

INTRODUCTION: “IS THERE A PLACE (STILL) FOR CRITICISM?”

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ABSTRACT

The texts presented in this special issue of the JSTA have two ambitions. On the one hand, they try to retake the problem of art criticism in a digital age that significantly transformed the means of exhibition and experimentation of works of art. Together they are an introduction to the task of criticism today, taking into account its genealogy in German theoretical romanticism and its new repertoires in post-colonial theory and infra-structural critique. On the other hand, they aim in recovering the discussion of criticism and the need for its inclusion in contemporary art discussions.

Keywords: Art criticism; Art theory; Infra-structural critique; Images; Cinema; Contemporary art.

The discussion about the state of criticism has been intense in recent decades, and many even declared its death. The diagnosis of a crisis has both an optimistic and a pessimistic tone. How does the crisis of criticism and new gestures of participation contribute to developing critical thinking about the arts and open space for the subject to feel, think and act differently? How has technological and digital mediation changed our ways of exercising criticism and its capacity to produce a common ground for aesthetic and political debates? Summing up: Is there still a place for criticism in a metric society driven by likes and obsessed with digital social networks? It is in this sense of urgency that we bring to this volume of the *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* a collection of articles that reflects on the contemporary status of criticism.

This debate permeates a broad theoretical and practical field, ranging from the attempt to redefine what is understood by criticism to repositioning its status on a different institutional basis. What is unquestionably positive in recent years is the production of new repertoires of critical analysis. This renovation of critical repertoires can be seen either in the field of postcolonial debate and decolonial theory or in the definition of an infrastructural critique – understood as a contemporary development of a critical attitude that began in the 1980s as institutional critique.

In a global art world, crossed by an astonishing number of biennials, art fairs and new museums, we observe a growing homogenization of visual culture, boosted by a liberal economy driven by the search for assets that equates liquidity security and social prestige. Nonetheless, inside this mega-system, a critical production begins to take shape, introducing new frictions to enable diversity and bifurcations. Only by welcoming differences in our ways of perceiving (and living) in the world will we bypass the lack of alternatives to the commodification of different life forms.

But how can critical theory in general and art criticism, in particular, make possible the diversification of subjective experiences? How to redefine the terms of arts political engagement within its expanded institutionality? How to approach art and politics beyond old dichotomies that separate subjectivity and objectivity, logos and pathos, reason and sensibility? We must reset criticism to multiply narratives and redefine identities. Art is the place to recognize difference and displace identities, an exercise of freedom.

We must destabilize the western canon and promote experiences with new models of engagement between art and society, opening ways of imagining different regimes of perception, institutions, and modes of existence. Leo Steinberg, in his seminal book *Other Criteria* (1972), explains in a simple and very poetical way, his search for other criteria of criticism: “It stands for the belief that all given criteria of judgment are seasonal; those other criteria are perpetually brought into play by new forms and fresh thought”.

In the last fifty years, we have seen the radicalization of globalization, a dazzling technological development, growing inequalities

and indisputable environmental urgency. We are completely lost in translation. Therefore, it's urgent to find a new critical repertory that can be, at the same time, more creative and less disenchanting, more political, and less ideological. In this sense, we bring about here some articles that reflect on the contemporary status of criticism, its tendency towards a more poetical writing and new forms of institutional intervention.

After exchanging emails with the Afro-American professor and theorist Fred Moten, we came up with the idea of editing parts from his last book entitled *All that Beauty* (2019). To define it as a critical piece seems wrong. It is more likely a poetical essay that appropriates different voices to confront the canon and the hegemonic regimes of aesthetic appreciation. Our main task in editing it, quite an impossible one, was to keep the coherence and the strength of his critical approach, composed of many Afro-diasporic voices, urging to transgress western (white) ideas of beauty. That was done adding other sensibilities, other ways of producing and perceiving beauty – *All that Beauty*.

In a different mindset, but no less relevant to invent other criteria of criticism, we have Marina Vishmidt's article, *Only as Self-Relating Negativity: Infrastructure and Critique*. Assuming recent geopolitical changes and the absorption of institutional critique by the hegemonic arts system, she proposes a new infrastructural critique that destabilizes forms of capture: "An institution can be a type of infrastructure, but the shift needs to be understood as one which takes the institution as its horizon, thus accepting the moralized premises that perpetuate it, to one which takes the institution as a historical and contingent nexus of material conditions amenable to re-arrangement through struggle and different forms of inhabitation and dispersal".

These two critical proposals are rethinking critique, tackling different subjectivities, and incorporating institutional resistances. How to problematize hegemonic art histories and open art history narratives and methodologies to new perspectives for art writing and new forms of criticism? How to reveal the many temporalities of the present that will expand our reduced horizons of expectations beyond modern historicism and monolingualism?

In this regard, Pedro Duarte's article, *The Origin of Art Criticism and What Remains of It Today* seeks to synchronize the promises of criticism with the challenges of new information technologies and their impact on artistic languages. An article that aims to contribute to systematizing "the historical evolution of art criticism (...) understood not as a determinative judgment about a work of art or as a mediation between art and public. Rather, it is a reflection that intensifies the poetic of a work". The author explores the historical development of criticism since its Romantic origin and pinpoints how a hybrid writing equating reflection and creation emerges, exploring a fragmentary and essayistic style. The challenge with which he finishes the article deals with the future of criticism in a technologically mediated world. How to deal with a public sphere that is more inclusive, dispersed and fragmented at the same time?

In the essay by Ainá Rocha the concepts and ideas of phantasmagoria and apparition will guide us through research into technical and memory images. One of the significant points of departure is Walter Benjamin and how his text *The Work of Art in The Era of Mechanized Reproduction* (2008) is an essential tool to discuss the idea of cinematographic authenticity. Can cinema, intended to mass consumption, retain any kind of aura? Which Benjamin points to as being the distinctive feature of any artwork? This questioning is not intended only to build new aesthetic or critic categories but also to discuss whether cinematic images can maintain the condition of being a “crystal of time,” which Benjamin recognizes as existing in all artistic images.

The main question this essay addresses in a very original way is about the power of images and how they can establish a critical relation to time and history through them. It is this dialectical condition of images that allow cinematic images to be at the same time a phantasmagoria and an apparition. Besides this discussion, the author relates the conditions of cinematic images, their aura, historicity, etc., to question the epistemological and ontological value of digital phantasmagories and apparitions.

Finally, the essay by Marc Rölli, *The Immanence of Criticism*, guide us through an essential history of criticism tracing it back to Kant and his critical project, to Hegel and the consequences his conception of historicism have on criticism, Foucault, among others. The main purpose is to build a framework inside which we can understand the place of criticism in a specific philosophical tradition and how it relates to history. As Rölli puts it: “a plea for criticism to be situated in historical relationships that are no longer of the traditional historical-philosophical type.” Ultimately, Rölli’s contribution allows us to advocate and find places for an epistemological pluralism that is urgent and of foremost importance in our contemporaneity.

We hope that the texts we brought together in this JSTA special dossier can contribute to the understanding of how criticism is a crucial tool for constructing a pluralist society where all subjects can find suitable spaces for expressing their subjectivity. Which, ultimately, we can state to be the purpose of all art practices.

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