



FORUM
CONGRESS QUALITY
7th-10th of July

Asociación Internacional de Críticos de Arte.



**17 CONGRESO EXTRAORDINARIO
36 ASAMBLEA GENERAL**

CRITIQUE AS A MIRROR OF MEANING

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If every critical dialogue sets out with a creation and a sort of reverse action attempting to dismantle the elements intrinsic to a work of art in search of its meaning, then there is no doubt that the act of criticism is an attempt to reach the matter of its virgin state and retrace the path which lead to its completion. The artist and the critic become two points moving around the process of creation; as though they were antipodes. They never coincide in presence, one labors to master the void and express himself, the other stares through his lens at what has been expressed in an attempt to explain the void; a nothingness that becomes everything - the anguish for a shape. This leads to two attitudes: while the artist holds the meaning but not the shape, until he has completed his work, the critic holds the shape but not the meaning, yet meaning is the creation of the critic who in the face of the image feels boundless interpretation possibilities which are his creation, but which are also his mistakes; because the meaning of a work of art is the work of art itself and only that. We are reminded of a drama critic who, after watching a performance of the "Midsummer's Night Dream" by Lindsay Kemp, thinks he sees in the lion on Juliet's shawl, the image of Yago. In familiar language, the critic cannot be a nitpicker. The story by Henry James, "Image on the Tapestry", is an appropriate example; the writer suggests a secret and the critic must discover it: the meaning is transmitted by the image and only that image - the question is how was the image achieved?

The last time I visited the Prado Museum in Madrid to admire "The Meninas" by Velazquez, I had just read Alice Through the Looking Glass, I found myself living for months in the mirrors of Velazquez and Carroll, hallucinated in the face of the mirror, which sends back a critical virtual image, and the interplay of opposites, which, as I faced the mirror, made me realize that the critic acts in the realm of reflection; he meditates on the work of art and duplicates it when he looks at it. We insist on the retracing of steps: from the whole to the parts; as in Alice Through the Looking Glass, the opposite side of the reality, for its imitation has become ineffective. This does not mean that we must insist that criticism is the art of judging - it is, rather, an interpretative science. The scholar of a work of art is a theoretician who builds a theory from practice, first come the works of art, then the definition of a trend.

Thus I view art as an invention and its critique as an interpretation. Art has never been an imitation for not even the most realistic landscape can replace the real landscape. There can be no signs of reality in a plastic creation - if we were to say that no image is real, other than the material thing itself; that a copy of a material thing is but an iconicity, a secondary reflected reality, we would be denying realism in art; in that case, either art does not presuppose

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an object and becomes an invention, or it does presuppose it and becomes a secondary reality. In both cases, it is up to the critic to discover a passion or a motive; even when a reality (that of the work of art) lacks configurations identifiable at a glance, its genetic precedent exists in the mind of its creator. Yet the observer too has his own vision which he will overlay on the real meaning. In reality, there will be as many overlays as there are sensitivities or cultures gazing at an artistic creation. That same creation will, however, have only one meaning and it is up to the critic to discover it. The message, enclosed in an artistic drawing is symbolic, cultural, or connoted, and its analysis must go back to its genuine sources; the emotional involvement might be valid as a reaction of the observer, but emotional subjectivity on behalf of the critic could interfere with his prophetic function and make him lose contact with the real aesthetic message.

Obsession with the visual message (and I refer to "non figurative art"), could, however, lead traditional or academic criticism away from the true meaning of an object of art. Collectors of highly coveted works of art frequently point out that they do not know what is expressed in the works, they are admired most for their signature. More than a bourgeois anecdote, this implies the importance of the content already implicit in signs. Indeed, these signs must have a meaning, not any kind of meaning, but that arising from a deductive logical sequence, comparable to that of language. Although Humberto Eco writes in his *Semiology of Visual Messages*, "Not all communication phenomena can be explained by means of linguistic categories." What is attempted is, and again, Humberto Eco's words express the purpose of this presentation: "the problem of semiology of visual communications consists in knowing how a sign, whether graphic or photographic, with no material element common to things, can look the same as the things themselves.

This statement is certainly serious, but even more serious, is the fact that semiology is just one branch of learning; the significant aspects that lead to the meaning of the object under study through a semiological critique (which I propose for a new criticism of new art) can also be reached through any well founded critical trend. Otherwise, criticism becomes worthless and we might as well report the facts without expressing any value judgement. On the other hand, if the word or the image do not lead to meaning, the sense of any analysis is lost. And, what is worse, if the aim of a work of art is to communicate a message, why then send incomprehensible messages?

Such a rationality in art would, however, seem to lose importance if we are to follow the words of Edgar Allan Poe, the critic: "the value of a poem is directly related to the stimulus it produces." We could then state that as long

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a work of art stimulates us, its rationalistic roots are of secondary importance. After all, discovering the organic content of an object of art is less important than feeling the impact of its secret beauty.

For contemporary sensitivities, the language belongs to his time, and it is the one he understands, because he feels it, but, perhaps, the critic's role is to explain the feeling. Sometimes we say, "I feel this way but I do not know what is the matter", and I believe that the non-figurative artist and his critic as well do it: they feel. Pierre Guiraud, the semiologist, said, not in vain, "Abstract art reflects our affective life".

The final meaning of any work of art is affective, but the final meaning of criticism is intellectual. Once more we find a certain antinomy between the functions, which if fully applied, neither exclude the above described functions, if creativity is predominately sensitive in its reason for existence, it is cerebral in its technical training, a critic without sensitivity is a poor critic. But it is not a question of such widespread factors, it is more an indication of the growing difficulties of criticism to attempt to penetrate the true meaning of works of art, works which break all of the known codes.

McLuhan, for example, when referring to mass media and its mutations and its "hot" and "cold" features, considers that Western culture is an intellectual overheating and an affective frustration which must be necessarily solved by the participation of the individual. In the aesthetic order, the non-figurative arts are in charge of the cooling of Western knowledge for the welfare of affective individualization. Hence, as I understand it, the gap between the creator, the artist and the critic is more and more insurmountable: the more individualized the meaning, the more futile the traditional instrument of analysis. The study of the school, the comparison to pre-existing models, the impressionist judgement will widen the gap between us and the new creature. ONE MUST PENETRATE THE WORK IN ORDER TO DISCOVER ITS LAWS.

I now return to my visit to the Prado Museum. On one wall, Velazquez shows a fragment of King Phillip IV's life. I was not there by chance, but because Michel Foucault led me there in the first chapter of his book Words and Things, to experiment with the painting of "Las Meninas" which he describes. The museum always placed a mirror in front of that painting, I had seen it there ever since I was a child, and I enjoyed it more when I saw it reflected in the mirror, more than in the original. Those courtly figures seem to come alive in the mirror, much more so than on the canvas. Moreover, in the mirror image, I am another image included in the painting. As a spectator I am a new element in the quicksilver painting, much less tangible. Had the mirror been one of those which disfigures, like the theatrical

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ugliness of Valle Inclán, I would have known very little of Velázquez' painting. The mirror is used as a symbol of the critic: to reproduce the work in one's mind, to penetrate its signs, to unravel the similarities, and to state what we have found. And that is it.