On Esthetic Judgment

Jacinto Lageira

Apart from the works of the second Wittgenstein – *Philosophical Investigations* – attempts to build bridges between ancient Greek theories of argumentation about values and the contemporary world were not published until quite recently: Stephen Toulmin’s work, *Les Usages de l’argumentation* (Uses of argumentation) and Chaim Perelman and Luci Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work, *Traité de l’argumentation* (Treatise of argumentation) both appeared in 1958. Since these works a great number of texts have appeared on argumentation about values (those of Michael Meyer, of the School of Amsterdam, passing via Karl Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas), but it is always a matter of reflections on morality, ethics and politics. There is almost nothing on aesthetics, and the theoretical ground to make up is considerable. However, a few rare philosophers have looked into the question, such as Morris Weitz, Monroe Beardsley (*Aesthetics, Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*), or more recently, Rainer Rochlitz, especially in *Subvention et subversion* (Subsidy and subversion) and *L’art au banc d’essai* (Art as guinea pig/art put to the test).

One of the initial difficulties encountered by a theory of argumentation about aesthetic values is precisely that of specifying its «field of argumentation», since it must both be inscribed in a lineage of a general rationality of current practices and customs, moral and socio-political, while at the same time differentiating itself from the latter. For Toulmin there are *ad hoc* norms and criteria that correspond to each of these specific fields, and which permit us to orientate ourselves in argumentation. Although it is stating the obvious, this is an important point since aesthetics at the same time as distinguishing spheres of rationality
belonging to morality, science, society and politics – this distinction being one of the founding contributions of modernity – must not cut evaluative argumentation off from reality via an excessive autonomisation. Such an option would contribute to laying the foundation for subjectivism, pluralism and relativism, since aesthetic evaluation would have no other grounds than a subject evaluating on its own and for itself. According to their partisans, such evaluations only involve the subject who pronounces them, and since «art does not commit one to anything», these evaluations have no consequence. Yet this subject lives in a society, acts morally and ethically, and is a citizen who takes sides. Given that works of art are not axiologically neutral objects, cutting them off from other evaluative spheres is not only artificial but disturbing and dangerous. Refusing to argue and refusing that others argue in aesthetics while one calls for precisely this approach in the fields of the deliberative (politics) and the legal (law) is problematic. Is it that evaluation in art is a field apart? Does the appreciation of art have such an exceptional status that one cannot argue about values or declared appreciations?

One can argue in aesthetics just as one can argue in morality and ethics, although neither the forms nor the contents nor the stakes are the same, since their «fields of argumentation» are not comparable. Following rules of fields of argumentation implies norms of argumentation, which in Toulmin’s opinion are defined according to certain criteria. For our arguments to be taken into account, accepted or discussed, the norms of argumentation in question must be assimilated and the criteria which led to their assumption must be submitted for validation, acceptability or admissibility. On this point even the tenants of aesthetic subjectivism, relativism and pluralism ground their reflection upon the field, so to speak, of non-argumentation or partial argumentation about art and/or aesthetics – and not upon the field of science or morality. In doing so they demonstrate that they inscribe their discourse within an argumentative field which they
cannot dispose of as they wish nor divert for their benefit. The argumentative field, its norms, and criteria can certainly, and fortunately, be reviewed, critiqued and modified, but these norms and criteria have the function of a minimal rule such that a counter-argument or another proposition can take place. To be against all forms of argument is nothing other than having recourse in rhetoric to what has been long termed the «argument from authority». But the field of argumentation requires rules and procedures because all intellectual options, whatever they might be, necessarily take place in a *sui generis* manner within a field of reflection, speech and language. Since we act and speak within shared signification, which constitutes us as agents of actions and speech, we cannot behave as though at a given moment, during aesthetic appreciation, sense can no longer be shared or if settling on one sense was just as valid as accepting any other one, and in another moment, when I decide politically or respond in front of a judge, I participate in the same sense. It is evident that I do not argue in the same manner when it is a matter of art as I do when it is matter of ethics or political action. Thus what should also be clear is that arguing differently in aesthetics does not mean that it is a question of minor, lesser, weak or light arguments on the pretext that the objects to which they refer are less important than judicial or deliberative objects.

