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Is Art itself a Criticism? Linking Wilde to Derrida, Rancière and Badiou

I. The critic's object is not always to explain a work of art but rather to deepen its mystery

It is more than evident today that the millenniums turn in contemporary society as well as in theoretical approaches to art undermined tactics of the art critics, who have suddenly found themselves in a situation where there was no consensus on what criticism should be. And, even worse: in the second half of the 20th century, room for criticism within the society has diminished radically.

Criticism along with other theoretical fields had to reinvent new responses to this newly created reality, characterized by a paradoxical or schizophrenic situation one could describe in the following sentence: *On the one hand we are witnessing a new methodological freedom, the use of a "mix" of different theoretical paradigms from semiotics to critical theory, poststructuralism, feminist and queer studies. And, on the other hand, critique and criticism is being declared as a relic of the past, as something that is far from indispensable.*

Our essay will try to deal with this question using as a starting point the famous quotation from Oscar Wilde's great dialogue *The Critic as Artist*: "Criticism is itself an art. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought."¹ says Gilbert to Ernest.

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In *The Critic as Artist*, published in 1891 and initially entitled "The Function and the True Value of Criticism", the English 19th century decadent poet, dramatist and novelist Oscar Wilde praises the literary genre of criticism which he

¹ *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume IV: Criticism: Historical Intentions, The Soul of Man*, J. M. Guy (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 152.

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considers as an act of creation.² He stages his reflection in a dialogue between two characters, Ernest and Gilbert, the latter embodying his own positions by stating that “without the critical faculty there is no artistic creation worthy of the name: no work of art without clear conscience, conscience and critical spirit are one.”³ For Oscar Wilde the criticism is contemplative consciousness. To be considered as a work in its own right, the critical text must absolutely preserve its autonomy: the right criticism must be creative and independent.

We can interpret his “The Critic as Artist” as a critical exercise attempting to analyze some aspects of the theoretical foundations of literary criticism in a series of works dedicated to the relation between art, criticism and society: Plato’s *Ion* and *The Republic*, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* and Arnold’s *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*. Wilde wittingly discusses the problems of the dichotomy between the evaluations of literature from ethical or aesthetic grounds while analysing among other topics those of the poetic forms, the nature of language, the manner and means of imitation and the effect of art upon its audience and the character of the critic. The result of this far-reaching discussion is the thought that the critic is not limited to “the subjective form of expression” and that the creative critics of the world have often employed the form of the Dialogue as a particularly impressive means of illuminating ideas:

GILBERT. [...] By its [the Dialogue’s] means he [the critic] can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from every point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illuminate the idea more completely, or

² “The Critic as Artist” is considered as Wilde’s essay containing the most extensive statements of his aesthetic philosophy. It is regarded by many as his iconoclastic classicism, an interpretive-impressionistic critical exercise which attempts, through knowledge, scholarship, and personality, to analyze some aspects of the theoretical foundations of literary criticism. A dialogue in two parts, it is by far the longest one included in his collection of essays titled *Intentions* published in May 1891. “The Critic as Artist” is a significantly revised version of articles that first appeared in the July and September issues of *The Nineteenth Century*. Wilde elaborates a purely aesthetic method that’s “superb in [its] changes and contradictions. He inverts Mathew Arnold’s apodictic critical formula to suit himself, so that “the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not”.

³ *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 142.

from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convert something of the delicate charm of chance.

ERNEST: By its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument.⁴

We will link this seductive idea with contemporary philosophers thinking art and criticism in a specific, let us say post-structuralist way: Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. Our question will be: How did the post-post-structuralist theoretical deconstruction, primacy of the third paradigm, the viewer, intertextuality, interculturality, intermediality, mediated culture change the very phenomenology of criticism?

