

Art Criticism as Practical Reasoning

Pre-print version; please cite published version here: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayx016>

Anthony Cross, Texas State University

anthony.cross@txstate.edu

ABSTRACT

Most recent discussions of reasons in art criticism focus on reasons that justify beliefs about the value of artworks. Reviving a long-neglected suggestion from Paul Ziff, I argue that we should focus instead on art-critical reasons that justify actions—namely, particular ways of engaging with artworks. I argue that a focus on practical rather than theoretical reasons yields an understanding of criticism that better fits with our intuitions about the value of reading art criticism, and which makes room for a nuanced distinction between criticism that aims at universality and criticism that is resolutely personal.¹

1 Introduction

Consider, for starters, Clement Greenberg's review of Piet Mondrian's late painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, written on the occasion of the acquisition of the piece in 1943 by the Museum of Modern Art:

Something of the harmony of the original white square of canvas should be restored in the finished painting. But harmony a thousand times more intense,

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Society for Aesthetics annual meeting in Savannah, GA in November, 2015; I am grateful to Karen Gover for her helpful commentary on the paper, and to the audience for their probing questions—all of which improved the paper tremendously. Special thanks also go to John Dyck, Margo Handwerker, Barbara Herman, Robert Hopkins, Barry Maguire, Alexander Nehamas, Thi Nguyen, Michael Smith, and Jack Woods for their feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal, whose critical feedback was especially valuable in developing and refining the paper's argument.

because it is the result of the successful resolution of a difficult struggle. The simplest way almost of accounting for a great work of art is to say that it is a thing possessing simultaneously the maximum of diversity and the maximum of unity possible to that diversity. For lack of the first the new painting by Mondrian called *New York Boogie Woogie...is*, for all its sudden originality, something a little less than a masterpiece. The checkered lines of orange squares produce a staccato rhythm—signifying jazz—too easily contained by the square pattern and white ground of the picture. At hardly any point does the rhythm threaten to break out of and unbalance this pattern enough to justify the latter's final triumph. There is resolution, but of an easy struggle.²

As Greenberg's review continues, he characterizes *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as a "gamble well worth undertaking", even though he ultimately finds it to be less successful than Mondrian's earlier paintings. Greenberg's admiration for Mondrian's earlier work is clear in Greenberg's well-known essay, "Modernist Painting", in which he takes Mondrian to be an exemplar of the internal critique to which all modernism aspires. Greenberg praises in particular Mondrian's ability to demonstrate the essential *flatness* of the pictorial medium via pictorial means: "the crisscrossing black lines and colored rectangles of a Mondrian painting seem hardly enough to make a picture out of, yet they impose the picture's framing shape as a regulating norm with a new force and completeness by echoing that shape so closely."³ By comparison, Greenberg characterizes *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as a failed attempt to push this formal investigation in new directions—one which lacks the purity and the seriousness of

² Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Mondrian's New York Boogie Woogie and Other New Acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art,' in his *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 153.

³ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting,' in his *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism., Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 90.

Mondrian's paintings of the 1920s and 1930s, insofar as it aspires to mere representation of the rhythm of the city.

I've introduced Greenberg's review as an example of the activity of art criticism itself—and, in particular, of the nature of critical reasoning and argument. Greenberg's review includes, in miniature, nearly every major aspect of art-critical activity, including what I take to be three of its central constituents: description, the characterization of the various elements of an artwork; interpretation, the characterization of the meaning of the work as it is expressed or made manifest in the work; and evaluation, the attribution of evaluative properties to the work.⁴

Much more could be said about each of these activities individually, but here I am interested in the way that each aspect comes together in the activity of critical communication. In particular, I am interested in a common view about the function of description and interpretation, which together we can refer to as *characterization*. On this model of criticism, which I'll call the *theoretical* model, characterizations function as reasons for beliefs about the value of the work; in other words, the aim of characterization is to provide reasons that ground evaluative judgments. The provision of such evaluative judgments is taken to be the essential or defining feature of art criticism.

Below, I examine this common view of criticism in greater detail before arguing that it is substantially mistaken about the function of characterization in a great deal of art criticism. To anticipate, I will argue for what I call the *practical* model of criticism, according to which such

⁴ Although there is little agreement in the philosophical literature about what James Grant calls the "constitutive aim" or aims of criticism—the aim or purpose of a piece of writing in virtue of which it is an instance of art criticism—there is near consensus that, whatever its aims might be, the activity of criticism includes at least these three aspects. James Grant, *The Critical Imagination* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 5. Monroe Beardsley takes them to be exhaustively constitutive of art criticism in Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 7–10, whereas more recent discussions of criticism, such as Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009) and Jonathan Gilmore, "Criticism," in Dominic Lopes and Berys Gaut (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 375–83, go beyond these three to include further activities such as classification, contextualization, elucidation, and analysis.

characterizations primarily serve to provide reasons *for action* rather than reasons supporting evaluative judgments. A critic's characterizations provide one with ways that it would be worthwhile to structure one's engagement with a work of art—rather than steps in a logical argument which takes as its conclusion an evaluative judgment about the work. Art criticism is in large part an exercise in practical rather than theoretical reasoning.

2 The Theoretical Model: Characterizations as Reasons for Evaluative Judgments

In “Critical Communication”, Arnold Isenberg presents a clear taxonomy of the major elements of what I've called the theoretical model of criticism:

A good starting point is a theory of criticism, widely held in spite of its deficiencies, which divides the critical process into three parts. There is the value judgment or *verdict* (V) : “This picture or poem is good - .” There is a particular statement or *reason* (R) : “- because it has such-and-such a quality -.” And there is a general statement or *norm* (N): “and any work which has that quality is *pro tanto* good.”⁵

On this model, when a critic cites a feature of the artwork in this way, she does so to provide a reason R to believe that the verdict V that the artwork is good or bad. To refer to this feature of an artwork as a reason in this way is to suggest that it plays a role in a critical argument: it links the specification of some feature of the work with an ascription of some overall judgment of value. The role of a characterization is to provide a piece of *theoretical* reasoning: it is a fact that makes reasonable a belief about the overall value of the work.

