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The Critical Condition of Visual Arts[1]

The troublesome relationship between art and its criticism, perhaps more fractiously between artists and their critics, has sometimes seemed beyond all hope of redemption. In the visual arts, at least, the artist might lay claim to know about his medium, whereas the critic is bound by the strictures of language. The painter, for instance, knows paint; whereas the critic deals with words. So the painter claims a special kind of authority and thereby thinks himself immune from the criticism directed at him. But is he right?

Perhaps the antagonism set out above is too crude. After all, the house painter knows paint and the journalist deals with words. But the conflict, as thus far described, becomes unsustainable once we begin to clarify what it is that the painter and the critic are concerned with. The painter knows paint as it is used in the production of visual images; and the critic deals with words as they are applied to images in their interpretation. Will this do? Not quite. Words are in themselves not merely shapes or sounds, they are part of a language; and mastery of a language requires that its speakers have an adequate grasp of the *concepts* within that language, through which the world is captured. So the critic is concerned, in his interpretive writing, with the application of concepts to images.

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[1]This paper was given at the joint meeting of the Scandinavian and the British Societies of Aesthetics at the University of Lund, Sweden on Thursday 23rd May 1996. The passage concerned with the relationship between Velazquez's *Las Meninas* and Picasso's variations were first aired in a lecture entitled 'Judging by Appearances' given at the School of Architecture, Yale University, U.S.A. on April 5th 1996 as part of the school's Public Lecture Series. I am grateful to Steven Harris and to Gavin Hogben for their helpful remarks on that occasion.

At least some of the critic's conceptual apparatus will be taxonomic requiring him to discriminate between various types of object or parts of object. Let us look at an example from architecture. The architectural critic ought to be able to discriminate in turn between the doric, the ionic and the Corinthian orders, for instance; to classify this building, or part of it, as ionic rather than doric and so on. Classification is important. (The doric columns incorporated in Nash's gardeners' huts on Marylebone Road at the edge of Regents Park are short, indeed squat, but they are taller than I - even though I am fairly tall. The ionic columns supporting the architrave in the Tate Gallery are moderately slender but they are fatter than I -though it has to be said I have at best a large build). Only after the classification has been made can criticism begin. After the critic has brought some sort of taxonomic pattern to bear upon the work under view, he can begin to describe the work and in so doing he can begin to judge the work. Having classified an object as a doric column he can describe it as short and fat; or go on to judge it *too* short or *too* fat.

Now the critic's description is of how he sees the building or, better, how he recommends that we *see* it. So, in the visual arts his judgements, his application of a conceptual scheme to the visual work of art is constrained by the limits of experience. We have to be able to see the work under the description the critic provides. Agreement in judgement is the sole criterion of success for the critic. Critical description, that is, aims at persuading us to share in an experience. In what follows, I take the critical description of works of visual art to be constrained by the ability the spectator has to see, and hence have visual experiences of, the work which the descriptions offer up for our acceptance.

But judging something, say a column, to be too fat is a comparative business. 'It's too fat' means something like it would be better, as a doric column, if it were more slender. With what, then, are we comparing this fat doric column? The natural answer seems to be that we compare it with our idea of some ideal (or falling within some ideal range) of a doric column. How then do we make these comparisons? We see the column in front of us but with what do we compare it? Where is the ideal doric column that so disgraces this poor object in front of me now? We seem now to be forced along the line of saying that the comparison is between the column in front of me and some ideal column that I have *in mind.* So that the ideal column is a mental object. On this view I have a mental image of the ideal and I compare this column in front of me with my mental image.

But what are mental images and how best might we account for them? On occasion we are disappointed when we see a film that has been made of a favourite book and we find that the film's star does not match up to the fictional figure we had 'pictured' in our minds. We can compare our image of a fictional character with another's image of the same character, discussing how each had privately 'seen' him[2]. Or we can make comparisons between a range of our own mental images. Lastly, and perhaps most convincingly, we can rotate three dimensional shapes to see if there is a fit between a specified object and another from a range of other similar objects drawn from a different angle. (I am thinking here of some of the tests that psychologists use).

