Art Criticism as Ideology

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At a conference, Philip Swallow, an academic figure in David Lodge's novel *Small World*, gives a paper that sums up a traditional notion of criticism. He argues that the function of criticism is "to assist in the function of literature itself," which enables us "better to enjoy life, or better to endure it" (Lodge, 1985, p. 317). The view assumes transcendental greatness in writers (and, as extended in this paper, in artists). They are, according to Swallow, "men and women of exceptional wisdom, insight, and understanding. Their novels, plays and poems were inexhaustible reservoirs of values, ideas, images, which, when properly understood and appreciated, allowed us to live more fully, more finely, more intensely" (p. 317).

"It is difficult," begins Terry Eagleton in his book *Criticism as Ideology*, to see criticism as anything but an innocent discipline. Its origins seem spontaneous, its existence natural; there is literature [and art], and so — because we wish to understand and appreciate it — there is also criticism" (Eagleton, 1978, p. 11). In the course of his book, he demonstrates that the acts of criticism are not natural outcomes of reading literature [or viewing art]. Criticism comes about under certain conditions and for certain ends. The history of criticism is not linear but rather a trail of the rise and fall of various kinds of criticism that relate to belief systems and values of the writers and the specific historical moments, or milieux, in which they lived. Eagleton concludes that "criticism is not an innocent discipline, and never has been" (p. 17).

In this paper, I will argue that art criticism is necessarily informed by — and indeed inseparable from — the context in which it exists, of which ideology is an important component. I will argue that studying and discussing ideological bases for critics' and students' interpretations and judgments of art is a missing but important dimension of the process of art criticism in art education.

I. Definitions and Premises

Ideology (in a generic sense) has been associated with dogmatism and the imposition of beliefs on others. Some writers discussing criticism understand ideology in this pejorative sense. Philosopher and critic John Hospers distinguishes between an ideological interpretation that is imposed and criticism where the critic finds clues in the work of art (Hospers, 1982). It is necessary to distinguish between this sense of ideology and the use applied here. C.A. Bowers, writing on ideology and educational policy, defines the term ideology as,

an interlocking set of beliefs and assumptions that make up the background or horizon against which the members of society make sense in their daily experience . . . a socially constructed and maintained belief system or cosmology that provides the overarching rules and assumptions for symbolizing reality. (Bowers, 1977, p. 31)

Ideology, then, is a constitutional factor in making sense of the world, "the grammar for organizing thought" as art educator Peter Purdue has characterized it (1977, p. 21). Ideologies (and there are many — that differ, even conflict, but often times overlap and interconnect) are neither constant over time nor over classes. Ideologies can and do become factors in one group's
control over another, with many writers today contending that it is the interests of elite classes that have guided choices effecting the content of education.¹

Art criticism is a signifying practice: it produces meanings, constructs images of the world, and strives to fix certain meanings and to effect particular ideological representations of the world (Pollock, 1987). Donald Kuspit points this out when he argues that without a "receiving ideology," a "critical consciousness" about "an informal structure of assumptions" (1981, p. 93), art criticism functions on unquestioning beliefs rather than analysis and can be subsumed by larger ideological and economic functions. Given this interplay, it becomes clear that we must incorporate ideological factors into understanding art. A critical interpretation of an artwork that includes analysis of the ideological context surrounding the making and critical acceptance of that work, as well as ideological considerations of the viewer, are integral factors in our reception of a work of art.

II. Art, Criticism, and Ideology

Professional art criticism as practiced today is often an exploration of ideological foundations of artworks, styles, eras, the writing of critics, or of a culture. Such practice implicitly acknowledges that beliefs form the backbone of our understanding — not empirical observations. It helps us to recognize the interrelationship of an artwork and its interpretations to systems of practice and valuing in art that are intertwined with ideologies of a historical moment.² In this section of the paper, I will offer some examples of current art criticism that include ideological context.

David Carrier examines Danto's (1981) seven red squares in the overture to his book Artwriting. The seven panels are:

- a red panel portraying Red Square, a Moscow landscape
- Red Square, a red panel which is a minimalist painting
- a red panel, Nirvana, which is a Buddhist image of Nirvana
- the red panel titled Red Table Cloth, a still life painting by a Matisse student
- a red panel which is a paint sample (Carrier, 1987, pp. 2-3)

The argument is that each of the above can be described as "a red panel," but that they are identical only in part, for when each red panel is fully described both in internal and external relationships, they are different. Thus, an artifact must be fully described. That description includes not only the physical aspects of the artwork but the contextual aspects as well: intent, background, social and ideological aspects of the historical moments or milieu of both the artist and the viewer, and historical and critical accounts of the artwork. Carrier concludes that criticism, also, should be understood to exist in a context. The minimalist Red Square would not have been understood as art prior to the 1960s; Red Table Cloth would have been "incomprehensible" to Giotto (Carrier, p. 2). An object is understood as an artwork "only under an interpretation" (Danto, p. 175). Ask not, says Carrier, "Is the account true?" but "What function does this text serve?" for there are no ahistorical standards by which to judge (p. 13).