⁵ Arnold Isenberg, “Critical Communication,” *The Philosophical Review* 58, no. 4 (1949), 330-344, at 330.

Isenberg's paper has generally been understood as offering a challenge to the theoretical model of art criticism. He argues that, according to the model discussed above, arguments from the presence of some particular quality R to an overall evaluative verdict V would only be valid if there were some general principle or norm N linking the presence of R in all artworks to overall judgments of value. Isenberg puts the dilemma for the defender of the common view in these terms: he claims that "as long as we have no alternative interpretation of the import and function of R, we must assume either that R is perfectly arbitrary or that it presupposes and depends on some general claim."⁶ The problem is that there don't seem to be any plausible candidates for such principles: to take a simple example, Greenberg's favored quality of flatness might support an ascription of value to a Mondrian painting, but it would be a liability in a Judd sculpture. A general rule licensing the inference of overall value on the basis of an attribution of flatness would be silly; the same goes for any putative quality that might serve to ground critical principles. In the absence of any such principles, all critical arguments would be invalid, and appeals to reasons would seem to be "perfectly arbitrary."

Discussions of reasons in art criticism since Isenberg have been dominated by attempts to respond to Isenberg's challenge: Some philosophers, such as Monroe Beardsley and Noël Carroll, have attempted to produce critical principles which *would* allow for a valid inference from the presence of some feature to an overall verdict.⁷ Other philosophers, such as Frank Sibley, have attempted to show that no such principles are necessary; instead, one might opt for a form of particularism, according to which critical justification linking features of works and beliefs about overall value does not depend upon any appeal to general critical principles.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 335.

⁷ Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 10; Carroll, *On Criticism*.

⁸ Frank Sibley, "General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics," in his *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, H. B Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 104–18. For an argument to the extent that Sibley is in fact a particularist, see Anna Bergqvist, "Why Sibley Is Not a Generalist After All," *BJA* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 1–14.

What is common to both of these strategies for responding to Isenberg's challenge is that they have retained the assumption that the function of characterization in art criticism is to provide support for beliefs about overall value. Isenberg himself rejects this assumption, and claims that characterization plays quite a different role in critical communication. However, as I discuss in the next section, Isenberg's alternative account of characterization's role in the practice of criticism will come at a high cost: it severs the link between art criticism and genuine reasoning.

3 Isenberg's Alternative: Criticism and Perception

Isenberg's alternative suggestion is that the practice of characterizing features of an artwork does not function to support ascriptions of overall value to an artwork; rather, it functions as a means of facilitating perception. The goal of characterization in criticism is to get one's audience to *see* the artwork in a particular way; as Isenberg puts it, "it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content."⁹

Isenberg illustrates his position by reference to the example of Ludwig Goldschieder's characterization of El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz* as having a "wavelike contour." According to Isenberg, the point of Goldschieder's characterization—his reference to its "wavelike contour"—has little to do with supporting an evaluative judgment. Rather, in offering this description, Goldschieder:

is thinking of another quality, no idea of which is transmitted to us by his language, which he *sees* and which by his use of language he gets us *to see*....[The critic] gives us directions for perceiving, and does this by means of the idea he imparts to us, which narrows down the field of possible visual orientations and

⁹ Isenberg, "Critical Communication," 336.

guides us in the discrimination of details, the organization of parts, the grouping of discrete objects into patterns.¹⁰

According to Isenberg, such critical communication is successful when it brings about a community of vision—that is, when critic and audience share the same perceptual experience, as brought about by the critic’s attempts to evocatively describe the artwork in question.

The problem with Isenberg’s explanation of the function of characterization, at least by the lights of many analytic aestheticians, is that it severs the link between critical communication and rational discourse: if critics simply guide us in perception, then what they do *not* do is give us a reason which supports an ascription of overall value to an artwork. Instead, they simply tell us something about how *they* see the work, and try—by whatever means necessary—to get us to see it in the same way. This, many have argued, fails to qualify as *reasoning*.¹¹

Recently, Robert Hopkins has attempted to defend Isenberg’s account of criticism against this charge. Hopkins argues that there is a way of reconstructing Isenberg’s account of criticism according to which it *is* a form of reasoning, albeit a peculiar form of reasoning that involves “arguing for a perception.”¹² But how could there be an argument with a *perception* as a conclusion?

Hopkins thinks that this worry can be overcome, provided that we take the right view of the nature of perception. He ultimately defends the claim that perception itself is a kind of extended and nested activity in which particular perceptions—say, seeing the delicateness of figure in a Botticelli—support and constitute more complex perceptions—such as seeing the prissiness of the Botticelli. The role of the critic, on Hopkins’s view, is to provide the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ cf. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 470; Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic,” in his *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, H. B Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 33-51, at 40.

¹² Robert Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception,” in Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes (eds), *Knowing Art: Essays in Aesthetics and Epistemology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 137-153, at 139.

“premises” from which follow more complex perceptions.¹³ Hopkins makes the further claim that these complex perceptions have a kind of conceptual content—a content that cannot be captured by any non-demonstrative belief—and argues that it is the point of art criticism to get audiences to accept as a “conclusion” the conceptual contents of a complex perception, i.e. that the Botticelli is prissy.

