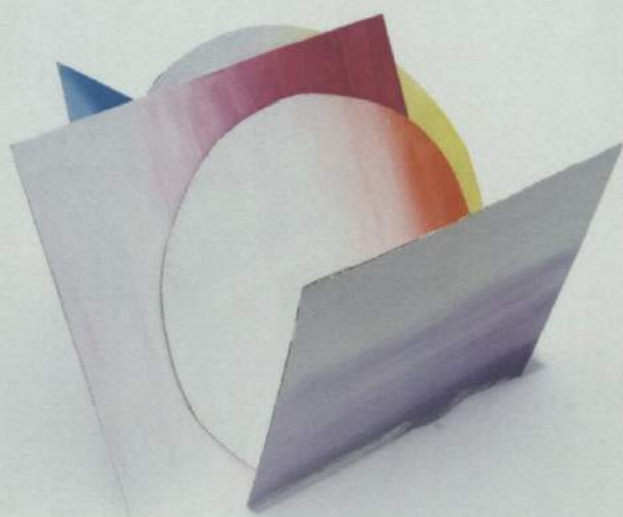


PAMELA FRASER  
& ROGER ROTHMAN

# BEYOND CRITIQUE

**Contemporary Art in Theory,  
Practice, and Instruction**



B L O O M S B U R Y

## Consideration (As an Antidote to Critique)

Karen Schiff

When I returned to art school in 2003, after training and teaching in literature departments for more than a decade, I noticed negative undercurrents that I didn't remember from studio classrooms in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The corrosiveness felt familiar from critical studies classes in the humanities. My school was indeed hastily developing theory-oriented curricula, along with a flavor of discourse that has come to be associated with theory: sharp-witted, sociopolitically disgruntled, and summarily righteous. After one critique session, a student depicted the theory-heavy dynamic in a cartoon: all the students were baby-pacifiers ganging up on one pacifier-avatar who was backed into a corner. Over the decade since then, protests about the tone of critique have expanded into public, online venues. In January 2016, bellwether art critic Jerry Saltz posted medieval images of taunting and torture on Facebook and captioned them with phrases such as "Art student in the center of a group-crit." Students at the Rhode Island School of Design document studio humiliations on a blog started in Fall 2015, "Tales from the Critkeeper: Allegories of 'Constructive' Criticism and other Academic Cruelties."

In literary studies, the discourse of criticism has also been, well, subject to criticism. Since the 1970s rise of "theory" in America, cultural critics have lamented the combative, "suspicious" tone of critique.<sup>2</sup> Strenuous objections, as well as strategies for reform, are now circulating in literary studies.<sup>3</sup> While this phenomenon promises to filter into visual studies, as did theoretical discourse itself, I will deliberately bridge the two disciplines, drawing on my experience in both. As I proceed to unpack the negativity in criticism, to construct consideration-based theoretical models, and to offer pedagogical strategies, my main concern is the relational structure underlying encounters between the observer and the observed. Oppositional structures establish conditions for an ontological negation of the artwork, and enable more war-like antagonisms that are commonly recognized as "criticism." The most troubling consequence of this chain of events



is a choked creativity. "Consideration" will counteract this, to open up both artists' inventiveness and writers' diverse interpretations, and to spell an ever-widening potential for Art within and beyond the academy.

### Antagonistic critique

My experience teaching an upper-level undergraduate literary theory/criticism course in the mid-2000s first compelled me to seek fundamental, structural obstacles in critical discourse.<sup>4</sup> Every semester, the class broke into two groups: those who were already accustomed to a theoretical language and those who were not. Those in the first group tended to enjoy the class. As the semester progressed, however, someone from the latter group always protested, saying something like: "I love the works we're talking about. But the way we're talking about them here sounds so negative—it's ruining the experience for me!" These students assumed that "criticism" meant "negative criticism" (as in, "Stop criticizing me!"), and they extended this narrow, colloquial meaning to suggest that a work of art could be "wrong." They worried that if they developed critical skills, they would become meaner people and enjoy art less. I talked about learning to see works through diverse "critical" lenses—like putting on and taking off different kinds of glasses—to develop new perspectives and even to expand our appreciation for the texts. My pep talk worked temporarily, but discomfort returned; some students tuned out from the class completely. Distressed about "losing the 'magic,'" they couldn't identify any causal mechanisms for their conviction that critical discourse was "negative."

