



Art Criticism in the Plastic Arts

النقد الفني في الفنون التشكيلية

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Article abstract:

The critical practice within the field of the plastic arts is arguably among the most significant issues posed in our contemporary era. Here, the relationship between the critic and the artwork constitutes one of the most crucial mechanisms in the study and analysis of the artwork according to established criteria. Through these criteria, the critic addresses the correct and incorrect aspects within the artwork. These standards are particularly concerned with the quality in the production and excellence of the artwork, focusing on its value within its environment and comparing it with other arts of the same genre. Consequently, this process guides the artist, as the producer, towards selecting subjects that primarily align with their artistic style and social environment, subsequently transcending the stage of mere reporting. This ultimately aims to rectify shortcomings and avoid all forms of impediments to the reception process.

- **Key words** : Art criticism; Art critic ; Fine art ; Plastic criticism; Recipient.

ملخص المقال

يُعدّ النقد الفني ضمن مجال الفنون التشكيلية من أبرز القضايا المثارة في عصرنا المعاصر، لما له من دور محوري في تحليل وفهم العمل الفني. إذ تُشكّل العلاقة بين الناقد والعمل الفني إحدى الآليات الأساسية في دراسة وتحليل العمل وفق معايير محددة ومعتمدة. ومن خلال هذه المعايير، يُسلّط الناقد الضوء على الجوانب الصحيحة والخاطئة في العمل الفني. وتُعنى هذه المعايير بشكل خاص بجودة الإنتاج الفني ودرجة التميّز فيه، مع التركيز على قيمته في سياقه البيئي والاجتماعي، ومقارنته بأعمال فنية أخرى تنتمي إلى نفس النمط.

وبناءً على ذلك، يُوجّه هذا المسار النقدي الفنان – بوصفه المنتج للعمل – نحو اختيار موضوعات تتماشى بدرجة أولى مع أسلوبه الفني وبيئته الاجتماعية، متجاوزًا بذلك مرحلة التقريرية أو السرد المباشر، ويهدف هذا التوجيه في نهاية المطاف إلى تصويب مواطن الضعف وتفادي كل ما من شأنه أن يُعيق عملية التلقي والتفاعل مع العمل الفني.

– **كلمات مفتاحية:** نقد فني; ناقد فني; فنون جميلة; نقد تشكيلي; متلقي.

Introduction

Over the recent period, art criticism has made significant strides forward, reaching advanced and novel stages due to several factors, the most prominent of which is the evolving concept and characteristics of art in the contemporary era, alongside the expanding scope of visual arts reception. The engagement of critics in various critical arenas (festivals, art exhibitions, the art market, etc.) and the impressions and contextual information they provide to the viewer about artworks have played an active role in mitigating the difficulties of the reception crisis. Furthermore, this involvement facilitates the recipient's participation in the development of the aesthetic sensibility of societies. This step has served as both an influencing and influenced factor in the ongoing construction and ultimate interpretation of the artwork.

The plastic arts are arguably among the most significant artistic domains affected by a scarcity of critics on a global scale. This is despite the diversity of international artistic experiences. However, a disparity in the balance of art criticism between the West and the East is evident. This imbalance primarily stems from several factors, most notably a discrepancy in the understanding of the concept of art criticism, its terminology, and the methods of employing its methodological tools and their application to artworks in many instances. Furthermore, the influence of unfounded subjective judgments based on personal opinions impacts the critical process. Consequently, we have chosen to approach this topic from a specific perspective that can guide the recipient towards understanding the terminology and functions of art criticism, among other aspects, by posing the following problem statement:

What were the initial precursors of art criticism, and how did their outcomes reflect upon the construction of the plastic artwork?