The major problem for Hopkins is whether or not one should characterize the process of developing one’s audience’s perception of an object as one of “reasoning.” After all, as Hopkins himself notes, it could simply be the case that the critic merely *causes* her audience to have a particular perceptual experience of the artwork—one with a particular conceptual content—without engaging in any sort of rational persuasion.¹⁴ Perhaps one might also get one’s audience to see the artwork in a particular way by hitting them on the head, or giving them a special pair of glasses. Are these cases of rational persuasion? Presumably not. The difficulty for Hopkins lies in trying to argue that criticism on his model differs substantively from these sorts of activities.¹⁵

Whether or not Hopkins is able to respond to this concern, I’d like to put aside his attempt to salvage Isenberg’s approach in favor of an alternative approach to understanding the activity of criticism—one which retains the link between critical communication and rational discourse, while also doing justice to Isenberg’s insight that criticism is often tied to bringing about a perceptual experience. Where this account differs is that it rejects two claims that Hopkins aims to reconcile: namely, the claims that a) criticism’s aim is to rationally persuade individuals to accept some belief; and b) that criticism operates by getting them to *see* an object in a particular way or to have some *specific* perceptual experience that grounds said belief about the object. Instead, according to what I call the *practical* model of criticism, the aim of criticism is to

¹³ Ibid., 149–50.

¹⁴ Ibid., 152.

¹⁵ Hopkins does begin to sketch a line of response to this difficulty in *ibid.* I am not certain that his response is successful, but for reasons of space, I cannot consider the issue further here.

provide individuals with reasons to *look at*—and, more generally, to engage with—an artwork in some particular way. In this respect, art criticism involves genuine reasoning—albeit reasoning that is practical rather than theoretical. I develop this view below.

4 The Practical Model: Characterizations as Reasons for Action

According to the practical model of criticism, in characterizing works of art critics provide us with reasons *for action*: in particular, pointing out these features serves as a way of providing considerations which count in favor of particular acts of looking, contemplating, listening, reflecting, or otherwise engaging with the artwork. For example, on this view to point to the “wavelike contour” of the El Greco is to claim that this feature of the painting counts in favor of a particular way of looking: following the contour with one’s eyes as one engages with the painting. It’s likely that, in looking this way, a particular kind of intrinsically valuable perceptual experience will follow—and this is *why* the critic insists that we look in this way. But on this view the critic’s argument doesn’t *establish* this perception for us; rather, we need to complete the act of looking ourselves. Paul Ziff develops a view similar to this in his long-neglected essay, “Reasons and Art Criticism.”¹⁶ I believe that this sort of view, properly developed and supplemented, has the resources to provide a more compelling picture of the role of characterization in critical communication than either the common view *or* Isenberg’s view. After introducing Ziff’s view, I address and remedy several of its problems as a means of developing my own version of the practical model of criticism.

First, consider Ziff’s analysis of the goodness of a work of art:

A person p_i , performs an action, a_i , in connection with an entity, e_i , under conditions, c_i ; George contemplates Fouquet’s “Madonna” in the gallery at

¹⁶ Paul Ziff, “Reasons in Art Criticism,” in his *Philosophic Turnings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 47–74.

Antwerp; e_i , is good if and only if the performance of the relevant a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile for its own sake. To state a reason why e_i is good is simply to state a fact about e_i , in virtue of which the performance of the relevant a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile for its own sake.¹⁷

Here, Ziff makes the claim that a work of art is good if and only if there exist reasons for looking at it in particular ways.¹⁸ Ziff's central idea is that it is the aim of criticism to make clear exactly what these reasons are. To cite some feature of an artwork—he later uses the example of calling a Mondrian painting “flat”—is to suggest that that feature of the work counts in favor of some individual engaging with that work in a particular manner under certain circumstances. Of the Mondrian, Ziff continues:

the fact that the Mondrian is completely flat indicates that the performance of a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile in connection with the Mondrian painting. In telling you this, I am telling you something about the act of aspection to be performed in connection with the work, for now you know at least this: you are to look at the work spatially, three-dimensionally.¹⁹

The point of characterization in art criticism, then, is to tell you what it would be reasonable to *do* with the work—not what to believe about it.

Notice that Ziff explicitly limits his account to a discussion of non-instrumental reasons for action: to call the Mondrian “flat” is to provide a non-instrumental reason for looking at the painting in a particular way. Ziff claims that to look at the painting in this way would be worthwhile for its own sake. As will become clear below, I suspect that Ziff introduces this

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ This is in keeping with Ziff's more general claims elsewhere about goodness: that for an object to be good is for it to answer to particular interests. Ziff understands the interests associated with paintings to be interests that we have in pleasurable experiences that attend our looking at them. Cf. Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), chap. 6.

¹⁹ Ziff, “Reasons in Art Criticism,” 73.

restriction in large part because he accepts a version of experientialism about artistic value, according to which artworks are valuable as art precisely because they reward particular “acts of aspection” with intrinsically valuable experiences. But, as I argue below, this restriction is problematic; removing it is one step towards a better version of the practical model of criticism.

Beyond Acts of Aspection

Ziff explains the notion of aspection as follows:

To aspect a painting is to look at it in some way. Thus to contemplate a painting is to perform one act of aspection; to scan it is to perform another; to study, observe, survey, inspect, examine, scrutinize, are still other acts of aspection. There are about three hundred words available here in English, but that is not enough.²⁰

He goes on to suggest that different schools of art—and, indeed, different artworks themselves—may call for importantly different acts of aspection:

Venetian paintings lend themselves to an act of aspection involving attention to balanced masses; contours are of no importance, for they are scarcely to be found. The Florentine school demands attention to contours, the linear style predominates. Look for light in a Claude, for color in a Bannard, for contoured volumes in a Signorelli.²¹

On Ziff’s view of critical communication, the critic’s aim is to recommend particular ways of looking at the artwork—with the ultimate goal of getting the audience to see the work in such a way as to facilitate appreciation. However, this final step—bringing the audience to *see* the work in a particular way—is not guaranteed, and will depend on certain facts about the audience, including their background knowledge, their perceptual capacities, and so on.