Although it might seem as though I’m playing with words, in aesthetics what is at stake is evidently the following: one argues about artistic objects, and not about subjects (persons). One argues about qualities and successes, not about facts. To estimate that an artistic object has a certain value for me is to foreground a subjective fact without having to evaluate the object in any way, since what is recognized and declared is solely the contents and forms of subjectivization. Thus to stipulate at the same time that these contents and forms possess quality and succeed does not make much sense. Even though this might have a sense for me, on the one hand it would not help in knowing or evaluating the importance and
signification of the object, and on the other hand, it’s a question of expressing the state of a subject for another subject passing via an act of language and not via the object. What is then legitimately expressed is a psychological fact, which is valorised on the basis of, about, and on the occasion of the object, which, however, has in no manner intervened *qua object* in the process of valorisation. Either the object has no value (which would contradict the fact that I have drawn appreciations and satisfactions from my relation with it), or these values are in me and not in the object, which contradicts the fact that in order to feel such sentiment and pleasure I am constrained to pass via that precise singular object. No doubt it can have a value for me and not for another person, which comes down to saying that our evaluations concern the object and not the qualities of the other’s sentiment. I do not evaluate his psychological state, his affects, his emotions – which would be to slide into the deliberative or the legal, or the practical-moral – but rather what he declares in regard to a state of valorisation *drawn from an object*.

In the case of moral and practical evaluations that do indeed bear on facts, actions and events, subjects can always be found at their origin and are directly implied in the process of evaluation, inseparably from the subjects that are the actors of the evaluations. In the case of evaluations bearing on artistic objects, subjects (authors) are certainly to be found at the origin, but the latter pass via objects to address themselves to other subjects who have to evaluate the objects. Creators do not address other subjects directly but via the *mediation*, the go-between of artistic objects. One can discuss and deliberate all sorts of non-artistic objects if and only if they are referred to in their respective field of argumentation, and the field of argumentation, each time it is not art in question, *has subjects as both its origin and its finality*. In the case of the practical-moral, subjects alone are at stake, in discussion, in disagreement or in perfect agreement. In the case of the aesthetic attitude, it is objects that are at stake and form the support
for evaluation, not subjects. Let us emphasize that the theory of aesthetic sentiment and of moral sentiment is founded in the last instance on the appreciation of the subject’s sentiment, a natural sentiment that is nothing other than a naturalization of reason and, on this basis, a naturalization of language. This comes down to saying that aesthetic and moral sentiment is explained by natural causes and not by reason. Against this theory, the argumentative field in aesthetics definitely requires a rationality of arguments that is specific to that strange domain of the world of art in which objects alone, and – even stranger – fictive objects, are evaluated.

Say that we are faced with these fictional objects, and that the specificity of our approaches to their understanding, their interpretation and their evaluation has been secured. What can be argued, legitimated or justified with regard to them must be equally specific, not only in virtue of the fact that my aesthetic arguments are only valid for artistic objects but also because they are co-substantial with the triangle formed by comprehension, interpretation and evaluation. This is the case because from the moment in which I announce or assert that I have understood the object, that I am able to interpret it and eventually evaluate it, I immediately announce – even if only implicitly – that I am able to justify, back up, and argue in response to questions if asked. The act of comprehension-interpretation-evaluation implies that I am potentially capable of responding to questions, doubts or critiques because the language in which this approach is expressed is in all regards the same as that in which argumentation would unfold. Argumentation is not a metalanguage that would be deployed subsequently, after the accomplishment of a critical act: it is already integrated within the critical act. The two moments are united within the same language. A criticism that cannot be explained in terms of its arguments has not been correctly argued at the moment of the critical act. When certain arguments are explained and developed it is often noticeable that they are not half as strong as the
critical act suggested. This is a way of exposing the critic’s prejudices or presuppositions, but essentially it indicates that arguments, in turn, are evaluated in relation to the object of critique. Hence the importance of the object: it is the anchoring point of the critique, the object concerning which we must agree, debate and argue.

