

ART HISTORY AND ART CRITICISM: SUBJECTIVITY

Dr. Eman Mustafa Tubeishatdr.emantubeishat@gmail.com**Abstract**

Art history and art criticism are included in the humanities, which aim to explain and comprehend human behavior and intellectual endeavor. The main methodological instruments used in both areas are based on hermeneutical heritage. Understanding (*verstehen*), which seeks to give these deeds or works of art meaning, is their main analytical category. An art historian examines and integrates creative works within a wider intellectual and social framework, in contrast to an art critic who examines the ideals linked with artistic achievements. Their functions are not always clear-cut since analysis, understanding, interpretation, and assessment regularly occur in the study of both areas. The approach of the art historian should have a scientific character and aim for objectively valid formulations, whereas the critic frequently assumes the additional role of philosopher or theorist of art. The critic should give equal consideration to subjective factors and acknowledge international artistic values. In this essay, I examine the various degrees of subjectivity inherent in the approaches used by art historians and art critics. Although I address the categories of artistic values (aesthetic, moral, and cognitive) in accordance with their subjective application as well as their role in the comprehension and assessment of art, I focus on the procedures and terminology used by both categories. I'm adamant that art history and art criticism are complementary disciplines since the former encourages the latter's in-depth and important assessments.

Keywords: Art, Criticism, History, Subjectivity.

Introduction

In a larger sense, art history and art criticism are included in the humanities, the third-largest scientific subject, which has different aims and approaches from the other two, the analytic-empirical and the normative sciences¹. The humanities draw their fundamental methodological tools from the hermeneutical tradition in order to understand and interpret human behavior and intellectual works. Their primary analytical category is comprehension (*verstehen*), which aims to give these acts or works of art meaning through a kind of subjective transfer. In contrast to the analytical sciences, which use a nomological approach, and the normative sciences, which adopt a regulative-deontological approach, the humanities have an explicit value orientation in their analysis of historical periods and cultural meanings (Elkins, 2003).

The study, comprehension, and interpretation of artworks are the goals of the intellectual pursuits of art history and art criticism. They differ fundamentally not only in terms of the age of their objects but also in terms of their goals: the art critic is more interested in contemporary art, which he studies, interprets, and critically evaluates. The art historian, on the other hand, studies historical works of art and builds systems on them using hermeneutical methods. In this

regard, the work of the art critic serves as a crucial resource and a fundamental substructure for upcoming historians.

The understanding and interpretation of artworks, which is the central theme of historical and critical texts, heavily depends on the author's perception, experience, and intuition. Art historians (but also many critics) attempt legitimate and intersubjective interpretations that will eventually be evaluated by the larger hermeneutical community while adhering, however conscientiously, to their chosen methods and criteria. They typically use a scientific methodology to build systems and theories, and they employ strict, objective language to express their conclusions. On the other hand, many art critics assess works of art using their own aesthetic preferences as criteria.

In accordance with the levels of subjectivity in critical and historical texts, this article offers a meta-critical approach. Two methodologies are used to examine historical and critical texts, which are divided into the following sections:

- I. Subjectivity as a direct intention of art historians and art critics.
- II. The subjective factor in the analysis and interpretation of works of art.

I. Subjectivity as a direct intention of art historians and art critics-

Regardless of whether he belongs to the analytic-empirical faculty or the humanities, the scientist always begins his work from a personal purpose in order to choose a field or an item to research. His creative imagination is heavily relied upon for inspiration, selection, and composition; as a result, speculations have a subjective quality. However, in the parts that follow, the analytical scientist must disassociate himself from personal impulses and beliefs in order to rigorously empirically and logically test his theoretical formulations with the aim of creating objectivity. The analytical sciences' goal is to investigate and explain the world, but this can only be done if subjective factors are minimized because they can skew the truth. However, subjectivity is crucial in the humanities, which take an interpretive rather than an explanatory approach to intellectual works and human behavior.

These intents must be taken seriously in a meta-critical examination since some art critics intentionally include them in their writings. I distinguish between three different sorts of texts to look at the degrees of subjectivity: essays for gallery and museum catalogs, reviews for journalistic magazines on art and other themes, and monographs on contemporary art that feel like philosophical essays.