In his deconstruction as a specific form of criticism Jacques Derrida asserts that there is not one single intrinsic meaning to be found in works of art, but rather many, and often these can be conflicting. In his famous essay *La Vérité en peinture* (1978) he uses the example of Vincent van Gogh's painting *Old Shoes with Laces*, arguing that we can never be sure whose shoes are depicted in the work, making a concrete analysis of the painting difficult. According to Jacques Rancière the interest of the scene is to show the thought at work. His concept is opposed to a whole philosophical tradition that says that we must first define the terms and see how they are combined and given the rationality of the thing. The scene thus produces its own critique of both art and society. Not without similarities with Rancière, Alain Badiou claims in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* that art produces its own truth and thus he redefines a relation of truth over beauty within the contested field of aesthetics: »Art is itself a producer of truths.«⁵ He thus describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art. Aesthetics has historically brought philosophy to art; Badiou reverses the situation. Can therefore Art itself produce its own criticism?

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Let us return to Wilde and bring to our mind the argumentation used by Gilbert in his answers to a series of questions produced by Ernest:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186–187.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, p. 1.

ERNEST. “But, seriously speaking, what is the use of art-criticism? Why cannot the artist be left alone [...] Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it?”⁶

GILBERT. The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name. [...] An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all. There have been critical ages that have not been creative, in the ordinary sense of the word, ages in which the spirit of man has sought to set in order the treasures of his treasure-house, to separate the gold from the silver, and the silver from the lead, to count over the jewels, and to give names to the pearls. But there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms.⁷

And as though this could maybe not be persuasive enough he pulls out the joker we quoted at the very beginning:

GILBERT: But, surely, Criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent.

[...]

ERNEST. But is Criticism really a creative art?

GILBERT. Why should it not be? It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry? Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation.⁸

Gilbert explains to his questioning but docile friend Ernest that the critic's object is not always to explain a work of art but rather to deepen its mystery, to make it a thing of wonder by revealing something of all that has gone into its

⁶ *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–144.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

creation. The critic, Oscar Wilde has Gilbert say, “does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest material. Anything will serve his purpose. [...] To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes.”⁹

Thus Wilde invites us to see criticism and art as two practices that are closely connected when he says that the actor is the critic of the drama. Thus he opens up the field of interpretation. And if a page of a novel can pass for a musical or pictorial criticism, why inversely a painting or a music would not they be the commentary of a literary text? We end up facing two major theoretical difficulties:

- 1) To take as a subject of study a practice the scope of which seems impossible to define.
- 2) To separate criticism and creation, whereas all criticism is, by nature, creative.

Oscar Wilde, in his text “The Critic as Artist” highlights the modernity of the criticism of ancient art that freely mixes individual practice and general theory. It was during the humanist period that the alliance of letters and arts flourished: the authors considered painters as “allies” whose works they celebrated. The artists seek their company and exchange their comments for portraits they make of them.

II. The scene produces its own critique of both art and society

The dialogical form as a particularly impressive means of illuminating ideas is also one of the tactics of one of the most prominent philosophers thinking theatre today, Jacques Rancière. In his book *La méthode de la scène* (with Adnen Jdey) Rancière questions the aestheticization of politics and the politics of aesthetics from a reflection on the stage and on time and thus defines art as one of the places where to think about aesthetics and politics. The interest of the scene as thought by Rancière is to show the thought at work, the concepts being made as opposed to a whole philosophical tradition that says that we must first define the terms and see how they are combined and given the rationality of the thing. The scene thus produces its own critique of both art and society. For Rancière one of the most salient aspects of the very close relationship between object and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

method is the role played in this philosophy by the dramatization of concepts. Rancière suggests that no gesture is more associated with this thought than that of staging. Within and among other scenarios the scene reveals the workings of the thwarted identity of the productions of art and political fiction.

Similarly to Wilde while discussing Plato, the privilege granted by Jacques Rancière to the notion of scene makes him not only to propose a radical critique of the Platonic matrix and its successors or Marxist heirs such as Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu. The very “scenographies” that are deduced from it help him to construct a new theory of the subject that distinguishes him from Alain Badiou and enable him to continue to develop Michel Foucault’s restrictive model or structure of society.