Take an object that is a candidate for appreciation or assessment, such that it may enter the world of art. It is supposed to introduce itself into a history of forms since it was produced, amongst other things, for precisely that purpose. It is intended to bear a sense and as such it cannot be reduced to its form alone. However nor can it be detached from that form and possess sense without it. This non-separability of material and sense – the ancient complementarity of form and content – is what I will call the *significance* of the art object.³ It signifies in that form, via that form, with that form or thanks to that form; the sense to which it pretends passes via this form and, precisely, via the *unformed*. The significance of the object will partly condition a critical argumentative discourse and in turn be conditioned by that discourse. The object will be instituted or not as an art object, or as having such or such a value, because speaking beings agree or not that it is such. Since no definitive or *a priori* aesthetic criteria exist, no eternal rules have been decreed and no infallible norms erected, the object is solely valued or devalued on the basis of an interpretation that constitutes it in an immanent manner as a work of art. This implies that one can argue about it. Without discussion, critical debate and various arguments, significance is not effective. It makes sense and is constituted via the critical relation alone.

The constitutive relation between the candidate object and the receiver has the advantage of avoiding *a priori* or essentialist definitions, as much for the object as for the receiver, who will regulate his or her field of argumentation, norms and criteria according to the parameters provided by the work. In turn, his or her arguments provide parameters for evaluating
the work – which is not in itself good, bad, mediocre nor a success –; and the parameters of the work (its history, sense and possible interpretations) confirm, relay and correspond, or not, to the critic’s field of argumentation. One can neither invent arguments *ex nihilo* nor create criteria of any sort. This interrelation is none other than a successful comprehension and interpretation of the object – they also being subject to argument – and it already includes an evaluation. During arguments about works of art, about their qualities and their value, language acts are not exclusively discursive techniques or logical constructs. Above all they create a «normative bond between people which is established by their perceiving the reasons for which a work legitimately pretends to being significant and a success from an artistic point of view». This normative bond engages us in relation to each other and also engages the entire process which runs from the comprehension-interpretation-evaluation to the works, from the works to the norms and criteria, and then from the latter back to the works.

The criteria and norms are submitted to revisions and discussions inasmuch as they are debated intersubjectively. They form the ideal frame of reference with regard to which the work’s conditions and properties are understood, interpreted and evaluated. These norms and criteria are thus not rigid, fixed and definitive, given that they exist for certain reasons and thanks to the reasons that are produced when defending or criticizing them. They are neither relative nor pluralist since not all criteria and norms that might be proposed as forming part of the frame of reference – *via arguments and reasons* – are admissible, acceptable or legitimate. Norms and criteria are not equally valid, interchangeable and equivalent; in which case they would only be norms and criteria in name. This frame is ideal: it is an aesthetic project more than a concrete reality and it is continually within the grasp of thought. However it is not idealistic; it does not consist of vague general ideas about the form or unity of a work of art, even less of Platonist Ideas starting from which everything would unfold. It is applied
and activated in the specific field of the concrete candidate objects for artistic and aesthetic appreciation. Uses and objects already exist as do uses of objects, which in the last instance form the only existent frame of reference that allows us to progress within the ideal framework that is being constituted: art is underway, it is always contemporary. Without the objects with which norms and criteria are necessarily in relation – and are theorized in so far as strange «art objects» must be accounted for – there would be no theories of art, no critique, and no aesthetics. This seems obvious, but as with redundancy, it is better left said.

Norms and criteria are not given \textit{a priori}, they are constructed, but they are not constructed in order to be at our conceptual disposal whenever we have need of them. That would give them a status and a structure external to their use. In reality they only genuinely become consistent and are constructed when they enter actively into the process of evaluation itself. They do not exist independently of that process, of their immanent activation within the critical act. Because they form an ideal frame of reference, norms and criteria are diverse, different and changeable; but all in principle may be argued for and only make sense relative to reasons. In this manner we find Hutcheson’s principle of «uniformity amidst variety» (1725), or Beardsley’s criteria of unity, intensity and complexity (1958), Adorno’s «truth content» (1969), or Rainer Rochlitz’s coherency and public character of the work (1994). One could object that the norms and criteria we are referring are defective in that they are always tied to the moment, submitted to or taken up in a historical movement of customs and ideas which will be entirely different tomorrow. Of course, times change and the wheel turns. But if the minimal processes of argumentation and of intersubjective and shared discussions are respected, the uses of the norms and criteria of the moment are none other than those that have been discussed and are under discussion, which are in debate and part of the dialogue. By nature, they cannot be imposed. They simply require critique
and debate. Moreover, let us hope that if uses of norms and criteria are different in the future, they remain subject to debates in which reason and argument prevail. Once the artistic and aesthetic interest (also moral, ethical and political) of being able to criticize with and via reasons is understood, returning to models in which the presentation of reasons is not desirable or is prohibited would be suicidal. Critique would really then be completely different because it would no longer be critique.