An underlying negativity in critique discourages students across the arts and humanities, as others have noticed as well. Some graduate students in English fall into "despair" (Ruddick 2011: 30) when instructor training programs exclude pedagogical goals aside from "critical thinking" (Ruddick 2011:29). Though they believe their work is useful, they find their contributions constrained; they lose confidence. A related "professionalization" denies a "home" to students who enter literary programs with an intense love for books and reading (Fleming 2008). In Studio Art, students who enroll with a love of drawing, for instance, quickly learn that "this is not enough; something else has to happen" for them to become regarded as viable student-artists.<sup>5</sup> The "something else" is "critique"—not just in studio "crit" sessions, but in sustained critical discourse and commentary. Some students eagerly absorb the subject; others become paralyzed.



I appreciate the intellectual thrills of theory and criticism, which have their own "magic," and I share the aspirations toward sociopolitical improvement and clear-eyed analysis. Yet my students' repeated grievances have compelled me to seek fundamental obstacles in these discourses. In the 1970s, when deconstructive theory began promoting a radically "open," "affirmative" search for multiple meanings and plural paradigms, critical pedagogy could be so sharply witty that students at Yale (the seedbed for the method) monitored each other for signs of psychosis and power politics plagued the faculty.<sup>6</sup> In other words, theory or criticism can be generous while its deployment can be cruel. Some students are profoundly unsettled by the questioning of their most basic navigational assumptions, but I believe that many students suffer more from the tone of critical treatments works of art, or from their experiences of encounters with critics.

I have come to understand these negative critical undercurrents as unnecessary effects of "critical distance." An ontological separation between the observer and the observed is a condition for independent thought: "Criticism is a matter of correct distancing," wrote cultural critic Walter Benjamin in 1928 (Benjamin 1978: 85). But this strategic separation can also occasion an opposition which can devolve into a hierarchical relation: the critic regards the work as a deadened, inferior object. Antagonism then can manifest in common "critical" techniques that preserve the critic's domination: looking for omissions, biases, oversights, or "silences," and imposing a predetermined set of standards. Swiftly subjecting a work to an authoritative agenda—critical antagonism is often marked by "smart" speed—subordinates the work and denies it any role outside that of an accessory to the critic's heroic exercise.<sup>7</sup> The critic's stance of superiority over the work implies, as my students sensed, that the work has somehow "failed."

While concerns about negativity in criticism have become entrenched, negativity has rarely been tied to the mechanisms of critique itself: the stakes are enormous. We may refrain from looking too closely at critique because commentary and dissent are essential elements of democratic, civil society. Or, to question socially utopian methods is to risk jeopardizing political progress. Plus "suspicion"—that emotional hallmark of the critical attitude—may be an ancient, biologically ingrained survival mechanism, as Rita Felski observes in *The Limits of Critique*.<sup>8</sup>

The paradigm of criticality indeed contains echoes of primal conflict and potential violence; its practice, by extension, teaches students to wage war. Bruno Latour notes the language of weaponry in the teaching of critique: "at first we [students of criticism] tried . . . to use the armaments handed to us by our betters



and elders to crack open—one of their favorite expressions, meaning to destroy—religion, power, discourse, hegemony” (Latour 2004: 242). British psychologist Alexander Shand, writing during World War I, suggests a connection between a critical attitude and literal conflict: “suspicion . . . become[s] prominent” during “times of war and social disorder” (Shand 1922: 195).

Actual war also lurks in Benjamin’s ideas about critical distance. In 1928, he had been calling for a clear and autonomous perspective for viewing art, one that would not be overwhelmed and undermined by the dangerously speedy, “insistent, jerky nearness” of advertisements that were already flooding daily culture (Benjamin 1978: 85). By 1936, when Benjamin returned to the topic of cultural speed in his canonical essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he now connected it with war in this essay’s epilogue on fascism. Earlier in the essay he associates speed—as well as its vehicle, film—with “the contemporary mass movements” (read: Nazism) that used film to incite loyalty (Benjamin 1968: 221).