²⁰ Ibid., 71.

²¹ Ibid.

This basic picture of criticism—as involving directed looking and perception—was widespread among Ziff’s contemporaries. As we’ve already seen, Isenberg’s account of criticism is notably similar insofar as, on his view, criticism aims to bring about “communication at the level of the senses.”²² Similarly, Frank Sibley claims that “the critic is successful if his audience began by not seeing, and ends by seeing for itself, the aesthetic character of the object.”²³

What ultimately accounts for these perceptually-focused accounts of criticism is a background commitment to a particular theory of artistic value: the experientialist theory of artistic value. The experientialist theory of artistic value identifies artistic value with the intrinsic value of the experiences that are yielded by engaging with a work of art. More specifically, Ziff, Isenberg, and Sibley all seem to endorse a further limitation on the theory, according to which the only intrinsically valuable experiences that are constitutive of artistic value are those that are on offer in a direct perceptual encounter with an artwork; as Sibley puts it, “people have to see the grace or unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, notice the gaudiness of a color scheme.”²⁴

Given this background picture of artistic value—one that was dominant in the middle of the twentieth century—it should be no surprise that Ziff, Isenberg, and Sibley all take the task of the critic to be one of directing the audience’s perception in such a way as to facilitate perceptual appreciation of artworks. However, this account of artistic value has been subject to increasing pressure over the past several decades; by appealing to narrative artworks, critics have challenged the limitation of artistically valuable experiences to those experiences on offer in an immediate perceptual encounter.²⁵ Others have appealed to cases of forgeries, lost art,

²² Isenberg, “Critical Communication,” 336.

²³ Sibley, “Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic,” 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵ Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126–60.

conceptual art, and other non-aesthetic art to argue that artistic value cannot be reduced to the intrinsic value of the experiences that artworks yield.²⁶ I am sympathetic to these challenges, but as I cannot rehearse them here for reasons of space, I will assume for the sake of argument that they have been successful in demonstrating the limitations of Ziff's particular version of the experientialist theory of artistic value.

The upshot is that Ziff's restriction of the role of critics to guiding our acts of aspection is too severe; it limits the relevance of critical communication to art that is primarily concerned with the realization of perceptual experiential value. However, critical communication and characterization addresses all sorts of art, and the recommendations critics make for engaging with it isn't limited to ways of looking. For example, consider criticism of the literary arts: to point out the rich internal lives of George Eliot's characters is to invite empathetic engagement with them, just as noting Dickens's vivid descriptions is to give a reason to imagine one's way into them. These are hardly acts of aspection, and yet engaging in such activities seems central to a proper appreciation of and engagement with these literary works.

Even in the visual arts, it isn't obvious that critics limit their recommendations to acts of aspection. For example, a critic's discussion of the artistic achievement that a painting represents might lead us to learn more about its historical context; such context often enriches our overall understanding and appreciation of an artwork, but acquiring such contextual and historical information seems separate from any particular act of aspection.

These considerations should also lead us to doubt Ziff's claim that critics aim only to specify ways of engaging with works of art that would be valuable for their own sake. If we assume—with Ziff—that the point of all artworks is to facilitate intrinsically valuable experiences via aspection, then this limitation is reasonable. However, once we reflect on the

²⁶ Denis Dutton, "Artistic Crimes: The Problem of Forgery in the Arts," *BJA* 19, no. 4 (1979), 302-214. R. A. Sharpe, "The Empiricist Theory of Artistic Value," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 4 (2000), 321-32. David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden: Blackwell Pub, 2004), chap. 2.

point that artists might aim to effect social change through their works or facilitate deeper moral understanding, it makes sense that critics would direct us to engage with the works in ways that might facilitate these ends. In such cases, critics would be providing us with instrumental reasons to engage with the artwork in a particular way; for example, a critic might suggest that we should empathize with Eliot's characters *in order to* deepen our moral understanding.

The lesson for our understanding of criticism is that we should relax Ziff's restrictions on the aims of critical communication. Critics, in referencing the features of an artwork through characterization, point out those aspects of the work which count in favor of engaging with the work, and furthermore tell us *how* to do so. This may include guiding us in our perception of an artwork, but it may extend beyond this too to other forms of engagement entirely. In doing so, their primary aim is to structure our activity—that is, to provide us with reasons for action.

Critical Reasoning as Practical Reasoning

Rather than taking critics to be engaged in a form of *theoretical* reasoning, I've suggested, following Ziff, that critics are instead engaged in a kind of *practical* reasoning—the aim of which is to bring about *action*.²⁷ On this understanding of criticism, critics provide us with advice about which considerations might count in favor of our engaging with an artwork in determinate ways.²⁸ For example, telling me that the figures in the Botticelli are overly delicate might count in favor of paying close attention to those aspects of the painting, or comparing Botticelli's depictions to other painters in the Florentine school. Each of these reasons, as

²⁷ This claim should be compatible with both the claim that the conclusion of practical reason is an action and the claim that the conclusion of practical reason is an intention. cf. Bart Streumer, "Practical Reasoning," in Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (eds), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 244–51.

