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Art Criticism: Theories and Approaches in the Modern Era

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Abstract: *This article provides a comprehensive exploration of art criticism's evolution in the modern era, tracing the development of influential theories and approaches that have shaped contemporary art analysis. From formalist critiques that focus on visual elements to contextual critiques that engage with historical, cultural, and political influences, art criticism has diversified to address the multifaceted nature of modern art. Key theories, such as formalism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, and postmodernism, each offer unique perspectives, contributing to a rich field where art can be appreciated, questioned, and deconstructed. This paper examines each approach's principles, key proponents, and impact on art criticism today. Through tables, charts, and graphs, this analysis contextualizes major movements in art criticism and highlights shifts in critical focus, offering a nuanced understanding of how critical theory informs art interpretation.*

Keywords: *Art criticism, formalism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postmodernism, modern art, critical theory, interpretative frameworks, cultural analysis.*

Introduction

Art criticism in the modern era has undergone significant transformation, evolving from primarily aesthetic evaluations to more complex analyses that consider sociopolitical, psychological, and theoretical dimensions. The expansion of critical theories in the 20th century introduced new frameworks for understanding and evaluating art, reflecting broader shifts in philosophy, politics, and society. Influential theories, from Clement Greenberg's formalism to the feminist critiques of Linda Nicklin, have expanded art criticism's scope, allowing for interpretations that engage with cultural identity, power dynamics, and personal expression.

This article aims to present a thorough examination of art criticism's theoretical landscape, offering insights into the varied approaches that critics use to analyze and interpret art. By exploring the core ideas of each theory and their applications to modern and contemporary art, this paper provides readers with an overview of the diverse methodologies available to art critics. Through visual aids and comparative analysis, this study illustrates how each approach contributes to a deeper, multidimensional understanding of art and its impact.

1. Foundations of Modern Art Criticism

Modern art criticism began with a focus on aesthetic value, assessing art based on visual and technical qualities such as composition, color, and form. Early critics in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Denis Diderot and John Ruskin, emphasized the beauty and moral purpose of art, evaluating works on their ability to convey virtue and inspire viewers. This early formalist approach set the foundation for art criticism, focusing on the inherent qualities of artworks and judging them by universal aesthetic standards.

Emergence of Art Criticism as a Discipline

In the early 20th century, formalist art criticism began to evolve into a distinct discipline as critics like Clive Bell and Roger Fry advocated for a more structured approach. Bell's theory of "significant form," for example, argued that the aesthetic experience of art is based on a work's arrangement of lines, shapes, and colors rather than its subject matter. Fry extended this idea, emphasizing that art's true value lies in its ability to evoke an aesthetic response regardless of content. Formalism thus became the first major theoretical approach in art criticism, setting the stage for more diverse perspectives to develop as modern art continued to challenge traditional boundaries.

Transition to Theoretical Approaches

As modernism flourished, art criticism began to expand beyond purely aesthetic evaluations, incorporating social, psychological, and cultural perspectives. The rise of modern art movements, such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism, challenged formalist standards, revealing new ways that art could express ideas, emotions, and experiences. This shift in art itself called for new frameworks of criticism that could address the broader meanings embedded in these works.

The introduction of theories like psychoanalysis, Marxism, and feminism in the mid-20th century transformed art criticism, allowing critics to interpret art through lenses that consider social issues, psychological states, and political structures. For example:

Psychoanalytic Criticism analyzed art through the unconscious mind, symbolism, and dream imagery, influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud.

Marxist Criticism interpreted art as a reflection of social and economic structures, emphasizing art's role in portraying and critiquing class relations.

Feminist Criticism challenged the male-dominated narratives in art, bringing attention to gender representation and the experiences of women artists.

The development of these theoretical frameworks marks a crucial transition in art criticism from a focus on aesthetic form to a multifaceted discipline that considers both the visual and conceptual layers of art. Today, art criticism encompasses an array of interpretative approaches, allowing for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of art's cultural and intellectual significance.

2. Formalist Criticism: Visual Elements and Aesthetic Value

Formalist criticism is an approach that emphasizes the intrinsic visual qualities of an artwork, focusing on its formal elements—color, line, composition, texture, and shape. Rather than interpreting art through narrative or historical context, formalist critics

analyze the arrangement of visual elements, assessing how they create aesthetic harmony, balance, or tension. This approach became particularly influential with modern and abstract art, where content and representation were secondary to the visual experience.