There are not as many principles and criteria as one might believe. There are not so many that can be applied to a sufficiently high number of cases to actually prove useful. When one takes the opposite point of view to fault or criticize these criteria, it soon becomes clear that the opposite terms are not viable. For instance, take the three principles that Beardsley claims to find in all good works: unity, complexity and intensity. Their opposites are dispersion, simplicity and weakness. The opposite of coherence is incoherence. It would be quite difficult to develop a critique or a theory based on such criteria. What kind of great work could be founded on criteria such as dispersion, simplicity, weakness, falsity-content, incoherency, private character, etc.? Until now such an approach could only show how several centuries of mediocre works have given rise to pertinent theories. On the contrary, it is because great works exist that good theories have emerged. But as Beardsley emphasizes, if one cannot determine the necessary and sufficient properties for a work to be good, one can at least explain for what reasons works cannot be said to be successful, or objects are not art objects. Beardsley’s principles, or any others taking their place in the process, must be understood in a weak sense, and not as strong defining traits.

Let us note, in passing, that if we knew which properties were necessary and sufficient for a work of art to be good, we would then know exactly what a work of art is, and the nature of art itself. As Morris Weitz has already cautioned us, it is vain to search for the essence or ontology of
art, its ultimate theory, since it simply does not exist. However, there are sufficient conditions and properties to say at least whether certain objects can be candidates for the world of art and not others, and to say whether certain objects in the world of art are better than others. According to Weitz, «There are no necessary and sufficient conditions, but there are conditions that consist of a range of similitude’s; that is, a bundle of properties none of which has to be present but most of which are present when we describe things such as works of art. I will call these conditions ‘recognition criteria’ for works of art…None of these recognition criteria is a determining, necessary or sufficient criterion». But he then immediately adds; «If none of these conditions were present, if there were no present criterion for recognizing something as a work of art, we would not describe it as a work of art».

In order that the encounter with these objects takes place correctly, the latter must fulfil certain conditions and properties, already more or less ideally defined by norms and criteria. Without art objects there is no tendency to reflect on norms and criteria, but without artistic and aesthetic norms and criteria one could not distinguish between any object of the world whatsoever, and one which is a candidate for aesthetic appreciation, nor distinguish amongst all the objects already considered artistic those that are better than others.

There are criteria concerning whether works’ properties are argumentable – what is said of them must be accurate, exact, and correspond to certain features of the object – but there are no criteria of the properties themselves, although there are conditions of the properties. It is even less the case that there are artistic rules, codes, principles or precepts that are defined once and for all and on the basis of which properties could in turn be determined by criteria. The simple reason for this is that it is the interpreter who confers aesthetic and artistic properties. The confusion originates in having been capable of, or wanting to transform works’
properties into criteria for an argumentation, when possessing properties does not lead \textit{ipso facto} into the establishment of criteria of comprehension, interpretation and even less of evaluation. Properties and conditions do not cause criteria. They can however provide a reason to have recourse to such criteria. If there are no objective properties of works that could serve as criteria of evaluation, it nonetheless remains the case that works have properties – moreover up to a certain point these properties are objective, such as: this material is marble; it’s a piano sonata and not a harpsichord sonata; it’s a medieval \textit{rondeau} and not a symbolist poem. Criteria of argumentation refer to these properties, but in turn these properties cannot be criteria \textit{for} argumentation because they are not criteria.