²⁸ Critics might provide other sorts of practical advice too: they might simply tell us to perform certain actions in relation to the artwork, without giving us any indication of why there is a good reason to do so. For example, a critic might simply say: "Pay attention to the bass melody in this song." We often follow such advice, but we do so only because we assume that there *is* a good reason for engaging with the artwork in this way.

provided by a critic in critical communication, would provide the critic's audience with a better map of the practical terrain surrounding the artwork—one which would better allow the audience to make decisions about how to engage with the work, or whether to engage with it at all.²⁹

An immediate objection to this view is that, insofar as this model of criticism doesn't involve any persuasion through rational inference, it doesn't count as an act of reasoning at all. One might ask: Is this really *reasoning* if it doesn't involve persuading an audience to accept a conclusion by means of logical inference?

To respond to this objection, one needs simply to note that not all reasoning is inferential. I grant that it is extremely plausible that theoretical reasoning is inferential, and involves a movement of thought leading from truth of the premises to the truth of the conclusion. However, we needn't conceive of practical reasoning as fitting the same model. An alternative picture of practical reasoning is suggested by Jonathan Dancy, according to which practical deliberation involves "an attempt to capture in thought the structure of the moral situation" that occurs in roughly two stages: first, we work out which features of the situation are salient to us from a deliberative perspective—either as reasons to act or not act in particular ways, as enablers or disablers, as modifiers of existing reasons, and so on. Then, on the basis of working out this practical landscape, we make a decision on how we should act.³⁰ Although this is not a process of inference, Dancy argues that we should nevertheless think of it as an instance of reasoning:

²⁹ I use the terminology of "mapping" as I take it to be the case that critics *discover* such reasons rather than *inventing* them. I owe this point of clarification to an anonymous reviewer for the journal. In this respect, my position bears similarities with the position developed by Joseph Raz in "Interpretation Without Retrieval," in his *Between Authority and Interpretation: On the Theory of Law and Practical Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 241-264, at 254-56. This discovery may, in part, be a discovery not just of further features of the work, but also of how the acknowledged features of a work might bear on its audience's circumstances in new ways. My view differs from Raz's in that, according to Raz, the aim of interpretation is to map out reasons to *pay attention* to an artwork. On my account, criticism may be about more than simply paying attention; there may be other forms of engagement for which critics aim to provide reasons.

³⁰ Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 105.

We are, however, always dealing with reasons here, and drawing our conclusions or making our decisions in the light of those reasons. So there can be nothing wrong with talking of reasoning, since we are involved in the handling of reasons. What would be wrong would be to suppose that all handlings of reasons involve inference.³¹

Opting for this understanding of practical reasoning would allow for the possibility that, if critics do specify genuine reasons which count in favor of engaging with the artwork in a particular way, then they engage in genuine reasoning even if they do not aim to persuade us by way of logical inference. Instead, critics function as aids in the process of practical deliberation by helping us to clarify those features of the artwork that count in favor of our engaging with it in determinate ways.

Illustrating the Practical Model

The example with which I began—Greenberg’s review of Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*—is one that might seem especially well suited to what I’ve called the theoretical model of criticism, according to which the aim of criticism as such is to provide support for an evaluative judgment about an artwork. However, it’s significant that Greenberg’s piece is a *review*—a particular genre of criticism which is generally focused on supporting a verdict.³² For better or worse, many philosophical appraisals of criticism take reviewing in particular as a model for *all* criticism—thus providing support for the theoretical model of criticism.

However, once one broadens one’s focus to include other varieties of criticism, it is not hard to find examples especially well-suited to the practical model of criticism as I’ve developed it. Consider John Berger’s discussion of J.M.W. Turner’s well-known oil painting,

³¹ Ibid.

³² On reviewing, see Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 44–53.

Snowstorm.³³ The painting, completed in 1842, depicts a steamboat adrift in a maelstrom. By Turner's own account, the painting is based on experience: Turner claimed that he was aboard such a boat in the midst of a turbulent blizzard and, rather than go below decks, he commanded the sailors to tie him to the mast. Although now generally recognized as a masterpiece, *Snowstorm* was initially dismissed for its chaotic depiction and for its use of paint which one contemporary dismissed as "soapsuds and whitewash."³⁴ Berger's writing about the painting helps us to understand *how* we should engage with it:

Turner transcended the principle of traditional landscape: the principle that a landscape is something which unfolds before you. In *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* the scene begins to extend beyond its formal edges. It begins to work its way round the spectator in an effort to outflank and surround him. In *The Snowstorm* the tendency has become fact. If one really allows one's eye to be absorbed into the forms and colours on the canvas, one begins to realize that, looking at it, one is in the centre of a maelstrom: there is no longer a near and a far. For example, the lurch into the distance is not, as one would expect, *into* the picture, but out of it towards the right-hand edge. It is a picture which precludes the outside spectator. Turner's physical courage must have been considerable. His courage as an artist before his own experience was even greater. His truthfulness to that experience was such that he destroyed the tradition to which he was so proud to belong. He stopped painting totalities. *The Snowstorm* is the total of everything which can be seen and grasped by the man tied to the mast of that ship. There is *nothing* outside it.³⁵

³³ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1980), 154–55.

³⁴ Andrew Wilton, "Turner, J. M. W.," *Grove Art Online* (OUP), accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T086656>.

³⁵ Berger, *About Looking*, 154–55.

Berger describes a process of immersion in the painting, such that one is “absorbed into the forms and colours on the canvas”; this, he suggests, will lead us to the sense of being engulfed within the storm itself—part of the experience Turner likely aimed to convey. Beyond this, Berger points his readers to a compare *Snowstorm* with the work of other painters in the landscape tradition out of which Turner emerged. In doing so, Berger hopes we will see a radical difference: rather than presenting us with a closed scene that, as an outside spectator, we regard as a discrete and pleasurable totality, Turner's aim is instead to immerse us *in* the landscape itself, and to allow us to instead grasp the overwhelming totality of experience that accompanies such immersion.