Core Focus of Formalism

1. Color

In formalist criticism, color is analyzed for its ability to create visual harmony or contrast, evoke emotions, and guide the viewer's gaze. The use of complementary, analogous, or monochromatic color schemes can dramatically alter a work's impact.

2. Line

Line in formalism is examined for its role in defining shapes, directing movement, or creating rhythm within the composition. Thick or thin, straight or curved, lines contribute to the visual energy and structure of the piece.

3. Composition

Composition refers to the overall arrangement of visual elements within the artwork. Formalist critics evaluate balance, symmetry, and spatial relationships, analyzing how these aspects contribute to aesthetic unity.

4. Texture

Texture in art adds depth and interest, whether through actual surface variations or the illusion of texture. Formalist analysis of texture considers how this element engages the viewer's senses and complements other visual qualities.

Key Proponents and Impact

Clement Greenberg, a prominent formalist critic, was instrumental in applying formalism to abstract art, particularly the works of Jackson Pollock and the Color Field painters. Greenberg argued that true art should prioritize "purely visual experience" over narrative or representational content. His critique of kitsch, or mass-produced art, positioned formalism as an elite standard for evaluating art's aesthetic quality. His support for abstract art helped formalism gain traction in the mid-20th century, shaping modern art criticism and encouraging the acceptance of nonrepresentational art in the cultural mainstream.

Other influential formalists, such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, advanced the idea that "significant form" was the essential quality of great art. They believed that aesthetic appreciation could transcend time and culture when based solely on the arrangement of formal elements, independent of narrative or symbolic meaning.

3. Psychoanalytic Criticism: Art and the Subconscious

Psychoanalytic criticism interprets art through the lens of psychology, especially focusing on how subconscious drives, desires, and conflicts shape both the creation and the meaning of artworks. Influenced largely by Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious mind, psychoanalytic criticism examines symbols, dream imagery, and hidden meanings

to uncover deeper psychological layers within art. Freud's concepts of repression, the Oedipus complex, and dream analysis laid the groundwork for understanding art as a manifestation of unconscious thoughts and desires, often revealing the artist's inner conflicts and unresolved emotions.

Freud's Influence on Art Criticism and the Development of Psychoanalytic Theory

Sigmund Freud, a pioneering figure in psychology, introduced the concept of the unconscious as a repository for repressed desires and emotions, many of which are socially unacceptable or deeply personal. According to Freud, these suppressed aspects of the psyche resurface in dreams and fantasies, often symbolically. He proposed that symbols in dreams are clues to the unconscious, a theory that art critics adapted to interpret symbols and imagery in art. Freud's interest in art and creativity led him to analyze artworks and artists through his psychoanalytic lens, viewing creative expression as a way to confront hidden fears, unfulfilled desires, and personal trauma.

Freud's theory of the "pleasure principle" (the drive for immediate gratification) and the "reality principle" (the need to conform to societal expectations) influenced how critics interpret conflicts in art between desire and restraint, freedom and control. In psychoanalytic art criticism, these dynamics are often reflected in the tension between an artwork's explicit and implicit content.

Application of Psychoanalytic Concepts in Art Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism uses various Freudian concepts to explore how psychological drives shape the artmaking process and influence the viewer's response:

1. Symbolism

Psychoanalytic critics analyze symbols within an artwork as expressions of the unconscious mind. Symbols that appear mundane at first glance may carry hidden meanings related to the artist's personal experiences, fears, or desires. For instance:

Surrealist artists, like Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, used bizarre and dreamlike images to evoke subconscious meanings. In Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), melting clocks symbolize the fluidity of time and suggest an altered reality, inviting interpretations that relate to memory, decay, and anxiety over mortality.

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits often feature symbolic representations of pain and emotional struggles, like thorns or bleeding hearts, which can be interpreted through psychoanalytic concepts of trauma and identity.

2. Dream Analysis

Freud's theory of dream analysis suggests that dreams are windows to the unconscious, revealing desires and anxieties that are otherwise suppressed. In art criticism, surrealistic and symbolic artworks are often analyzed as visual dreams, where images are not literal but convey psychological realities.

