

The Judge is Not an Operator: historiography, criticality, and architectural criticism

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'Criticism is always an affront, and its only justification lies in its usefulness, in making its object available to just response.'

Stanley Cavell¹

We are now emerging from a hyper-theorised, hyper-critical period in architecture. Whether you call it deconstruction, postmodernism, or some other thing, it was a period when architectural discourse and academe spun off on a self-referential tangent that often seemed to bear little relation to architectural practice. This was a moment dominated by North American academics and schools of thought, and Diane Ghirardo has described the period between 1970 and 2000 as 'three decades of theoretical delirium in which poeticising reflection passed for theory... thirty years of trying on and discarding borrowed theories with all the rapidity of a commodified consumer at an outlet sale.'² Within all this, it seems fair to say that the influence of Peter Eisenman was ever-present. For him, architecture was (and indeed continues to be) inextricably tied to philosophy via deconstruction, and inextricably tied to criticism through the concepts of autonomy and resistance. He argues that there is a 'possible inherent criticality that is unique to architecture,' where 'criticality can be understood as the striving or the will to perform or manifest architecture's autonomy.'³ The stake of this, for Eisenman, is nothing less than the 'survival of the discipline' of architecture per se.⁴ Such criticism embodies a resistance to or a negation of commodity culture, and is thus the late inheritor of a Marxist-inflected, Frankfurt-school cultural critique. During the height of this period, the prefix 'critical' took on a talismanic character; employed as a kind of charm, it was used to both pre-empt and ward off a whole range of (sometimes contradictory) accusations: of commodification, of irrelevance, of empty formal experimentation, of the submission to spectacle and fashion, and so on. But if this once-dominant position can be described as 'criticality' (or 'critical architecture', these terms will be used interchangeably throughout this essay), it has been explicitly challenged, in recent years, by the new guard of the 'post-critical'. Now that the tide of high theory has passed, and criticality has been left dessicated, high on the salty shores of architectural discourse, it is the post-critical that has come scuttling forth to scavenge, and to take its place.

¹ Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', *Philosophical Review* 71, 1962, pp. 67-93; quoted by William H. Hayes, 'Architectural Criticism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol 60, no 4, Fall 2002, p. 325.

² Diane Y. Ghirardo, 'Manfredo Tafuri and Architectural Theory in the U.S., 1970-2000', *Perspecta* 33, *Mining Autonomy*, 2002, p. 45.

³ Peter Eisenman, 'Autonomy and the Will to the Critical,' *Assemblage*, April 2000, issue 41, p. 90

⁴ 'The discipline is critical within its own project when it detaches itself from other projects rather than from difference in itself. Here, the critical becomes generative as opposed to being reactive or resistant. It becomes part of a dynamic internal condition, continually opening architecture's discourse.' Eisenman, 'Autonomy and the Will to the Critical,' p. 90

In the present furore that surrounds this new, post-critical condition, it is possible to observe several important confusions about what the 'post-critical' might actually be, and what it might mean. It is at once a generational wrangle amongst American architecture academics, a trans-Atlantic misunderstanding as to the nature of political activity in architecture, and (arguably) it apes the current 'post-theory' debate in the wider world of cultural theory. Some of these confusions can be cut through by asking a relatively simple question, which will form the linking thread in this essay: if architecture has become post-critical, what becomes of architectural criticism? More specifically, what is the changed relation between historiography, current architectural practice, and written architectural criticism within this new condition?

Criticality, post-criticality, and architectural criticism

In this paper we will argue that one of the problems of critical architecture was that it tended to hollow out written criticism. The excitement in architectural discourse over the last decades has been a dance between 'theory' and design, where history has provided the band. Design has asserted the theoretical content and utility of practice, while partnered with arabesques of theoretical writing. In the meantime written criticism has come to look rather dowdy. Not only does criticism have the age-old perceptions of bias and timidity, but new problems have also emerged in the era of criticality. If critical architecture in theory and practice claims to move directly from analysis to creation, then the actual protocols of written criticism, those of appraisal and judgement, seem not only outdated but an actual impediment to 'criticality'. Against such views we argue that criticism is the place where a concrete, disciplinary conception of architecture, such as that held by most practicing architects, meets with the historical-aesthetic conception of the specialist critic. Criticism is the interface between a whole series of oppositions – between architectural culture and architectural practice, the academy and the industry, the discipline and the operation of architecture, the history of past practice, its inflection in the present, and its projection into the future. We are not proposing that criticism is the foundation of critical thinking in architecture: theory, history, architectural design and critical writing are all kinds of practice that have the potential to account for and act on the relations of architecture, thought and the actuality of the world. But perhaps it is timely to think that writers of criticism are not short-sighted historians, and nor does the necessary externality of criticism deny the critical potential imminent in architectural works. The judgement of the critic is not the problem, nor is it final in the sense of a final authority. The making of a judgement is crucial in opening architectural criticism to an operative role in architectural practice. Further to this, we argue that the activity of aesthetic judgement is itself historiographic – the critic as judge has recourse to a whole body of law and precedent in the form of the architectural canon, which itself is made up of a consensus of past critical judgement.⁵ This must be judgement without operation in and of itself – it is an activity that prepares or readies criticism to be taken up by architects. Criticism is thus made available or opened for operation, but the judge is not an operator.