His basic claim is that art has its reasons. He calls for the capacity of spectator’s emancipation, but on the other side, artists personify for the philosopher the aesthetic and political dimension of dissensus. The decisive question thus become the relations “between aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics”¹⁰ We must think in terms of editing, the operations of which compose, decompose and recompose the relationships of what is shown, thought and said, in order to define the existing dominant rationalities and, consequently, to criticize them. This leads to Rancière’s interest in a history of art understood as a history of regimes of identification of the arts.

Rancière’s interest in a history of art understood as a history of regimes of identification speaks about a specific dilemma of today’s reception of art: it has become a common belief that if there are criteria for evaluating old works of art, the same cannot be said for contemporary art. The viewer is not supposed to judge, whether a work of art is aesthetically effective or not, but only to understand its iconoclastic function that it has the duty to approve. But the new rule that arises from the rejection of an older one is arbitrary, since nothing is forbidden, especially not incoherence, banality, platitude, indigence.

The same traits that once led to the condemnation of an object as artistically invalid, recommend it today as “contemporary”. This category includes virtually

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de la scène* (with Adnen Jdey), Éditions Lignes, Paris 2018, p. 70.

any object provided it is art. In these conditions that lack the criteria, it is impossible to criticize a “contemporary” work. Most of the time any criteria would by definition be considered academic. That the work departs from it and disappoints the expectation of the public of connoisseurs is, according to French philosopher and aesthetician Anne Cauquelin, a quality to retain in her favour, far from condemning it. As a result, since without the freedom to blame, there is no flattering praise, we cannot praise “contemporary” works. The task of the one who makes the job of commenting them consists, at best, of creating the illusion of their importance by means of a learned joke.¹¹ The characteristic of art, claims Gerard Genette, resuming an idea of Ernst Gombrich, is to call on us an attitude “consisting in finding in the object, besides its possible aesthetic merits, certain “defects”, that we would like to see corrected.”¹² On the other hand we do not criticize - notes Gombrich - the mountains, the trees or the flowers. Urinals, bottle dryers or bicycle wheels are even less critical. We thus obtain another proof of our theorem. There is no art without criticism, no critique without criteria and therefore we can claim: there is art, there are criteria.

In consequence we have to admit that we cannot say anything without a principle of discrimination, we cannot speak of art without distinguishing it from non-art. When a historian or a critic mentions one, they distinguish it favourably, *ipso facto*, from the crowd of others whom they pass over in silence. Finally, the unity of the concept of art, a condition of aesthetics and the history of art, implies the universality of aesthetic values. In other words: the possibility for men belonging to different civilizations to communicate through art. Like Dürer discovering Aztec art, the Japanese the Albertian perspective at the end of the same century, Artaud Balinese dance in the beginning of the XX. Century ... Consequently, this is conditioned on the fact that men have something in common that we have called “human nature”.

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According to Alain Badiou, the relationship between truth and art is thought of in the history of philosophy under three “schemes”. The first, which he calls didactic, defines art as “the charm of a semblance of truth”. It appears with Plato. The second, “romantic”, states that “art alone is capable of truth”. Between the two, is placed the classic schema, which Aristotle laid the cornerstones. “Art is

¹¹ See her book *L'art contemporain*, Éditions PUF, Paris 2007.

¹² Gerard Genette, *L'œuvre d'art II. La relation esthétique*, Seuil, Paris 1997, p. 167–168.

not truth, but it does not pretend to be true". It aims only to resemble the real to "please" the viewer, captivate and engage in an identification leading to catharsis, the "deposition of passions." According to this vision, art is "registered in the imaginary". If one considers the major currents of thought of the twentieth century, Marxism is a didactician, what Brecht's ideas on the theatre clearly show, Heidegger is romantic and psychoanalysis is resolutely classical.¹³

He claims these three schemes are today "saturated", their story is closed. He therefore proposes another "mode of knotting" between art and philosophy. In none of the three schemes is the truth both immanent and singular. It is precisely this simultaneity that must be affirmed. The "relevant unity of what is called art cannot be the work, because it is "essentially finite" whereas the truth in Badiou is an infinite multiplicity. This point is demonstrated by Badiou in *L'Être et l'événement*¹⁴. The truth, according to the particular meaning that Badiou gives to this word, is a type of being and not a criterion of the statements like the truthfulness of which the opposite is the erroneous one. The truth, in this sense, has no opposite. There are four types of truths that philosophy strives to make compossible. They are produced by art, science, politics and love.

