it abundantly clear that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ I am not suggesting that reconciliation is always possible or that it should be achieved under all conditions or at any price.

If we accept the conditions of cultural life and growth referred to above - and I cannot see how they could be rejected - then we are confronted with the dilemma which modern art criticism has to face : evaluative criticism presupposes some sort of system of standards, yet many art critics (and I should count myself among them) reject the notion that all works of art can be judged in terms of ~~xxx~~ standards that are applicable to all of them and that are relevant to works of all times and ~~xxx~~ periods. The study of the history of art and of the history of ideas provides little evidence to support the notion of absolute and universal values, but a great deal of evidence to the contrary. In addition, one must point out that such a system is undesirable from the viewpoint of social cooperation, because those who advocate it, too often tend to enforce one particular set of values (alleged to be absolute and universal) and not permit of any divergence of evaluative acts or decisions of different individuals.

These facts have led some authors to suggest a way out of the dilemma which, as far as I can see, is not a solution but rather an evasion of the problem. It has been argued by some authors that, since human beings ~~xxx~~ as individuals are unique, and that, since works of art are unique value structures, divergencies concerning their value are in many cases inevitable and, if occurring, not reconcilable. It is, of course, not my intention to deny or doubt the uniqueness of individual structures, animate or inanimate. However, it seems to me that a theory which stresses uniqueness exclusively and which, in consequence, denies the possibility of evaluative criticism, is not adequate in the sense that it does not account for a number of facts relevant to criticism and the situations which necessitate the passing of value judgments. The arguments often advanced against evaluative criticism can be summarized as follows. The ~~xx~~ evaluation of a phenomenon presupposes standards in terms of which it can be judged. Standards, however, imply classes and since works of art are not classifiable but are unique, we cannot have evaluative criticism. It is consistent with this position that one holds that it is the critic's function to interpret the work of art, but not to pass judgment. The first argument seems to me an attempt to justify what is clearly a preference for a particular kind of value -- the value of uniqueness and/or originality -- by an appeal to the principle that a thing is identical only with itself. However, if we wish to apply the relation of identity in this manner to things, (not restricting it to names or symbols) then it is applicable to all instances and has no particular and exclusive relevance to art. In this sense, any event in physics is "unique", yet the usefulness of classes and standards in physics can hardly be denied. Similarly, every human being is "unique" in this sense, nevertheless the possibility of classification and the

existence of standards of behaviour cannot be doubted. That is to say, if one denies the possibility of establishing classes and standards for aesthetic objects on grounds of their uniqueness, then the establishing of classes and standards in all other fields can also be denied on the same grounds.

In regard to the critic's functioning only as an interpreter, the following comments are offered. Since a critic usually does not interpret works of art chosen at random and indiscriminately, but presumably takes an interest in the the work of art which he interprets, he has, in selecting certain works of art and rejecting others, applied some sort of standard. In view of the fact that the critic, by interpreting a certain work of art, wants to arouse interest in an audience which may be indifferent to this work of art, I fail to see why he should pretend to an attitude of indifference, which in fact he does not hold. The request that a critic should state ~~his~~ the conclusions which he has reached concerning the aesthetic value of a given work of art, should not be interpreted to mean, and does not imply in any way, that he should force his judgment upon others, or that he should cling to one approach and one set of standards exclusively.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that in our present culture criticism does actually take place and is generally considered to perform an important function; it occurs in educational institutions where the work of students is graded. Criticism published in journals and newspapers functions in fact (if not in intention) as a value judgment; also the whole system of juries, awards, prizes, etc. would become meaningless without a criticism that acknowledged value judgments.

The problem which a theory of art criticism should solve is therefore not whether comparative value judgments are possible, but it is rather

the problem of evolving an approach which facilitates comparative evaluations without falling back upon a system of absolute and universal values. The approach proposed here is based upon the following three assumptions : (1) Notwithstanding the individuality of percipients, it is possible to reconcile divergent preferences and interests; (2) in certain situations, it is desirable that an agreement concerning the value, or disvalue, of certain phenomena be achieved (which does not mean that agreement must, or can be achieved in all situations and under all circumstances); (3) notwithstanding the uniqueness of individual works of art, they may be ~~expressed~~ considered comparable inter se within the descriptively definable limits of their respective classes or styles.

