What Is a Critic?

By RUDOLF ARNHEIM

A MAN MAY spend much of his life looking at works of art, thinking about them, and writing about them and yet not be a critic by profession. As a theorist he may be concerned with the nature of art, with the laws of the mind by which the eyes see shape and color, as well as with the human needs fulfilled by the making and consuming of art. In these studies he uses the actual production and consumption of art as raw data—to get ideas and to check on his ideas.

A critic, on the other hand, is concerned with particular works of art; but in order to deal with them he relies on those generalities that occupy the theorist. Perhaps the difference between the two is simply a matter of emphasis. The theorist uses paintings and sculpture to define principles of art; the critic uses the same principles in order to deal with painting and sculpture. If so, have there always been critics? Lionello Venturi, in his *History of Art Criticism,* discusses such men as Xenocrates, St. Augustine, Cennini, Vasari, de Piles, Winckelmann, Kant, Hegel, Helmholtz, Burckhardt, Riegl, Woelfflin, and many others. All of them wrote art theory. Perhaps it is true that, as Oscar Wilde said, in the best days of art there were no art critics —an observation on which he himself commented that it had "all the vitality of error and all the tediousness of an old friend."

Probably art theory and art criticism became separate professions only with the development of magazines and newspapers. This is a historical question. What concerns me here is the particular state of mind and intention that can be described as the critical attitude. Is the critic properly defined as a man who applies theory to particular objects?

An astronomer writing a monograph about Venus is not commonly called a critic, even though he discusses a single thing. What about an article on *our* kind of Venus, let us say—the small prehistoric stone figure from Willendorf on the Danube? I open a book on the subject and find the author saying that the little Venus "probably illustrates the ideal of female beauty held by men of that particular region in the Stone Age." It seems the writer considers the Venus because she illustrates something. He is interested in the Stone Age. He is not a critic.

Let us try another approach. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that the critic is a judge. But so is everybody else, even though theorists and historians may insist that they are only after the bare, neutral facts. Actually the theorist cannot explore the nature of *the* artist without stripping from the real specimens everything that is accidental, weak, contaminated. He has to find what is essential, strong, and pure about the artist; and this means judging. Similarly, the art historian assumes, more or less tacitly, that it is the great artists who represent and reflect the art of their period most reliably. To show how the nineteenth century embodied itself in art means to concentrate on Delacroix, Manet, Cézanne, not on Ary Scheffer, Rosa Bonheur, Giovanni Boldini, or Christoph Wilhelm Eckersberg. It is true that when an art historian, as a historian, talks about "a perfect Renoir" we must compare him with, let us say, a devoted dermatologist exclaiming: "A beautiful ringworm!" For both of these professionals, beauty is the delight of encountering in the flesh the pure embodiment of a type, a law, a generality. In addition, of course, the two men may also be lovers of art and even critics.

What distinguishes the critic is not simply that he deals with individual artists or works, nor that he applies to the particular specimen the available knowledge of theory and history. What counts is, apparently, that the particular work of art is not the means but the end of the critic's endeavor and that he applies theoretical standards for the purpose of gauging the validity of that work. Much criticism makes unprofitable reading because the standards on which it is based are shallow, unclear, unstable. The true critic is ingrained with the "invariants" of art, that is, the fundamental conditions that must be met if a painting or piece of sculpture is to be called a work of art.

However, the great critic excels not only by his well-founded principles. He has at least two further indispensable virtues. One, he possesses a style of his own, just like a good artist—a style anchored in some aspect of the spirit of his time and yet strongly personal. (His literary style as a writer is only an external expression of this quality.) The particular direction from which the critic throws his light gives volume to the object; he models it by a particular distribution of light and shadow. His approach is one-sided, by necessity, for when an object is lighted evenly from all sides it flattens out and vanishes. By the spontaneous onesidedness of what he notices and likes and what he overlooks and rejects the critic exerts an active force in the cultural history of his time. Even his great mistakes are genuine agents of this history and mobilize counterefforts. A critic at whom artists throw palettes and blowtorches is likely to have merits because who would bother to throw things at a fool?