Yet for Benjamin, a reparative critical activity depends not just on distance between the observer and the observed, but on “correct distancing” (Benjamin 1978: 85, emphasis added). “Distancing” can be an activity—a verb—and not just the static noun, “distance.” The structure of relation sets up a mode of engagement. We can find structures of problematic distancing: in suspicion, “We remain physically close while psychically removed” (Felski 2015: 38). This relation enables various critical operations, but as a reflex it is psychologically corrosive, as we have observed in the classroom accounts.<sup>9</sup>

The search for more constructive critical paradigms can be examined in terms of the interaction between the critic and the work. Annette Federico, in her 2016 book, *Engagements with Close Reading*, reports that literary scholars are inquiring into “what we should *do* with the literary work. Should we accept its invitations, or hold it at arm’s length? Become immersed in the author’s world, or rationally dissect it?” (Federico 2016: 3; see also Ruddick 2011: 31). “Close engagement” is a common suggestion.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, though, it shares strategies with both an outmoded, formalist New Criticism and a maligned, suspicious deconstruction.<sup>11</sup> And on what structural basis can “close engagement” occur so the closeness does not prevent independent thought, as Benjamin warned?<sup>12</sup> Some critics, see a more “distant reading” as congruent with contemporary trends of internet literacy and world literature: reading online prioritizes skimming (Hayles 2010), and global interconnectivity demands a literary history that is “a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual*



reading" (Moretti 2013: 48, original emphasis). The essential variable, I believe, is not proximity or distance, but rather the "correctness" or artfulness of the encounter's dynamic. Ideally, in a "correct" distancing, independence of mind can be a countermeasure to war instead of an unwitting perpetuator of it.

No matter which structural model obtains, the vocabulary of "critique" remains an obstacle. As Latour writes, "The practical problem we face, if we try to go that new route, is to associate the word *criticism* with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts" (Latour 2004: 247). But texts as far back as the 1700s maintain that "We are never safe in the company of a critic" who is "no more than a Fault finder" (OED 1984: 1180). Given the long history of associating criticism with negativity, which is so powerful that even students poorly acquainted with critique feel burdened by it, we cannot simply assign new meanings to "criticism." Better to take a fresh start with a new word, and a new paradigm.

### Analytic consideration

As an antidote to "critique," I propose "consideration."<sup>13</sup> I do not mean this as just "a kinder and gentler critique," to appropriate George H. W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign phrase. While "consideration" indicates concern for others' well-being, which would improve the tone of academic exchange, I aim to engage different mechanisms and to serve different goals. The difference between "critique" and "consideration" is encoded in the etymological histories of the two words: "criticism" comes from *krinein*, indicating separation and judgment, while the root of "consideration"—sidereal, from *sidus* or *sider*—has to do with observing the stars.

The perspective of "critique" is not observation but rather scrutiny. It involves separating a work from the observer—and sometimes also into its constituent parts—so its scope is precise and focused. A Greek root of the word "critic" became the Italian *critica*, the late-sixteenth-century "arte of cutting of stones," which also implies that the critic's approach must be strong and sharp. In this lapidary allusion the work becomes impenetrable, obdurate. A stone must be cut with a swift blow, like the pace of thought and the "incisive" comments in many critiques and critical studies classrooms. But Latour notes that critical swiftness leads to weak conclusions: "What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick



reading...?" (Latour 2004: 228). When critique proceeds like stonecutting, insight, accuracy, and complexity become secondary to performances of brilliance.

Consideration is more broadly inclusive, opening a perspective as wide as the sky. Gazing at the night sky creates feelings of both humility and embodied mortality, yet smallness in relation to the stars can be paired with a feeling of being contiguous with the cosmos. In terms of art, consideration implies a sense of curiosity, of almost awestruck mystification in trying to fathom the work, instead of an adoption of an ontologically antagonistic detachment from the work (and from curiosity itself). The separation between human and constellation/artwork blurs, and the pace slows in accord with the stars whose light is so many years away.<sup>14</sup> The longer time frame required for this fathoming is encoded in the Latin *considerare*, which means "to look at closely, examine, contemplate"—"contemplate" is from roots meaning to "spend time together." The root *desiderare* itself means "to miss, desire," and again derives from the Latin for those distant stars. Desire suggests a longing for a lost, former connection with the work, or for a connection that has not yet been forged. In the encounter with a great work, that connection might never be completely forged. Artworks, like stars, remain bright yet slightly out of reach.

It is not clear whether this starry association signals astronomical science or astrological fortune-telling, but in medieval times, astronomy and astrology intertwined. So, this historical layer of "consideration" hovers between secular and religious realms. I explore this below.

If we change "criticism" to "consideration," the title—and role—of the "critic" can also change: I propose "analyst." Again, many "critical" processes pertain, but the psychoanalytic context implies a conversation between critic and work. The work now seems almost alive—or personified. Psychoanalyst-artist Gabriela Goldstein writes that "the object acquires autonomy. We might say that it is an encounter with the Other in its radical otherness" (Goldstein 2013: 174). In psychoanalysis, "otherness," or individuation, establishes opportunities for mutual acquaintance. Silences are respected as evocative aporias. The analyst endeavors to contribute to an ongoing, long conversation, with nothing to prove.

