

Criticizing Photographs

An Introduction to Understanding Images

THIRD EDITION

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About Art Criticism

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT reading and doing photography criticism so that you can better appreciate photographs by using critical processes. Unfortunately, we usually don't equate criticism with appreciation because in everyday language the term *criticism* has negative connotations: It is used to refer to the act of making judgments, usually negative judgments, and the act of expressing disapproval.

In mass media, critics are portrayed as judges of art: Reviewers in newspapers rate restaurants with stars, and critics on television rate movies with thumbs up or thumbs down or from 1 to 10, constantly reinforcing judgmental aspects of criticism. Of all the words critics write, those most often quoted are judgments: "The best play of the season!" "Dazzling!" "Brilliant!" These words are highlighted in bold type in movie and theater ads because these words sell tickets. But they constitute only a few of the critic's total output of words, and they have been quoted out of context. These snippets have minimal value in helping us reach an understanding of a play or a movie.

Critics are writers who like art and choose to spend their lives thinking and writing about it. bell hooks, a critic and scholar of African American cultural studies, writes this about writing: "Seduced by the magic of words in childhood, I am still transported, carried away, writing and reading. Writing longhand the first drafts of all my works, I read aloud to myself, performing the words to hear and feel them. I want to be certain I am grappling with language in such a way that my words live and breathe, that they surface from a passionate place inside me."¹ Peter Schjeldahl, a poet who now writes art criticism as a career, writes that "I get from art a regular chance to experience something—or perhaps everything, the whole world—as someone else, to replace my eyes and mind with the eyes and mind of another for a charged moment."² Christopher Knight, who has written art criticism

for the *Los Angeles Times* since 1989, left a successful career as a museum curator to write criticism precisely because he wanted to be closer to art: “The reason I got interested in a career in art in the first place is to be around art and artists. I found that in museums you spend most of your time around trustees and paperwork.”³

Some critics don’t want to be called critics because of the negative connotations of the term. Art critic and poet Rene Ricard, writing in *Artforum*, says: “In point of fact I’m not an art critic. I am an enthusiast. I like to drum up interest in artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work.”⁴ Michael Feingold, who writes theater criticism for the *Village Voice*, says that “criticism should celebrate the good in art, not revel in its anger at the bad.”⁵ Similarly, Lucy Lippard is usually supportive of the art she writes about, but she says she is sometimes accused of not being critical, of not being a critic at all. She responds, “That’s okay with me, since I never liked the term anyway. Its negative connotations place the writer in fundamental antagonism to the artists.”⁶ She and other critics do not want to be thought of as being opposed to artists.

DEFINING CRITICISM

The term *criticism* is complex, with several different meanings. In the language of aestheticians who philosophize about art and art criticism, and in the language of art critics, *criticism* usually refers to a much broader range of activities than just the act of judging. Morris Weitz, an aesthete interested in art criticism, sought to discover more about it by studying what critics do when they criticize art.⁷ He took as his test case all the criticism ever written about Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. After reading the volumes of *Hamlet* criticism written through the ages, Weitz concluded that when critics criticize they do one or more of four things: They *describe* the work of art, they *interpret* it, they *evaluate* it, and they *theorize* about it. Some critics engage primarily in descriptive criticism; others describe, but primarily to further their interpretations; still others describe, interpret, evaluate, *and* theorize. Weitz drew several conclusions about criticism, most notably that any one of these four activities constitutes criticism and that evaluation is not a necessary part of criticism. He found that several critics criticized *Hamlet* without ever judging it.

When critics criticize, they do much more than express their likes and dislikes—and much more than approve and disapprove of works of art. Critics do judge artworks, and sometimes negatively, but their judgments more often are positive than negative: As Rene Ricard says, “Why give publicity to something you hate?” When Schjeldahl is confronted by a work he does not like, he asks himself several questions: “‘Why would I have done that if I did it?’ is one of my working questions about an artwork. (Not that I *could*. This is make-believe.) My formula of fairness to work that displeases me is to ask, ‘What would I like about this if I liked it?’ When I cannot deem myself an intended or even a possible member of a work’s audience, I ask myself what such an audience member must be like.”⁸ Michael

Feingold thinks it unfortunate that theater criticism in New York City often prevents theatergoing rather than encourages it, and he adds that “as every critic knows, a favorable review with some substance is much harder to write than a pan.”⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who writes frequently about photography, says there are instances when it is clear that something is nonsense and should be called nonsense, but she finds it more beneficial to ask questions about meaning than about aesthetic worth.¹⁰

“What do I do as a critic in a gallery?” Schjeldahl asks. He answers: “I learn. I walk up to, around, touch if I dare, the objects, meanwhile asking questions in my mind and casting about for answers—all until mind and senses are in some rough agreement, or until fatigue sets in.” Edmund Feldman, an art historian and art educator, has written much about art criticism and defines it as “informed talk about art.”¹¹ He also minimizes the act of evaluating, or judging, art, saying that it is the least important of the critical procedures. A. D. Coleman, a pioneering and prolific critic of recent photography, defines what he does as “the intersecting of photographic images with words.”¹² He adds: “I merely look closely at and into all sorts of photographic images and attempt to pinpoint in words what they provoke me to feel and think and understand.” Morris Weitz defines criticism as “a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art.”¹³

Throughout this book the term *criticism* will not refer to the act of negative judgment; it will refer to a much wider range of activities and will adhere to this broad definition: *Criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art.*