“Unification” and “Non-unification”: On Art Criticism and Art History Writing

Chuanzi Huang*, Yexin Huang

Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

Abstract

Italian art historian Lionello Venturi asserted in "History of Art Criticism" (1936) that all art histories are histories of criticism. This paper first reviews the four recognized stages of art criticism, which include description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. It analyzes Venturi's "unified view" on art histories and the histories of criticism, pointing out that evaluation is indispensable to both art historical research and art criticism. Secondly, it explores the differences and similarities between art criticism and art history from the perspectives of theoretical ontology, basic form, timeliness, narrative mode, and analytical dimension. Finally, it considers the common and separate dilemmas faced by the current academic community in the fields of art historical research and art criticism. They face the challenge of "subjectivity disappearance" in the cultural environment of pluralism and relativism, and the issue of "discourse suspension" in the contemporary landscape of decentralized art creation and multimedia. In the face of such dilemmas, researchers need to revisit the artworks and reassess value judgments.

Keywords

Art history, art criticism, relations, evaluation, dilemmas

When studying art history and discussing art phenomena from a specific historical period, it is inevitable to delve into the reasons behind their emergence, the historical context of the era, and to incorporate vivid terminology and personal emotions when describing the corresponding artworks. We then begin to criticize as we express our views on the values of the era behind them. The art histories of today are based on art categories, emphasizing an overall perception of art. Their core form is still the selection of values centered on artworks. Through different selection criteria, the multi-dimensional possibilities of art historical research are being explored. Today, criticism is not only an important bridge between artists and the public, a method of communication between exhibitions and audiences, but also a means of interpreting art history and providing testimony.

1. All the art histories are histories of criticism

1.1 Several stages of art criticism

The concept of art criticism has a relatively unified opinion, following the "four stages of art criticism” proposed by Feldman1, which include: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. According to scholars like Shen Yubing (2022) and Wang Hongyi (2019), these four parts can be summarised as follows:

1) Description: An empirical and perceptual account of the object of criticism, including visual information and background knowledge.

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1 Edmund Burke Feldman, professor at George's University, art theorist and critic.
2) Analysis: The study of aesthetic form, including analyzing the formal relationship between stylistic elements and the thematic analysis of the work, its internal spatial relationship, and its relationship with the display environment.

3) Interpretation or Explanation: Repeatedly questioning and interpreting the meaning of a work to discover unusual meanings. The researcher may draw on the knowledge of other disciplines, and the interpretation is based on the work itself rather than on the artist's intention as expressed in the work.

4) Evaluation or Judgement: The evaluator makes different judgments about the value of the work according to different criteria and methods, which is a controversial aspect of criticism.

Among these aspects, interpretation, and evaluation are usually regarded as the core of art criticism.

1.2 The "unification" of art history and art criticism

In History of Art Criticism, Lionello Venturi asserted that all art history is a history of criticism, since the description, interpretation, and evaluation of works in art history invariably involves art criticism, and can be said to be a task for criticism (Lionello Venturi, 1986). Art history writing has long been misunderstood as simply a chronological listing of facts and works with exhaustive detail. The separation and independence of art history, art criticism, and aesthetics were once seen as a standard division in the 1930s: the mission of art history was considered to be providing works of art with exhaustive detail, without judging or commenting on them; art criticism was meant to develop value judgements following the pursuit of beauty; and aesthetics was in charge of systematizing the arts and elevating them to universal significance (Jia Fangzhou, 2015). Obviously, Venturi did not agree with this statement, arguing that the most serious condition of pushing art history to the fallacy is the separation between the history of art and art criticism. If a fact is not investigated from the perspective of judgmental effect, it will be useless; if a judgment is not constructed on the foundation of historical facts, it will be a lie (Lionello, V, 1986).

The "unified view" Venturi refers to is not fiction. In terms of theoretical ontology and basic form, art history and art criticism share a fixed, stable foundation: evaluation. In other words, valuable art history requires the inclusion of criticism, as it contains choice, judgement, and most importantly, a consciousness of problems.

In terms of theoretical ontology, both fields are based on the historical interpretation of visual materials. For example, we always discuss "iconology", as the art evolved from "picture theory" to include media and photography in "image theory" and "hyperimage"2, art history remained inseparable from art criticism. (Dong Bingfeng, Xiang Zairong and Teng Yuning, 2021) The reason iconography drove art history's development as an independent discipline is its theoretical ontology of visual production and linguistic interpretation of images. Therefore, both the description of art history and the interpretation of criticism rely on analyzing the problem of viewing, including the social construction of vision and the visual construction of society.

In their basic form, both art history and art criticism involve sorting, describing, and summarizing. Art history follows the lineage of the art world because they are fundamentally historical. To discuss history, art historians must examine social trends, period characteristics, and the influence of politics, economics, philosophy, war, and colonization on artistic expression. Art criticism’s mission is to comment, often requiring critics to have a comprehensive historical perspective and descriptive ability. Critics must summarize art history and explain the phenomena’s origins. More importantly, criticism outputs value judgments, requiring precise evaluations based on historical perspectives and personal values. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand eyes; many art histories can emerge. Preceded by Arnold Hauser's Social History of Art, written from a sociological perspective, and followed by E.H. Gombrich's The Story of Art, which takes a cross-cutting perspective. Historians add personal judgments when analyzing, and their perspectives shape work selection and emphasis. Almost no one can be purely objective.