The third and equally important virtue of the great critic is that marvelous openness of mind and eye that makes him discern the new growth among the drying leaves and broken branches. It is a gift not easily reconciled with the other two, and therefore the great critic needs the additional aptitude for making his talents get along with each other as profitably as possible. He is all too easily tempted to distort his standards in order to justify his preferences or in order to surrender to novelty; tempted also to let his principles dogmatize his eyes. Hence there are many ways in which a critic can fail to be useful.

OF these failures I will mention only a few. A critic is not useful, I believe, when he sees reflected in the work of art only a mirror image of himself; not useful when he struts about, displaying his colors, when he hides in an ink cloud like a cuttlefish, when he drifts on every current, forever afloat and rudderless, or when he despises rather than feels compassion for human incapacity; useless also when he lacks the barometric sense of altitude: his heart does not beat faster when he is lifted to the heights, nor is he depressed by the dumps.

Let me come back once more to the critic as a judge, however, and suggest that what we need him for is not so much to discover greatness as to sift the genuine from the spurious. The few truly great artists cannot be helped much by the critic in their effort to break through. Their coming seems to occur like a natural event, and much of the cursing and blessing they stir up looks equally elemental. When it comes to a Picasso or Matisse or Henry Moore the critic seems to have little power either way. What we need him for is to tell us when we are in the presence of art and when only in that of what the communication engineers call "noise"; that is, pretense, make-believe, opportunism, imitation, irresponsibility, or emptiness.

I will even stick my neck out a little farther and describe, as one example of the lack of fundamental principle in some criticism of our time, a phenomenon that I shall call the Brancusi syn-

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drome or the top-layer fallacy. It consists in the assumption that art can be simple. Every work of art has a top layer of form, which summarizes in the most evident generality the over-all, dominating forces of the composition. In a Renaissance painting, for example, a triangle may unify the richness of form and meaning assembled under it. Without that triangle the wealth of the invention would scatter. But it is also true that without that wealth the triangle would be an empty husk. Therefore, if, these days, you take the naked triangle and display it all by itself and write something like, "The determined pointedness of the triangle aims dynamically at spiritual heights," you are committing the top-layer fallacy. You are taking a sign for a symbol, poverty for richness. The human brain, the most complex object in the world, cannot be represented by an easily exhausted shape or gesture. Granted that rich meaning can be applied to religious or political signs, such as a cross, a star, a red disc; but as visual statements these shapes are empty. Similarly, an evenly stained canvas, a nest of squares, a shiny egg, a set of stripes, or an assortment of refuse may stir up powerful feelings here and there. Anything in this world can do that. But a work of art does not ask for meaning; it contains it. And in order to contain meaning congenial to the human brain, art cannot be simple. It never has been; never will be. This is one of those invariant fundamentals that our critics fail to consider.

To be guided by principle does not, however, require quoting it explicitly as though it were holy scripture. Some of the best critical writing never mentions principle but always implies it. Since we all employ ourselves privately as critics, every one of us knows that his descriptions of persons and things are constantly intermingled with evaluation, judgment, classification—all of it wrapped quite often in some telling metaphoric image. May I give two recent examples of my own experience? The other day, looking at a photograph that showed the amusing carpenter work of a gifted woman sculptor, as well as the artist herself sitting before the work in perfect frontality and staring ahead, pokerfaced and with the fearful symmetry of heavy makeup, I said to myself: The Buster Keaton of modern art! The comparison helped me to place this particular blend of temperament and mechanics, of folk art and cleverness, of distortion and beauty, of laughter and sadness. It helped me a good deal. And the other night I woke up in the middle of the dark and said to myself, and I don't know why then and there: "Is it not surprising that Chagall's paintings do not smell of perfume?" This one, too, helped me.

BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

The Master Fibber

STRATFORD, ONTARIO.