However, a truth procedure as a configuration is new at the time of the inaugural event (the birth of a group of works). But it does not remain so: the configuration is "composed of a virtually infinite complex of works"¹⁵ and can last for centuries, like the novel. It follows that artistic truths (configurations) are not new most of the time and, at one time or another, they are generally "normalized"¹⁶. It is undeniable that art, in each of its domains, produces "immanent and singular" truths. They can be named "aesthetic values".

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It seems more than convenient at this point to make a short comparison with Jacques Derrida and his concept of multiple nature of signification in *Writing and Difference*. According to Derrida the experience of writing suggests that

¹³ We are referring to the lecture of Alain Badiou "Art et philosophie" in Paris, Beaubourg, March, 26th 1993, noted by Aimé Thiault and transcribed by François Duvert. Web: Transcriptions de Conférences et interventions d'Alain Badiou ; <http://www.entrettemps.asso.fr/Badiou/conferences.htm> <http://www.entrettemps.asso.fr/Badiou/93.Beaubourg.htm>

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement*, Seuil, Paris 1988, pp. 365–377.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Petit manuel d'Inesthétique*, Seuil, Paris 1998, p. 26.

¹⁶ Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement*, p. 377.

meaning is not a pre-existing static structure but rather a process which begins with the act of inscription:

To write is to know what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some *topos ouranios*, or some divine understanding. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning.¹⁷

It is in the very nature of writing that it does not know where it is going. It always constitutes the meaning and that is, primarily, its future. But Derrida does not emphasize the notion of meaning as force in order to suppress a notion of meaning as structure. His model of meaning tries to unite the diachronic and synchronic aspects of meaning divided by Saussure's structural approach to language. Derrida nevertheless claims the system of signs must always remain incomplete, the writer cannot represent *langue*. His theory of signification reminds us that all interpretation must take account of the radically multiple nature of signification. The reference of any sign is always complex as the meanings, and experiences signified are often conflicting.

Derrida's criticism of the reduction of art to a level of an illustration of any theoretical viewpoint brings us back to Badiou and his concept of *art* being itself a producer of truths.

The "truths" in art are given in these "beauties" which attract us, attach us, move us and incite us to look for them without ever getting tired of them. They may concern the whole of a work or some of its parts (these are the "relevant units"). The "configurations" of Badiou, note well, are also forms that convey a specific type of content. If we name them truths, it will be necessary to specify that they are specifically artistic and without relation to the truthfulness, whereas it goes without saying if one names them "Beauties".

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At the same time, these forms are often organically linked to truths from other origins. Therefore, we cannot accept without restrictions Badiou's formula, echoing the purism of yesteryear: "art is rigorously coextensive with truths that

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, p. 11.

it generates.”¹⁸ After all, not so long ago, Badiou admitted that “art, as a mixed procedure [individual and collective], supports the truths of love.”¹⁹ Why not also recognize that art sometimes expresses political and religious truths, as well as other meanings related to the values and worldview of each era? It is from this intertwining that the rich polyphony of works of art proceeds.

Badiou neglects the fact that the three schemes coexisted and interpenetrated in almost all authors. For example, Sartre is “classic” because for him the criterion of art is to please, but also “didactic” since he declares that “at the bottom of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative”²⁰. That the link between art and truth is limited to “the *constraint* that a *truth* exercises within the domain of the *imaginary*”²¹ may be a small thing.

But can we be content with this sentence to regulate the question of mimesis and its truth content? While it is true that the aesthetic value of a work is above all that of its form, the degree of its adequacy to the content helps to make it satisfactory and vice versa: the beauty of the form is required to ensure the good transmission of the message. In other words: judging by the effects of a work on the people, as Rousseau does, in no way leads to neglecting the properly artistic point of view. More generally, the stimulation of artistic creation by meanings and values external to art cannot be overestimated.

