

# CRITICAL POSITIONS (ART) CRITICISM'S LACK OF FOUNDATION

**JENS KASTNER**

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"I still enjoy Nolde's pictures, because their artistic expression is so powerful."

Christian Ring, director of the Nolde Foundation Seebüll, 2019

If even Christian Ring, as director of the Nolde Foundation Seebüll, could no longer enjoy Emil Nolde's pictures, then we would have to ask, who could?! That Ring emphasizes that he *still* enjoys them clearly derives from the fact that Nolde was a committed National Socialist and anti-Semite who expressed his attitudes even toward his own colleagues in open aversion (Max Liebermann) and denunciation (Max Pechstein). To *still* enjoy his paintings obviously requires some justification. This legitimization, in turn, can only function by trying to separate the work of art on the one hand from the artist's political attitudes and lifestyle on the other.

The article from which the opening quote is taken was published on the occasion of the great Nolde exhibition in Berlin in 2019, and began with the question: "Can one separate the individual Emil Nolde

from his work?"<sup>1</sup> (A question which the article does not, in fact, answer.) The case of Emil Nolde is neither isolated nor exceptional, in that this question has arisen repeatedly in recent years in regard to (predominantly male) artists. After the HBO documentary *Leaving Neverland*, which raises serious accusations of sexual abuse against Michael Jackson, can we still dance to his music?<sup>2</sup> Examples like this abound. Even if the political and moral transgressions of the artists in question vary widely, and even if they strongly differ from the called-for measures against the enjoyment of art (which are seldom adequately described by the term censorship), in every case the debate essentially involves two contradictory positions: yes to enjoyment and dancing, because it is only art's "unconditional lack of responsibility" for all external matters that makes an "aesthetic

experience productive" (as Hanno Rauterberg, journalist for weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT*, asserts);<sup>3</sup> no to enjoying art regardless of an artist's transgressions because, even if it is acknowledged that the freedom of art is an achievement, such a separation is hardly possible affectively and, moreover, perpetuates "a male theoretical tradition" (as Lea Susemichel, editor of the feminist magazine *an.schläge*, states).<sup>4</sup>

## (ART) CRITICISM AND ITS POSITIONS AND LEGITIMIZATIONS

The question also up for discussion here is that of the foundations and mission of art criticism. Or, more broadly, the issue of the position and legitimization of criticism in general.

The question "Do I find this good (beautiful, pleasing, inspiring, etc.)?" is always more difficult to answer if it also has to include more than just the work of art itself. It becomes more complex, and roughly runs: "Do I *still* find this good (beautiful, pleasing, inspiring, etc.)?" The question of how art should be judged was therefore initially a way of reducing complexity. Everything outside of art itself was supposed

to be viewed as irrelevant. At the same time, however, we should also bear in mind that this process of reducing complexity, which remains part of a widespread understanding of art criticism to this day, was always one that was enforced by those in power and that guaranteed privileges. With regard to the genesis of art criticism, we must remember two points. On the one hand, the emergence of an advanced artistic judgment in the eighteenth century was, as Wolfgang Ullrich writes, a kind of "educated bourgeois compensation."<sup>5</sup> Those who did not (yet) own works of art took possession of them in a secondary manner, namely, intellectually. In addition, the educated bourgeoisie did their best to ensure that their manner of appropriation became the definitive, and therefore legitimate form (in contrast to simple ownership). On the other hand, the bourgeoisie sought to distinguish themselves not only from the nobility, but also from the (sociostructural) other side, that is, from the working classes. Accordingly, Pierre Bourdieu noted that the "emergence of the fields of art and of criticism was linked with a desire to be able to pass autonomous aesthetic judgements, independently of the tastes of the general public, . . ."<sup>6</sup> The development of a purely aesthetic judgment, which of course first authenticates the work of art's "unconditional

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lack of responsibility" (Rauterberg), was thus at the same time a strategy of distinction: aesthetics as active demarcation of boundaries. The aesthetic experience as something free of all necessities (or responsibilities) first developed historically with the bourgeoisie's rise to power. The aesthetic experience ultimately became universalized as a prerequisite for appropriate art consumption and, more importantly, for legitimate judgment of art. In reality a bourgeois and therefore privileged matter, the concept of the *pure* experience of art "unwittingly establishes this singular experience as a transhistorical norm for every aesthetic perception."<sup>7</sup> Henceforth the only experience that counts in regard to art was that which occurs directly with the work of art itself. (And not—to clarify the train of thought laid out here—with the artist's moral or political transgressions.)