In catalog essays, the critic consistently expresses a favorable assessment while speaking for the gallery, museum, or artist. He or she analyzes and interprets the piece in an effort to highlight the work and its author while also attempting to place it within a larger artistic tradition or era. In this context, allusions and comparisons to classic or contemporary artists frequently serve as means of elevating the artist and his creations.

The historicized criticism approach fits into the broader search for a reliable frame of reference that enables logical assessments (Neill & Ridley, 1995). Before the middle of the 19th century, critics assessed modern art in relation to the creations of particular earlier artists or movements. At the Quattrocento's close, Raphael and Michelangelo functioned as standards for Renaissance

art that had previously been judged in connection to antiquity. After the bitter disputes between the supporters of Rubens and Poussin in the 18th century, there was a noticeable return to the designs of ancient Greece and Rome. In the struggle between "ancients and moderns," paragons were sought in both ancient and modern arts. When the avant-garde emerged at the end of the 19th century and the criterion of creative newness was promoted as a criterion of evaluation, criticism based on a historicized approach lost its grounding. However, "artistic modernism" quickly emerged, asserting that momentum was generated by a body of works and presenting 20th-century art as a unified entity with a distinct evolution along a predetermined course. In addition to considering how much the avant-garde works contributed to the development of avant-garde art, their value was assessed in connection to contemporary works (Ackermann, 1979).

The historicized criticism that peaked between the 15th and the 19th centuries and is still in use today has its origins in comparisons of contemporary artwork to standards from the past, whether recent or distant. Its goal is to promote contemporary art by demonstrating that it is just as important as earlier works and that it plays a significant role in the development of art. The critic does not express his personal opinion, but by equating a modern piece of art with a classic masterpiece, it appears as though the critic is speaking for the entire field of art. However, these similarities elevate and strengthen the intersubjective validity of critical writings.

Some catalog essays use poetic language that develops literary value. The majority of catalog essays have the dual purposes of promoting the artist while also appearing to the reader as independent "works of art" that satisfy their sense of aesthetics⁶. The goal in both situations is to encourage the reader or visitor to an exhibition and all that entails. However, because both aesthetic and formal truth criteria are necessary for their intersubjective acceptance, their meta-critical analysis should place equal emphasis on both.

Journalistic reviews have a recent tendency to steer clear of evaluative judgments in favor of objectively describing and interpreting the works. It represents a resurgence of the positivist critical tradition, which has its origins in 19th-century Germany, where the extension of methodological monism to the humanities was prompted by the natural sciences' dominance and the use of their methods. Explanatory methods to literary and creative works, however, can only have a limited reach because they are unable to fully determine them. A positivist review includes no mention of the characteristics that make a work intriguing and capable of inspiring aesthetic experience; instead, it discusses it as a scientist would describe a natural occurrence. Even in this situation, language is crucial because carefully chosen words with a descriptive-ontological character serve as evaluations at the same time (Carrier, 1986).

Modern and contemporary art monographs frequently resemble essays in philosophical aesthetics. Due to developments in the 20th century, a theoretical and philosophical foundation was required to redefine art and support avant-garde works. 8 Examples of this type include Rosalind Krauss' *the Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* and A. Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The aforementioned writings, which have post-modern works as their foundations, discuss concerns with the definition of art and the

possibility to elevate trivial or other aesthetic items to the status of art. The justification for different perspectives is provided by the use of direct, usually narrative language, numerous instances from the creative history, and allusions to well-known philosophical systems. A philosophical essay aims to provide logical and inductive justifications for its starting point of subjective questions and suppositions. The more widely and consistently a philosophical theory is accepted by philosophers, critics, and readers, the more potently intersubjective it becomes. In art-historical monographs, the author also begins with personal motivations: he selects his study topic based on his own mood and affinity for specific artists, movements, or eras, or because he thinks there is a knowledge vacuum that needs to be addressed with new and innovative interpretations. However, historians work to retain an important distance from the study object by writing in a precise, analytical manner without romantic effusions and subjective judgements, in contrast to certain art critics.

Narrative and theoretical writings are both categories of art history. By placing the works of art in a specific order, selecting which ones to include or leave out, and emphasizing certain pieces over others, the art historian attempts to create a story out of the interpreted works of art. The art historian, on the other hand, approaches the development of a theory with an explanatory orientation and attempts to include the works in a theoretical framework. In order to explain a work's distinctive historicity and provide enough continuity with the past to allow an art historian to explain historical developments, theories in art history search for essential concepts.