The analyst sees self-encounter as a never-ending process, just as encountering an artwork can yield ever-changing impressions. Art critic Nancy Princenthal champions an inherent, positive "failure" in any attempt to fathom art: the work's visuality functions like the unconscious. "What matters most about visual art," she insists, "is that it's visual, that it always involves an essential quality that exceeds written accounts" (Princenthal 2006: 45). I partly attribute the work's ultimate



intractability to the fact that it was made, or at least conceived, by a human being, whose motives are always multiple and at least somewhat mysterious.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, "consideration" opens a space of engagement that cannot be attached wholly to either the observer or the observed. Fiction writer Guy Davenport "imagines this space as a mechanical, optical illusion: a critic and a work represent two figures which intersect to materialize as a third figure like a "ghostly triangle in the stereopticon." Davenport's ghostliness, which is an effect of biophysics, dissolves the oppositional quality of a viewer looking at an objectified work. The effect is comparable to poet Charles Bernstein's "close listening": the poet, the listener, and the act of speaking/listening act in concert, so the performance emerges in a non-localized, in-between space, constitutes the "work," and shapes its reception (Bernstein 1998). It also recalls Louise Rosenblatt's "transactional" idea of "the poem . . . as an event in time. It is not an object. . . . It happens during a coming together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text" (Rosenblatt 1978: 12). Because consideration happens in specific moments, and people (and works) involved morph over time, "opposition" is unsustainable.

### (Religious) reconsiderations

The etymology of consideration, in signaling the firmament, underscores the latent religious dimension, which fleshes out critique's origin story, welcomes complexity, and suggests resources for theoretical models.<sup>16</sup> Though today's professors tend toward secularism, I focus here not on the sociopolitical problems created by religion but on its visionary utopianism: when critical commentaries try to redress social ills, critics function like clerics or even missionaries.<sup>17</sup> Critical discourse is situated within the academy, but universities began as medieval training grounds for clergy. Critics can see their efforts as righteous work, trying to heal the culture: in my PhD program, graduate students joked that the critical theorists among the faculty tended to dress in black (like clerics) and talk like demi-gods.<sup>18</sup>

Black shows no sweat. The critic-cleric's body, cloaked in black, can circulate abstract ideas without physical distractions. The black-clad critic thus performs historical Christian dogmas about the "profanity" of the body. Or, to tie this interpretation of the critic's wardrobe to a more secularized academic context, the posture of quasi-divine authority could be gained by sidestepping the body's unruly complexity—black shows fewer contours and irregularities. Either way, if



the physical body can be bracketed and ignored, it can also be repressed and denigrated, akin to how an artwork can be bracketed and denigrated by the critic's paradigms. Incorporeality bolsters the critic's intellectual power. Then the work becomes profane, errant material, in contrast to the critic's sacred, unimpeachable ideas.<sup>19</sup>

A religious history of critical discourse substantiates my associative speculations and my reflections on unfathomability. In the time of early universities, sermon-writing guides formulated rhetorical strategies that resemble current non-religious critique. Rhetorical historian James J. Murphy focuses on Alain de Lille, an influential Cistercian monk who introduced preachers to an "analytic spirit" in his groundbreaking guide from the late twelfth century, *On the Preacher's Art* (*De arte praedicatoria*) (Murphy 1974: 309). Murphy says that this critical distance "may be his most significant contribution,"<sup>20</sup> locating criticality in the clergy rather than the academy (Murphy 1974: 309). Alain included the use of *divisio*, dividing complex ideas into discrete topics (cf. cutting the stone).<sup>21</sup> His guide was also notable for its "overwhelming" use of quotations—just as it is common in contemporary critique (Murphy 1974: 305). Murphy cites these aspects of Alain's text as evidence that the university's rhetorical idea of a "truly 'critical' ... form (as distinct from the subject matter)" has ecclesiastical roots (Murphy 1974: 311). The sermon writer's "moral instruction" in the fight against sin and vice has certainly foreshadowed today's critical appetite for social correction (Murphy 1974: 308).