III. The paradox of criticism

Derrida’s criticism of the reduction of art to a level of an illustration of any theoretical viewpoint, Badiou’s concept of *art* being itself a producer of truths together with Rancière’s belief that there are hardly any clear criteria for evaluating the contemporary art and Wilde’s thought that the critic is not limited to “the subjective form of expression” and that the creative critics of the world have often employed the form of the Dialogue as a particularly impressive means of illuminating ideas lead us to the paradox of criticism today.

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¹⁸ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, p. 376.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, « Qu'est-ce que la littérature ? », in: *Situations II*, Gallimard, Paris 1948, p. 107.

²¹ Badiou, *Petit manuel d'inesthétique*, p. 14.

And suddenly one did not feel at ease in this situation in which hermeneutic tools we use in order to critique various forms of power and authority within cultural and artistic representations became a kind of authority of their own. Thus the very body of work renowned for its deconstruction of authorial value produced new forms of authority.

Let us think of a possible example of this new form of authority: In order to underline our argument about the logocentricity of today's theatre and its dangers, we would without any doubt quote Jacques Derrida and use the authority of his work in order to underwrite our analysis and critique. And this is just one in a long line of possible examples of a paradoxical situation of poststructuralist philosophy which, according to Gavin Butt, "operates both as criticism's chief discursive enabler whilst simultaneously marking its limit point: operating as an authorizing meta discourse for contemporary critical manoeuvres, whilst simultaneously working to constrain the production of new concepts and/or methods of critical procedure."²²

Thus we are approaching the situation in which theory and criticism in particular itself became "doxa, the very state it set out to subvert." How can we avoid this? One of the possible answers is the work of certain scholars that took very seriously the challenge to criticism. Let us mention Peggy Phelan, whose performance studies over the past decade experimented with how the conventional tasks of critical might be refigured or superseded by the productive attentions of the embodied critic, concentrating her or his inquiry either in making a judgment of quality or exposing the workings of power and ideology.

How did they do this? The simplest answer would be by addressing performance as a unique spatio-temporal event that is opposed to the art-historical object. Thus Phelan – similarly to Erika Fischer-Lichte and her aesthetics of performativity – has been exploring how critical writing might respond creatively to an art form that is eventual, singular and given to disappear. We can see her writings as an attempt to use the scene of writing "to re-mark again the performative possibilities of writing itself."²³

²² Badiou, *Petit manuel d'Inesthétique*, p. 4.

²³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 148.

By focusing attention on the performativity of critical response, then, and the ways in which such responses might deviate from established modes of critical procedure, Peggy Phelan, Amelia Jones, Erika Fischer-Lichte seek to consider a critical practice situated, paradoxically, after criticism was deadened by the hand of capital and powers within culture and society.

And this is probably the most suitable redefinition of criticism we can provisionally get to: criticism or inter-criticism (in the sense of Barthes, Kristeva, Eco and their researches into intertextuality, as well as Patrice Pavis's attempts to redefine theatre semiotics) should most probably concentrate on theatre as a phenomena embodying two concepts:

1. Dynamic *tour de force* of singularity and plurality, the incarnation of the fact that there is no being without "being-with," that "I" does not come before "we" (i.e., is no existence without co-existence (Jean-Luc Nancy). *Dasein* does not precede *Mitsein*)
and
2. Performative antipoetic *feedback loop* between actors and spectators, the event of the performance that provokes and integrates emergence and thus blurs distinctions between artist and audience, body and mind, art and life (Erika Fischer-Lichte).