Before returning to the trajectory of this rather polemical argument, it will be useful here to make a discussion of the relative positions in the critical/post-critical stand-off. An excellent summary of the debate so far has been made by George Baird in his essay "'Criticality" and Its Discontents', where he identifies the principal texts and protagonists of this new position, all of whom, not incidentally, are based in North American ivy-league universities.⁶ Baird singles out Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting's essay 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism' in particular, as a key text in the larger ideological shift.⁷ Somol and Whiting argue that for the past twenty years in architecture, 'disciplinarity has been absorbed and exhausted by the project of criticality.' They set out thus 'to provide an alternative to the now dominant paradigm of criticality, an alternative that [they characterise] as projective.'⁸

⁵ The strong parallels between legal judgment and architectural criticism have been pointed out by Peter Collins. Collins, Peter. 1971. *Architectural Judgement*. London: Faber.

⁶ George Baird, "'Criticality" and Its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2004, vol. 21, pp. 16-21.

⁷ Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta* 33, *Mining Autonomy*, 2002, pp. 72-77.

⁸ Somol and Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect', p. 73.

A little earlier, in the last issue of *Assemblage* in 2000, the generation gap among the Americans had already become wonderfully clear, when Eisenman defended and restated the position of the journal through the idea that criticism directed at the autonomous state of architecture could and should be generative.⁹ Against this, Somol wrote that ‘criticism isn’t necessary’, that it had become something of an industry, and that it was no longer ‘fun’. Somol then went on, with Whiting, to develop the concept of ‘projective’ practice, which would look forward without the dead weight of the critical. This projective architectural practice would be instrumental, pragmatic, performative, contingent, and focused upon ‘the effects and exchanges of architecture’s inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics, etc’.¹⁰ It would be ‘linked to the diagrammatic, the atmospheric and cool performance’ in contrast to criticality’s link with ‘the indexical, the dialectical and hot representation’.¹¹ Naturally the position drew fire, such as the following response from Cynthia Davidson:

In my reading at least, the idea of the postcritical and the idea of the projective practice as currently elaborated by Somol, Whiting, [and others] abandon, rather frivolously, the hard-fought achievements in the field that I most cherish and have worked hard to advance: criticality, theoretical depth, and resistance to the banalities of consumer culture.¹²

The sore point in all this seems to be politics, and the question of whether architecture has a political role, or indeed any political power or agency at all. The ‘critical’ position assumes what Whiting and Somol call an index of the political, through which architectural form can represent political circumstances such as Davidson’s ‘consumer culture’ and act upon it in architecture, as a model for actual action in the world. The post-critics are right to debunk such magical politics, but then they too are unwilling to give up the authority of political action through architecture. Their aim is not to abandon criticism as such, but rather the way that it has been (literally) formalised and formulated in the critical architecture project. According to Jeffery Kipnis we should now follow Somol and Whiting to a Deleuzian politics of ‘sensations rather than negations’.

Kipnis has written an important essay in the debate, which sets out some of the complexity of the two opposed positions. But his quite subtle and nuanced account of the issues is outweighed by the power of this essay’s ironically reductive title: “Is Resistance Futile?” In many ways this is indeed the burning question – if critical architecture was ultimately unsuccessful in ‘resisting’ the predations of consumer culture, is it important that it tried anyway? Or should current architecture take a lesson from this failure, and give up on resistance as a waste of time and effort?¹³ The issue here is clearly not whether the specific formalist ‘critical architecture’ of Eisenman and others has been set aside, but whether the whole project of criticism and resistance has been given up as too hard, and not fun or interesting enough any more. It is not difficult to show that our account here is an unfair representation of the post-critics, but in doing so the doctrines and politics of left-wing American intellectuals have also to be considered; in doing so, in turn, the transatlantic divide only deepens. American and European academia has read the same source texts

⁹ Eisenman, ‘Autonomy and the Will to the Critical,’ pp. 90-92.

¹⁰ Somol and Whiting, ‘Notes Around the Doppler Effect’, p. 75.