I have reasons which allow me to understand, interpret and evaluate the object in such a manner according to some of its properties, and I have arguments –according to certain criteria from the field of argumentation of the art world, corresponding to the object, its history, and its form, thanks to which these criteria can claim a certain validity with regard to the object in question – if and only if what I say about it corresponds to certain properties that we can perceive in the object. One can contest the presence of these properties, contest whether they are important or interesting, or perceive quite different properties in the work, but the structure of argumentation will remain similar: it is only according to certain norms and criteria that belong to the field of argumentation in question that a contradictory discourse will be admissible or not \textit{in its relation to the object}. In order for reasons not to be relative or relativist, or in order for my discourse, following Berkeley’s idealism, not to confer being upon things, certain rules, criteria and norms of argumentation must be respected not so much in and for themselves but rather, more specifically, in so far as they refer to an object which itself has neither rules, nor norms, nor criteria. This object does, however, possess properties which necessarily condition the
argumentative recourse to certain rules, norms and criteria, but not to certain others which would be completely foreign to the object of critique.

Conditions and properties are on the side of the work; norms and criteria are on the side of language acts and intersubjective argumentations. If, according to the current norms and criteria – which can always be revised and changed – the conditions and properties do not match certain expectations or are not satisfied, no kind of experience then can take place that would lead us to designate the object as artistic or as subject to aesthetic evaluations. But if, according to the norms and criteria in force at a certain moment in the historical contexts of the world of art, the norms and criteria are not satisfied in that they do not even encounter the work or cannot enter into any relation with it, this is either because the work is in advance of its times and thus surpasses the norms and criteria – which must be updated – or it is because these norms and criteria are inadequate and badly elaborated. The work is misunderstood, misinterpreted, its evaluation is thus dysfunctional; in short the critical act is ineffective, misfires or is even null and void.

The critical act, made up of the triangle comprehension-interpretation-evaluation, is what creates the normative bond between norms-criteria and conditions-properties. In this term «critical act» the act should be emphasized, since it is through the act that critique is literally activated and practiced, an act without which norms-criteria would be useless and conditions-properties inexistent. A fundamental moment of this normative bond of critical as act is the phenomenality of the work – its appearing – in which everything begins. First I must hear the music, read the text, see the film, perceive the dancers; in short, I must be perceptually engaged in the object that is proposed to me – precisely in order to complete the object.

One of the recurrent themes of theories of argumentation is that one should work towards the resolution of conflicts. Is this the case in
aesthetics? Should one work towards the resolution of conflicts over critical evaluations? What would be gained in doing so? In aesthetics it is more a matter of resolving questions of significance and of the evaluation of that significance, the qualities and non-qualities of the object in itself. In any case one can never definitively resolve problems or questions of evaluation in aesthetics. In contrast to the practical-moral sphere, interpretation in art, if it is not infinite, is nevertheless subject to various re-elaborations and reevaluations. Given that the object also concerns or refers to something, via the thematics or subjects that it stages, we could be lead to speak of certain elements in their relation to extra-artistic reality while, at the same time, not denying nor ignoring questions of significance. The object we speak of, that we deliberate upon perhaps to condemn it morally or politically, remains a fictional object belonging to the domain of art. The difficulty is thus that of being able to speak of the possible factualization of the art object whilst maintaining its field of argumentation within the sphere of the aesthetic.

Interpretation is constitutive of the work, and such interpretation is immanently evaluative, even if this is not yet explained nor explicit even for the interpreter. Interpreting without evaluating is impossible. In an intersubjective argumentation we take into account what the other says with regard to the form and semantics of the work. We take into account his or her argumentation in order to relate it to the work. This allows us to evaluate the interlocutor’s discourse. If interpretations are constitutive of the work what remains to be seen is to what point the other’s interpretation constitutes not only the chosen object as work, but especially to what degree his or her argumentation is admissible as an evaluation of the object. Since it is the receiver-interlocutors who, through their interpretations, constitute certain objects as successful works or not, it is necessary to account both for this process of constitution within the norms, criteria and rules relative to the object and for the process of argumentation
between interlocutors inasmuch as it refers to the significations of the discourses about the work.

These two moments are interdependent: if one solely evaluates the quality, legitimacy and pertinence of the interlocutor’s discourse without referring it to the object then, apart from engaging in a sterile guessing game concerning his or her intentions, one is dismissing the fact that his or her discourse refers to an object that it constitutes as a successful or failed work. One can neither refer uniquely to the receiver’s discourse, since he or she is clearly speaking of something that he or she is critiquing, nor can one refer uniquely to the object, since it is precisely the conflict of interpretations and critical argumentations over its value that constitutes it as an art object ... subject to further discussion. Works are not excellent, mediocre or bad in themselves and neither are evaluative arguments justifiable, legitimate or evident in themselves. It is not a question here of style, of eloquence, or of the effectiveness of a critical speech or text – the traditional ethos – but of the correspondence of a field of argumentation to its object, which includes in the process of comprehension-interpretation-evaluation the possibility of bringing all or part of this process back into question. The reason for this is that this process can only come alive and take a certain form within the field of other argumentations. One can reflect or rationalize for oneself, but one argues in addressing the other.