ONE of the most pleasing productions in the thirteen years of the Stratford Festival of Canada is *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, with the latter being presented under the catchier title *Falstaff*. As directed by Stuart Burge with the assistance of John Hirsch, there is a fuller development of these plays' comic potentialities than has been evident in other recent productions of this theatrical doubleheader.

This is particularly true of Part 1. For Douglas Campbell, who must be the first actor in history ever to play Hotspur seven years after playing Falstaff, gets more humor than usual out of this role, with the result that instead of a history play relieved by comedy, we now have a comedy sprinkled with a bit of history. The sprinkle turns out to be just enough to make us see that both the King and his wayward son, Prince Hal, are reacting to the dishonor of usurping the crown from Richard.

Happily, Tony Van Bridge's portrayal of Falstaff emerges as a sort of sixteenth-century Monte Woolley, a truly clever and witty old rascal who came to a predominantly liquid dinner. From the moment when, from the darkened stage, we first hear an isolated snore we are delighted to find a man who can sleep happily while the rest of the world worries about its moral rationalizations. As we watch this antidote to sobriety and guilt squirm his way out of the defensive lies he invents about the Gadshill caper, we see less a fool than a master fibber exercising his craft. Similarly hilarious is Eric Christmas's portrait of his crony, Bardolph, inspired by the grizzly little soldier, Ol' Bill, in the World War I cartoon "The Better 'Ole."

At the end of the first play, the merriment is balanced with a suggestion that Hal's friendship with Falstaff is beginning to cool. And this is carried progressively into the second part. Here, half of the action consists of grave scenes relating to the putting down of the rebellion by what seems an unfair trick, to the death of the King, and to the emergence of Hal as a reformed Henry V. These are vigorously performed, with Leo Ciceri's haunted King and Douglas Rain's repentant Hal combining in an excellent reconciliation scene. But it is the other half, the extension of the ventripotent knight's highhanded antics both with his Eastcheap cronies and with the rustic Justice Shallow and Justice Silence that make *Falstaff* so delightful. As Shallow, William Hutt is outstanding as he establishes the character with a high-pitched voice and a concentration on the old man's ridiculous need to remember his youth as far more wicked than it really was. His foolery and that of the others is beautifully executed and almost never descends into the silliness that plagues so many productions of Shakespearean comedy. It is impressive work by an expert company that has worked together in Shakespeare for more years than any other professional group of its kind.

Also a popular success here, as it is at Minneapolis, is *The Cherry Orchard*. Nevertheless, one suspects that the larger size of this Ontario theater is less friendly to Chekhov than the more intimate Minneapolis playhouse. For although Mr. Hirsch has directed the play sensitively and understandingly, we find it almost impossible to feel sustainedly the play's rich atmosphere.

However, if audiences are not held spellbound, they are at least intelligently entertained. Kate Reid's Ranevskaya captures the ruined quality of a sensual woman. Although William Hutt's Gaev is perhaps closer to Uncle Vanya than it is to an elegant and useless country gentleman, it is modestly effective. And almost every member of the cast, including Hugh Webster, who is badly miscast as Trofimov, receives applause for individual outbursts.

Best of all is Douglas Campbell as Lopahin. While he starts out a little too British and a little too comic, Mr. Campbell gradually achieves the most genuine introspective feeling he has brought to any of the roles we have seen him perform. If Mr. Hirsch has not managed to create an extraordinary production of *The Cherry Orchard*, he has at least explored with some success the task of presenting more real behavior and real responses on a stage built for larger-than-life presentation.

The Festival is also presenting at another theater the North American premiere of *Mahagonny*. Written as an opera in 1930 by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, its inspired music has long made it a collector's item. However, as produced in English translation, *Mahagonny*'s story of sin in a boom town seems unnecessarily stark and disconnected, and comes most to life in some of its songs. One suspects that it will take the sort of adapting hand the late Marc Blitzstein brought to *The Threepenny Opera* to give *Mahagonny* the impact its music entitles it to.

—HENRY HEWES.