Max Ernst, a prominent Surrealist, created visual "dreamscapes" that are fragmented and uncanny, using collages and abstract forms to portray the subconscious. His work *Europe After the Rain II* (1940–1942) is an apocalyptic landscape interpreted as a response to the

trauma of war, revealing existential anxieties.

3. The Unconscious

Psychoanalytic criticism views art as a way for artists to access and express their unconscious minds, making visible what is hidden. Artworks become a “stage” where repressed feelings, fears, and conflicts can be enacted symbolically, even when the artist may not be fully aware of these motivations.

Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings have been analyzed as expressions of unconscious impulses, with his energetic, spontaneous technique mirroring the unfiltered release of emotion. His abstract forms are seen as a manifestation of inner turmoil and psychological freedom, echoing Freud’s idea of catharsis.

4. The Oedipus Complex and Family Dynamics

Psychoanalytic art criticism often interprets familial themes in art through Freudian concepts like the Oedipus complex, where artists explore complex relationships with parental figures. Artists may project these unconscious conflicts into their work, sometimes symbolically.

Edvard Munch’s *The Dance of Life* (1899–1900) portrays relationships and sexuality as deeply intertwined with psychological angst. His repeated use of female figures symbolizing innocence, desire, and death is often analyzed in terms of unresolved maternal associations.

Psychoanalytic Criticism’s Impact on Art Interpretation

Psychoanalytic criticism provides a framework for understanding art as a pathway to the unconscious, emphasizing that artworks are more than aesthetic objects; they are psychological narratives that reveal inner complexities. By interpreting symbols, exploring dreamlike imagery, and analyzing psychological undercurrents, psychoanalytic critics offer insights into how art addresses universal human experiences such as fear, desire, and identity. This approach has not only influenced Surrealist art but has also expanded the ways in which contemporary art is interpreted, offering a deep and often personal dimension to understanding creativity.

4. Marxist Criticism: Art as Social and Economic Commentary

Marxist criticism interprets art through the lens of social class, economic conditions, and the ideological structures that shape society. Rooted in the writings of Karl Marx, this approach sees art as a product of its social context, often reflecting the power dynamics, class struggles, and cultural values of its time. Marxist critics analyze how economic and political systems influence artistic production, viewing art as both a reflection of and a response to societal conditions. This perspective often challenges traditional views of art as purely aesthetic, instead framing it as a vehicle for ideology, social critique, and revolutionary potential.

Key Figures: Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School

Walter Benjamin, a prominent Marxist critic, contributed significantly to the field with his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Benjamin

argued that the mass reproduction of art, such as through photography and film, undermines the "aura" of unique works and democratizes art by making it accessible to the working class. He believed that this shift in art production could disrupt the power structures of traditional art institutions and create new avenues for political expression and social change.

The Frankfurt School, including figures such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, further developed Marxist art criticism by exploring how culture and mass media reinforce capitalist ideologies. Adorno, for instance, criticized "culture industry" for standardizing and commodifying art, suggesting that popular culture distracts the masses from social injustices and pacifies them within capitalist systems. The Frankfurt School's analyses have been influential in examining art as a means of cultural reproduction that upholds or resists dominant ideologies.

Marxist Critiques of Art Movements

Marxist critics often analyze entire art movements, exploring how they reflect or challenge the socioeconomic conditions of their times. This approach has led to critical insights about how art movements emerge in response to changing class dynamics, technological advances, or revolutionary ideas.

Analysis of Marxist Approaches in Art Criticism

Marxist critics argue that art movements often arise in response to socioeconomic conditions, as artists either reflect or resist the realities of their time. Realism, for example, emerged in the 19th century as artists began to portray the lives of the working class and the realities of industrial society, challenging idealized depictions of the upper class. In contrast, Abstract Expressionism, which gained popularity in postwar America, has been critiqued by Marxists as depoliticized, promoting individualism over collective struggle and aligning with capitalist values.

Pop Art presents a complex case, often seen as both a celebration and critique of consumerism. Artists like Andy Warhol embraced mass production and popular imagery, which can be interpreted as a satirical take on consumer culture, yet simultaneously aligns with the commodification of art. Conceptual Art, however, explicitly questions the art market by prioritizing ideas over material objects, challenging the capitalist value of "ownership" and the monetary worth of art.