The third assumption above raises the question of classification of works of art. This question I have discussed fully elsewhere² and, for the purposes of this discussion, I restrict myself to a brief summary of the main points of those investigations. Any phenomenon can be classified in many different ways and the adequacy of a particular system of classification depends upon the purpose for which it is to be used. Similarly, the question of how wide or how narrow a given class is to be, is a matter of practical considerations. The major question with which we are concerned is, of course, "on what basis are we to classify works of ~~art~~ art?". In regard to that question, the following comments are offered. Since, in the criticism of works of the visual arts, one is dealing with objects that are perceived visually, no system of classification, comparison and evaluation can be adequate that is not based upon, and in conformity with, the principles of the psychology of perception. In saying this, I do not advocate what has been sometimes called a "purely formalist approach" - that would, in fact, be in contradiction to the request that

attention be paid to the psychology of perception. I am saying, however, that if one considers objects primarily as visual objects, then the first step in classifying them must be in terms of visually perceived similarities. These similarities are gestalt similarities, rather than similarities of separate single characteristics. By that I mean the following: one can discover the same shade of reddish-brown, let us say, in Rembrandt's Hendrikje Stoffels at a Window and Miro's Composition (1933) and hence it would be permissible to classify the two pictures on the basis of that similarity. However, I should hold that perceived as wholes, as gestalts, the Rembrandt and the Miro have so little in common that, in terms of our approach, they are incomparable inter se. In practice, a great number of criteria which are used in criticism are derived from the classes which have been established through art historical studies; not only have such classes been applied to works of art of past periods, but they have also been applied, on the strength of similarities, to contemporary works of art.

The problem, then, consists in analyzing the accepted classifications or styles, and in showing why we perceived as similar paintings which are said to belong to the same style or class. Furthermore, in cases in which we have as yet not developed useful class concepts, as is the case of a great deal of modern art, we must endeavour to discover the gestalts in terms of which such works of art can best be seen as unified and ~~xxx~~ coherent wholes. Wölfflin, in his Principles of Art History,³ has established two classes - linear and painterly - which are relevant to two kinds of art; it is now necessary to add new classes in order to be able

to evaluate adequately those paintings which do not fall into either of Wölfflin's two classes.

Feeling justified in assuming that in the visual arts descriptively definable classes can be, and have been, used, we may now turn to an analysis of some of the implications of the above assumptions. In view of the well-known fact that one and the same work of art can have a different value for different percipients, the notion that a work of art must have one, and only one, aesthetic value for all percipients is rejected as untenable. From this it follows that, in cases of disagreement, the intersubjective ^{aesthetic} value of a given work of art is undetermined until the end of the discussion -- such a value emerges during the discussion. The question with which criticism is concerned is, therefore, not whether a percipient feels, or can feel, in a certain way towards a work of art, but rather whether it is desirable (from the critic's point of view) that he should feel in a certain way towards a work of art in a given situation. In other words, the question is not whether a work of art has positive value, but rather whether two percipients can agree that it should have positive value.

If we consider the reaching of such agreements as the aim of criticism, two possible ways of achieving such an aim seem to be offered.

(1) Percipient A requests percipient B to accept his valuation of the work of art in question (or vice versa). (2) In a process of exchange of observations and interpretations, either of the two percipients discovers, or both discover jointly, new aspects of the work of art, and such discoveries lead either one, or both of the percipients to adopt attitudes different from the ones held previously.

According to the position assumed here, the aesthetic value of a work of art cannot be defined independently of the satisfaction of a percipient's expectations. The problem with which we are dealing here consists in changing a percipient's expectations towards a given work of art. In other words, if someone adopts a negative attitude towards Henry Moore's Reclining Figure, and if it is considered desirable that he adopt a positive attitude towards it, then the critic's task consists in pointing out to him, that, by assuming a different set of expectations, he may be able to adopt a positive attitude, and thus gain aesthetic satisfaction from an object that seemed to offer little or no possibility for such satisfaction prior to the discussion. Since art criticism is not concerned exclusively with the percipient's attitude, but rather with the conditions within the work of art towards which such attitudes are taken, it would seem necessary to point out those aspects of the work of art which, in the critic's opinion, would make a change desirable and justifiable.

I should like to distinguish here between two kinds of statements :

- (1) Statements concerning the consequences of a change of attitude; such statements might be called "inducements"; they ~~predispose~~ predispose a percipient to a change of attitude and expectations; and
- (2) statements concerning the aspects of the work of art towards which a change of attitude is said to be desirable, and which, if approached relevantly, will yield the consequences announced in the "inducement".