IV. The Emancipated critic?

Of course, we all agree and should not forget that "criticism, understood in at least two of its guises, was always *paradoxical* in its mode of operation. Firstly, in the sense that it depended for its definition on departing from commonly understood beliefs and values; we should also not forget the following thought stressed by Gavin Butt:

Even the unreconstructed figure of the modern disinterested critic – much derided by postmodernists – distinguished himself by seeking to pronounce on the (aesthetic) value of that which had hitherto not been recognized as such, either by other members of the intelligentsia or by society at large. That the modern critic's judgment of quality may have subsequently both transformed, and then passed into, a received set of values of a particular class or group within society -thereby

becoming doxa – should not detract us from criticism’s important role in initially striking out *from it*.²⁴

Nevertheless, we should take into account two concepts: Nancy’s ‘singular plurality’, which refuses to start with the opposition of same and other, arguing, instead, for a primacy of relation, the ‘in-common’ and the ‘with’; and Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetic of performativity, which traces the emergence of performance as ‘an art event’ in its own right.

Criticism has to be put into dialogue with these two concepts. It has to apply them to the stage phenomena and try to see them, not as fixed works of art, but performative acts with such qualities as: openness; hybridity; the change in priority from “I” (the artist, the spectator in singular) to “we” (the performers and spectators interchanging their traditional roles).

Let us return to the beginning of our essay, to Oscar Wilde: his persuasion that perfect form of the art criticism is the one that treats the work as the trigger of the author’s own creativity. Let us link it to some XX. Century interpretations of the role of the critic: Francis Ponge, Jean Dubuffet and Jorge Luis Borges. The work of art, a motive for inspiration, is also a “means” of renewal of expression, as French Francis Ponge points out:

It supposes that one is desirous of experiencing (acquiring) unheard-of feelings, of suggestive and complex forms of still unpublished feelings, that the work of art is considered as a means of modifying and renewing its sensory world. To launch the imagination in new, unexplored directions.²⁵

The critic is an interpreter even if he does not intend to explain the work. Its function is double, reception and emission at a time, and is similar to that of the artist, as defined by Jean Dubuffet in *L’Homme du commun à l’ouvrage*:

Every painting starts from an equivocal point of departure. The painter attributes himself, in effect, two very different roles. On the one hand he wants to be an in-

²⁴ G. Butt (Ed.), *After criticism: new responses to art and performance*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2005, p. 5.

²⁵ Francis Ponge, *Méthodes*, Gallimard, Paris 1961, 1988, p. 42.

terpreter (a medium) of the objects he evokes, to give them word, to make their voice. But at the same time he wants to hear his own voice, which is something else. The mechanism of the two senses, which can be said to be in contrast – that of reception and that of emission –, married in a single operation...²⁶

Jorge Luis Borges claims that only the artist, whether a painter or a poet, can bring together in the critical text “the two antagonistic poles of thought, namely the Impressionist pole and the Expressionist pole”.²⁷ This essential aspect can be summarized by the expression of André du Bouchet “Here in two”.

Oscar Wilde considers subjectivity as the essential element of interpretation. The critic must not be a specialist, but rather this “unprejudiced mind”, of which Francis Ponge speaks at the beginning of “Matter and Memory” (*Matière et Mémoire*):²⁸ “It is simply artistic temperament that speaks all art. It does not speak to the specialist. It claims to be universal and to remain one through all his manifestations.”

This “unprejudiced spirit” is the very incarnation of the critical poet who confronts the work without any form of prevention. Francis Ponge strives to listen to and understand the artist through his treatment of the material. The work of art, considered since Charles Baudelaire as a pretext for the invention of a new genre in which text and image “aspire to meet”, is similar to the object for Francis Ponge, object for which he must each time invent a proper expression. Observing the impression of the lithographic plates, the poet remarks that “it is the memory, the mind [...] which make here the third dimension (Ponge, *Matière et mémoire* 4).

²⁶ Jean Dubuffet, *L'Homme du commun à l'ouvrage*, Gallimard, Paris 1973, p. 197: « Tout ouvrage de peinture repose, dès son départ, sur une équivoque. Le peintre s'attribue, en effet, deux rôles très différents. D'une part il veut être un interprète (un médium) des objets qu'il évoque, leur donner parole, se faire leur voix. Mais en même temps il veut faire entendre la sienne propre, ce qui est tout autre chose. Le mécanisme des deux sens, qu'on peut dire contraires – celui de la réception et celui de l'émission – mariés dans une seule opération... »

²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I*, Gallimard, Paris 2010, p. 838.