- ***What were the origins of art criticism, and how did they influence artistic works?***
- ***What is the role of the art critic in the context of a reception crisis?***

1- Critical Thought in Ancient Greek Philosophy

1-1- The Theory of Mimesis

1-1-1- Platonic Theory: Simple Mimesis

As indicated by the subtitle, this theory is attributed to the philosopher Plato. It emerged as an inevitable consequence of the potent nature of art, which experienced a remarkable proliferation within Western artistic thought. Art criticism is considered a fundamental element in the evaluation of artworks, bestowing upon them a refined artistic sensibility. Plato (428 BCE/347 BCE), a proponent of idealism, posits that an artwork must be presented to society in a morally and aesthetically commendable form. Consequently, any artwork that contravenes ethical principles is deemed superfluous.

1-1-2- Aristotelian Theory: Imitation of Essence

Mimesis, in this context, refers to the act of imitation, replication, and resemblance in statements, actions, and other aspects related to nature. Here, Aristotle's imitation of nature in his critique of the artwork builds upon a theory fundamentally rooted in his criticism of his teacher Plato's "simple mimesis" theory (Saliba, 1949, p. 350). This is a theory Aristotle presented and developed through his analysis of tragedy. He argues that Plato's theory does not adequately consider the orientations of content, revealing perceived shortcomings. For Aristotle, the creation of an artwork transcends mere reproduction and copying devoid of

an underlying essence. By way of illustration, an art critic, for instance, should focus on the substance of the artwork and its central idea, which in turn leads to its meaning, without undue consideration for its originating contexts and forms. The essence of the artwork, in this view, is what artists share through their past experiences, enabling them to convey a range of ideas in a captivating manner that mirrors life.

1-1-3- Imitation of the Ideal

Through this theory, Plato sought to convey the notion that genuine knowledge and comprehension of ideal forms cannot be attained without recourse to knowledge grounded in reason, rather than solely through sensory perception.

The theory of the Ideal Form (the Idea of the Ideal) operates on a procedural basis that leads us to examine both appearances (imitation of opinion) and truth (genuine knowledge), thereby enabling a distinction between the two. From this distinction emerges the ethical criterion. The artist aspires to realize a conception that closely resembles the Ideal Form, existing at a considerable remove from the immediate goal, which is often attained. "...Furthermore, the goal acts as an enticement, beckoning the individual forward, whereas the Ideal Form serves as an impetus, propelling the individual from behind towards the future (if one may express it thus). The Ideal Form is a conception from the past that we seek to realize in the future, and it is achieved (through work and imitation) of the aforementioned Ideal Form. In contrast, the goal possesses a luster that attracts us towards it; upon its realization, we compare it with the Ideal Form to ascertain whether it perfectly resembles it or not..." (Hassan Abdel Razzaq, 2013, p. 193)

2- Theories of the Philosophy and Criticism of Art in the Modern Era

The dichotomy of form and content in the artwork has long been a central concern for critics and researchers in the field of the arts in general, and the plastic arts in particular. Across various critical currents and orientations, proponents of Formalism and the school of Content have respectively adopted the structural components and the implicit significance of the artwork's substance as the theoretical foundation of their critical frameworks.

2-1- Formalist Theory

Proponents of this theory, which emerged in Britain during the early 20th century spearheaded by the British critics Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clive Bell (1881-1964), posit that form constitutes the fundamental basis of the artwork. Fry examined the paintings of numerous Italian artists and wrote about the works of artists possessing a refined artistic sensibility, such as Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), and the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). Throughout his criticism, he discussed the plastic drama created by the interplay and tension between the lines and masses within the artwork, as detailed in his book Transformations.[i] Bell argued that the characteristics of line and color and their interrelations are paramount; a refined artwork is essentially a significant form. The impetus behind Bell and Fry's formulation of Formalist theory in art was their personal experience of aesthetic emotion, which they believed was solely evoked by the formal aspects of art.

Critics such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell adopted Formalist theory as a significant reference point in their critique of artworks, particularly in the plastic arts. Proponents of this theory based their art criticism on the formal foundations of the artwork through formal analysis. Formal criticism relies on viewing the artwork in and of itself, with critics focusing on the formal analysis of the work, respecting its individual character, aesthetic specificity, and intrinsic structure. The criterion of value, therefore, originates from the work itself.

