

HISTORY AS A CRITICAL TOOL:  
Is it or isn't it?

Ida-Rose Hall      Hum. 101

A

## HISTORY AS A CRITICAL TOOL: IS IT OR ISN'T IT?

The discussion of "History as a Critical Tool: Is it or isn't it?" was the culmination of several days lectures. The panelists were Monroe C. Beardsley, Sir Ernst Gombrich, Karsten Harries, Rene Wellek, E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

Each participant was given a limited amount of time to state his views of the topic, and then the time was thrown open to general discussion of the theme.

I could not (with my limited background of knowledge) come to a clear conclusion of each of the participant's point of view. I will attempt to jot down some of the ideas gleaned from my notes. These may be out of context and may not clearly define the authority's real view point.

Monroe C. Beardsley:

He indicated that there were two ways to judge, say, a piece of art.

- 1) Judgment of Aesthetic "goodness". In judging the work of art in this aspect there are limitations to the relevancy of Art History.
- 2) another way to judge a piece of art is the critical process or the description of art work by expressive qualities. There are three phases of this approach.
  - 1) Expression involves matching. Matching or comparing one work of art with another.
  - 2) Matching involves selection between envisioned aspects of the work of art. (Why is this work "better" or "less good" than that one?)
  - 3). You cannot judge what range of objects to match without appropriate art historical knowledge.

Karsten Harries:

He talked about the relevance of History to Philosophy. There is a new urgency in Philosophy, namely: "Where is man's place." This is central to philosophy. (My note: After all, it is MAN that is doing the philosophizing.) *me*

The death of philosophy has come in the idea that Philosophy must serve science as it once served religion. Philosophy has lost its Socratic function and has tried to become a "super Science". Its death has also come from those who want to subordinate philosophy to science.

History helps us to find out where we have come from and where we have got to go. We should take History more seriously. We will find alternatives in the past which relate to alternatives which are desperately needed now.

Historical function is tied to critical function. At the same time, we cannot sacrifice the future to the past. Historical function sets limits to kinds of answers of "What is man's place." We cannot determine the future by the history of the past. Philosophy must be illuminated by a sense of right and wrong. There is a poetic function of philosophy. (Which is nullified if you try to define philosophy in terms of "scientific methodology?")

Sir Ernst Gombrich:

History is arbitrarily selective. History is a record of events. The substance of History is analysis. Much modern art is so "novel" that it has no connection to history and hence cannot be compared to other art. (In this modern art or abstract art must have thrown the critics for a loop.) Much art can be understood much better if its relation to history is understood. For Instance, in the Notre Dame cathedral is a plaque which explains its history in relation to the various stages of its building. When viewed in a context of its historical development one would get a much different view

than if the historical background of the building were not known.

Rene Welleck:

One cannot escape History in understanding literature. Even the meanings of words have historical implications. He used the examples of "knights" and "ladies". The words themselves belong to a definite historical period. A literary work is incomprehensible unless the history of a work is understood. History elucidates, explains. A human too often says "I don't know." (and I don't care). He doesn't judge--doesn't know right from wrong. He told of his own experience in reading as a youth Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth". Later when he found out that it was just an imitation of another work, and this changed his point of view. (This comment led to some interesting comments later in the evening.) The danger of literary History is that it can cloud clarity--we can let the esthetics be buried in the facts. In art our relation to a good work can be smothered by our knowledge of History. (Ignorance is bliss?)

All art works which involve words can be subjected to criticism. After all, "words are not made by God, but by man, and they can therefore be criticized."

If we view everything from a historical point of view it leads to skepticism and indifference. However, a critic CAN'T say "I don't know--I can't say why--he has to make choices. He is in the constant act of making choices. He is ignorant if cut off from the past. (How has he been affected by abstract or modern art?)

E.D. Kirsch, Jr:

How much attention should be paid to History in the criticism of art? Some say none, some say most. He discussed Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn." and said that there are many volumes of interpretations on the last two lines of the poem. There are at least four distinct and quite disparate views on those lines. All four can be valid historically. He wonders what would happen if a new letter was found in which Keats himself explains what he meant in those last two lines.

From a purely esthetic view all four must therefore be wrong. Keats himself has established the meaning. But in reality, by the very nature of art history and criticism, all four continue to be valid. After all the duty of a critic is to remake meaning anyway.

The Discussion period:

All of them agreed that History was valid and useful as a critical tool.

They discussed the use of "novelty" in a work of art. They said that the use of an "ostrich" egg to symbolize the forgetting of his father by man in his mortal existence" was purely historic and would not be appreciated or understood unless a person was acquainted with the "history" behind the novelty. It would certainly distract from your appreciation of the work of art.

At one point, Dr. Beardsley drew attention to the painting of the crickets, and of the covered wagon on the walls of the room. His point of view was that you did not need to have "history" to recognize the wagon, or the mountains. This led to a lively discussion and much interest from the audience. One of said you had to know history to recognize the wagon in the first place, that those wagons weren't exactly being seen on the streets today. Another pointed out that the pictures were more appreciated if one knew the historical significance behind the painting.

They decided that if a letter from Keats were found today, it would not

change anything, because whether the author meant one thing or another did not change the fact that the critic and the reader could then criticize the AUTHOR'S point of view.

They questioned whether finding that "the Good Earth" was but a feeble imitation, clothed in a different country, language, customs, and costume, should lead to a conclusion that the work was "less" good.

My own comment on the above idea is that "nothing" is truly original. Especially in literature where the author has to deal with human relationships, attitudes, and emotions. Men do not differ that much from nation to nation, or age to age. This is distinctly shown in ecclesiastical history. Man today essentially has the same feelings, passions, and problems that Adam and Eve had--and History and its knowledge does not seem to have prevented each generation from insisting on "finding things out for themselves."

I wondered about the validity of Historical criticism in relation to Modern or Abstract art. I suppose one can criticize it from aspects of form, style and color--but some of this is pretty vague in some forms of abstract art. I have always felt that unless even an abstract piece of art did not reflect artistic Ability, or talent, or something, it did not qualify to be called "art". (purely from a layman (ignorant layman's) point of view.) But once a piece of art has been accepted or "critiqued" and entered the annals of art, and therefore "history" there then accumulates a "History" on which to judge future works of art in this field.

In general, I believe that they all agreed that History IS valid as a critical tool. They pointed out some of the limitations involved, and some of the dangers. It was a very interesting Panel discussion.

Ida-Rose L Hall  
Humanities 101  
Dr. Jon Green