Michel Foucault locates a religious origin for the antagonistic "critical attitude" later, in Renaissance Europe, as a wariness in response to overbearing ecclesiastical authority. A critical muscle "specific to modern civilization" develops because "the Christian church ... from the 15th century on" created "a veritable explosion of the art of governing men" (Foucault 2007: 43). Criticality became a psychic survival strategy, an individual (resi)stance against being completely circumscribed by prelates "to whom [subjects were] bound by a total, meticulous, detailed relationship of obedience"—religious strictures, understandably, could be stifling (Foucault 2007: 43).<sup>22</sup>

While I agree that one must be savvy about governors' intentions, it is dangerous to assume that they will always be unhelpful. Felski agrees: "Excessive suspicion, [Alexander] Shand declares, has catastrophic consequences for communal and collective life ... it fractures the body politic" (Felski 2015: 43).<sup>23</sup> And while resistance to the total rule of ecclesiastic authorities in post-15th-century Europe might carry into contemporary critique as a residue, it need not totalize into



"reflexive suspicion." This is like approaching a text—or an artwork—with the presumption that it will be automatically insufficient. How is it possible to move from a dismissively critical rigidity to a cautiously considerate openness? After all, ministers or other governing figures—like texts or artworks—can be productively visionary. The unpredictability that must be allowed by this perspective—any circumstance can have repressive or generative impact—requires independent, cogent assessments, not an always-already-critical attitude of simmering resistance, eager for discharge.

A positive model for analytical relations with a work comes from theologian Martin Buber, a religious humanist who derived ethics from Hasidism and Taoism.<sup>24</sup> In his "I-Thou" dialogism, the "Other" is a fully formed subject, and the encounter is a respectful, non-hierarchical relation. Buber contrasts this desirable structure with an "I-It" relation, in which the "Other" is regarded mechanistically and instrumentally. The "I" does not exist outside of either relation: selfhood takes shape according to how one regards the Other. Further, Buber's "dialogue" includes the encounter with a seemingly unresponsive person or inanimate work of art or literature: "The object of our perception does not need to know of us, of our being there" (Buber 1968: 8). As Buber commentator Maurice Friedman sums up the idea:

I-Thou is a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. It may be between man and man, but it may also take place with a tree, a cat, a fragment of mica, a work of art—and through all of these with God, the 'eternal Thou' in whom the parallel lines of relations meet. I-It, in contrast, is the typical subject-object relationship in which one knows and uses other persons or things without allowing them to exist for oneself in their uniqueness.

Friedman 1968: xiv

When Buber himself addresses the religious backdrop of his theory, he defines "God" more expansively than Friedman. In a passage entitled "A Conversion," Buber reveals that his failure to save a young man from suicide convinced him to have "given up the 'religious'" in favor of responding fully to "the everyday out of which I am never taken" (Buber 1968: 14). In other words, "God" becomes a shorthand for the enormously complex web of reality, which is as inscrutably amazing as any sidereal panorama.<sup>25</sup> Buber's structural relation, while marketed as theological ethics, applies beyond religion.<sup>26</sup>

Buber's "I-Thou" analog for the encounter of the observer and observed is structured as a binary encounter that does not lead to hierarchical antagonism.



Rather, recognition of otherness admits wonder about variety and uniqueness. But the "I-Thou" relation is categorical and abstract; it glosses over the specific identities of the interlocutors and therefore could benefit from supplementation.<sup>27</sup> Still, like the ideas of Davenport, Bernstein, and Rosenblatt, Buber's encounter comes to life in the circumstances of direct, physical contact: "[Dialogue] is completed not in some 'mystical' event," but within the contingencies of "the common human world and the concrete time-sequence" (Buber 1968: 4). Because the "Thou" and "I" are always changing, an "I-Thou" relation with the work, marked by curiosity and an ongoing awareness of the work's inherent otherness, yields a plural, ever-expanding richness of meaning. This is the hallmark of living with a great work. It also models a peaceful strategy for changing minds and societies.

### Classroom considerations

In a paradigm of consideration, the object of study functions as a source of new information for continual learning. Any creative practitioner can produce a vision that has not yet been imagined, so initial approaches are best seen as the beginning stages of an inquiry. As theory professor Diana Fuss writes, "My own best experiences in the classroom have come when a class has collectively worked through their resistance to reach the point of inventing something unusual, unexpected, or even uncanny" (Fuss 2012: 166). The "something" invented could be an interpretation, a theory, an artwork . . .