¹¹ Somol and Whiting, ‘Notes Around the Doppler Effect’, p. 74.

¹² Cynthia Davidson, Foreword, *Log*, vol. 5, Spring/Summer 2005, *Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City*, p. 2.

¹³ This was the tenor of some of the discussion at the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference, held at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, in late 2004. While the conference was not set up as a response to the criticality debate, and did not explicitly address it, some of the discussion that took place there is relevant here. To caricature, it appeared that the Americans had cheerfully decided resistance was indeed futile, conceding defeat and dropping the critical project with a breezy abandon that left the startled Europeans in dismay. ‘Critical Architecture’ was held at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, from 26-27 November 2004. It was the second international conference on architectural research to be organised by Dr Jane Rendell and Dr Jonathan Hill of the Bartlett School, in association with Dr Mark Dorrian and Professor Murray Fraser representing AHRA (the Architecture Humanities Research Association). See <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/architecture/events/conferences/critical.htm>

(though not necessarily in the same languages) and drawn vastly and bizarrely different conclusions from them. In particular, the American interpretation of Marxism and post-structuralism must be considered at least imaginative, and at most a wild misinterpretation. In this context, does abandoning 'resistance' mean rejecting all political understanding of architecture? Or does it only mean discarding the already idiosyncratic and peculiar versions of continental philosophy that have been perpetuated in American academia – like Frederic Jameson's version of Manfredo Tafuri's philosophy, or Eisenman's version of Theodor Adorno, or the widespread invocation of Jacques Derrida?¹⁴ It may well be wrong to think of American post-criticality in the way we fear the creeping and insidious 'soft-power' of American popular culture, but accepting this means also realising how few concepts of architectural theory actually work across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

Theory After Theory

The post-critical itself involves an historical judgement: that the age of high theory in architecture is over, and that anyway it was circular, abyssal, trapped in its own overblown self-reflection, obfuscatory, overly abstract, gratuitously 'difficult', and ultimately unproductive and unrelated to actual architectural practice. This is a compelling argument, but this is also where the third source of confusion lies. An apprehension of the stifling effects of theory is not restricted to architecture alone. Pretty much the same things are currently being said in literary and cultural studies, in history, in science studies... In fact the hottest theory of the moment is 'post-theory': Ian Hackings's *The Social Construction of What?* Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, Payne and Schad's collection *life.after.theory* and volume 30 of *Critical Inquiry* are just a few examples of what is becoming a whole new genre of theoretical writing. Naturally one should be sceptical of the post-critical in architecture in the light of such intellectual fashions, but what if there is a degree of truth here? What if we really have reached a 'tipping point', to use the currently fashionable term? The issue then would not be the truth or effectivity of 'theory' as such, but what actually happened to it in the long frame of the development of concepts and the shorter frame of their institutional uptake. There is much to agree with in Bruno Latour's recent broad analysis, which lends weight to the post-critical position in architecture; in his brilliant essay "Why has Critique run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", Latour draws a connection between the rampant proliferation of deconstructive critique, and its mutation into populist conspiracy theory. He writes that

[W]hile the Enlightenment profited largely from the disposition of a very powerful descriptive tool, that of matters of fact, which were excellent for *debunking* quite a lot of beliefs, powers, and illusions, it found itself totally disarmed once matters of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus. After that, the lights of the Enlightenment were slowly turned off, and some sort of darkness appears to have fallen on campuses.¹⁵

In Latour's conception, the critical apparatus is now so widespread, and so deftly wielded, that it can be effectively turned against any object in the world, including itself, in a way that is very difficult to refute or refuse. This constant undermining and installing of doubt, this revelation of false idols, only ever leads to their simple replacement with others equally false.¹⁶ This substitution is a sleight of hand. It is very often an

¹⁴ In the essay "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy", Derrida makes clear his attempt to maintain faith with enlightenment, and that he is not a relativist. His relation is then not unlike Adorno's. See Jacques Derrida, 1982. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy". *Semeia: an Experimental Journal of Biblical Criticism* (23):pp61- 97; also published as Fenves, Peter D., Immanuel Kant, and Jacques Derrida. 1993. *Raising the tone of philosophy: late essays by Immanuel Kant, transformative critique by Jacques Derrida*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Enquiry*, vol 30, Winter 2004, p. 232.