II. The subjective factor in the analysis and interpretation of works of art

In accordance with the writer's aims, I have separated texts into two groups: those that are distinguished by the unadulterated subjective viewpoints of their writers, and those that employ a scientific technique and terminology for a more objective approach. I'll now try to look more closely at the second group in order to demonstrate that, despite the authors' best efforts, the subjective factor is a key factor in these texts. In light of the fact that interpretation is a common methodological tool in both art history and art criticism, I will examine Erwin Panofsky's iconographical and iconological theories, two of the most well-known and intersubjective hermeneutical approaches still used by both art historians and art critics today.

I'd like to make clear the terminology I'll use as I approach the aforementioned methods, though, before moving on. I assess a method's content using the standard of "formal" truth in order to demonstrate its viability. I've taken the term "formal" truth from the formal sciences of mathematics and logic, where it refers to the logical structure of propositions rather than a correspondence to the real world. I take two different stances toward the writings based on the subjectivity criterion: first, an aesthetic stance that examines the way a theory is presented. A theory can be either subjective or objective, according to this method. The second method is an empirical one that investigates the range of a theory's acceptance. This method categorizes theories as either intersubjective or subjective, meaning that they were not accepted by anyone other than their creator.

In order to analyze and interpret all artworks, regardless of their time and place, Panofsky set out to create general principles. He thought that both the civilization that produced the art and particular human characteristics were responsible for it. In an effort to overcome the hermeneutical problem (Hatt & Klonk, 2006) based on this dual perception of artworks, Panofsky argued that full interpretations are those that approach the work not just as a part of its historical and cultural age but also as a human production.

He rejected Heinrich Woelfflin's (1932) rigidly formalistic hermeneutical system¹⁰ and instead approached the artistic work as a combination of form and content. Woelfflin (1932) asserts that, independently of the brain's expressive and intellectual abilities, our sensory organs spontaneously provide order to the disorderly realm of facts. According to Panofsky, the higher mental faculties engage in the classification of sensory data, which is influenced by the language and content of the outside world. He disagreed with Woelfflin's separation between form and substance and said that changes in style indicate changes in the work's content as well. Therefore, only empirical findings might result in reliable formal principles (Panofsky, 1920).

Within this framework, he created a theory based on the intrinsic formal aspects of the creative work, which result from the interaction between form and content (Moxey, 1986). His system was composed of opposing pairs, such as plenitude and form, time and space, haptic and optical values, depth and surface, and merging and divided forms. These opposite pairs, which have a universal quality and reflect the relationship between the mind and the work of art, should also serve as a means of regulating the relationship between the work's form and content. Creating an objective framework for the examination of creative works would help prevent subjective psychological interpretations, which Panofsky (1925) claims lead to privatized and emotionalized notions of art.

Warburg and the 19th-century hermeneutical tradition, which emphasized the distance between the interpreter and the interpreted object and highlighted the enormous challenges involved in interpreting artworks within the context of their historical era, had a significant influence on Panofsky. Panofsky contravened Heidegger (1930) by creating control and balance systems that limit subjectivity and emphasized the objective criteria of interpretation.

With his paper *Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst* (16), which was founded in part on Dilthey's ideas, Panofsky (1968) established the hermeneutical approach in art history. Both thought that valid interpretations were those whose individual components depended on how they were interpreted collectively (Panofsky, 1943). However, Dilthey had accepted a direct connection between the author and the work, interpreting it according to the essential criterion of the artist's objectives. Panofsky did not attempt to localize the artist's subjective objectives because he believed them to be impossible, even though they may have existed in the form of a written record by the artist. He saw the evolution of the relationship between the mind and the outside world as art history. For him, art was a form of knowledge that gave a subject an impartial, public, and objective framework. The iconological technique of Panofsky (1968) is a hermeneutical approach to art that is closely tied to a broad history of the human spirit. It represents the third phase of his 1955-

completed hermeneutical model (Baetschmann, 1979). Pre-iconographical description, which applies Woelfflin's formalistic theory, is the first stage, and iconographical analysis, which is the second stage. In his belief that two crucial elements must be present for the proper understanding of an artwork, Panofsky agreed with Warburg. These elements are the work's connection to its culture as realized through the interpretation of its content in analogy with the content of literary works, and the connection of its content to related historical iconographic types within a history of types. The iconological interpretation, the third stage, aims for a deeper understanding of the work beyond the conscious level (Carrier, 1989). Panofsky wanted to show how works harmonize subjective motivations and objective worldviews. However, he offers corrective principles such having a basic comprehension of cultural history as well as acquaintance with what he saw to be the human mind's underlying tendencies throughout history in order to assure the objectivity of interpretation, which is accomplished through a form of synthetic intuition and is in great part dictated by the interpreter's psychology and his "Weltanschauungen".