The statements constituting the inducement are derived from the definition of aesthetic value and art. It becomes clear, I think, that the inducement, i.e. the definition of art and of aesthetic value says little about the aesthetic qualities of the work of art, but is rather a statement

of the role which art and aesthetic value should play within a given cultural group, and the socially approved reactions which a percipient should have when confronted with a work of art. For example, if aesthetic value is defined as "pleasure on the part of the beholder", then the part of the definition which constitutes the inducement consists in a prediction that the percipient will gain more pleasure if he adopts ^{the attitude} towards the object which the critic urges him to adopt, and it also assures the percipient that it is socially acceptable and proper to experience pleasure when having an aesthetic experience.

Inducements are necessary but not sufficient for an effective art criticism. They are necessary in the sense explained above; they are insufficient because they do not specify how and in what ways the predicted state of satisfaction is to be brought about - they merely predict, or urge, that a state of satisfaction is to be achieved, and the justification of achieving satisfaction is not derived from the aesthetic qualities of the work of art, but from the system of values sanctioned by a cultural group. Let us imagine, for example, a critic who addresses another percipient with the intention of arousing his interest in, and changing his attitude towards van Gogh's Sunflowers. If this critic tells the percipient that he will experience pleasure because the work is beautiful, the critic has merely stated what is the proper reaction towards beauty (in another cultural setting the proper reaction might well be moral elevation, etc.) But the critic has not stated why the work is supposed to be beautiful, or in what respects a work of art in which the percipient is supposed to take an interest differs from one in which he is ^{not} supposed to take an interest -- and that is, after all, the issue about which disagreements are apt to

arise. In most cases the critics have, of course, not restricted themselves to merely asserting that ^{certain} a work of art is beautiful, dynamic, aesthetically valuable, morally elevating, or whatever the case may be, but they have generally attempted to lend weight to their inducements by saying that pleasure will be experienced because the work is beautiful because it is integrated, harmonious, vivid, etc. etc. Unfortunately, such a justification confuses the issue instead of clarifying it by introducing such value qualities as "harmony", "integration", "vividness", etc., and treating them as if they were objective properties of the work of art.

The evaluation of a work of art involves the evaluation of the function of its components. The function of components, however, cannot be judged without a knowledge of the objective which is to be attained by their functioning. Since our position implies that criticism cannot be based upon the assumption that there is one, and only one, objective for all components in all works of art, it follows that criticism must be preceded by an agreement concerning the objective in relation to which the function of components is to be judged. Failure to ^{do} _{do} this results either in meaningless criticism or implies that all components in all works of art perform the same function and that the manner in which they are supposed to function is known and understood by everybody. Such an assertion could only be supported by confusing the specific perceptual and aesthetic function of components within the work of art, with the role ascribed to art and aesthetic value in a cultural group. For example, if the role of aesthetic value and art is defined as that of giving moral elevation, then the perceptual function of the components is not that of ~~mixing~~ being morally elevating, but of achieving a perceptual objective, and it is the successful achieving of that objective which brings about the moral elevation -- otherwise one

would have to claim that certain colours are moral and other colours are immoral. What is meant by "perceptual function" of components may be further explained by comparing two paintings belonging to two different styles. In Rembrandt's The Jewish Bride the pictorial components, colours and shapes, are combined in a particular manner to create the impression of a third dimension on a two-dimensional surface; ^{whereas} in Mondrian's Composition in White, Black and Red the colours and shapes are combined which tends to give the impression of a two-dimensional composition on a two-dimensional surface.

aesthetic

If one grants that the perceptual function of components in different works of art is different -- and I cannot see how this could be denied -- then the necessity of reaching an agreement concerning the aesthetic perceptual objective of a given work of art for the purposes of art criticism is obvious. The insistence upon judging works of art and their components in terms of relevant objectives raises immediately the question, "How can one determine which of a number of possible objectives is relevant to a given work of art?"

According to the position maintained here, a work of art can have, and probably has, more than one objective. From a purely academic-theoretical point of view this statement could be interpreted to mean that any one of a practically unlimited number of objectives is applicable to any given work of art, and that, therefore, it is impossible to obtain the agreement necessary for criticism. (By implication, this would make any evaluative or comparative criticism impossible.) However, such an interpretation is not necessarily implied by the above statement, nor does it agree with the known empirical facts -- agreements, which formed the basis for criticism, have been achieved (usually in the form of tacit assumptions rather than in the form of explicit announcements). But

But even if such agreements never had been achieved, this fact would not preclude the possibility of reaching them now, or in the future, nor would it invalidate the correctness of the ~~xxxx~~ reasoning presented here. Fortunately enough, the logical reasoning is here not in contradiction to the evidence of experience.