I do not mean simply for students to seek new or multiple conclusions. I aim for them also to "mine" the work for what it can offer: the word "mining" connotes deep and difficult digging to encounter the work on its own terms—How does a work function? What are the underlying ideas, motivations, or influences? How has the maker composed the work, and what might we gain anew from it?—then owning the results (making conclusions that are "mine"). In other words, in addition to researching anyone else's responses, students can explore both the "I" and the "Thou" in their encounters with art. These perspectives are especially important for studio artists learning to evaluate their work's originality. By reflecting on other artists' unique motivations, techniques, and results—not just to show how existing artworks refract trends in art or discourse—students might better locate their own. This outcome is summed up by Nancy Princenthal as "the joys of the unfamiliar that are among the highest pleasures of compelling



new art" (Princenthal 2006: 45). The following examples of classroom processes—in Visual Studies, studio critique, Art History, and a studio-based lesson in visual perception—all aim to stimulate this radical novelty, and they are intended as adjustable processes rather than prescriptive exercises.

A major example of an investigative, consideration-based curriculum is W. J. T. Mitchell's classroom exercise "Showing Seeing" (Mitchell 2002: 176–79). Mitchell asks students to perform experiences (or discuss objects) that involve visibility, while explicating the performer's thoughts and any implications about seeing and culture. This lesson asks students to unpack experiences they might not have regarded as visual or cultural. Students engage "critical skills," but the goal is to generate new theories based on their experiences, not to apply existing paradigms to new phenomena. Structurally, students articulate visual experience from their place within it; they cannot maintain a habitual critical distance.<sup>28</sup>

In dancer Liz Lerner's Critical Response Process, studio "critique" becomes a slow, ritualized conversation that does not corner the artist. Though the name of this approach uses a "critical" vocabulary, its mechanisms are considerate: observers must ask the artist's permission before offering feedback, and this offer can happen only at the end of a four-stepped procedure that unpacks the work's unique aims and manifestations. The ritual quality of the process slows the pace, allowing time for thought. A facilitator (not necessarily the teacher) guides the dialogue, revising critical barbs—or opinionated questions that would suppress exchange—into helpful, "neutral" questions to draw out realizations. The process "allows both student and teacher to clarify their artistic perspectives" (Lerner and Borstel 2003: 49); its mutuality evokes Buber's "I-Thou" relation.

I collaborated with Art History students as a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Fellow at the Pratt Institute (2008–2009), to create thesis statements based on new considerations of famous paintings. I assured them that even tentative hypotheses, if original, would impress their professors more than "proofs" of established generalities, and I dared to demonstrate in real time. For a "compare and contrast" assignment, we projected two paintings of *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo da Vinci (1498) and by Tintoretto (1594). Students began describing the differences: earth tones versus primary colors; diagonal composition versus rectilinearity. We agreed that they already had been trained to see these "easy" details; we pressed on. Christ was not at the center of Tintoretto's table; might this reveal a shift in humanistic philosophy? (Better.) At last, someone remarked that Tintoretto's painting had animals, while Leonardo's didn't. We traced how the eye was directed to notice these animals, and speculated about their inclusion



at this Last Supper. Might a late Renaissance theology or worldview have included dogs and cats?

As these questions became the basis for constructing viable thesis claims, the students grew palpably engaged in the class, in the construction of ideas, and in the enterprise of art history. By considering the images in front of them, instead of proceeding as if the images had been thoroughly exhausted by others, they experienced a fresh encounter with artwork and were stimulated by the process as well as its results.<sup>29</sup> Buber helps to account for their rapid animation: upon seeing the painting by Tintoretto as a ("Thou") locus for new meanings, the students' contributions gave them agency and palpable presence ("I"). (There is no "I" outside of the relation.)

In a seminar for graduate students from different studio departments at the Rhode Island School of Design, in 2016, I led an even more basic exercise—retrospectively titled "What do you see?"—to strengthen visual perception and verbal description. I pushed my plain laptop into the center of the seminar table and asked the students to say what they saw, challenging them to mention only visual details (not brand names or models, for instance, which required external knowledge), and not to repeat each other. Initial skepticism waned during the second round, as students found unexpected nicks and optical reflections. One student had done a similar exercise, in which students were challenged to describe an object so that an alien could visualize it; the point here, however, was that we could expand our visual capacities from within our own limitations. In the third round, students became so engaged that some were reaching out to touch the laptop, to verify their perceptions or investigate further. At one point, we gathered near a window to see a sublime visual effect in the interaction of the laptop with the table.