Marxist art criticism highlights art's potential to reveal social inequities, reinforce dominant ideologies, or challenge oppressive systems. By interpreting art through the lens of economic and social structures, Marxist critics contribute to a deeper understanding of how art interacts with society, offering a powerful critique of art's role within capitalist and socialist frameworks. This approach reveals art's potential as a form of resistance or complicity, providing insight into the broader relationship between art, culture, and ideology.

5. Feminist Art Criticism: Gender and Representation

Feminist art criticism emerged in the 1970s as a response to the male dominated art world and has since become a major force in reshaping art criticism. This approach examines how gender influences art creation, interpretation, and institutional recognition,

particularly focusing on the historical exclusion and misrepresentation of women in art. Feminist critics analyze both the representation of women in artworks and the roles of female artists within art history, challenging traditional narratives and advocating for more inclusive perspectives.

Key Themes in Feminist Art Criticism

1. Representation of Women

Feminist critics examine how women have been depicted in art, often as objects of the male gaze rather than as autonomous subjects. This analysis looks at portrayals that reinforce stereotypes of femininity, passivity, or idealized beauty, challenging the ways these depictions serve patriarchal narratives.

2. Gendered Roles and Stereotypes

Feminist critics address how societal expectations around gender roles have shaped the subjects and styles deemed “appropriate” for women artists. Traditionally, women were more often expected to engage in “domestic” or “feminine” art forms, such as portraiture and decorative arts, rather than monumental works or abstract compositions.

3. The Exclusion of Women Artists

Art history has often neglected the contributions of women, with male artists dominating museum collections, art histories, and critical discourse. Feminist criticism advocates for a reevaluation of art history to include overlooked women artists and to recognize their contributions on par with their male counterparts.

Influential Feminist Critics: Linda Nicklin and Griselda Pollock

1. Linda Nicklin

Linda Nicklin’s groundbreaking 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” questioned the systemic barriers that have historically prevented women from achieving recognition in the art world. Nicklin argued that these barriers stemmed not from women’s lack of ability but from social, educational, and institutional restrictions that limited their access to training, commissions, and professional networks. Nicklin’s essay sparked widespread discussion about the structural inequalities that have shaped art history and encouraged feminist critics to reevaluate historical narratives to acknowledge women’s contributions.

2. Griselda Pollock

Griselda Pollock expanded on Nicklin’s work by incorporating psychoanalytic and cultural theory into feminist art criticism. Pollock’s work examines how the male gaze and unconscious biases influence the representation of women in art, often positioning them as passive subjects rather than active creators. Pollock advocates for a feminist rereading of art history that considers the ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to shape the experiences of female artists. Her analysis emphasizes the role of cultural context in art creation, arguing for a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of art history.

Feminist Critique of Gender and Representation in Art

Feminist art criticism has led to a reevaluation of both historical and contemporary artworks, challenging traditional assumptions about gender roles and encouraging greater recognition of women artists. Feminist critics examine a wide range of themes, from the portrayal of women as muses or objects to the ways in which female artists have subverted these portrayals. They also consider how artistic genres and media have been gendered, questioning why certain styles or subjects have historically been associated with femininity or masculinity.

This approach has transformed art criticism by highlighting the social and political dimensions of art, arguing that the art world, like other social institutions, reflects broader power dynamics. Feminist criticism advocates for a more balanced perspective that acknowledges how gender affects artistic production and reception, ultimately working toward a more inclusive art history that recognizes the diversity of artistic contributions across gender and cultural lines.

6. Postmodern Criticism: Deconstruction and Cultural Relativism

Postmodern art criticism emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, challenging the objectivity and universality that earlier art movements and critiques often upheld. Rooted in skepticism toward absolute interpretations and grand narratives, postmodern criticism emphasizes multiple perspectives, cultural relativism, and the idea that meaning is unstable and subjective. This approach rejects traditional hierarchies, embracing ambiguity, irony, and fragmentation in both art and interpretation. Postmodern critics argue that the viewer's perspective is as valuable as the artist's intention, and that art's meaning is fluid, contingent on individual and cultural context.