Therefore, "all art histories are the histories of criticism” means critical discussion can apply to all art historical material, not that all criticism comprises art history.

2. Not that all criticism comprises art history

2.1 The Rationality or Romance of Time

From the time dimension, art history's scale is more bound by its rational mission. Art criticism is freer to be romantic.

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2 Dong Bingfeng, Xiang Zairong, and Teng Yuning explain Felix Tillman's notion of "hyper image" as "a kind of superposition and hybridisation of image studies and image landscapes in today's world"
While art history analyses have dimensions and types, fundamental rules and general objectivity—or temporal objectivity—exist. This manifests in genres emerging from events, or groups breaking in certain years. Art fits on a timeline. In contrast, art criticism retrospectively analyzes emotional threads rooted in artists or society before events erupt. It can view time vaguely through nature, or follow history's stages rationally. Here, criticism is more selective. Retrospection in criticism may be more comprehensive.

For example, we call Paul Cézanne the “father of modernism.” In art history, apart from some genres described as influenced by Cézanne early in the 20th century, his impact is rarely recalled later. Modern art stemmed from two Western philosophy veins, leading to two style veins: Russell, Wittgenstein, and Popper’s rationalism and mathematical logic birthed Cubism, Suprematism, Futurism, and Constructivism. Alternatively, sensualism from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, emphasizing poetic existence, sparked Fauvism, Expressionism, and Surrealism. Cézanne combined both, influencing genres in both veins. His innovation resembled a “whale fall” birthing a new ecosystem. Art history's linear analysis favors the “proximity principle,” weakening Cézanne. Criticism's time is more spatial and erratic, looking back across time and space. Criticism obsessively connects phenomena to historical counterparts, letting us see Cézanne's spatial reasoning inherited by Giacometti, giving “reviews” of his influence.

2.2 Timeliness

Art history examines facts and works from the past that can be characterized, while art criticism faces current, unfolding events and art. As such, art history tends to have a longer timeframe, preferring objectivity. Art criticism has a shorter timeframe related to social changes. This "short timeliness" means criticism should be interpreted in a historical context, not that it lacks inspirational value.

For example, critic Clement Greenberg, a spokesperson for Abstract Expressionism, played a major role in modern Western art history, known more as a critic than a historian. In his Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Greenberg used terms like trash and kitsch for capitalist pseudo-art serving commerce or politics. He responded personally to post-Pop art, struggling to reconcile personal and historical perspectives, causing his discourse to falter. Postmodern artists and critics reacted against Greenberg's "purity," "flatness," and "non-utilitarianism" as contrary to discussing political and social issues (Gao Yuan, 2023). Yet from today's view, we do not deny Greenberg's value because of his limitations. Instead, we recognize his prominent role as an art critic enshrined in art history.

2.3 Narrative mode

Western art history contains three classic narrative modes: Vasari's "linear" approach before modernism; Clement Greenberg's modernist focus on epistemological meaning; and Arthur Danto's postmodern interactive narratives reacting to theoretical turns (Jing Zhongyue, 2018), which represent three different forms of art historical "reproduction": original reproduction, generalised reproduction, and reproduction after generalised reproduction. Greenberg is said to have overthrown Vasari's linear narrative by responding to the problems that arise in artistic practice, while Danto was first and foremost concerned with the philosophical problems of art1. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Greenberg's and Danto's approaches to the service of art history come out of criticism, and the latter two narrative approaches have become bound up with criticism. But whichever way we look at it, when we compare art history and art criticism, art history always contains a stronger "linear" lineage, and therefore a grander narrative. Although art criticism requires a historical perspective, its narrative is more discrete, dominated by the critic's personal will, and allows for a discussion with a smaller footing than that of art history. Art history cannot leave the historical mandate of "history," but art criticism can.

2.4 The perspective of analysis

From the perspective of analysis and methods, art criticism is beneficial to injecting more new blood into the study of art history. Corresponding to "art history" are nouns such as "social history", "literary history" and "image history"; corresponding to art science are nouns such as "sociology", "literature" and "iconography". Under the influence of

1 See Zhang Xiaoyuan's discussion of these three narratives in “The Essence of Art's Existence: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Art History (Shanghai Art Review, 04, 2016, pp. 40-44)”: primordial reproduction, i.e., art is a gradual subjugation of the visible exterior of the real world, the visibility of the world acts on the human visual system, and art recreates reality through imitation; generalised reproduction, i.e., art’s subject matter, i.e., the ontology of art, is the epistemological sense of the term. art ontology, a reproduction at the level of epistemological meaning; and reproduction after generalised reproduction, i.e. art as an object with art-theoretical properties, as expressed meaning.
globalization and information facilitation, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research have become mainstream research methodologies. The interdisciplinary perspective involved in art criticism is broader than that of art history, and can be extended to the level of “narratology” and “cosmology”. However, art history may struggle to incorporate “cosmological history” in comparison. These expanded perspectives could enrich art historical interpretation.