This assertion of universality simultaneously renders the critic's own point of view invisible. And this is programmatic, meaning that the sociostructural, ethnically definable, gender- and sex-specific point of view from which art is viewed should literally be indifferent. Indifferent in the sense of irrelevant, but also indifferent in the sense of equally valid. This stance, established as a universal norm, on the one hand represents an achievement—and scholars

from Friedrich Schiller to Jacques Rancière have defended it as such—because it signifies an emancipation from the church and the nobility. It formally universalizes access to art and simultaneously dissociates it from ownership as well as from religious, moral, and symbolic demands on its forms of expression. Bourdieu further points out that the "The pure disposition is so universally recognized as legitimate that no voice is heard pointing out that the definition of art, and through it the art of living, is an object of struggle among the classes."<sup>8</sup>

This only becomes apparent again when we are made aware of the fact that the program of (artistic) liberation is highly exclusionary: it not only separates the connoisseurs from the philistines and the *pure* experience from that contaminated (by other areas of life) and thus still determined by function and subject to necessities. It also simultaneously excludes from the legitimate, hegemonic discourse all those who emphasize and cannot ignore the extent to which this experience is impure, characterized by a specific social environment, and possibly marked by discrimination. (Whereby the term discourse should be understood here in the broadest sense and by no means only refers to debates in the feuilleton: those whose voices are not heard in legitimate discourse also have more trouble

finding housing, earn less money, receive less recognition, and so forth.) This dichotomy between liberation on the one hand and exclusion on the other can ultimately be seen as a good example of the ambivalence of modernity.

## (ART) CRITICISM AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN SYSTEMS OF POWER

Art criticism thus proves to be heavily involved in social structures of domination. It does not operate independently of power relations and does not automatically oppose social privileges. Thus, what has been repeatedly stated about criticism in general in recent years applies to art criticism in particular: criticism itself is part of its own subject matter. There is no secure external point of view, no neutral ground, from which criticism could develop its effects. This applies equally to Michel Foucault's famous definition of critique as "the art of not being governed so much."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this by no means excludes the fact that criticism is nevertheless simultaneously entangled in processes of governing, that is, in Foucault's sense, in practices of directing and guiding. To this extent, what

becomes particularly clear in matters related to art criticism applies equally to a critique of social and economic conditions. All criticism is entangled and has no secure ground from which to pronounce its judgments or even to make its attacks on deplorable conditions. The question arises as to what comes next.

There are essentially three possible reactions to criticism's lack of foundation: dismissal, grounding, and practice.

Firstly, renowned sociologists have declared not only that the expression and practice of criticism no longer have a legitimate basis in view of criticism's own entanglement in an increasingly complex social world, but that they, in fact, should not even have had one to begin with. Bruno Latour, for example, advises us to reverse Marx's formula drawn from Feuerbach's eleventh thesis, namely, that philosophers had only *interpreted* the world in different ways, but the point is to *change* it. According to Latour's reversal of Marx's dictum on philosophy, the social sciences "have *transformed* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *interpret* it."<sup>10</sup> Armin Nassehi also states that the social sciences should above all be concerned with "expanding the arsenal of descriptive tools and making them more precise,"<sup>11</sup> because criticism that uses metaphors of rebuilding (society)

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is "latently authoritarian."<sup>12</sup> The recommendation that arises here from criticism's lack of foundation is a call to abandon it (in order to replace it—again—with description and interpretation).