¹⁶ Furthermore, Latour argues that criticism has undermined even real and actual facts to the extent that there are no longer any solid points of reference in the world at all. '[T]he danger [is no longer coming] from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact – as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the

alibi for the simple switching of one mythology with another, in which the real and urgent matters, about which we should all be critical, are lost or passed over. A significant aspect of critical architecture was that was post-humanist, in the sense that buildings were not measured against an ideal of human satisfaction but rather against history. Critical buildings were intended as historiographic devices, reading machines that actively demonstrated their own historicity. Buildings that are ‘critical’ supposedly put you in concrete rather than idealised relation to history, give you a method and approach to the past. A critical building will not only be understood, but felt, and this disjunction of affect and intellect will open the historicity of the present more powerfully than a book, or so the story goes. In fact, to follow Latour’s terms, the debunking of essentialist notions of the human experience of architecture merely becomes the sleight of hand in which ‘criticality’ takes its place as the privileged outside of history, becomes a value rather than an action. This is also a matter of comportment; we have learnt very effectively to unpick, but we have been less successful in learning how to stitch. This is also Somol and Whiting’s position, more specifically in relation to architecture: that the critical comportment induces a kind of paralysis, where the counter-arguments and reasons for *not* doing something are always so strong and evident that they mitigate against anyone ever taking any action at all. This is a key element of their projective architecture – it is predicated on action, on casting a line forward into the future, but in a ‘relaxed’ and ‘easy’ fashion that is not too uptight about the implications and repercussions.

A similar argument about the present universality of the critical attitude is made by John Whiteman, who claims that criticism is both ubiquitous within, and characteristic of, our modernity. Following Immanuel Kant’s pronouncement that ‘our age is, in every sense of the word, the age of criticism, and everything must submit to it,’ Whiteman argues that criticism has become a ‘way of life’ in modern Western societies.

Truth is what can stand up in the howling gales of criticism. Our age is one of deep suspicion in which everything must be questioned if it is to be substantiated. Truth for us is an unmasking, a laying bare... We cannot accept the world as it is immediately given to us through “ordinary” words and images, and instead look for justification behind the veil of deception.¹⁷

Such circumstances lead away from a commitment to the actual world and a retreat into ‘the general and abstract as harbours of unassailable legitimation and sophistication.’ In the specific context of architectural criticism, this means a diffusion of attention away from the specific architectural object. But here it is possible to employ Whiteman’s work further, to repeat the distinction between criticality, as an attitude and general architectural comportment, and the far more specific activity of written architectural criticism.¹⁸ Somol and Whiting may well be correct about the paralysis inherent in attempts to make architecture itself into built critique, but this only serves to underscore our argument about the too-close coupling of critique and practice within criticality. This is not to say that architectural criticism is not also nihilistic, or at least not necessarily.¹⁹ But the very distinction between criticism and architectural practice here becomes crucial.

past – but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! While we spent years trying to detect the prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices?’ Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?’, p. 227.

¹⁷ John Whiteman, ‘Criticism, Representation and Experience in Contemporary Architecture: Architecture and Drawing in an Age of Criticism’, *Harvard Architecture Review*, vol. 6, 1987, p. 138.

¹⁸ The most important single book on the specific process and technique of architectural criticism remains Wayne Attoe’s, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 1978. The fact that this book is now so (relatively) old, but has not been superseded, is curious and notable in itself.

¹⁹ Pattabi Raman and Richard Coyne note that ‘[t]he usual sense of the word ‘criticism’ is of ‘fault finding,’ implying that there is an ideal position from which the work in question deviates. The purpose of criticism here is to conserve truth or to uncover what is true, beautiful, or essential in the work.’ In fact, though, the origins of the word criticism, as derived from the Greek *krinein*, are “to separate, to cut into,” and “to judge, or discern”. As Miriam Gusevich notes, ‘It is also related to a discerning decision, a decisive point, a crisis (*krisis*).’ None of this is to say that it is necessarily inherently negative. See Pattabi Raman and Richard Coyne, ‘The Production of Architectural Criticism’, *Architecture Theory Review*, vol. 5, April 2000, p. 83; and Miriam Gusevich, ‘The Architecture of Criticism: A

The vast majority of architectural criticism is written, and therefore enacted in a medium which is different from that of its objects: it is always a translation and a transcription into language, and it is thus impossible to speak of architectural criticism without also speaking of literary technique, rhetoric, and the persona of the critic as author. As Pattabi Raman and Richard Coyne have noted, this already imbues architectural criticism with a certain semantic instability; '[t]he restlessness of the critic already resides in the restlessness of language.'²⁰ But it is precisely the gap, this caesura between built presentation and written representation, which allows architectural criticism to take a productive role. Architectural criticism has many modes and processes, and the quite distinct activities of description, analysis, exposition, explanation, interpretation, comparison, historicisation, and judgement each have a role to play. Of all these, it is judgement which locates and holds a still point within the swirling mists of generalised cultural critique, and the equally endless wanderings of architectural exegesis. The role of the critic is to make a strong judgement about a building, which demands agreement or disagreement, but which does not simply open onto infinite further interpretation. Operative criticism is, at base, an instruction. It demands that architects and the public 'admire this', 'build like this', 'value this'. It is certainly possible to disagree with such judgemental imperatives, to refuse or to fight them, but this very process is itself the operation and value of criticism. As Miriam Gusevich has written,