In summary, art history and criticism are partially “unified” yet distinctly non-unified. We should integrate them to broaden the discussion’s scope but understand they cannot completely equate. We must beware of blurring disciplinary lines and keep examining problems in today’s art historical research and criticism.

3. Reflection on today’s art history research and art criticism

3.1 The issue of subjectivity

Adopting an interdisciplinary lens can broaden art history’s scope, diversifying our perspectives. Some consider this dialectic, but it risks slipping into dominant relativism. We must consider if art history's core has been lost in this research. Which dimension does art occupy in a multidimensional cultural world? Is the distinction between art history and humanities fading? We can view criticism as an expression of art history, and art history as criticism's interdisciplinary starting point, but cannot discard art history's subjectivity.

Current criticism often extra struggles between aesthetic analysis and cultural/political discussion. An interpretive focus can ignore descriptive experience and sensibility. Therefore, there is a common phenomenon of conflict between description and interpretation—emphasizing interpretation while ignoring description, being eager to analyze the context, and interpreting the meaning of the work but neglecting the sensibility of the work. Upholding judgement distinguishes criticism from general writing. Ensuring value and returning to the work can defend subjectivity. As researchers, we must see life's duality—daily experience's authenticity and rigid rules. We must discuss beauty's redemption in context, resisting relativist ambiguity. Practicing discipline can better maintain boundaries and subjectivity in artistic research.

3.2 “Discursive suspension” in “aesthetic entropy” and the streaming media era

Following Hegel, Danto once again proposed the "theory of the end of art" in 1984, calling the mixture of the "post-historical period" after the end of art a state of "aesthetic entropy"—pure, directionless, and standard-less, styleless, diverse. The omnipresence of art, its dissolution and re-establishment of itself, provides freedom for both artistic creation and research, without being restricted by history. Facing the increasingly personal and decentralized artistic creation phenomenon in contemporary times, criticism faces a kind of "discursive suspension", which is also a challenge that art history needs to face. Contemporary art has become hard to summarize, there is no fixed, majority art form, and everyone is equal. Whether it is a summary of art history or a critical discourse, they all face a certain degree of "weakness" and "powerlessness."

In the increasingly dialectical contemporary landscape, criticism has always accidentally become a secondary discourse text attached to artistic practice. Its role is no longer the "legislation" of the Greenberg era, but more of "propaganda." Since the 1990s, with the strengthening of systems such as biennales and art fairs, and the strong rise of curatorial mechanisms, critics are likely to be replaced (Shen Yubin, 2022). When capital and the market begin to penetrate and dominate the art world, a lot of criticism becomes a value-added option for artistic works. However, this is not the original intention of criticism. In the era of all-media, information is flattened, and text seems to have become a decoration of the work. It is neither as fast as visual images in catching people's attention in the era of fast reading, nor can it cope well with the impetuous atmosphere of global culture. At the same time, we cannot deny the advantages of synchronicity and share in the network society, which allows us to conveniently and quickly obtain high-definition pictures of artistic works, documentaries, and research resources on radial structures shot and produced by sophisticated equipment from all over the world. Art criticism appears in the modern public sphere as part of public opinion or ideology, so it is bound to be mixed with both truth and falsehood. In the media game, gaining attention is a socially established rule (Shen Yubin, 2022). Criticism and art historical research are now, and will likely remain, part of the media game in the future. Perhaps only through the interpretation of ideological symptoms can we see people's common fears or hopes among the many pieces of information that are both true and false. Postmodernism centres on how history is viewed and how its resources are used (Wang Zhiliang, 2022). We still need to have confidence and belief in both, and we need to see the tenacity of art historical research and art criticism in facing the challenges of the times. They are speaking out in more diverse ways, and the subject form is changing.
Many of today’s critics work part-time as part of the “intermediate mechanism” between artists and the public or are curators, or observe the dynamics of the art world in academies and art galleries. As mentioned above, the rise of curation: in the process of becoming functional, curation has gradually evolved into not only a branch of criticism but also a means of special research on art history. At the same time, many independent art spaces are turning their attention to young artists who have not had a voice, providing them with opportunities while bringing overlooked voices into public discourse, which in itself constitutes criticism.

4. Conclusion

Venturi once regarded “sensitive intuition” as the most important talent of art criticism. He pointed out that it should be remembered that when a critic is forming his ideas, he or she does not do it according to the existing concepts, but, most importantly, according to the intuitional experience gained from the artworks—namely the ‘factual elements’. Today, facing the ever-changing and bizarre world, it’s not that we can’t see it, but how we choose, and how we stay grounded in change and stability. Art may be a change in form or a breakthrough in concept. As a cultural person, we must not forget the times and the roots. With the starry sky above our heads, good art is like the guidance of gods. It not only confirms the times but also directly points to people's hearts.

References