These intellectual dismissals of criticism are linked to everyday attitudes of not wanting to be told what to do, say, or think, in the sense of "you must still be allowed to say that," et cetera. In short, criticism is rejected as presumptuous, whereby as a rule this type of stance is admittedly less due to a pseudo-anarchic anti-authoritarianism than to a refusal to question the normalcy of one's own lifestyle in regard to its negative effects on others. (This at least holds true for most reflexive reactions against political correctness, moralistic fanaticism, etc.) In this respect, these intellectual and everyday rejections of criticism's self-declared right to regulate go hand in hand with the acceptance of existing rules and practices.

It is not, however, only because of this apparent paradox that the first reaction to criticism's lack of foundation hardly appears convincing. Retreating to a position of description and interpretation means either to assert that the descriptive and interpretive practice—unlike the critical one—has no impact (an assertion that contradicts all the basic assumptions of the

social and cultural sciences over the past five decades, which, for this reason alone, makes it hardly plausible); or it means to assume that these practices do have an impact, but that this is *only* the unintentional and above all uncontrollable side effect of description. This gesture of dismissal is thus ultimately tantamount to declaring the social and cultural sciences bankrupt. This becomes particularly clear with respect to other phenomena with consequences, for example in view of the targeted impact of the methods of corporate representatives who deny climate change, or the deliberately—and not only legally—enforced interests of neoliberal profiteers of global social inequality.<sup>13</sup>

The second reaction to criticism's lack of foundation involves the attempt to (re)establish such a foundation, that is, to ultimately free criticism from its entanglement and (re)found it. This refoundation is based on the accurate realization that the location—the critical position—defines the critical stance. This location can be understood geographically, sociostructurally, and culturally. In the context of post- and decolonial theory, scholars have repeatedly noted how important location is for thinking and speaking. As the philosopher Enrique Dussel pointedly states, "*the place from which we speak*" is significant, not

only for what is said,<sup>14</sup> but equally for the chance to be heard.<sup>15</sup>

Dussel, however, does not merely formulate this reference to the significance of location as a challenge to scholarly neutrality and as critical scepticism toward Western universalism. He, along with many others, attempts to make the place of existence, that is, the concrete world in which people live, the point of departure for criticism. Criticism should thus be newly grounded and given a firm foundation in the materiality of the exploited and of victims of discrimination. This criticism should derive from all of the excluded practices which are "viewed as non-existent, unproductive, and useless" in the dominant system.<sup>16</sup> Their negation by the system or by the hegemonic discourse becomes criticism's starting point. Here it should find its new outside, which Dussel calls exteriority, and here Dussel foresees the foundation of a critical "community of the oppressed."<sup>17</sup>

In daily life, this theoretical foundation attempt is linked to an activism of *critical whiteness* and to many forms of critique of *cultural appropriation*, for which criticism must by necessity have such an oppressed starting point and position. Whoever does not share this background counts as privileged and, due to their (sociostructural, ethnic, gender, and sexual) status, is not

entitled to lay claim to the terms and practice of criticism. Belonging to the community becomes more important than one's stance itself. This, however, essentializes the possibility of criticism, tying it to an intrinsic notion of belonging.

Yet the rejection of such an essentialization, that is, of the assertion of an intrinsic connection between the location of criticism and the critical position, already marked the beginnings of what we now know as critical theory. Early critical theory flatly refused to make a particular social situation and collectively experienced discrimination a necessary condition for legitimate criticism. Legitimate social critique was dissociated from the experience of exploitation. This position consequently did not, as Dussel alleged of early critical theory, derive from a lack of radicalism or an intellectualism that had turned its back on material suffering. On the contrary, it was a conscious—and paradigmatic—statement when Max Horkheimer wrote in his seminal essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937) that a theory oriented toward the abolition of injustice and suffering could well stand in opposition to views that currently prevailed among the proletariat (in another version of the text, Horkheimer speaks more generally of "the exploited"). "If such a conflict were not possible," wrote