To summarize, Berger provides us with reasons for two ways of engaging with the painting: first, visually immersing ourselves in it, and to “allow one’s eye to be absorbed”; and second, comparing Turner’s painting to the history of landscape out of which it emerged. Berger’s aim is not offering a verdict or providing theoretical support for a belief about value—indeed, such a verdict would be redundant given that Turner’s painting is recognized as a masterpiece. Although the example is drawn from the criticism of visual art, it features modes of engagement that go beyond acts of aspection—this is illustrated by Berger’s suggestion that we draw a historical comparison. Even given the practical aim of this piece of criticism, one might suspect that there is nevertheless still a connection between it and the evaluation of Turner’s work. This suspicion is not entirely ill-founded; I discuss such a connection below.

Reasons and Value

Even if critics do aim to provide their audiences with reasons for action—rather than theoretical support for evaluative beliefs—it does not follow that such reasons are completely irrelevant when it comes to one’s beliefs about value.

As it turns out, there is an indirect link between the appreciation of reasons of the sort Ziff has in mind and one’s coming to have beliefs about the value of the work: as Dancy has noted,

“where there is value, there are reasons of certain sorts—reasons to protect, promote, cherish, respect, tend, approve, defend, and so on.”³⁶ Ziff makes this connection himself, insofar as he claims that an artwork is good if and only if there exists some set of reasons for engaging with it in determinate ways. This means that if a critic is *correct* about the existence of such reasons for action in the case of a particular artwork, then this is an excellent indication that the artwork has a particular kind of value.

However, to suggest that the only purpose of providing such a reason is to provide evidence for the value of the artwork is to miss the point of how such reasons are primarily meant to function. This was a point that Sibley appreciated; in discussing the ways the critics teach audiences to engage with artworks, he notes that, although such an activity might constitute a kind of “perceptual proof” of value, “it was neither the aim nor the outcome of the critic’s activity...to provide reasons from which his audience might reasonably conclude that his judgment was true.”³⁷ To suggest that the purpose of providing critical reasons is solely to support an ascription of value would be to present an etiolated and misleading conception of the function of reasons in art criticism.

The above discussion might also suggest an alternative account of the aim of critics: rather than trying to identify reasons for action, on this alternative account critics might aim to specify those features of the work in virtue of which it is valuable. Presumably, such features will also count as reasons for action; the goal of criticism, then, would be one of explaining the value of a work rather than engaging in practical reasoning.³⁸ One might worry that there is very little distance between this construal of criticism and the one that I’ve developed, especially if one

³⁶ Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 177. Notice that this formulation is meant to be neutral between the view that value is to be analyzed in terms of reasons—Scanlon’s buck-passing account being the most influential recent version of such a view—and the view, often associated with Moore, that values ground reasons.

³⁷ Sibley, “Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic,” 38–39.

³⁸ I owe this suggestion to an anonymous reviewer for the journal; Sibley discusses such explanation as a central aim of criticism in *ibid.*, 37–40; For a more recent development of the same view, cf. James Shelley, “Critical Compatibilism,” in Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds), *Knowing Art* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 125–136, at 134–36.

grants the practical significance of the features that one appeals to in explaining the value of an artwork.

There is, however, a significant difference between the two views: According to this alternative account—criticism as explaining value—the aim of critics may ultimately have little to do with indicating the practical significance of their explanations. According to the practical model as I’ve developed it, critics not only identify those features of a work in virtue of which it is valuable; in addition, they make explicit the practical significance of those features to an audience that may be unclear on how to engage with an artwork or whether to do so at all. This, I suggest below, fits nicely with what I take to be a central aim of art criticism.

5 Critical Reasoning: Theoretical or Practical?

We now have in front of us two alternative accounts of the role of characterizations in art criticism. According to the *theoretical model*, these function in the service of *theoretical* reasoning: they make reasonable a belief about the value of an artwork, by functioning as premises in an argument that inferentially supports said evaluative belief. On the alternative approach I’ve developed, the *practical model*, the function of such characterizations are primarily *practical*: they function as considerations counting in favor of a variety of actions and attitudes focused on features of the work itself. Is either of these accounts of art critical reasoning correct? In what follows, I first address an objection meant to show that the practical model violates a core intuition about the aims of art criticism. I then present three reasons for preferring the practical model to the theoretical model.

An Objection: The Aims of Art Criticism

Robert Hopkins has objected to the practical model on the grounds that it violates a core intuition about the aims of art criticism:

Practical reasoning usually proceeds by spelling out how acting in a certain way will enable one to attain some goal or satisfy some desire....The comic might show me how to get pleasure from the aria just as surely as the critic does. Nonetheless, if he does so by offering me pragmatic justifications (‘approach it in such and such a way, and you will find it funny’), he is hardly offering the same kind of consideration, in pursuit of the same kind of end, as the critic. The critic seems concerned, not to maximize my positive states, but to make me aware of the work’s true nature. That is one reason why the activity is appropriately dubbed ‘criticism:’ it seeks a balanced appraisal of both strengths and weaknesses, not merely to maximize whatever positive states of the viewer might be wrung from an encounter with the work. Hence the reasons the critic provides are not pragmatic but of another kind, the kind that, for want of any less tendentious term, we dub ‘theoretical.’³⁹

The objection goes as follows: in pointing out ways that an audience might profitably engage with an artwork, the critic’s focus is on the audience maximizing the value of their interaction with the artwork. This might lead to the critic suggesting that audiences engage with the artwork in ways that have little to do with appreciating the true nature of the work itself.⁴⁰ The fact that the painting is tasty may be a reason for the audience to eat it; would *this*, according to the practical model, therefore be an acceptable thing for a critic to point out as part of *art* criticism?⁴¹

The response to this objection is that the practical model requires further specification: it must be amended to rule out the possibility that art critics might specify reasons to engage with the artwork that have little to do with its status as an artwork. Telling an audience to eat a

³⁹ Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception,” 145–46.