Criticism is riskier than commentary. It is willing to judge and to condemn, to stake out and substantiate a particular position. Serious criticism is not sheer negativity; it is the careful and thoughtful disclosure of dimensions that might otherwise elude us.... It is also self-reflective, since it recognises that to identify a building ... as worthy of discussion implicitly offers it as a potential candidate to the canon, and criticism takes the responsibility to substantiate its judgement.²¹

In the present politics of institutions, then, it seems as if a flowering of written architectural criticism will be possible in the space left by the withering of 'critical practice'. Having identified some of the threads in the knot of post-critical architecture, let us try to unpick it, or at least loosen it a little. Davidson's attack and Kipnis's defence of Somol and Whiting both occur in issue number 5 of the journal *Log*. Davidson is the editor of the journal and Somol and Whiting were the guest editors of the issue. *Log* is perhaps the most interesting new architecture journal and, apart from the excitement of the editorial spat in number 5, this is for the simplest of reasons: because it is a journal that still values architectural criticism. What is significant here is firstly, a displacement, and secondly an opening onto a longer vista of intellectual history.

Judgement and the Judge

Latour enjoins us to see the moment of critique in a larger historical frame, and so it is apposite to ask why it is that critical practice and the practice of criticism have seemed so opposed in recent times. The answer to this lies with the figure of the judge. The conceptual advantage that critical architecture has is that it places criticism in practice and thus in the concrete present rather than in a judge who then requires some authority to stand outside the present. We could put all the preceding discussion the other way around and state that 'critical practice' and 'critical historiography' mark an absence, a failure to agree on the conditions and criteria for judging the merit of buildings. The post-critical might thus be seen as returning to a problem not only of the late Twentieth Century, but one that goes back to the original Critique of Judgement.²² Kant's critique removed the grounds by which empirical aesthetics might have acted to justify and naturalise aristocratic taste, but have we gone too far in thinking that every judgement of taste must be

Question of Autonomy', in Andrea Kahn (ed) *Drawing Building Text*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1991, p. 23 note 20.

²⁰ Raman and Coyne, 'The Production of Architectural Criticism', p. 90-91.

²¹ Miriam Gusevich, 'The Architecture of Criticism', p. 14.

²² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, Translated by J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

uncritical if it does not have the strictures of history and praxis? What in the end is uncritical in liking buildings?

The instability of the frame and terms of reference through which architecture should be judged has often been noted. Writing in 1914, Geoffrey Scott fell back on the old Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness and delight, noting that '[b]etween these three values the criticism of architecture has insecurely wavered, not always distinguishing clearly between them, seldom attempting any statement of the relation they bear to one another, never pursuing to their conclusion the consequences which they involve. It has leaned now this way and now that, and struck between these incommensurable virtues, at different points, its arbitrary balance.'²³ More pessimistic authors have, when faced with this same uncertainty, opted for a reductive, objectivist or strictly technical approach, William H. Hayes, for instance, argues that '[t]he best that we can do now is to be radically empirical, that means that only by living with a building can we determine its performance and that any general claims beyond that are no more than and no less than inductions from experience.'²⁴ But given the mixed nature of architectural practice itself, any practicing architectural critic soon realises that he or she must define and assert the specific frame of reference that will be brought to bear on a given building, whether this frame is functionalist, normative, phenomenological, formalist, aesthetic, sociological, or one of any number of other possibilities.²⁵ The key point here is that the very selection of the set of critical tools to be employed on a specific building is itself historiographic – it is informed and determined by history as much as it is an active writing into history.²⁶