"Form in the artwork is not merely the features of the elements that the artist draws upon to compose it, nor simply the sum of their value, but rather an attempt to embody a 'visible subject' that parallels numerous ideas and visions stirring in the artist's mind, interacting with visible nature on one hand and the workings of their mental activity, perceptions, and inner dreams on the other." (Basiouni, 1995, p. 12)

Formalist criticism relies on two primary methodologies: one heuristic and the other descriptive.

A- The Heuristic Method: This encompasses a set of procedures and techniques that enable the art critic to discern the value of an artwork. It focuses on the discovery of intricate elements within the artwork's structure and serves to sustain the aesthetic experience. This method is not primarily concerned with rendering a judgmental evaluation of the artwork; rather, it emphasizes the apprehension of aesthetic values and the verification of its structural components.

B- The Descriptive Method: This method relies on the descriptive analysis of the artwork and the subsequent insights generated by the art critic after detailing and examining the artwork's content and substance. It does not necessarily require the critic to provide interpretations or issue judgments regarding the quality of the artwork. (Othman Qazzaz, 2002, p. 14)

From the aforementioned, it becomes apparent that Formalist theory does not acknowledge any influence of values, whether ethical, social, or political, on art. For its proponents, neither the subject matter nor the content holds any significance; the sole emphasis is on form (Othman Qazzaz, 2002, pp. 26-27). The value of an artwork, according to this perspective, resides in the formal organization of its constituent elements—line, mass, space, and color—within an aesthetically valuable artistic product. Consequently, Formalist theory does not provide a criterion applicable for distinguishing between good and bad art. However, it is certain that not all formal relationships of line and color possess artistic value. (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 206) In contrast, the theory of Content emerged in opposition to its Formalist predecessor, with its proponents focusing their critique on the subject matter and content of the artwork.

2-2- Content Theory (Theory of Meaning/Subject Matter)

Content Theory seeks meanings in expressive artworks that transcend mere aesthetic considerations. It views art as an instrument serving the broader values of society and as an effective means of influencing human behavior. Furthermore, it posits that an artwork can convey multiple layers of meaning, ranging from simple, illustrative levels to complex symbolic, social, and political content. When critics discuss the meanings within artworks, their focus lies on the intentions of the artist. (Othman Qazzaz, 2002, p. 26)

Content is not merely what the artist presents, but also how they present it, within what context, and with what degree of social and individual consciousness, as well as the extent to which they possess and control the elements of execution. This integration allows technique and thought to coalesce into a singular form through an expressive language that transcends the presented subject, aiming to suggest a unique meaning and enabling communication and the instigation of human dialogue with the artwork. (Basiouni, 1995, pp. 21-22) A primary characteristic of Content Theory is that it provides the critic with a broader scope for offering diverse interpretations of artworks, thereby enriching their artistic thought and aesthetic perspective towards artistic achievements. It also allows them to benefit from the opinions of others (critics, artists, the public) regarding the artwork. (Basiouni, 1995, p. 08)

The study of any artwork necessitates an examination of its formal features and an exploration of its internal meanings. No critical process is devoid of an inquiry into the fundamental components upon which form is constructed and an investigation into the substantive message of the plastic expression that the artist



seeks to convey to the recipient. The critical term constitutes the cornerstone upon which the critical framework is built, encompassing both denotative and connotative levels, thereby integrating linear and visual language and weaving the intrinsic relationship between the inherent qualities of the artwork and its plastic articulations.

2-3- Edmund Feldman's Method of Art Criticism

Edmund Feldman posits that the descriptive stage is primarily a process of visual scanning through which an artistic record is documented, encompassing all elements of the artwork, including an overview of the artist and their artistic orientation. It is understood that this description should be concise, particularly at this initial critical juncture, which demands caution in the presentation of data, maintaining a complete distance from issuing judgments or opinions that could subsequently influence the progression of the critical process through the methodological steps that follow this stage.