John Berger, author of Ways of Seeing (1973), describes a gap between seeing and words. The way we see, he argues, is affected by what we know and believe and the physical surroundings in which we encounter an object. What is seen is a choice. When images are considered art, their meaning encompasses assumptions and beliefs we have about art. Our knowledge and our personal beliefs and choices are influenced (if not largely determined) by the larger social ideologies of our era. Beyond examples of what Giotto could not have considered art,
are institutional criteria that determine whether a particular style, artist, or artwork is important enough for consideration in major exhibitions, national journals, and books. Alice Neel's up and down reputation exemplifies the context of criteria for judgment. Neel received some recognition for her figure portraits during the 1930s, then fell out of favor until the 1980s. Her work during this period remained fairly constant, but criteria for recognition changed. During the period when she was largely ignored, the art world attended to abstract art, with figurative painting considered beneath the ideals of high art. During the 1980s, the influences of feminism and figuration in neo-expressionism created a context in which Neel's work was again celebrated as important (Hills, 1983).

Carrier analyzes and compares the critical approaches of Ernst Gombrich and Clement Greenberg to show us not only their different understandings of art, but that each man understood the subject of art to be different. Gombrich's subject was naturalistic art and its content; Greenberg's modern art centered in the properties of the medium rather than in representation and illusion (Carrier, 1987, pp. 14-15). The point is that a "plot structure" is imposed when making sense of art and that this always involves interpretation which in turn reflects the critic's organizational grammar — his or her ideology — that makes sense of the very diverse environment in which he or she lives. The "truth" of a critic's claims are measured in their susaveness and in their relevance to current ideas about art, not in metaphysical terms.

Dominated by the art theories of Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, art criticism in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 60s was based in the work itself, in a type of phenomenological relationship that brought the viewer to interact with what was visibly present in the work. Greenberg championed the abstract expressionists and in particular, Jackson Pollock. Under his influence, art criticism became talk about the flattening out of the "fictive planes of depth [in a painting] until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas" (Greenberg, 1940, pp. 307-308). James Herbert, in an exploration of the political origins of early criticism by Greenberg, argues his writing was part of a larger political program to bring about social progress through revolutionary change. Greenberg looked to the avant-garde in culture to accomplish this revolution. The avant-garde, as represented at the time by early abstract expressionists, embodied an individualistic consciousness from within, that in itself was a revolutionary act (Greenberg, 1939). Towards the 1950s, when the revolution clearly had not materialized, this consciousness became severed from its revolutionary implications, crystallizing as a celebration of the individual. Yet Greenberg continued to support the same artists — now nationally and internationally accepted — and the same severance of art from life. He wrote of a truth severed from ideological interests instead of a social revolution facilitated by the cultural avant-garde (Greenberg, 1949; Herbert, 1985, p. 17). James Herbert's study of Greenberg, a chronological tracing of the critic's argument from the early 1940s until the 1950s, takes us from a politically revolutionary ideology to one that reproduces the ideology of the ruling elite. Art style and favored artists remained constant, with the ideological context between the 1930s and the late 40s/early 50s changing significantly. The 1930s was an era during which radical social change was entertained, one where proposals for social revolution were received positively. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, of course, Joseph McCarthy's inquisition of suspected communists and other social revolutionaries had darkened the climate of free speech and permanently extinguished the careers of numerous artists, filmmakers, and writers. The nature of Greenberg's argument for the superiority of abstract expressionist art changed during this period in response to changes in the ideological climates during which he wrote. Carrier concludes that Greenberg's theories were "an argument about taste" (p. 31); Greenberg's own taste, that is. This is interesting and relevant to the argument I am building here for the ideological component of criticism, for had Greenberg not molded his arguments to the ideological context of the times, the theories would not have taken hold.

