

The Critique and the Not-All of the Artwork

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1. Why did film criticism disappear in Italy? Why have the great journals and magazines that represented the most important critical traditions ceased to be published? And why it did not happen in France, where the “Cahiers du cinéma” and “Positif” still pursue their mission with determination?

Discourses on cinema have been certainly put forward in recent years. But the critical one is not a generic discourse among others. It is not a mere review, which is indeed “a practice that in general has nothing in common with the art of criticism” (James 1986, p. 232). Criticism is not even a “comment”, since it has to do with the truth of the artwork: “Criticism”, as Benjamin says, “seeks out the truth content of a work of art” (Benjamin 1991–1999, p. 297). **The evanescence of criticism in Italy ultimately contributed to the loss of the veritative outcome of the artwork.** And the truth of the artwork is *something that exceeds the sensitive form by including it* (using Benjamin’s alchemical metaphor, it is like the flame emanating from the stake). This excess has been eluded in a twofold way: 1) by reducing the artwork to the cultural value of the text; 2) by a subsequent dismiss of the text for the benefit of generic and totalizing notions (visual, medium)

used as mere exchange operators.

In the case of the culturalization of the texts, their singularity has been lost to their generality, i.e. to the possibility of identifying areas of exemplary meaning in order to understand the dynamics and values of social life (from which the importance given to popular films).

In the case of the absorption of the artworks into theoretical categories characterized by a totalizing extensibility instead, the artwork has become the irrelevant effect of discursive plans that could very well disregard it. It is no coincidence that one of the most important contemporary reflections on the media, that of Richard Grusin (2015, pp. 124-148), has come to affirm the radically mediated nature of our experience (beyond any technical mediation).

These two perspectives have taken the generic, and therefore also pervasive, name of *Cultural Studies* and *Media Studies* respectively.

2. But also the so-called criticism, i.e. discourses on cinema host in non- and specialized press, have often been radically subaltern or superfluous (from the mere reuse of press releases to full-page interviews) compared to the authentically "daring" critical discourse.

Such elusion has often been explained as the natural effect of the transformation of objects, forms of vision and spectatorship, that would now overlook any critical mediation. This is absolutely false. Elsewhere, for example in France, both the endurance of the presence of spectators in film theatres and the centrality of film criticism – in the face of changed conditions of use and production of the artworks – confirm that such elusion has different origins.

Let us try to identify some of them. The first origin can be found in a theoretical Italian tradition that, in the course of the 20th century, mostly placed the truth on the part of the theoretical, even ideological, discourse and not on the part of the artworks (it would be enough to think of Benedetto Croce's perspective) (De Gaetano 2017, pp. 17-33). Disregarding artworks has meant building autonomous and (illusory) self-sufficient theoretical plans. This has also happened when the artwork has been instrumentally used from the 'outside' to support a thesis. It is exactly the opposite of what (great) criticism should do: throwing the artwork into its 'outside', making it lose off at open sea.

The second origin is the price paid to Neoliberal ideology – whose effects have also been felt in the field of film studies – according to which, in order to be up to date, it was

necessary to gain access to territories, concepts and *exchange* practices rather than practices of *use*. What really counted were the cornerstones of a potential exchange (of everything with everything), where the use of elusive and totalizing categories (for example that of the visual) overtook the aesthetic features of a singular artwork whose use is still a form of resistance to the exchange.

This second reason for the fading of critique has grafted on the first – being ‘skeptical’ on the power of the singular artwork –, and transformed the modification of the productive and fruiting modes of the film into the alibi to make a comfortable assumption: films are not useful as artworks, at most they are objects of a theoretical plan that can perfectly live without them.

3. The key words that led to the formation of new discursive fields were all aimed at creating a *fluid, totalizing and opaque area* in which everything could be confused and exchanged: *visuality, media, performance* – each thought in all their endless declinations. Such key words also led the way of academic education, in the belief that, through them, much could be captured and incorporated. Not to mention what got lost: the possibility to give a *veritative strength to the discourse*.