Architectural history has often been taken to be the authority for judgement, and critical judgment a mode of historical analysis. By comparing buildings across history the critic can see what merits in a building escape historical determination. The problems with this position are well explained and then reorganised by Tafuri. He argues that the role of the critic is not that of judging whether buildings are good or bad, pleasing or displeasing, but where and how they fit into the trajectory of history – whether they are reactionary or regressive, whether they contribute or stand in the way of history. As opposed to electing some person to decide what architecture should be, it seems modest to make history the judge of architectural merit (although this requires history to be a unity visible to historians and thus another kind of metaphysic). Tafuri has no place for criticism outside history, and argues that there are only two acceptable methods of criticism – constructivist image juxtaposition and typological urbanism, both of which are modes of practice. Similarly what the historian must not be is operative, history must be objective, or at least true to itself. In these terms the fault of the operative historian, such as Siegfried Giedion for example, was that he judged present practice as a critic, and then searched for historical precedents for the favoured works. For Tafuri, criticism is a moment of mutual recognition between the unreflected timeliness of an architectural practice and the writing of history. A second way of avoiding the clash of history and judgement is more extreme, and sees history as well as judgment eaten by critical practice. Here history has no telos as it has for Giedion or Tafuri, and is limited to precedent and the role of revealing and making transmissible the embodied knowledge of the discipline. In such a scenario architects of the late 1940's did not know how 'critical' Le Corbusier's actually was, and the historical skills of Colin Rowe were required

²³ Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*, Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, 1954, p. 154, quoted by William H. Hayes, 'Architectural Criticism,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 4, fall 2002, p. 325.

²⁴ William H. Hayes, 'Architectural Criticism,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 4, fall 2002, p. 329.

²⁵ On functional criticism in architecture, see Reyner Banham, "Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture." In *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, edited by Marcus Whiffen, 91-105. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965.

²⁶ For an excellent discussion between several prominent American critics on their methods of criticism and their choice of frames of reference, see Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, "Listening to Critics: The Stage Is Set." *Architectural Record* 188, no. 1 (1999): 68-72. See also Suzanne Stephens, "Assessing the State of Architectural Criticism in Today's Press." *Architectural Record* 186, no. 2 (1998): 64-69.

to dig the Villa Foscari out of history and to make it available on the same terms as the Villa Stein.²⁷ Here again judgment lies in the act of architectural practice and it does not even require the recognition of a historian, but only a kind of *ekphrasis* or ritual praise that compares it with precedent.²⁸

Aesthetic Judgement and Architectural Disciplinarity

What has been unspeakable for the whole period of critical architecture is aesthetic judgement. This is for reasons, good at the time, which were true across the spectrum of cultural discourse. On the one hand there was (and still is) the possibility that empirical psychology might show that much of cultural preference is not cultural at all but ‘hard-wired’ in the brain, perhaps as a result of so many accidents of human evolution. On the other, there was (and still is) the powerful, good-old-days critique of ideology such as that of John Berger and more systematically Pierre Bourdieu, which showed that aesthetic preferences are not only learnt but actively propagated to naturalise social inequality.²⁹ (And for those who are strong social constructivists, psychological aesthetics is still in on this plot.) But there remains a limit to how much one can disbelieve in the senses and believe in buildings as something specific, and not as indifferent instances of what might have been thought, drawn or imagined. Gradually over the last decade issues of sense and affect have re-emerged in architecture, largely, strangely, through the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose empiricism is undeniable even to those who quote him like poetry. The more specific reason for opposing aesthetics as the basis of architectural judgement is the general incompatibility of aesthetics with a concept of disciplines of art making, such as architecture.

If, as Kant thought, there is the possibility of pure judgment of one’s sensory experience then there is no space for a disciplinary aesthetic for architecture in particular. There are simply judgments of sense which every person, architect or not, makes. These might tend to an ideal that may be more or less knowable, but knowing it really doesn’t make much difference except at some higher level of resonance between faculties of mind. Moreover, such aesthetic sense would be no help to architects, since the basis for actual, everyday architectural practice is the disciplinary one of precedent – what architects know is what other architects did. On this basis, it is possible to say that things are ‘true’ or ‘false’ to the discipline. This is only aesthetic in the last instance, namely buildings are beautiful if they have been hallowed by reference and use as precedent, therefore a lot of people must have liked them. Here sense is unknowable except by referring it to concepts. Of course Kant’s position is famously extreme and one of the ways that the post-critics, particularly Somol, go post-critical is to weaken the meaning of aesthetics. Here again the move does not originate in architecture but with the post-post-modern critic of art and culture Dave Hickey, whose laconic prose and ideas are a clear model for being less ‘critical’ as a path back to practical criticism.³⁰

Like Hickey, Somol and Whiting’s flippant language and irreverence toward theory is the rhetorical outcome of a position on aesthetics that opposes “those who assume that anything that works must be facile”.³¹ Perhaps as with Hickey, this is a genuine interest in what used to be called pop, but the facile is here not so much a value, as a blunt weapon to beat up romanticism. Much of what is dis-likable about high theory is its cult of persons and of the persona of the theorist, which as Ian Hunter has shown has its own institutional history in the teaching of metaphysics in universities, as it has slowly evolved

²⁷ Colin Rowe, c1976. ‘The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa’, In *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

²⁸ The intention in *ekphrasis* is always to fail, such that the description never exceeds the thing itself. The humility of this gap, where the detailed, fulsome written description of an object or artwork, which sets out to praise and admire the thing represented but for this very reason is always intended to fall short and be inadequate to the object, is instructive of the nature and possible utility of an *uncritical* writing in architecture.