Through this methodology, Feldman provides us with an inductive process based on inferring general principles from the specific details of the artwork, thereby enabling its discussion and interpretation. This is considered an initial critical engagement that leads to the uncovering of the artwork's meanings and the clarification of its visions in relation to the individual and their social and human environment as a whole. His methodology was structured as follows: (Maithreyi, Jaffri, & Abu Talib, 2016, p. 58)

A- Description:

Description is considered one of the most crucial stages in the visual study and criticism of an artwork. In this phase, the critic provides a general yet precise account of the artwork. As the initial methodological step in the analysis of artistic creations, it is imperative for the critic to be well-versed in various aesthetic acquisitions in their engagement with the subject matter, ensuring accuracy and avoiding affectation, exaggeration in description, or digressions into matters extraneous to the artwork under examination. Consequently, the process should be specifically focused on the artwork at hand and nothing else.

B- Analysis:

This stage follows description and is itself divided into two aspects: formal analysis and implicit analysis. The former is concerned with revealing the relationships between the compositional elements within the spatial context of the artwork, while the latter explores the underlying meanings and motivations of the content, which are often related to the artist and their social environment. Through this comprehensive analysis, the various aspects of the artwork are discussed in terms of the artist's success in weaving the threads of their artistic creation. This evaluation is based on the artist's command of the fundamental principles of art and the extent to which the visual values are employed and aligned with the content and its formal and chromatic implications.

C- Interpretation:

The interpretation of an artwork relies on the critic's prior knowledge of the artwork's data, its circumstances, and the underlying motivations that led the artist to address the subject in a particular manner. Interpretation is considered one of the most complex and challenging stages due to various general and specific approaches. The interpretation of an artwork must remain within its context and not deviate into unintended meanings. Consequently, the interpretation of the artwork should follow specific systematic steps, thereby revealing the artist's intentions despite differing artistic styles. Furthermore, the significance of this stage lies



in elucidating the visible aspects of the artwork in a way that engages the recipient with the various elements of its construction.

D- Judgment:

This represents the final stage in the reading and in-depth study of an artwork. Judgment, in many of its aspects, is open to discussion and disagreement among critics, depending on the critic's knowledge and immersion in artistic aspects on one hand, and their cognitive practice on the other.

Judgment is defined as the expression of an opinion on a matter, while considering expertise. This straightforward conceptualization of aesthetic judgment allows us to form a basic understanding of the nature of the individual who possesses the necessary attributes to render a judgment, rather than merely an opinion, and to accept it in the reception of the artwork from an aesthetic perspective that is also subject to the imperative of aesthetic awareness of the artwork. Aesthetic judgment, in many of its facets, is based on a set of principles derived from the aesthetic sensibility towards the constituent elements within the artwork.

3- Who is the Art Critic?

Profound knowledge within their area of specialization is a necessary attribute for the art critic, who, as a specialized individual, possesses the capacity to reveal, through evidence and

corroboration, the range of negative as well as positive aspects inherent in various artistic masterpieces. This encompasses all facets relevant to the subject of study that accompany the artwork in its formation, as well as the examination of aspects related to the artist and their personal context, within which they present their works in a specific manner that is largely considered an expression of their identity. (Hamza & Benazza, 2021, p. 298)

3-1- Attributes of the Art Critic

A- Artistic and Cultural Expertise

This expertise is acquired through practice stemming from aesthetic experience. It is crucial to emphasize the necessity of engaging with the cultures of other societies and keeping abreast of the latest developments in the trajectory of the arts. Without these attributes, the critic's artistic writing will tend towards aridity and a lack of familiarity with contemporary terminology relevant to art and its practitioners, considering that art is fundamentally a human cognitive phenomenon.