While these classroom activities exercise critical processes, they proceed according to creative logic. Our work was not relying on others' commentaries; we created fresh, new observations. When students realized that they had to "perform" their "critique," they maintained a subtle dismissiveness—of the classroom activity, of the field, of the artwork or visual material in front of them, and of themselves as creative agents. When the students' engagement sparked new ways of seeing (a rainbow under the laptop?) and about worldviews that challenged their own (theology with housepets?), their interest in the field was confirmed—or kindled—and art(works) became fascinating.

Whether using a codified method like Lerner's, or a less systematic exercise like mine or Mitchell's, art education can promote more productive encounters with creative works. Instead of holding art at a stereotypical "critical distance," these



processes create what I hope Benjamin would call a more “correct distancing”—proximity marked by a consciousness of unfamiliarity/alterity, uniqueness, and mystery. If we approach the works that we study and make with patient consideration, instead of subjecting them to our brisk critical attacks, we will invite students’ intellectual and creative expansion. This more “sidereal” approach can also reinscribe a sense of wonder about the visionary possibilities for Art.

## Notes

- 1 Many thanks to Jennifer Liese (Rhode Island School of Design) and Lisa Ruddick (University of Chicago) for their attention to these ideas and their suggestions for this text.
- 2 In 1970, Paul Ricoeur identified the founders of “the school of suspicion” as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche in the early twentieth century (Ricoeur 1970: 32). Raymond Williams, in his 1976 compendium of *Keywords* in cultural studies, worried that the “predominant general sense [of “criticism”] is of fault-finding” (Williams 1983: 84). Diana Fuss wrote that by the 1980s, she and her graduate school colleagues believed that “if you were not resisting something . . . then you were not theorizing” (Fuss 2012: 164). In an influential 1997 essay, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick wrote about “the prestige that now attaches to a hermeneutics of suspicion in critical theory as a whole” (Sedgwick 2003: 126). And science-culture theorist Bruno Latour, in a 2004 essay on critique, noted that an overemphasis on the destruction of dominant narratives has led to doubt even in the scientific method that is supposedly prized by modernity: we can no longer uphold a narrative, for instance, of climate change (Latour 2004: 242). In 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus interrogated the aggressive, “symptomatic reading” strategy of looking in texts for “symptoms” of hidden ideologies by “constru[ing] [elements present in the text] as symbolic of something latent or concealed” (Best and Marcus 2009: 3). And in 2012, Diana Fuss wrote that “even today, the reigning approach to theory tends to privilege resistance and . . . refusal, subversion, reversal, and displacement” (Fuss 2012: 165).
- 3 Rita Felski’s 2015 book *The Limits of Critique* was discussed feverishly at the 2016 annual conference of the Modern Language Association, where many panels focused on rethinking humanism (Felski 2015). Lisa Ruddick’s online article “When Nothing Is Cool,” on “the thrill of destruction” in criticism which manifests as “malaise” and “immorality,” got more than 64,000 hits within six weeks of its December 2015 publication (Ruddick 2015).
- 4 I use the terms “theory” and “criticism” almost interchangeably, as often happens in literary and visual studies.



- 5 This observation was made by a professor who attended the College Art Association panel, "Critiquing Criticality" (February 14, 2013), where this essay began as a presentation.
- 6 See Marc Redfield's *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America*. Redfield thoroughly chronicles the media's "distortion" of deconstruction—which came to be synonymous with theory and criticism—as "an effort to 'destroy literary studies'" (Redfield 2016: 4). At a discussion of Redfield's book at Cooper Union (February 24, 2016), Susanne Wofford and Emily Apter described deconstructive methods as "affirmative" and "open," though the goal of intellectual subversion could feel constructive or destructive. Testimonies about the effects of deconstruction on the students and faculty were gathered in informal, post-event discussion.
- 7 See Ruddick 2011: 30–31 for an explanation of the speed and truncation of the inquiry.
- 8 Felski draws on the work of British psychologist Alexander Shand to note that the attitude of suspicion may have "originally served a biological function" of helping us to stay alert to "lurking predators and other dangers" (Felski 2015: 37).
- 9 Or perhaps unsafe, difficult psychological conditions (such as in war) *create* this dysfunctional stance of physical proximity and psychic distance.
- 10 Federico, Ruddick, and Latour all call for a common-sensical return to close engagement with works; they avoid hierarchical negations because an initial critical distance dissolves into an existential "inward dimension" (Ruddick 2011: 32) or a larger factual "reality" (Latour 2004: 244). Jean Kennard's "polar reading" begins with complete immersion in the text, which soon leads to its opposite when the reader encounters foreign textual details (Kennard 1984). Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus devote a special issue of *Representations* to "surface reading," an emphasis on a text's manifest details, in contrast to "symptomatic reading" (Best and Marcus 2009). Both "symptomatic" and "surface" reading demand close engagement.
- 11 See Paul de Man's discussion of Reuben Brower's pedagogy of New Criticism (de Man 1986: 23–24).
- 12 James Elkins resolves this by finding it impossible to "read" objects closely: any attempt leads to "a moment of incomplete awareness, built on self-contradiction and the resurgent hope of intimacy with the object" (Elkins 1996: 186). While he finds this troubling, I discuss it below as an excellent aspect of "consideration."
- 13 Felski briefly suggests "composition rather than critique" (Felski 2015: 182), but "composition" lacks dynamic power.
- 14 See David Mikics (Mikics 2013).
- 15 Though Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" essay famously identifies the reader and not the author as the generator ("writer") of meaning, this shifts attention away from the author; it does not deny the physical existence of that person (Barthes 1977). And a reader-analyst can generate infinite inscriptions of meaning, as Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z* (Barthes 1975).