The common cultural background, the traditions, and the purposes of those concerned in the process of criticism serve to eliminate quite a ~~xx~~ number of possible objectives considered by them ~~xx~~ to be extreme, arbitrary, or irrelevant. Few critics today, to give but one example, would insist on considering (and condemning) Degas' Ballet Dancers in terms of the Neo-Classicist clarity of Poussin's compositions. Within cultural groups certain habits of perception have been formed which are relatively stable and relatively uniform; The relative stability of such perceptual patterns frequently hides the problem discussed here (and introduces another one). Since the approach to works of art is shared by a majority of ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ people, it is taken for granted that it is the only possible and proper approach to all works of art. For example, as long as the Classicist perceptual pattern was dominant and accepted by the majority, all works of the Baroque period were seen as departing from a "natural" way of looking at paintings, and were condemned accordingly.

While the relative stability and uniformity of perceptual patterns is the basis of organized criticism, it creates, on the other hand, the very problems with which we are concerned here. Disagreements concerning the aesthetic value of works of art frequently, if not regularly, occur when new styles ⁱⁿ ~~xx~~ art arise which cannot be criticized in terms of the prevalent, accepted patterns of perception. Thus, when Monsieur Wolff described the works of Pissarro, Monet, or Renoir as lunatic; when Mr;

Kenyon Cox denounced van Gogh and Gauguin as mad men, and when Picasso or the Surrealists are condemned as insane, we have an illustration of the inability on the part of percipients to break away from accepted perceptual patterns. All too often, one condemns as bad anything that differs from one's accustomed manner of perceiving, without an effort to at least inquire whether these new works could not be considered in terms of some kind of new perceptual pattern (and thus be found to give satisfaction).

The two major conditions for an adequate art criticism developed so far ^{are} ~~were~~ : (1) that, in cases of divergence of opinion, the value of a given work of art emerges during the discussion concerning it; (2) that, although "inducements" (in the sense in which we used the word) are necessary, there is need for an agreement concerning the manner in which one can achieve the ~~subjective~~ aesthetic satisfaction which is ~~promised~~ predicted (promised) in the inducement.

The following example will, I hope, clarify ^{further} the questions involved here. Let us suppose that a critic is trying to persuade another person that he is wrong in condemning a still-life by Braque because "things don't look like that in real life"; the critic will point out to this person that such standards are not relevant to Braque's manner of painting and he will urge him to approach the painting in a different way, i.e. more relevantly. What arguments can the critic advance in support of his suggestion without ~~falling~~ referring to his personal tastes and preferences, and without invoking the authority of alleged absolute and universal aesthetic laws?

The following suggestion is proposed in answer to the above question. A critic, when urging another person to look at a particular painting in a new way, in fact says : " if you approach this painting in a new manner, then you will gain more satisfaction from it (than you are likely to get if you approach ^{it} in your present way) ". In other words, he states an hypothesis and we must ask, how can such an hypothesis, which contains a reference to a percipient's enjoyment, and hence a subjective factor, be verified without making the verification dependent on subjective and individual preferences (of either critic~~x~~ or the other percipient) ? For our purposes the following three controls can be offered. (1) An hypothesis concerning the ^{aesthetic} objective of a painting is relevant if contents which are asserted, or understood, to be present can be shown to be present. Any content, presented directly or symbolically, is a component of a work of art and is hence of importance to art criticism. Thus, if one wants to interpret and criticize a painting presenting two female figures, one nude, one clothed, it is important to know what, in the context of the composition, these figures represent. Without knowing (a) the contents of Titian's Sacred and Profane Love and (b) which of the two figures represents sacred and which profane love, an interpretation and criticism of the picture will at best be incomplete, quite likely to be misleading, and wrong from the point of view of the history of ideas. (2) An hypothesis concerning the aesthetic objective of a painting is relevant, if the aesthetic expression of colours, ~~and~~ lines, and shapes in the composition is in conformity

with the aesthetic expression which these colours, lines, and shapes have within the cultural tradition to which the percipient belongs, or other traditions which he has come to understand. The term "aesthetic expression", as used here, refers to the fact that certain colours and shapes are habitually associated with certain states of mind and feelings, e.g. certain dark colours are usually associated with sadness, melancholia and mourning, others with gaiety, etc.⁴ To be sure, such associations are culturally conditioned, as for instance the use of the colour black as the colour of mourning in Western civilization, but these associations are relatively stable and the expressiveness is usually experienced as a quality of the colour and deviations are experienced as disturbing -- as one would experience ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ disturbance should a funeral march be played in waltz rhythm. (3) An hypothesis concerning the aesthetic objective of a painting is relevant if it can be shown that the pictorial components are present which are alleged to bring about by their function and interrelations the kind of objective which the work of art is asserted to have. For instance, the hypothesis that Rembrandt's Saul and David is a painterly composition (in the sense in which Wölfflin has defined the term) can be supported by pointing out that the colour areas merge, that clear contours are avoided, that the light is concentrated in a few areas, instead of being evenly distributed, that a clear symmetry is avoided, etc. etc.