B- Acuity of Observation

The mechanism of analyzing and interpreting the artwork as an initial stage of the critical process constitutes one of the most significant procedural steps, demanding meticulous observation and examination, particularly in light of the visual reflections of the artwork's components in its final form. Precise observation of the various elements enables the critic to identify centers of strength and weakness within the artistic product. This forms the basis for highlighting the shortcomings of the artwork, which the critic endeavors to convey primarily to the artist in order to avoid oversights in their artistic output and to rectify them based on the critic's informed evaluative opinion.

C- The Ability to Persuade

This ability manifests itself only through the possession of sufficient expertise that enables the critic to encompass arguments, evidence, and other supporting factors that contribute to the validation of their interpretations, evaluations, and judgments.

D- Objectivity

Objectivity constitutes the fundamental link in the critical process, wherein the critic distances themselves from subjectivity in expressing opinions, judgments, and any form of bias that could compromise the message of the artwork and, consequently, distort its content, which reflects the artist's subject matter. This detachment aims to avoid presenting a misleading portrayal of the artist's trajectory in some instances. (Azzam, 1999, p. 23)

The Function of the Critic

The function of the art critic is linked to two primary aspects: the first pertaining to the artist, and the second relating to the audience. In our endeavor to further understand the nature of this topic, we have addressed it in two distinct sections.

A- The Critic's Relationship with the Artist

"... and the ability of criticism to define, stimulate, and activate ideas at the level of free practice open to others, in which we can distinguish its local imprint within the framework of global theory, or what can be called the comprehensive human critical achievement of various local issues at the cognitive level and understanding of the era, and moving from lived reality to anticipating the future, considering criticism as a cognitive material extended in time, containing an image of creativity by presenting it freely, independently, and objectively, and within the framework of the ethics of critical writing that reflects, in addition to the value of the artist, the value, effectiveness, and visions of the critic". (Talal, 2011, p. 20) On the other hand, the critic must apply these standards within their scientific framework and avoid all forms of obfuscation, thus avoiding hasty judgments that could lead to confusion of concepts and inaccurate assessments of the artwork.

The aforementioned criteria are subject to aesthetic realism. Within the unity of the artwork lies a power through which the audience strives to achieve a novel perception related to public consciousness and the holistic world. This is a power that the critic must first comprehend by categorizing forms within their designations and significations, thereby enabling the discernment of error and correctness and the evaluation of the artist's approaches through judgment of their artwork.

B - The Critic's Relationship with the Audience

This relationship is no less significant than the preceding one. Through it, the critic presents the content of artworks to the public according to their aesthetic framework, employing mechanisms of description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Through the initial visual observation of the artwork and based on levels of knowledge and artistic culture, the viewer can form an approximate idea of the artwork's content according to its subject matter, guided by the semiotics of forms and colors and various non-verbal cues within the artistic space, a process termed the perception of the artwork.

This relationship is fundamentally based on creating a balance between the audience and the artist; that is, fostering an artistic awareness between the public and the artwork, especially in light of the multiplicity of contemporary artistic movements. Awareness of art has the potential to enhance ethical behavior and elevate the cultural role of individuals within their societies, thereby refining public taste. The critic's engagement with the artwork contributes to distinguishing the imagined artistic image for the viewer, who is then able to comprehend both the utilitarian and aesthetic aspects of the artwork. These mechanisms facilitate the realization of the goal of artistic appreciation within its aesthetic contexts.

The cumulative effect of the critic's relationship with the audience may, at times, transcend conventional boundaries, involving the recipient in the process of evaluating the artwork. From this



perspective, qualified individuals such as research students, professors, and other specialists can contribute to the enrichment of the subject through conducting discussions and comparative studies on the arts. However, the submitted research should be innovative and not adhere to the pattern of literary narration, as observed in many readings. Instead, it must be subjected to peer

review by experts before publication, primarily to refine it and place it within methodological frameworks that remain consistent with the context of aesthetic formation.