The history of this particular practice shows that, despite these corrective rules, interpreters have frequently viewed works from the standpoint of their own personal worldviews. Thus, whereas German art historian Konrad Hoffmann (1978) categorized Durer's "Melancholia I" as medieval art and described Durer as a devout nobleman of this time and perspective, Panofsky (1968) interpreted Durer's "Melancholia I" in terms of humanism.

The fact that there are different interpretations doesn't cast doubt on Panofsky's theory; rather, it shows that, despite his methodical efforts, the subjective element still plays a major role in determining the meaning of the work because the interpreter is unable to approach it without drawing on his or her own ideas about the world and art. However, it is widely acknowledged that his interpretations have helped to establish a tradition, have had an impact on numerous later art historians, and have taken on an intersubjective quality (Carrier, 1989).

However, Panofsky's worldview has influenced his decisions and hermeneutical strategies. Italian Renaissance art served as his primary research subject, and a sizable portion of his theory was based on its core ideas. The idea of balance, which he applied to his five opposite pairs as a standard for rating and nominating "great" works of art, unquestionably stems from the humanist critical tradition. Bellori's theory about the hierarchy of painting genres, with allegorical and historical pictures dominating over landscapes, everyday scenes, portraits, and still-lives, is implausibly supported by this author because all of his analyses and interpretations center on the first two categories of paintings. All of his decisions can be understood as the results of his humanist bent. His interpretations of Durer's artwork, particularly those that explore the connection between the artist and Italian renaissance art (Panofsky, 1943), serve as another illustration. The Italian School, which Panofsky unquestionably champions as being the best, and the empirical northern tradition collide in Durer's work, according to Panofsky. The fact that Panofsky sees Durer as a type of captive of the strange northern darkness that is struggling its way toward the southern sunshine, as Svetlana Alpers (1977) points out, speaks much about his masterful interpretation of the artist.

The subjective origin of Panofsky's interpretations of Durer's art is linked to his humanist inclinations (Panofsky, 1925). However, they are valid due to their clarity, internal cohesion, logical order, and thorough sourcing, and their use of language gives them an objective character, at least upon first reading. However, a critical reading reveals the insertion of subjectively based evaluative judgments. Consider the following contrast, which he uses in his book "Early Netherlandish Painting" (Panofsky, 1953) to explain the aesthetic experience one has while seeing a Van Eyck painting: The mesmerizing effect we occasionally experience while staring into deep water or when we allow ourselves to be lured by rare stones is similar to how genuine Jan van Eyck paintings emit a mysterious attraction. It is unquestionably a subjective assessment that differentiates the objective and detached language and gives it artistic value.

Conclusion

According to the aforementioned perspectives on art history and criticism that focus on subjectivity, both intellectual pursuits converge. The texts' analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of artworks all share a significant amount of subjectivity, but this does not take away from their validity or reduce them to the level of simple inspirational activities.

Serious art critics and historians look into approaches and corrective principles in order to preserve the veracity of their works and to lessen the subjective components that come from erroneous and unique expressions. They interpret the works in the context of the entirety of the information they are aware of about them and their time period by methodically upholding the logic of their theories, uncovering and exploring their connections, and incorporating them into a system of historical, theoretical, and cultural understanding. The last method they judge individuals, either directly or indirectly, is through the words they use, which express their implicit personal judgments.

While empirical research on the texts' long-standing acceptance by the scientific community reveals their intersubjectivity, aesthetic-linguistic analyses of the texts reveal their subjective/objective nature. The underlying hypothesis, according to which the creator's own interpretation is the only one that can be trusted, cannot be true. What distinguishes the artwork from natural things or happenings is its indefinable intellectual depth and breadth of readings and interpretations. Even if it is confirmed by the artist's own verbal or written testimony, embracing it as the only truthful explanation would lessen the phenomenon's originality. The relationship between the piece of art and the viewer is multifaceted and irreversibly changed, providing countless opportunities for aesthetic fulfillment and mental expansion.

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