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Museums and their Publics*, trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990; originally published as *L'Amour de l'art: les musées d'art européens et leur public*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1969.

³⁰ Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*, Los Angeles and New York: Art issues. Press; Distributed by D.A.P. (Distributed Art Publishers), 1997.

³¹ Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, “Okay, Here’s The Plan”, *Log*, 5, 2005, p 5.

since the Seventeenth century.³² Sometime in the late Eighteenth Century the figure of the metaphysician and that of the person of cultivated aesthetical judgement joined together, at which time aesthetical feeling, and/or the ability to analyse it, became something rare, difficult, and served to give a high profile to the individual judge. But for Hickey, or (before all this) David Hume, aesthetical feeling is not uncommon or distinguishing at all, it is a simple matter of relating to things in the world, something commonplace, trivial, and easy, if nonetheless hard to account for and reconcile.³³

Whether one sees the post-critical as an innovation or a memory of a pre-hyper-critical time, the point is that such an account has aesthetic feeling as being already there, rather than being a state to be attained through the long difficult labours and ascesis of theory. This dumb move derails a long-held opposition between political and aesthetic critique: if you subscribe to a romantic/aesthetic view of architecture, then a social constructivist critique, dedicated to constant uncovering social constructions and unmasking politics, would be mutually exclusive from an aesthetic critique, which is always implicitly about beauty. These are exclusive if you think that beauty is transcendent and rare and important. But just imagine that you didn't, that you had abandoned a romanticist idea of beauty and aesthetics, and you had an idea of beauty as trivial and commonplace: then you could talk about the aesthetics and the social constructions together. The benefit would be that in the process of such a 'weak', pluralist approach, one could also dramatically deflate the hubris of criticism and make it possible to enact without an authority outside of itself. It is precisely such an approach to architectural criticism that we would advocate.

The historiographic task of the architectural critic

The critic stands at the hinge between past and future, and his or her task is to locate and reveal discrepancies between what architecture has been, and what it is now. Like history, criticism is retrospective, and acts to conceptualise and make transmissible that which has been lived, acted, built. Just as historiography is constantly rewriting and reframing the past, criticism is constantly rewriting architectural practice. The architectural critic has a concept of discipline that is different from the actual profession and actual practice at any given time. In selecting and curating those projects that will be written into the historical record, the historian is always a critic, whether explicitly or not. Criticism can also be historical; we might still read John Ruskin's criticism today, not just as evidence of the ideas of the time, but to see which parts are still useful and which have become simply history. It is ultimately architectural criticism, or at least a consensus of critical judgements made by historians, which serves to formulate an architectural canon. But this is a heavy weight that leaves criticism as a proxy for the grey eminence of history and with no authority of its own. If criticism is to advance and provide tangible guidance to architectural practice, then it must engage in the immediacy of feeling and of aesthetic judgement. Only in this way can criticism be opened and rendered available for architectural operation – so that practice can project free of the history that it might become.

Of course while fighting for its own criterion criticism cannot and should not relinquish its historiographic role.³⁴ This is what stops it from being subsumed into practice, with all the confusion and

³² Ian Hunter, 'The History of Theory: Notes for a Seminar', [m/s](#), Centre for the History of European Discourses, [University of Queensland](#), Brisbane, 2005. [Forthcoming Critical Inquiry 2006](#)

³³ David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*. In *Four Dissertations*. 1757

³⁴ An unusually perceptive discussion of the interrelation of historiography and architectural criticism was made by Cornel West in a 1991 lecture to the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Discussing what he saw as an 'intellectual crisis in architectural criticism', he argued that a 'theory-laden historiography' was a way out of the impasse of the then current 'criticality':