But puzzles surround the notion of mental images. They are not located in space: there is no theatre or gallery in the head. They are not made from any media and they are possessed of neither mass nor weight. (The conservation of a mental image may require chemistry of a certain kind, and someone's mental images might need cleaning up, but it will be quite different from the chemical cleaning, restoration and conservation of old masters). Mental images do not require illumination and they do not require an organ of perception. We do not perceive mental images even if we enjoy our experiences of them.

Perhaps the most damning indictment against them is that we do not seem to be able to provide them with criteria of identity independently of the pictures or the descriptions to which they give rise. Perhaps, then, they are not independent and these shadowy putative objects are to be identified *through* the description we give (or feel able to assent to) and via the pictures we make (or identify as resembling our inner images). In that case undergoing experiences of mental imagery engages a recognitional capacity. It is precisely because I can engage in some public activity, drawing, describing, identifying a material picture or agreeing to another's verbal description, that we can make

[2]Since it is highly unlikely that our mental images of the narrative content of a novel are congruent between one reader and another, I take it that the mental images attendant upon reading a novel are not the locus of meaning for that work of art. Nevertheless, our ability to enter into descriptions of the characters of the novel or of the plot, for instance, show that our enjoyment of the work is imaginative. I can *argue* with you as to whether Philip Marlow is a cynical man, if he is honest or honourable. These disputes belong to an imaginative description of the character described in the fiction. But I cannot legitimately argue as to whether or not he is greying at the temples, where this goes beyond the text. Kendall Walton distinguishes between the kinds of imaginative projects involved in looking at a picture and on that basis imagining the content and reading a novel and on that basis imagining looking at a character in the fiction. In the first case we really do look, whereas in the second case we are only to imagine looking. See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1992). For a discussion of the relevance of this distinction to the appreciation of paintings, see, Edward Winters, 'Aesthetic Representations' in British Journal of *Aesthetics,* Vol 33, No. 3, July 1993.

sense of mental images. This is true also of the psychologist's test. No *thing*, the mental image, is identified through the rotation test. Rather, the ability to match up drawings of the same object from different views simply employs a recognitional capacity. Why should there be any more to the identification than that?

Let us now return to talk of works of visual art. When I look at one of Picasso's paintings from the *Las Meninas* series I see a painting. In so doing I am able to enjoy the work as a painting with a certain structure and a certain content, belonging to a certain genre and fitting within the range of work Picasso has produced. I can more or less make out the figures and can get some grip of the kind of space that is represented in the picture. But if I am acquainted with Velazquez's picture of some three hundred years earlier I see Pisasso's picture under a different light. But nevertheless I am looking at Pisasso's painting and it is *his* painting that I see. Thoughts of the Velazquez enter into the descriptions that characterize my experience of the Picasso and some of these descriptions will be comparative. I see the white rectangle toward the top right hand side of the picture as distant within the spatial framework of the Picasso, but see the whole space as shallower than that of Velazquez. And so I *see* a kind of spatial tension that would be unavailable to me were I unacquainted with the original Las *Meninas*.

In Velazquez's painting, there are two large ceiling hooks, from which I imagine chandeliers could be hung. These appear one in front of the other perpendicular to the picture plain. In several of the Picasso paintings these hooks appear side by side so that in conventional picture space they would appear as equidistant from the spectator. Familiarity with Velazquez, however, allows us to see Picasso 'yanking' the space about in the picture so that the interior space is concatenated into the shallow space of bas-relief. But seeing the space as twisted, so that I regard the space as that pictured in both Velazquez and Picasso, requires my having Velazquez's picture in mind when I so see Picasso's space. But we have seen the difficulties we are drawn into by putting the matter in these words. For no perception of the Velazquez is available to me when I look with my eyes at the illuminated Picasso in front of me.

Nevertheless a recognitional capacity is engaged in this particular example. I recognise the Velazquez in the Picasso before me. And that recognition is instantiated by my disposition to describe the work in comparative terms or to assent to comparative descriptions or to simply point to and identify parts of the content. I identify the pictorial content in two paintings that hang on the walls of two art galleries, i.e., two physical objects.