⁴⁰ Hopkins does not clarify what he means by the notion of a work’s “true nature”, but I take it that he means the features in virtue of which the artwork is the artwork that it is.

⁴¹ Thanks for this specific example—and for an especially clear statement of Hopkins’s objection—to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

painting because it's tasty might be practically relevant for one's audience—especially if they were hungry—but it would not be art criticism. While I cannot fully work out the details of such a further specification here, let me suggest one potential solution to the problem: one might insist that critics, if they are to practice art criticism, should limit themselves to providing reasons that are themselves centrally connected to the activity of appreciating the work in question as an artwork. James Grant makes such a move in arguing that the constitutive aim of criticism is to provide readers with information about factors relevant to the appreciation of the artwork as art.⁴² Such a limitation would rule out cases where critics specify modes of engagement that seem to have little to do with art criticism. Of course, the ability to *apply* such a limitation would depend on a full account of what sorts of responses count as appropriate ways of appreciating an artwork. I don't pretend to be able to provide such an account here.⁴³

With this objection out of the way, let's return to the initial question: what reasons are there to prefer either the theoretical model or the practical model of art critical reasoning? Perhaps one might try to answer this question by arguing for a single constitutive aim of criticism, as Grant does. Grant argues that art criticism must be centrally focused on the appreciation of an artwork, which he understands as a complex phenomenon involving having appropriate perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and practical responses.⁴⁴ While I am sympathetic to many aspects of Grant's account of criticism, it doesn't settle the issue of whether or not we should favor the theoretical model or the practical model.

Grant argues that, in order for communication to count as art criticism, it must attempt to communicate:

⁴² Grant, *The Critical Imagination*, 39.

⁴³ Grant also punts on this issue. *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31–33.

(a) what parts, features, or represented elements appreciation can involve responding to; or (b) what responses appreciation of it can involve; or (c) what appropriate reasons for these responses there are.⁴⁵

Notice that this account is neutral between the theoretical model and the practical model: Grant understands appreciation as involving both cognitive responses as well as practical responses. This means that Grant's account accommodates both conceiving of art criticism as providing reasons for belief about the value of an artwork, as well as providing reasons for specific actions relating to the work.

Perhaps this is correct as an account of the constitutive aim of criticism, insofar as it allows that critics might provide different sorts of reasons depending upon their aims in particular contexts. Reviewers, for example, might primarily be in the business of providing evidence for overall judgments of value; this is plausibly the goal of Greenberg in the example above. Even so, I suspect that this is not the normal case; I think that much of the time critics aim to provide reasons for action of the sort specified by the practical model. I present three main lines of argument below to defend this claim. First, I argue that the practical model better accords with our notion of the benefits of reading criticism. Second, I argue that the practical model allows us to draw a distinction between art critical reasoning that aims at universality and that which is relative. Third, I argue that the practical model is better able to account for the nature and value of art criticism that is personal.

On the Value of Art Criticism

The practical model is attractive in large part because it paints a more plausible picture of why critics give reasons in the first place. Most of us read criticism not because we aim to learn what's good and why—although this is something that we may do when, for example, we read

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

reviews. Rather, as Alexander Nehamas puts the point, we “read the critics of *Hamlet*...in order to grasp what [Hamlet] has to offer to us, which requires us to understand what it says.”⁴⁶ Learning to understand what a work has to say to us requires that we know how to engage with it. This is especially pressing in the case of art forms with which we are not familiar: consider a clueless visitor to an installation of Donald Judd’s boxes in Marfa, Texas. It can be *enormously* helpful to read Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” as in doing so one learns that, rather than looking solely at the individual boxes themselves, what one ought to pay attention to instead is Judd’s attempt to create “the kind of wholeness that can be achieved through the repetition of identical units.”⁴⁷ Even in the case of art forms with which we are familiar—and artworks like *Hamlet* or Turner’s *Snowstorm*, which we already know to be valuable—we return to criticism again and again to find new and worthwhile ways of engaging with artworks.

On Relativity in Art-Critical Reasoning

A second reason to prefer the practical model is that it allows us to draw the plausible distinction between art-critical reasoning that aims at universality and that which is relative to a particular audience or class of individuals.

There may exist reasons for *any* individual to engage with an artwork in a particular way. We can express this in Ziff’s formulation as a fact about an artwork, in virtue of which the performance of the relevant action by *any* individual is worthwhile for its own sake—regardless of any facts about that individual’s circumstances, background, sensitivities, and so on. I think that it’s very reasonable to assume that—whether or not they succeed in doing so—some critics aspire to provide reasons of this sort.⁴⁸ However, the practical model also makes

⁴⁶ Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 43.

⁴⁷ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150.

⁴⁸ For what it’s worth, Ziff thinks that this is actually the norm in criticism: he suggests that “it would ordinarily be at best foolish to reply to ‘Guernica’ is well worth contemplating’ by asking ‘When?’ or ‘Where?’ or even ‘For whom?’” Ziff, “Reasons in Art Criticism,” 57.

possible the specification of art-critical reasons that are not reasons for everyone: one might cite some fact about an artwork, in virtue of which the performance of the relevant action is worthwhile for *some* individuals, under *some* conditions.

This distinction makes possible a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which art criticism aims to provide reasons that are—or are not—general. Whereas it does not usually make sense to suggest that a piece of evidence would count in favor of belief for some but not others, it *does* make sense to suppose that some feature of an artwork might be a reason for some but not all individuals to pursue certain ways of engaging with the work. It is a virtue of the practical model that we can accommodate the fact that critics often tailor their reasoning to specific audiences with specific background knowledge, capacities, and preferences—think here of an opera critic writing about a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* for Wagnerians, rather than for the general populace. Critics are able to tailor their criticism to their audiences by identifying features of artworks that will count in favor of acts of engagement on the part of the specific subclass of individuals in question.