- 16 Contemporary reading theorists support this connection—Moretti notes that “close reading” is, “[a]t bottom, a theological exercise” (Moretti 2013: 48), and Felski writes that “secular interpretation—even in the guise of critique—has not stripped itself of its sacred residues and that reason cannot be purified of all traces of enchantment” (Felski 2015: 174).
- 17 This is a different sense of ministry from what Fleming describes as students consulting the “priestly caste” of the literary professoriate to unlock textual secrets. It is also distinct from Ruddick’s aspiring “teacher-healers”, who can regard teaching literature as an act of humanist ministry, in a New Age key (Ruddick 2011: 29).
- 18 Also, while “righteousness” can be defined secularly, in terms of impeccable behavior, it is also often associated with religious arrogance, or something in-between—a “holier than thou” attitude.
- 19 This framework refers back to Platonic philosophy, where ideas represented (divine) perfection, and material phenomena—especially artworks—were seen as inferior to philosophical (critical) thought.
- 20 “It has long been the opinion of scholars that this new preaching mode originated in the medieval university”, writes Murphy, but he identifies Alain’s treatise as the spark for “a homiletic revolution” in Europe (Murphy 1974: 310). “[W]ithin twenty years of 1200 a whole new rhetoric of preaching leaped into prominence, unleashing hundreds of theoretical manuals written all over Europe during the next three centuries”, in extreme contrast to “only four writers who could by any stretch of the imagination be called theorists of preaching” before 1200 (Murphy 1974: 309–10).
- 21 Alain “never discusses the principle of division [as a mode of exposition], but every section contains examples of its use. The typical division is into three”, which is also (coincidentally?) the typical number of examples or body paragraphs in college-level expository essays (Murphy 1974: 308).
- 22 See also Judith Butler, “What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” (Butler 2001).
- 23 Shand, a British psychologist, had monitored the psychosocial effects of World War I.
- 24 Buber does not reveal Taoism as a source; it was not well known at the time, and might have been perceived as heretical in rabbinical circles. Instead, he weaves Taoist ideas into his philosophical discourse. See Friedman 1976.
- 25 Latour similarly calls for us to “get *closer* to [facts]” so we can “see through them the reality” in which we exist (Latour 2004: 244).
- 26 Buber does not discount the word “God” or avoid using the paradigm of God; he simply obviates dualistic concepts of divine versus worldly, religious versus secular.
- 27 Jean Kennard’s theory of “polar” reading, which she calls “A Theory for Lesbian Readers”, gives greater attention to identity (Kennard 1984). Her model, initially adapted from Joseph Zinker’s Gestalt psychology, complements Buber’s dialogism:



- both the reader and the text can be seen, productively, as "other." The theory uses minority identity to construct a framework that can apply to any reader (or viewer). Kennard later constructs a more flexible vision of shifting identity, drawing on psychoanalysis in her essay on "Teaching Gay and Lesbian Texts" (Kennard 1998).
- 28 For an analogous exercise from the humanities, see Diana Fuss's "gender diary" (Fuss 2012: 170–71).
- 29 Theorizing from observations resembles the strategy of Leo Steinberg, whose creative and revolutionary 1983 book, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, makes general theological claims based on his having analyzed the portrayals (or concealments) of Christ's genitals in countless Renaissance paintings (Steinberg 1983).

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