In an article in which contemporary criticism is explained through categories, Patrick Frank (1985) pairs critics Lucy Lippard and Hilton Kramer as "political" critics because of the overt engagement with ideology that each writer evidences. Noting that "to put Hilton Kramer and Lucy Lippard together in a Political School may seem like sheer folly," he explains that both consistently stand up for cultural values, "if from opposite sides of the spectrum" (pp. 26-27). Kramer (1982) has harshly criti-
ized Lippard for her political involvement in art. In his first editorial to *The New Criterion*, the journal he founded after resigning as art critic for *The New York Times*, he presents reasons for starting a new journal that include a need to respond to the "disgusting and deleterious doctrines with which the most popular of our Reviews disgraces its pages" (p. 1). Declating the introduction of politics and Marxism into the interpretation of art (which he terms "political fantasies"), he lists critics who have undertaken a politically based deconstruction of modernism.

One of the saddest of many such cases is that of the critic Lucy Lippard. Here is a writer who began her career in the Fifties as a serious student of modern art, and went on to produce important monographs on the work of Eva Hesse and Ad Reinhardt and valuable anthologies of the writings of the Dadaists and the Surrealists. There was every reason to suppose that a writer of this quality would one day become one of our leading historians of the modern movement. In the Seventies Miss Lippard fell victim to the radical whirlwind... The descent into straight-out political propaganda is not usually so crude. (Kramer, 1982, pp. 3-4)

Frank, in putting Kramer with Lippard in the same camp, argues that Kramer's "search for an ideological rudder after the collapse of the sixties parallels that of neo-conservatives in other fields... [His] establishment of *The New Criterion* amounts to an effort to set up and defend such values" (p. 27). In a commentary published in 1990, critical theorist (and photographer) Allan Sekula calls Kramer a "bare-knuckled polemicist" (p. 41). Whereas Kramer decries "commercially compromised, or politically motivated" art criticism (p. 1), Sekula points to the funding of *The New Criterion* by conservative foundations in addition to advertising income from commercial galleries. The "critical disinterestedness" Kramer calls for on the first page of his editorial is a political stance in which the values and world views of neo-conservative groups are assumed "neutral" or "objective" ground. Readers familiar with Lippard's writing of the past fifteen years recognize her writing as advocating certain political and ideological platforms; they also recall her candidness about her advocacy (Lippard, 1985).

**III. Art Criticism in Art Education**

I offer these analyses as evidence that the practice of art criticism is a "signifying practice," as Pollock (1987) calls it, even though ideologies may be hidden in "a cocoon of accepted values" (Lippard, 1985, pp. 243). Most of the structures for critical talk about art developed by art educators for the classroom are based on describing what is physically present in the artwork: formally, compositionally, and representationally. Other methods are based on a phenomenological premise of the viewer's experience with visual aspects of the artwork. From these descriptive or impressionistic inventories, students are to formulate interpretations and judgments of artworks. Consideration is not given to ideological context. "Art educators," criticizes Purdue (1977), "do not seem to have utilized ideology as an analytical tool with which to examine taken-for-granted assumptions" (p. 31).

The examination of ideological underpinnings could be adapted to several of the existing criticism methodologies. Feldman (1973) allows for the introduction of contextual information in his sequenced steps for the art critical process. In practice, few teachers expand beyond describing, formally analyzing, interpreting, and judging characteristics immediately observable in an artwork. In doing so, they leave out a wealth of information surrounding it — including ideological context — that makes art meaningful to students as a culturally charged area of study. While we might not fault Feldman for this minimal use of his method, as Hambien (1986) observes, a more explicit development of the context of understandings is suggested.

Feinstein (1989) bases her "Art Response Guide" on Feldman's stages, but specifically allows for inclusion of "what you might know about the work" in the descriptive stage. She distinguishes the interpretive stage as metaphorical, asking in addition to what is depicted, "what else can the painting's components and the painting taken as a whole represent? What else can it stand for, what else can it mean?" (p. 44). Although Feinstein's utilization of "clustering" is a strategy for responding to her interpretive stage, intuitive impressions of expressive
qualities in the artwork are emphasized. Yet the method could be readily adapted to be more encompassing. What we “might know about the work” could include information gathered that is not readily visible in the work — including ideological underpinnings. What we might interpret through her questions in the interpretive stage could focus upon ideological meanings.