It can justifiably be claimed that the three controls presented above are independent of a percipient's preferences and that the verification of the hypothesis concerning the aesthetic objective of a painting depends, as does any scientific inquiry, on the knowledge and integrity of the investigator. Iconological studies are matters of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~

factual empirical inquiry and so are investigations concerning the aesthetic expressiveness which certain colours, lines, and shapes have for certain cultural groups. The third control offered involves a knowledge of such concepts as "painterly", or "linear" composition, and similar concepts. If such concepts are not known to the other percipient, then the critic will have to develop them in a process of cooperation, the critic makes, in such a case, certain predictions (concerning the function of components in relation to an objective) which, if they are verified, justify the assumptions on which the predictions were based.⁵ (This is, of course, nothing but the ordinary procedure in experimental investigations.) During the process of verification the critic must support his assertions by referring constantly to observable pictorial factors, and he must guide the observer's perception by means of a description which operates with constant cross-references between what the critic claims the percipient should see and those factors in the painting which would support such claims.

In the preceding parts of this paper I have endeavoured to show that disagreements concerning the aesthetic value of works of art can be reconciled in a reasonable manner, i.e. in a manner that does not depend exclusively on an emotional appeal and which does not depend on dogmen and laws alleged to be absolute. Of course, I do not claim that all disagreements will disappear and that all value judgments justified in the manner described above will be found acceptable by all concerned -- such a claim would be in conflict

with the basic assumptions of the approach advocated here. However, I do believe that greater clarity and a degree of mutual tolerance can be achieved if a reasonable method is employed. For example, if one percipient, A, objects to a painting by Rembrandt because the contour lines are not clear, because figures and surrounding atmosphere seem to merge; because the main figures are not arranged symmetrically around a central axis, etc., then percipient B can point out to him that the set of expectations which A brings to the Rembrandt is not relevant to it (but is rather relevant to a painting of the linear kind, e.g. Palma Vecchio). During his interpretation B need not invoke in any way his personal preference, his likes, or dislikes of either the linear or painterly kind of painting. After such an interpretation A might be willing and able to adopt a new set of expectations and obtain aesthetic satisfaction where he previously experienced frustration and disappointment. On the other hand, A might not be willing to change what he considers his criteria for aesthetic satisfaction; however, if B's interpretation was at all relevant to the pictorial facts, then A should at least be able to comprehend the irrelevance of linear criteria (expectations) to painterly works of art. If A is at all tolerant, he should be able to understand how and why others may gain aesthetic satisfaction which he, for reasons of his own, is not able or willing to obtain.

At the beginning of this paper I pointed out that a certain amount of agreement in regard to values is a necessary condition for the successful functioning of a cultural group. The recognition of such

social needs, however, should not lead us to insist upon complete agreement under all circumstances. While I advocate the reconciliation of divergent opinions where such reconciliation is possible, I should, nevertheless, want to leave room for the sort of informed dissent indicated in the preceding paragraph. In conclusion I should like to say that the approach and method advocated here would, with necessary modifications, seem to be applicable to other areas of human affairs in which disagreement arises and reconciliation is needed.

- 1) if percipients believe that they agree, the problem is hidden; if they do, in fact agree, then problem does not arise.
- 2) cf; H.Hungerland "Problems of Descriptive Analysis in the Visual Arts" J.Aesth. vol. IV (1945) 20-25; "Suggestions for Procedure in Art Criticism" J.Aesth. vol; V (1947) 189-195; "Consistency as a Criterion in Art Criticism" J.Aesth vol. VII (1949) 94-112.
- 3) Heinrich Wölfflin Principles of Art History New York 1933;
- 4) It is assumed here that "aesthetic expression" is distinguishable from "self-expression" and from "cultural expression"; "self-expression" refers to the fact that it is sometimes possible to infer an artist's personality traits from his use of certain shapes and colours; "cultural expression" refers to the fact that it is sometimes possible to infer certain general characteristics of a cultural period from the use and handling of certain themes or composition schemes.
- 5) The reliability of the prediction can be further tested by applying whatever results have been achieved to other, similar works of art. Since the working hypothesis is first stated in regard to only one work of art, in its conditions are met if this particular case a percipient does indeed gain more aesthetic satisfaction. Obviously, our case will be strengthened if a wider range of applicability can be shown -- as indeed can be done.