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Horkheimer, "there would be no need of a theory."<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer certainly took into account and accepted criticism's resulting lack of foundation, noting that "critical theory has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the third reaction to the crisis of criticism builds on this. It takes the practice of criticism more or less literally: if criticism has no firm foundation (or all attempts to assert such remain unsatisfactory), and if we simultaneously see the need to continue working to dismantle hegemony and reduce suffering, then we practically have no other option but to practice criticism in the truest sense of the word. To try, to repeatedly start over, to "advance questioning," as the Zapatistas say.<sup>20</sup> Criticism, as Ruth Sonderegger describes it, building on Max Horkheimer's thinking, then appears as a stance that simultaneously implies "the willingness to disclose, reflect, and work on one's own situatedness and partisanship regarding the goal of reducing powerlessness."<sup>21</sup> Criticism as a stance is then on the one hand more than just a practice of questioning underscored by argumentation. It must demonstrate more than good reasoning, yet at the same time it must also be willing to disclose the genealogy and localization of these reasons,

and to accept that both will then be placed in relation to other practices. Whoever criticizes privilege, and jets around the world on first-class flights to promote this point of view, will rightfully see their own position called out as inconsistent.

On the other hand, criticism in this context can also be a form of critique that always extends beyond its direct object. In terms of art criticism, this entails taking the concrete conditions of production and reception into account in the assessment of creative works. These conditions of production also include the artist's attitudes and political stance, even if they do not intentionally affect the content, creation, or effect of a specific work of art itself. To invoke art's lack of responsibility for everything outside of art itself when judging a work of art would thus be completely out of the question.

## ART CRITICISM AS CULTURAL CRITICISM

This is, ultimately, an understanding of art criticism as being cultural criticism at the same time. It acknowledges that the modes of production and reception that apply to art follow their own logic. However, it does



not shy away from also addressing the attitudes out of which art is created, and which art in turn inspires. As Antonio Gramsci formulated in his *Prison Notebooks*, the point is to “fuse the struggle for a new culture . . . and criticism of social life, feelings and conceptions of the world with aesthetic or purely artistic criticism.”<sup>22</sup> Specific artistic practice and general habits of consuming art—and everything else—then become the subject of art criticism as cultural criticism. It can (or should) not ignore the processes of production, reception, and circulation.

Art criticism as cultural criticism builds on an understanding of culture as a conglomerate of processes and practices which create sense and meaning. These processes and practices take place not in a vacuum, but always under particular economic and political conditions. They are also influenced by these conditions insofar as a particular position in the social sphere can lend more or less clout to the process of assigning meaning and significance. When, for example, the director of the Nolde Foundation praises the expressiveness of Emil Nolde’s pictures, this carries more weight for their overall significance than if an unauthorized person were to express this position. Since there is, however, a kind of permanent, power-laden battle over the determination of meaning and significance, it

is possible that even the opinion of the most eminent expert on Nolde will not prevail. For example, this may not be able to prevent the German Chancellor from having Emil Nolde’s paintings removed from her office because of his National Socialist views.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, this battle is fought using weapons specific to the field: invoking something like *power of expression* as a criterion of quality is only effective in the cultural field (and simultaneously serves to delineate the boundaries of that field). On the other hand, positions external to the field often have a decisive effect on the outcome of such a battle, an outcome which is always only temporary. The question as to which artistic breach of convention is considered appropriate or presumptuous, innovative, or irrelevant also depends on a conglomerate of conventions outside the realm of art. Meanings change—not only those of works of art—and it is the social battles that determine which changes will prevail. An art criticism understood as cultural criticism has a responsibility to actively participate in these struggles with all its means and opportunities.