Perhaps the ones most readily adaptable to ideological contexts are the art criticism methodologies developed by Tom Anderson (1988) and by Terry Barrett (1990). Anderson’s structure unites viewers’ intuitive and affective responses to works of art with intellectual and analytic contextual components. Context is examined because, in the author’s words, “modern hermeneutics suggest that all learning takes place in a tradition, a system, a mode of understanding, and that knowledge is based on models of reality constructed from one’s culture and adapted for personal use” (p.35). Anderson does not mention ideological considerations, but his grounding in hermeneutics leaves open the possibility of their inclusion. Barrett’s method of art criticism for classroom use, laid out in his book Criticizing Photographs, is based on the work of Morris Weitz in literary criticism. Its four steps are description, interpretation, evaluation, and theory. Theory involves questions of “is it art?” and “how should it be understood?” Theory is an important component in understanding art criticism and art through criticism. Although not well defined by the author, questions of ideology could easily be developed for incorporation into this component of Barrett’s method, and he might be sympathetic to them.

In adapting existing structures for art criticism in the classroom, I have focused on discerning ideological considerations of maker, professional art critics and historians, art world, and culture. But what about the assumptions that underlie students’ beliefs about art, however rudimentary these may be? Laura Chapman’s deductive method of art criticism described in her 1978 book Approaches to Art in Education, begins with the judgment of the viewer who must then defend his or her reasons. The defense technique that she describes is built primarily upon data gathered from visual elements of the artwork. Reasons could be expanded to include exploration of the ideological beliefs of the student viewer.

The point is that although ideological factors have not been explicitly included in methods of art criticism for the classroom, mechanisms exist for their inclusion. Adaptations to existing methodologies are made by formulating questions that lead inquiry into ideological underpinnings. Such questions might begin with: What kind of art is the critic discussing? What criteria seem to govern the critic’s beliefs about the nature of art? What beliefs about art govern(ed) art during the era when this critical account was written? What function does this text serve? For what class or group of readers might it have been written?

IV. Recommendations

Teaching about the ideological underpinnings of art can also begin with comparison of several critics writing about the same artwork, artist, style, or period. Varying interpretations may be traced to distinct theories of art and/or to different philosophical beliefs about living. These can be explored in relationship to other writing the critic has produced, the era when the writings were produced, the journals in which they appeared (this tells us something about the audiences for whom the writing was intended), and so on. In studying interpretations of women artists, I have found that varying interpretations reflect branches of the feminist movement. Arlene Raven (1981/1987) writing about the art of May Stevens, for instance, argues that Stevens “re-members” female bonds across “the common void” of knowledge about women’s lives (p. 15). The void has been produced through the silencing of women in public and permanently recorded senses that allow women’s experiences and lives to become recounted as history. Raven argues that Stevens bridges the void by naming the lives and experiences of Rosa Luxemburg, a German revolutionary leader whose theoretical writings on socialism are well respected, and Alice Stevens, May Stevens’ mother and a housewife who became mute and institutionalized when the artist was a teenager. In naming the life of her mother, a symbol of “ordinary” women who are written out of history, Stevens makes her exceptional — “extraordinary.” Many of the collaged excerpts from the writings of Luxemburg are from her private diaries, revealing her desires for the “ordinary” aspects of life such as love and parenthood. The words that join Alice Stevens and Rosa Luxemburg, argues Raven, are a dialogue “inspired by, drawn from the supra-
historical community of women writers re-searched from the common void” (p.13). Re-membering bonds between all women and a supra-historical community of women are part of what is known as “cultural feminism.” The ideological beliefs about women that fuel cultural feminism are founded upon the belief that a set of universally shared female qualities and experiences exists.

Another set of beliefs about women underlies Patricia Mathew’s (1987) analysis of May Stevens’ art. This critic finds in Stevens’ work a new narrative structure formed by a dialectic of opposites. Dialectics are formed between the images and writings of the two women, between the personal/private and public/political aspects of the lives of each, and between the original contexts of the photographs and quotations and the present context of them. The dialectics form discontinuous narratives, argues Mathews, with several stories emerging from their juxtapositions. Mathews explains that they form a horizontal network of meanings in which class, gender, nationality, and age become factors. These discontinuous narratives can be understood in the postmodern sense that there are no universals, that meaning is socially and culturally constructed, and that differences between women are crucial. These differing beliefs about women inform the contrasting approaches to political change held by cultural versus postmodern feminists. Whereas cultural feminism is founded on the belief that social change will come through a strong community of women formed by female bonding and the celebration of women’s strengths, postmodern feminists eschew universalities for a foundation of difference. Their approach to political change is through an understanding and subversion of the socializing mechanisms that construct gender. Different systems of beliefs — that is to say, different ideologies — about the bases of gender and society inform these two feminist positions.