Providing the discourse with a veritative strength can only happen if one takes on the singularity of artworks. That does not mean placing oneself in a hyperboreal area that isolates the artwork, or perhaps a fragment of it, and intends it as the expression of the author’s ideals. On the contrary, **what is specific to criticism is *reflection*, whose character is neither subjective nor ideal**: “Reflection is not, as judgment is, a subjectively reflecting process; rather, it lies enclosed in the presentational form of the artwork and unfolds itself in criticism, in order finally to reach fulfilment in the lawful continuum of form” (Benjamin 1991-1999, p. 165)

This passage should be made clear: *criticism is the place where the artwork is exposed to its truth – that is, to an idea – before it is accomplished and implemented in the continuum of the forms*. Or even better: **by “dissolving” the artwork itself, criticism is the only form of knowledge that ensures the transition from** the singularity of the artwork to the continuity of forms. Contrary to what people think, criticism does not respect the integrity of the artwork, because it must necessarily dissolve it in order to free the universality of the idea on one side and to infer a familiarity between artworks on the other (through “schematizations” like genres). Critical reflection (neither judgment nor commentary), by rapping with the singularity of the artwork, “dissolves” its singularity into the universality of the idea. Without criticism, the artwork would be somewhat speechless, it would not have the ability to become an idea, to universalize itself, or to relate with other artworks.

Avoiding criticism means renouncing both to the truth of the artwork and to the tradition of the forms. And therefore it also means winding up time, intended both as a tradition and as a form of resistance to mere operability.

Eliminating criticism, the artwork and its historicity, would mean working for the benefit of either devices, visual streams, media environments, performance, or of journalistic discursivity, which avoids any form of reflexion.

Who supports such idea believes that, in such way, one would finally deal with reality, without any debt to pay for the ideality of art and without any constraint with tradition. Everything would be finally entrusted with theoretical perspectives “at the height of our times”, which would remove misleading hierarchies or old ideals and ultimately replace them with the valorisation of what is ‘popular’ (that most likely avoids critical mediation), and with a medial technicality capable of overcoming the plan of representation.

Often using a simplistic reading of Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, an opposing polarity between an idealistic subjectivism based on the aura of the artwork and the totalization of the exchange value of the technologically mediated object, which is independent of artworks and authors, has been set up.

4. In such polarity, the real problem is completely missed: **thinking of the role of criticism, of the artwork and its historicity in the light of cinema and technically produced images.** Benjamin called “dialectical” those images that, because of their own genesis, set up a non-linear historicity between the *present* of the perceived image and the *past* of the captured object.

In this sense, more than other forms of expression, images have an immediate index of historicity:

The historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time, it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior (Benjamin 1999, pp. 462-463).

“Unread” images lose their veritative outcome. More than other forms of expression, images make the need for criticism explicit. And more than other arts – certainly more than literature –, cinema requires critical reflection, which should act as a model.

Instead, the opposite is true: “The relationship between literary [*Buchkritik*] and film criticism [*Filmkritik*] is the reverse of what it should be. The first should learn from the second. On the contrary, it is mostly film criticism to imitate the literary one” (Benjamin 1991, p. 166).

Literary criticism has had a more continuous life because of its philological basis; because it has written “commentaries”. But criticism that aims at the truth of the artwork, at the way in which the *idea* emerges from the sensible, is different from a commentary. Because of the objects it deals with, film criticism has, or should have, a priority in grasping the trait of this truth, suspending it from any subjective determination, both from that of judgment and of the author, while identifying the immediate historical features of the image. Such historicity is well distant from the continuous linearity of historicism which philology refers to; it is a ‘dialectical’ historicity, where the ‘now’ and ‘then’ are held together.

In many cases instead, film criticism has used categories or approaches taken from literature, starting from the notion of authoriality conceived as the origin of the artwork, as a category that holds together chronological linearity and aesthetic unit. The author is either the *proper name* of a world or becomes a mere artifice that serves to bring the conditions for the appearance of artworks to be united.