Key Concepts in Postmodern Criticism

1. Deconstruction

Deconstruction, developed by philosopher Jacques Derrida, is a method of analyzing texts (including artworks) to reveal multiple meanings and contradictions within them. In art criticism, deconstruction focuses on breaking down established interpretations, exposing how language, symbols, and context shape what we understand art to signify. Deconstruction highlights the instability of meaning, encouraging viewers to question surface appearances and consider the underlying assumptions embedded in artworks.

2. Cultural Relativism

Postmodern criticism advocates for cultural relativism, recognizing that interpretations of art are deeply influenced by the viewer's cultural background and societal norms. Unlike modernist views that sought universal aesthetic standards, postmodernism embraces diversity in interpretation, valuing different cultural perspectives equally. This approach opens up art criticism to voices and experiences that may have been marginalized in traditional art discourse, fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of art.

3. Irony and Fragmentation

Irony and fragmentation are key features in postmodern art, which often uses self-referential humor and juxtaposes seemingly unrelated elements to critique established narratives. By embracing irony and fragmenting conventional narratives, postmodern

artists and critics disrupt traditional expectations, inviting viewers to question norms and engage with multiple, often contradictory interpretations.

Key Figures: Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault

1. Roland Barthes and the “Death of the Author”

In his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes argued that the creator’s intention should not be the definitive source of meaning in a work of art or literature. Instead, Barthes believed that meaning is constructed by the viewer or reader, who brings their own experiences, emotions, and interpretations to the artwork. This idea resonates strongly with postmodernism, which values subjective interpretation and questions the authority of the artist’s voice over the viewer’s experience. Barthes’ theory influenced postmodern critics to focus on how art functions in the viewer’s mind rather than on the artist’s original intent.

2. Michel Foucault and the Role of Power in Interpretation

Michel Foucault’s theories on power and knowledge also shaped postmodern criticism, especially in the way art is interpreted and contextualized. Foucault argued that interpretation is influenced by systems of power that shape how knowledge is produced and understood. In art criticism, this perspective encourages critics to examine how institutions—such as museums, academic art history, and media—shape public understanding of art, often reinforcing dominant ideologies. Foucault’s ideas support a critical approach that questions who has the authority to interpret and define art, highlighting the power dynamics that underlie artistic value and meaning.

Postmodern Criticism’s Approach to Interpretation

Postmodern criticism destabilizes traditional interpretations, often prioritizing subjective and culturally relative perspectives. By rejecting universal truths and embracing multiple narratives, postmodern critics create a flexible and open-ended framework for analyzing art. This approach has led to greater emphasis on:

Multiplicity of Meanings: Recognizing that artworks can hold different meanings depending on the viewer’s personal and cultural context.

Self-referential: Analyzing artworks that critique or reference the artmaking process or the art world itself, questioning authenticity and originality.

Intertextuality: Examining how artworks reference other artworks, texts, or cultural symbols, encouraging layered interpretations and dialogues between works.

Critique of Authority: Questioning the roles of the artist, the critic, and cultural institutions in defining art, and promoting a more democratic approach to interpretation.

Dr. Ersin Irk is a researcher specializing in public administration, welfare governance, and institutional transformation in developing economies. His scholarly work examines how leadership agency and institutional entrepreneurship can reshape subsidy-dependent welfare systems into legally autonomous, rule-based governance authorities. By combining longitudinal case study methodology with empirical performance data, Dr. Irk

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Summary:

This article provides an in-depth examination of the theories and approaches that shape modern art criticism, emphasizing the field's shift from aesthetic evaluations to theoretical analyses. Each critical approach, from formalism and psychoanalysis to postmodernism and ecocriticism, offers unique perspectives that deepen our understanding of art's social, psychological, and cultural roles. Through tables, charts, and comparative analyses, the study highlights how these diverse methodologies contribute to a multifaceted interpretation of art, revealing art criticism as an evolving discipline that reflects broader intellectual and societal shifts.

This comprehensive overview illustrates how each approach informs and enriches art criticism, offering insights into the dynamic ways that critics engage with and interpret art. The findings underscore art criticism's capacity to illuminate art's complex relationship with identity, politics, and culture, positioning the field as essential to understanding modern and contemporary art in a global context.

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