On the Personal in Art Criticism

The third reason to prefer the practical model is that it better reflects the intuition that some art criticism—if not all—is personal in nature. I'll first aim to characterize what this claim amounts to, and then argue that the practical model of the nature of art-critical reasons allows us to better understand what such criticism amounts to, how it differs from criticism that aspires to something like universality, and why it is valuable.

First, the intuition: Matthew Kieran has claimed that “criticism of the highest order is shot through with art critical evaluations that are partly a function of personal experience and attitudes. The features that are focused on, the ways those features are understood, and

evaluations of the work often depend on personal assumptions and attitudes.”⁴⁹ Whether or not Kieran is correct about *all* criticism—especially given that the dominant formalist critical paradigm of the twentieth century, the New Criticism, was explicitly concerned with eliminating the personal element from literary criticism—there does seem to be a particularly resilient brand of criticism which foregrounds this aspect of criticism. Consider the ideal of criticism expressed by French literary critic, Anatole France, in 1911:

As I understand it, and as you allow me to practice it, criticism is...a sort of romance designed for those who have sagacious and curious minds, and every romance is, rightly taken, an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces.⁵⁰

This sort of personal criticism isn’t confined to the romantic critics of old, either; it’s alive and well today in contemporary art criticism.⁵¹

The problem with thinking about such criticism from the standpoint of the theoretical model is that we lose focus of the criticism’s personal aspect. All other things being equal, it would be strange to say that some fact is evidence for one person and not evidence for another. Valid forms of inferential justification do not vary from person to person.

The practical model, as I’ve argued above, allows us to introduce a distinction that captures what personal criticism amounts to. This allows us to account for Kieran’s claim that criticism may be “a function of personal experience and attitudes”: critics may point to ways of engaging with a work that would only be worthwhile given certain facts about one’s sensitivities, attitudes, and experiences. As discussed in the previous section, this relativity may apply to particular communities or audiences; critics can focus on ways of engaging with artworks that

⁴⁹ Matthew Kieran, “Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value,” *BJA* 48, no. 3 (2008), 278-294, at 287.

⁵⁰ Anatole France, *On Life and Letters*, trans. A. W. Evans (New York: J. Lane Co, 1911), vii.

⁵¹ Two examples are Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997); and T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

only apply to members of a particular group or class. However, critics can also write about *their* way of engaging with a work in a way that is ineliminably personal.

Consider T.J. Clark's remarkable accounting of his relationship with Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* in *The Sight of Death*.⁵² At one point, Clark records that, in viewing the painting's figure of a woman with outstretched hands, he is struck by a personal association:

Abruptly, and as it were absent-mindedly, this morning I told myself to look at the picture of *Snake* propped up on my desk and free associate. I think this happened quickly and casually enough for the first associations to be truly involuntary; but when they came they were utterly familiar, utterly unsurprising. Those infinitely caring and protective arms and hands, of the woman reaching out to the man's vulnerability, are also (one of them) raised to strike: they are my mother's hands, that is, terrifying and endlessly gentle. And then—against, all this presented itself instantly (and I believe there had never been the least trace of it in the months spent looking a year ago)—it turns out that the woman's expression is also my mother's, recalled from one specific occasion...which can stand for many.⁵³

After being struck by this association, Clark reflects carefully on his engagement with the painting to determine whether it is a clue to something genuine about the painting itself and what it represents:

The question, to repeat, is not whether the associations are genuine, with the sight of the painting confirming their deep-rootedness, but whether the personal meanings, once recovered, turn out to enter my way of looking—whether the play of fear and desire that accrues to the central figure in my imagination ends up being not just

⁵² Clark, *The Sight of Death*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 229.

compatible with her place in the picture as a whole...but deeply *a part of* the place, the pose, the expression. The honest answer is No...Pictures have depths as well as surfaces, yes, but they don't have to be “my” depths.⁵⁴

Even though Clark ultimately discounts his associations, his recounting of this process is nevertheless significant. Clark's description of his engagement with the painting is one that concerns a historical relationship that is entirely personal: no member of his audience could have exactly the same associations with the painting that he did, nor would precisely the same question arise as to whether these particular associations constitute genuine reasons to appreciate it as an artwork.

Why, ultimately, would we be interested in such personal criticism? Applying the practical model also allows us to appreciate the value of such personal criticism. Even if a critic presents us with reasons to engage with a work that depend on their own personal experiences and attitudes, they may nevertheless be *genuine reasons*—albeit reasons which apply only to that particular individual. Even if these reasons do not apply to us, learning about the ways that others engage with artworks might serve to expand our notions of how it might be worthwhile to spend time with works of art. This might push us in the direction of developing our knowledge, sensitivity, etc. so as to make it possible for us to engage with an artwork in a similar manner.

6 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I've argued that the practice of citing features of an artwork in art criticism can be better understood—at least in the usual case—as a form of providing reasons for *actions* rather than reasons for beliefs. I've also suggested, *contra* Ziff, that such actions should be understood to include more than “acts of aspection.” Finally, I've claimed that this

⁵⁴ Ibid., 221–22.

way of understanding the role of reasons in art criticism may help us make sense of both the nature and value of art criticism. I do not pretend to have resolved all of the difficulties that might attend such an approach; my aim in this paper has only been to revive a neglected approach to understanding criticism---one which, in my opinion, deserves more thorough treatment than it has been afforded by contemporary philosophers of art.