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- 1 Maria Ossowski, "Lassen sich die Person Emil Nolde und sein Werk trennen?," Bayerischer Rundfunk, *kultur-Welt*, April 12, 2019, <http://web.archive.org/web/20190505185525/https://www.br.de/nachrichten/kultur/ausstellung-emil-nolde-eine-deutsche-legende,RNWMMK0N> (accessed September 4, 2020). The article particularly addressed the exhibition *Emil Nolde: A German Legend; The Artist during the Nazi Regime*, April 12 to September 15, 2019, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin.
- 2 Marietta Steinhart, "'Leaving Neverland': Die verlorenen Jungen von Neverland," *ZEIT ONLINE*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/film/2019-03/leaving-neverland-michael-jackson-dokumentation-kindesmissbrauch-vorwurf> (accessed July 30, 2020).
- 3 Hanno Rauterberg, *Wie frei ist die Kunst?: Der neue Kulturkampf und die Krise des Liberalismus* (Berlin, 2018), p. 86.
- 4 Lea Susemichel, "Ich komme von Homer . . . : Vom weißen, männlichen hochaktuellen Geniekult," in Heinrich Böll Stiftung / Gunda Werner Institut, December 13, 2019, <https://www.gwi-boell.de/de/2019/12/13/ich-komme-von-homer-vom-weissen-maennlichen-hochaktuellen-geniekult> (accessed July 30, 2020).
- 5 Wolfgang Ullrich, *Siegerkunst: Neuer Adel, teure Kunst* (Berlin, 2016), p. 24.
- 6 Pierre Bourdieu, "Lecture of 23 February 2000," in *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (Cambridge, 2017), p. 279.
- 7 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, Analytic Aesthetics (1987), pp. 201–10, esp. p. 202.
- 8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (1984; repr., Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 48.
- 9 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley, 2004), pp. 382–98, esp. p. 384.
- 10 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2007), p. 42.
- 11 Armin Nassehi, *Die letzte Stunde der Wahrheit: Warum rechts und links keine Alternativen mehr sind und die Gesellschaft ganz anders beschrieben werden muss* (Hamburg, 2015), p. 278.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- 13 Grégoire Chamayou, for example, recently presented a detailed analysis of the way "authoritarian liberalism," to use his words, has asserted itself in discourse since the 1970s. In this process, scientific-theoretical, legal-governmental, and spiritual-ethical means were used to justify social inequality and reject environmental standards designed to regulate the accumulation of capital. See Grégoire Chamayou, *Die unregierbare Gesellschaft: Eine Genealogie des autoritären Liberalismus* (Berlin, 2019).
- 14 Enrique Dussel, *Der Gegendiskurs der Moderne: Kölner Vorlesungen* (Vienna, 2013), p. 99.
- 15 The case of Christian Ring, quoted at the beginning, illustrates like hardly any other example how decisive the location of criticism or of any judgment on a social issue truly can be. In his statement, he of course primarily justifies his profession and his position. After all, if he now found Emil Nolde's pictures unbearable due to their creator's political stance, then he would probably have to change both.
- 16 Enrique Dussel, *Ethik der Gemeinschaft: Die Befreiung in der Geschichte* (Düsseldorf, 1988), p. 92.

- 17 Dussel, *Der Gegendiskurs der Moderne*, p. 120.
- 18 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (1972; repr., New York, 2002), pp. 188–243, esp. p. 221.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- 20 The Zapatista movement in southern Mexico caused a worldwide sensation with its 1994 uprising. Ever since, it has repeatedly influenced leftist activist and sociotheoretical policies and discourses. See, among others, Jens Kastner, *Alles für alle!: Zapatismus zwischen Sozialtheorie, Pop und Pentagon* (Münster, 2011).
- 21 Ruth Sonderegger, *Vom Leben der Kritik: Kritische Praktiken – und die Notwendigkeit ihrer geopolitischen Situierung* (Vienna, 2019), p. 23.
- 22 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London, 1985), p. 95.
- 23 Incidentally, the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commended Angela Merkel's action: "It goes without saying that paintings by a National Socialist were a dubious choice for such a state location, even if they are not National Socialist images. They truly belong back in the museum." Jürgen Kaube, "Merkel hängt Nolde-Bilder ab: Nachgeholte Deutschstunden," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/angela-merkel-haengt-bilder-von-nolde-ab-16124645.html> (accessed July 30, 2020).

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