Thus far, we have been considering the nature of comparison between a work of art in front of us and another work of which this work is a variation. In seeing the work as a variation, we are disposed to use comparative descriptions that take us from the present work to the original, familiarity with which is required for us to be able to accept the comparisons under view. Put this way, the veracity of the comparative description is constitutive of the experience we have of the variation. The comparative description is internal to our experience of the present version. It is the constitutive role of these comparative descriptions which render the connection between original and variation internal. The Velazquez *Las Meninas* and Pisasso's interpretation are internally related under these comparative descriptions. Our experience of the Picasso is characterised by the descriptive content to which we are able to assent. Our being familiar with, but being in the absence of, Velazquez's painting enables us to describe Pisasso's work in terms which relate it to the absent work. Thus, our experience of the work is critically engaged in so far as descriptions of our experiences relate the work in front of us to another work. Unfamiliarity with the Velazquez prohibits my ability to experience the work under these descriptions. I simply cannot see the work as it is described.

Let us now move on to discuss works of art that are not specified as variations or versions of previously existing works by other artists. It has been said of Velazquez that he 'painted paint'. Here it is possible to see why it is that Picasso was so enthraled by his countryman. Picasso, like other painters of the early twentieth century was concerned with the material with which he was working; concerned, that is, with drawing our attention to it. Picasso, in his development of cubism and collaboration with other colleagues wanted to deny the tradition of perspective drawing. Rather than seeing the world as a container of objects, the observation of which was ordered according to perspectival laws of vision, the spectator being given a single point of view onto this world, he preferred to romanticize the scientific view of the day and present the viewer with a manifold of viewpoints and to regard the distinction between space and its occupants as flawed. The conception of a different kind of pictorial space together with a contempt for the detail which defined and delineated an object within that space can be seen in the *Las Meninas* series. The later examples, however, whilst influenced and developed from his experiments with space and with multiple points of views are more concerned with the way in which a modern artist might paint objects in space from a single point of view.

To this end he used paint colour blocks to picture both objects and spaces between objects, so that a design pattern across the

canvas becomes a feature to which we are supposed to attend. It can be seen as both ironic and as inviting difficulty that he should choose, in *The Pigeons* series, to paint a view through a window. It is ironic in that the perspectival space he had given up would have seen representation as a 'window' onto another world, through which the spectator gazed. In Picasso's series the recognized distant views are constantly brought into tension with the 'materiality' of the paint surface, so that sky, pigeon, cage, window frame, promontory and sea are all treated as integral 'bits' of the painting. A wave and a seagull are flicks of the brush. In these paintings Picasso 'paints paint'.

Now consider Matisse's *Open Window* series. Again we are presented with open windows through which we look and again we can see the concern with painting sky and jug and stem-head with an evenness that calls our attention to the formal pattern and design of the canvas. And so here we have a similarity between two painters' concerns and between individual examples of their work. We can compare Picasso with Picasso, Matisse with Matisse; and Picasso with Matisse. And these comparisons show up in the experiences we have of the paintings. It makes sense to look at a painting and ask what the painter might have done and in asking that question having an example to hand. *Looking* at a painting just is this kind of critical activity.

If we are taken up with modernism we might thereby find the academic portrait painting dull, even unintelligent; or if we are card carrying post-modernists we might find the labour of painting antediluvian, preferring instead the images produced by the latest computor packages. But these are all critical stances and each requires the spectator to be able to assent to descriptions of the work under view: to be able to connect the constitutive description of this experience of a work with descriptions of experiences of other works of art. These descriptions, as we have seen, thereby characterize the experience of the works and relate it to its context. This context, however, is not something exterior to the work but is internal to descriptions of it.

It follows from what I have said that the context, indeed at its broadest art's history, is not a fixed entity[3]. Rather it is constituted and constructed in the apprehension and appreciation of works of art. For anything to count as a work of art it must fit within *some* pattern of relationships, however they are to be described, with other works of art. From this it follows that description is not an option that any work of

[3]On the transitive but relative stability of the context of art history see, T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' reprinted in *Selected Prose of T.S Eliot,* (ed.) Frank Kermode, (London: Faber & Faber, 1975).

art can forgo. Description gives to art its critical condition. Perhaps better, it is a condition of a thing's being a work of art that our experience of it can be described.

If what I have said is true, it follows that for an artist to be a master of his medium, he must work within a critical context. It is always possible that he may do this unreflectively, but this is beside the point. His ability to manipulate the context or to negotiate and exploit its vicissitudes is itself critical independently of whether or not the artist is able or willing to articulate this.