Knowing about these ideologies allows us to make sense of variances in interpretations. Art is seen in relationship to belief systems that help people make sense out of life and out of art. By including the examination of ideological factors in studying art, criticism becomes a social practice through which particular views of the world are defined and a tool in intervening into the dominant ideological representations of the world.

Teaching about the ideological underpinnings of art can sometimes begin in a comparison of writings by the same critic over time. Douglas Crimp analyses his own earlier writing. He undertakes a 1982 analysis:

When [appropriation artist Sherrie] Levine wished to make reference to Edward Weston and to the photographic variant of the neoclassical nude, she did so by simply rephotographing Weston’s pictures of his young son Neil... Levine’s appropriation reflects on the strategy of appropriation itself — the appropriation by Weston of classical sculptural style; the appropriation by Mapplethorpe of Weston’s style; the appropriation by the institutions of high art of both Weston and Mapplethorpe, indeed of photography in general; and finally, photography as a tool of appropriation. (Crimp, 1982, p. 30)

In this writing, Crimp approaches art through style, rather than through meaning. In a 1990 writing, he reflects on the meaning the subject, Neil, might have to audiences unencumbered by art training: “Weston’s posing, framing and lighting of the young Neil so as to render his body as a classical sculpture — [is read through] the long-established codes of homo-eroticism” (p. 47). Considering recent legislation against homo-eroticism in art, Crimp determines his earlier understanding of appropriation and of these images as grounded in a select artworld discourse, closed off to wider meanings. His myopia, he determines, is symptomatic of a blindness in the artworld to consideration of the ideological implications of trying to separate art from life. This, he concludes is no longer relevant nor meaningful — if it ever was.

Stanley Fish and other theorists of reader-oriented criticism in literature have argued that interpretation is a shared activity, that every interpretation, no matter how personal or unusual, can be analyzed historically and ideologically as characteristic of a group, or what Fish calls an “interpretive community” (Suleiman, 1990, p. 192). If we remove criticism acts from their interpretive communities, stripping them of their ideological meanings, we ask our students to confront art in a near
vacuum. Art is less meaningful, less related to the “real life” issues that motivate learning (Bolin, Amburgy, Garber, and Pazienza, 1991). In the classroom, this should be addressed on three levels: through a study of critics’ ideological underpinnings, students’ beliefs about art, and teachers’ beliefs, asking of each group how their beliefs interface with the broader ideological contexts of school, society, and art institutions.

Schools have been found crucial sites of economic, political, and ideological reproduction. A non-reflective approach to art criticism that relies on visual description of the artwork or expressive response to the visual elements ensures that popular and dominant ideologies about what is art, what is good or important, and what is meaningful will prevail unquestioned. These ideologies include economic interests, as Gablik (1985) has argued; moral interests, as we have seen with Jesse Helms’ recent campaign (that might also have been fueled by a desire to reduce government spending); and the class interests of an economically powerful elite. The ideological component to art criticism in the classroom offers an enhanced understanding of art that both informs students of the ideologies of the decision-making classes of people, and allows them to explore art in the context of meaningful — “real life” — issues.

References


Endnotes

1 See particularly Aronowitz and Giroux (1985).

2 "Historical moment" is a term that combines the factual/event specificities of a time/era with ideological factors influenced by economic and educational class, nationality, ethnicity, and sometimes race and gender.

3 Kramer quotes Sir Walter Scott, October 1808, on the eve of establishing The Quarterly Review, founded in response to the Edinburgh Review.

4 One of my colleagues recently argued this point with me, reminding me that many viewers approach art feeling inadequate to interact with artworks because of insufficient information. Teaching a method of interaction, such as those proposed by art educators, provides a route of access. While I agree, I respond that this is only part of what should be taught as art criticism in the schools. I am arguing for the "other half:" an art criticism that incorporates contexts of history, art, ideology, and viewer.

5 Anderson consciously displaces the contextual state, "presuming that external information should not precede personal experience with an art object so the weight of expert opinion will not smother the vital spark of personal encounter" (p. 29). This concern loses its importance when emphasis shifts to socio-historical and ideological considerations of understanding art.


7 For a succinct, if biased, explanation of the cultural and postmodern positions in feminism, see Bright, 1989. Bright uses the term post-structural rather than postmodern.

8 A similar comparison can be made based on art criticism written about the work of Frida Kahlo. See Garber (1991).

9 To some extent, the differences between Raven's 1981 ideas about the nature of women and Mathews' 1987 views are representative of feminism in the early 1980s and later in the 1980s. Raven's approach now tries to integrate differences between women into a network of similarities shared by women.