4- Aesthetic Values of the Artwork

The structural components and formative elements of the artwork constitute a fertile ground that the art critic utilizes in their analytical readings and critical writings. Through these, the critic endeavors to comprehend the relationship woven between iconic signs and their formative counterparts in their unified representation of the artwork's content. These are considered the two primary pillars upon which the critic relies to generate novel conceptualizations of the significance of aesthetic and artistic values, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Unity:** Unity in an artwork is achieved when the artist successfully establishes two fundamental considerations: first, the relationship of the design's parts to one another, and second, the relationship of each part to the whole... Unity does not imply similarity between all components of the design; rather, these components must coalesce to form a cohesive entirety. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 104) In the plastic arts, unity is a broad concept encompassing multiple elements, including unity of form, unity of artistic style, and unity of idea. It is the convergence of these elements that evokes in the recipient a sense of the artwork's unity.
- **Unity of Form:** The constituent elements of unity necessitate the convergence of both the eye and the mind to achieve unity of form within the artwork. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, pp. 112-113)
- **Unity of Idea:** Plato states, "There are two realms, one the realm of thought and the other the realm of matter"... The idea possesses inherent forces that act upon its propulsion outward from the artist, making the artist a medium for its interaction with matter. Unity of idea signifies that the artwork should be integrated and complete. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 126)
- **Unity of Style:** Each artist possesses a unique style in their work. Combining multiple styles in the creation of an artwork with a singular subject can disrupt its unity. This is a characteristic often observed in contemporary art styles that aim to deconstruct the unity of the artwork. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 126)
- **Variety:** Variety can manifest as differences in form, color, texture, or direction. This variation may take the form of gradations in color, direction, or size, or as a contrast between one color and another. It can also involve diversification in the thickness of lines and in shapes. Numerous examples of variety exist while maintaining the element of unity. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 121)
- **Balance and Equilibrium:** The former, balance, is the state in which opposing forces are equalized. It represents a parity between the formative elements, whether between areas of light and shadow, between volumes of lesser and greater weight and lightness, or between expanses of varying breadth and narrowness. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 159) The latter, equilibrium, encompasses the rhythmic relationships between time and space. Equilibrium also involves the relationships between weights, the achievement of

which cannot be solely attained through a set of rules. Rather, the artist reaches it through a profound sense of the work's organization and their integration within it. Equilibrium encompasses several types: axial, radial, and illusory. The elements of balance and equilibrium influence the sense of movement within the artwork. (Gillam Scott, 1980, p. 54)

- **Rhythm:** Rhythm is the repetition of masses or spaces forming units that may be identical or varied, proximate or distant. This organization can apply to intervals between volumes or colors, to the arrangement of their gradations, or to the directional organization of the artwork's elements. Forms and lines divide the artistic space into superficial or spatial intervals. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, p. 143)

- **Harmony and Proportion:** Proportion is defined as the relationship in size, quantity, degree, or between one thing and another, or between ratios. Harmony is defined as a clear movement in a regular and periodic repetition, according to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. (Gillam Scott, 1980, p. 59)

- **Similarity and Symmetry:** The identification of visual elements within an artwork and the analysis of their counterparts enable implication in terms of form and significance. The symmetry of colors and shapes, and the similarity of the constituent elements of the artwork, facilitate the perception of its unity and continuity. (Belassem, 2008, p. 216)

- **Gradation and Contrast:** Gradation is where two contrasting ends are connected by intermediate degrees of variety and progression. Variety and gradation constitute a regularly evolving movement that imparts a sense of tranquility. (Bader Ghaith & Mo'tasem, 2007, pp. 150-151)

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Conclusion

The art critic reflects their critical vision by moving beyond fleeting emotional responses and rhetorical discourse that merely describes visual facts. Instead, they endeavor to explore the semantic relationships elicited by the structural connections and aesthetic values within the artwork. Considering these as the two poles of the critical process, which is based on a cognitively and aesthetically grounded analysis, the critic enables the recipient to understand the artwork by defining its artistic nature and compositional structure, and by revealing the content of the formative messages produced by the aesthetic and artistic values of the artwork. In doing so, the critic attempts to provide an interpretative reading that generates a critical language whose fundamental elements constitute the lexicon of critical terminology.

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