This seems, once again, like stating the obvious. But what is not so obvious is that the arguments exchanged over the evaluations of a work are either valid or not, whereas the work is not evaluated as being valid or invalid. The work is neither true nor false. However, it could quite easily be mediocre, average, successful, failed, unbalanced, etc. What then comes up is the problem of the properties of the language and of the objects that are candidates for appreciation. We do not evaluate discourse in the same way we evaluate works. However it is on the basis of this interaction that the critical act is born.
Works of art are simultaneously the objects of a perceptual experience which can be discussed and the objects of a semantic experience which can also be discussed – parts of the critical attention constituted within the significance of the work. However, the arguments that can be advanced during an evaluation cannot be perceptually and semantically discussed in the same manner as the object, despite the fact that the arguments are about precisely this object. The main risk of evaluative arguments concerning art objects lies in the permanent temptation to place the validity of the evaluative discourse of the work and its pertinence for the evaluation of the work on the same level. It’s easy to understand that an evaluative discourse could remain valid as discourse without for all that being particularly perceptive as a critical evaluation with regard to a work’s qualities or absence thereof. This explains how the same work can give rise to different interpretations, and thus different valid discourses, without a pertinent evaluation resulting from such activity – unless one claims that there exist just as many evaluations as interpretations to which they correspond. But not all evaluations are justifiable and not all interpretations are equivalent. Certainly, it is more convenient to criticize or argue about the validity of a discourse as such than to discuss the reasons that lead us to value or devalue a certain object.

It might seem as though argumentation concerning the validity of discourse is more approachable in that we possess semantic and cognitive criteria for it, whereas in art such criteria are lacking. Certain thinkers go so far as to lament the terrible situation in which « there are no longer any criteria » for judging works of art. How can it be claimed that there are no longer any criteria of judgment when, on the contrary, there are too many, thanks to the considerable development of artistic practices? It is as if these thinkers pretend that these practices have always existed, whereas in fact they only appeared in the eighteenth century. Moreover, the canons, codes, rules, principles and precepts concerning Beauty or any other such term are
not and never have been criteria. Here we have a remarkable confusion, a blind spot or rather a denial since intellectuals have done everything in their power for two millennia to prevent argumentability about aesthetic evaluations from coming into the world. The discrepancy between the great advances in practical-moral argumentation and the slowness in aesthetics does partly explain why argumentation about the validity of discourses seems more understandable than argumentation about the pertinence of evaluation; although we do understand that not all evaluative assertions have the same pertinence. And this is quite simply because the objects of discussion do not all have the same validity.

In the same manner as one can explain good or bad reasons as to the validity of the discourse itself during a dialogue about the evaluation of a work, one can explain good or bad reasons for accepting, admitting as accurate or legitimate, or rejecting as inaccurate, unworkable and inadequate, statements about the work. It becomes clearer why the interdependence of comprehension, interpretation and evaluation is important: at each stage or moment (inseparable in practice) one can always ask me what reasons led me to understand, interpret and evaluate the work in such a manner. Just as the arguments and the criteria for the comprehension and interpretation of the work are constructed as I speak and advance in my critical relation, constituting it as a work, evaluation is never absent. To progress in an understanding is already a choice, a preference; rejecting or taking, dismissing or following. It is already a part of the critical act, the act of krinein, the act of using and applying criteria; criteria without which I cannot distinguish what is to be understood, and without which I thus misunderstand or understand very little. Situating myself in an appropriate field of argumentation places me in principle within an entire chain of prerequisites called for by this field of argumentation through the questions the other can ask me: what reasons do I have to believe what you say, how you interpret and evaluate?
NOTES


3. «Significance» is an old English term for «significance» which means something’s importance or meaningfulness.