5. A lazy criticism on the one hand, a tradition of studies willing to seize the truth more from the point of view of the category than from that of the artwork on the other. Let us not forget the question of *methods* of criticism, which dominated the discussion in the semiological period, avoiding the relationship of criticism with the singularity of the artwork – and ultimately a strong, albeit often implied, adherence to the principles and words of Neoliberalism through the establishment of theoretical areas of total exchange –, have led to the situation in which we find ourselves now: **a great proliferation of discourses on cinema that excludes the film and have no veritative strength.**

But even more: being one of the guiding principles of Neoliberal thought the regulation of the natural and cosmic order ([De Carolis 2017](#)), through the indulging of such order (the “spontaneity” of the market), the great categories that marked the thought of cinema and images in these years have literally paid off to join such natural “totality”. Just think of the notion that sums them all up, ‘media environment’, which attests the ‘natural’ making of technological devices that extensively cover the empirical totality of the ‘cosmic order’ where the singularity of the artwork is cancelled. The totality of the world is the set of technologically and media-like environments where everything is lost.

The artwork is instead the *not-all* par excellence, something that only criticism can make a *all* through the universality of the *idea* that make this “partiality” emerge from the sensible.

But the problem is serious, because it is a cultural and political fact that films are no longer interpreted, and that criticism occupies a residual place in today’s debate. Avoiding to intend criticism as a discourse capable of giving truth to the artwork, of dissolving its singularity in the universal character of the idea – and of relating it to other artworks through a *scheme of forms* –, means missing to recognize important films which not only remain ‘speechless’ (without criticism no innovative artwork speaks for itself) but also unseen. Think of how two recent important Italian films such as Frammartino’s *Le quattro volte* (2010) or Marcello’s *Bella e perduta* (2015) have had an almost clandestine passage in Italy and have been completely ignored (with a few exceptions) by critics in the face of a great international success (especially in France, where we can find the only great film critic tradition, started by André Bazin with the *Cahiers du cinéma* and continued by Serge Daney with *Trafic*).

If on the one hand criticism is a great example of theory (*What is cinema?* is the most important book of critique of the 20th century, but also an extraordinary book of theory) on the other, by dealing with singular artworks, it is also an important factor to ensure their visibility and cultural presence. Thinking of Bazin, we would never know what Neorealism was without the thought of the French critic. Without criticism, theory becomes abstract and artworks are silent. **Without criticism the entire film culture, starting with its tradition, vanishes**, leaving on the ground a proliferation of discourses unable to make a mark, to express some truth about artworks and the world.

6. But the time of “cosmic categories” is over, because the key words of the infinite possibilities emerged from the totalization of technical and symbolic devices are vanishing. They turned out to be ineffective. *Through criticism, it is time to go back to the not-all of the artwork*. Such movement should not be understood as a return to a backward position, marked by either idealistic subjectivism, authorial instances or the sacredness of the artwork.

It is exactly the opposite. Criticism is the art capable of dissolving the empirical unity of the artwork, and hence its uniqueness, by both extracting the universality of the idea (on both the world and art) and by identifying its “familiarity” with other artworks, thus contributing to the definition of a tradition (neither continuous nor homogeneous).

What counts for criticism are the effects of the artwork, not its causes. And these effects have to be grasped in order to be made *real*. Returning to the artwork and to

criticism means therefore re-affirming the *truth of the effects*, those which dissolve the determinism of the artwork in the truth that criticism is able to extract (even with violence). Criticism has indeed always a *destroying* character (that has nothing to do with the negative judgment of the artwork), which does not preserve, does not safeguard, does not protect what it is dealing with. It pushes it offshore, bringing it under the power of the idea to constitute a constellation with other artworks. Without the agonistic trait of criticism, speech becomes vacant, a merely reviewing or renunciatory act.

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