'The future of architectural criticism rests on the development of a refined and a revisionist architectural historiography that creatively fuses social histories of architectural practices and social histories of technology, in light of sophisticated interpretations of the present cultural crisis. This historiography must be informed by the current theoretical debates in the larger discourse of cultural criticism. Yet the benefits of these debates are in the enabling insights that facilitate actual history writing and cultural analysis of specific past and present architectural practices, not ontological, nor any epistemic conclusions that promote mere avant-gardist posturing and posing... The present obsession with theory must now yield to theory-laden

discomfort that is familiar to critics and architects alike. The complex, layered relation between criticism and practice at best contributes directly to architectural practice and at worst is parasitical and ineffective. It is not always clear what architects want from criticism, and why and for whom critics are actually writing. This also bears on the question of *when* architectural criticism is useful to architecture – its temporality as well as its historicity. A further complication of criticism is that the doctrine of Kantian disinterest makes the requirement for objectivity in criticism so high; the critic, in this conception, must be *especially* disinterested, and there is a wide-spread belief that architectural criticism is not adequately objective because it is tainted by commercial bias. Further to this is the belief that criticism is insufficiently rigorous or ‘hard’ in its judgements, it is too polite, too sycophantic, obsessed with glamour photography, unduly attracted by novelty and spectacle, complicit in the architectural ‘star system’, vague or simply incorrect in its criteria for judgement, and overly predicated on formal concerns. All of this has contributed to a wide-spread and continuing belief that architectural criticism is in a state of unremitting crisis.³⁵

Even given all these complications, architectural criticism is still crucial and indispensable to architecture. It has a very specific utility, albeit one with a complex temporal lag. Instrumentality and temporality are ambiguously linked in architectural criticism – it almost always happens after the fact, when the building (whether good or not) is already a *fait accompli*. In this sense architectural criticism has a temporality of its own, of the time of its reception, which differs from that of history, but which also becomes historical because of the time of construction. The criticism of film is in the ‘now’ of the screening while what architectural critics do is like criticism published after the film has closed at the cinema, which is to say the history of cinema. The use of criticism (other than history) thus lies in assisting architects to know where this work fits within history, and in making recommendations for future architectural practice. But this utility bears fruit only after a substantial lag, as architects enact its findings in their next buildings. The temporality of architectural criticism thus covers a greater span than almost any other type of criticism, not only because of the ancientness of architecture as an art, but also because current critique is projected into, and has its efficacy in the future. This also leaves the architectural critic in a difficult position – in the interests of being productive, there seems little point in railing against something that is already done and finished, in arguing that it shouldn’t ever have been built. There is of course a value in seeing such works as warnings and correctives, an example of what to avoid in the future, just as good work should be emulated. But there is also a strong argument that architectural criticism should concern itself with unbuilt schemes, with drawings and ideas and competitions, because it is there that it has the potential to make a direct effect on design outcomes in the world.

There is no question that architectural criticism contributes significantly to a lively and intellectual architectural culture, that it is a tangible way in which the history and theory of architecture can be located in architectural practice and architectural objects, and even that it can be a valuable tool in architectural education – in the production of reflexive, informed, and discerning graduates. But all of this is empty if the practice of architectural criticism does not ultimately make a contribution to architecture as both discipline and a discourse. So how, why, when, and for whom is architectural criticism useful? More particularly, what do architects want from architectural criticism, and why? Often enough, these questions are not posed, let alone answered. But they are crucial to an understanding of the role and efficacy of criticism within architectural culture, and to a defence against its traps: the meaningless, the banal, the parasitic, the ineffectual. In the possibility of a healthy and robust architectural criticism, with a strong

historiography if architectural criticism is to have any chance of breaking through the impasse that now engulfs us.’

See Cornel West, ‘On Architecture?’ *APPENDX Culture | Theory | Praxis*, Issue 2:
<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/appendx/dev/issue2/west.htm>

³⁵ See for example Richard F Bohn, "Vocabulary: A Critical Discussion of Architectural Criticism." *Architecture Plus* 2, no. 5 (1974): 70-71+; James Marston Fitch, "Architectural Criticism: Trapped in Its Own Metaphysics." *Journal of Architectural Education* 29 (1976): 2-3; and more recently Thomas Fisher, "A Call for Clarity: American Architectural Criticism Should Be Less Misleading and Obscure." *Architectural Record* 187, no. 7 (1999): 47-49; and Richard Meier, "What Good Are Critics? We Need Them to Excite and Provoke the Public." *Architectural Record* 188, no. 3 (2000): 57-59.

concept of what architecture is and should be, lies the possible future hope for political engagement between architecture and the world. Perhaps in this way, at some time in the future, architecture may be able to properly take up the broader political role that both the critical and post-critical positions advocate, each in their own ways. It is through direct, operative criticism that the hidden or unrealised aims of critical practice might actually and eventually emerge.

In the past few years it might seem that there is a judgment to be made. Does one see or not see an historical fissure opening around the term 'critical'? Is this situation real or hysterical? Is it to be applauded or regretted? We have argued that there is no 'critical architecture' in general and these questions can only be answered in the choices confronted in practice. But it is no paradox that these questions are clearest in the contingencies, the messy temporality, the accounting for feelings, the provisional finality of judgement, that is the practice of criticism.