²⁸ Francis Ponge, *Matière et mémoire ou les lithographes à l'école*, Fernand Mourlot, Paris 1945, p. 4. « Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement : sans doute... Mais seulement ce qui ne se conçoit pas bien mérite d'être exprimé, le souhaite et appelle sa conception en même temps que l'expression elle-même. »

Of course, we all know that the Enlightenment idea of the critic as a discriminating authority on matters of art and culture became increasingly problematic. Therefore we have to question her or his role as specialized analysts of culture in favour of repositioning the academic inquiry as a kind of cultural participation in its own right. Or, to use the words of Jacques Rancière in *Emancipated Spectator*: We must grasp the position of the “emancipated spectator” who challenges “the opposition between viewing and acting”, by understanding “that the self evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection?”²⁹

The criticism has to reposition itself: rather than being remote from that which we survey, we have to participate, become enmeshed, perhaps even in “creative” production of the cultural fabric itself. But we should also not forget Rancière’s alternative perspective on the effort to emancipate the spectator that could stand also for the situation of the critic: Critic has to deliberately attempt to traverse the abyss that divides activity from passivity by asking “if it is not precisely the desire to abolish the distance that creates it”?³⁰ This is the actual paradox that theatre and performing arts criticism shares both with the spectator and the dramatist. In many ways what Rancière calls the “emancipated spectator”, and what we re-fashion as the “emancipated critic”, are nothing new. The transcendental figure of the critic has had its obituary read before, in the 1980s. As Gavin Butt puts it in his witty introduction to the book *After Criticism: The Paradoxes of Criticism*:

The transcendental figure of the Enlightenment critic – one placed at a special remove from society, from the object of criticism – has had its obituary read before at the height of postmodernism in the 1980s. The traditional authority of the critic, and his special dispensation to discriminate in the name of universal human values, was gladly bidden goodbye by postmodernists concerned to pay heed to cultural difference: Marxists and feminists critiqued it as an ideological form of class and gender privilege whilst post-structuralists deconstructed it as logocentric fiction. In the wake of such critiques of criticism then, postmodernists – particularly of the post-structuralist persuasion – quickly set about abandoning any absolutist statements of judgment in favor of reading artistic and literary

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, Verso, London 2009, p. 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

texts *deconstructively*: to reveal the ways in which power might be seen as working both within and against them.³¹

Once we recognize our limits, our inability to “say it all,” we avoid closing off other possible interpretations. We admit to the fact that meaning keeps reappearing within the unstable and shifting space, between sender and receiver, author and reader, artist and viewer. It does not precede the act of its inscription that is static in its nature. Its nature is that of constant changes and developments.

When we deny art its personal and historical context, we radically undermine one’s role as an art critic. A good art critic has to bear in his mind that art *works* in many contexts. When we regard something as art we assume that it means many things to many viewers. And according to Derrida we should not commit a mistake of neglecting the validity of different interpretations of art. And we should not attempt to reduce the work of art to the level of a mere illustration of one’s own theoretical viewpoint. The dangers listed are to be highlighted by any deconstructive art criticism; they represent something that has by all means to be avoided.

And this leads us back to Wilde and his dialogic essay “The Critic as Artist”: For the true critic the subject is only raw material. It’s the way this subject is treated that matters. Oscar Wilde likens criticism to the poetry that gives form and life to matter: “I would call criticism a creation within a creation [...] I would say that the highest criticism [...] is in itself more creative than the creation ...”³² Criticism is profoundly subjective: it is just as much an impression as an expression. It is a contemplative consciousness, trying to preserve its autonomy. The true criticism must be creative and independent. And the same holds true for art as a producer of truth in the sense of Badiou, truth that is in itself critical. In this sense art one could easily conclude that art does produce its own criticism. Or, as Wilde puts it: “antithesis between (art and criticism,) is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name.”³³

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³¹ Butt, *After Criticism*, p. 3.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³³ Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 142.