

The Subject of Critique

Annemie Halsema

What does “terra critica,” a world in critical condition, imply for the subject’s capacities of criticizing the conditions that it is part of? While the humanities have had an emancipatory agenda of transforming social formations over the past 250 years, its critical role within a world that is economically, ecologically, culturally and politically co-dependent and entangled has become more and more difficult to sustain, as the organizers of this workshop explicate. One of the reasons is that the traditional capacities of distancing oneself and judging independently have become difficult to maintain. Critique, in the present circumstances, no longer can simply aim at creating a “better” social order, but needs to take into account the entanglement of different spheres and the situatedness of every diagnosis.

In their announcement of this project, Birgit Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele suggest “immanent criticism” as an alternative for the traditional Kantian notion of critique. This notion, derived from Walter Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation on criticism in Romanticism, implies a potential of critique that is inherent in the object and facilitated by the critic or reader. Immanent criticism seeks to awaken the tendencies and potentialities hidden within the work of art. It involves, Gilloch explains, an “intensification of consciousness,” an ever-greater realization of the actual meaning of a work of art.¹ For Benjamin it is not the task of the critic to guess the purposes and motives of the artist, because the latter do not possess privileged insight into the significance of their works. Rather, the critic seeks to bring to light the secret of the artwork, its inherent but hidden possibilities, which elude the artist because they manifest themselves only later under different circumstances. Criticism, in other words, is the immanent illumination and actualization of the artwork in the present moment of reading. In immanent criticism, the subject of critique is but a facilitator: what matters is not the distancing of judgment, but engagement with a work of art.

For Benjamin, it is in the object that we find the possibilities of apprehending and criticizing it. Critique brings the inner potentialities of the artwork to consciousness and to knowledge of itself. That implicates the rejection of the subject-object relation. The critic does not scrutinize the artwork in order to pass arbitrary judgement upon it. Rather, he or she is an observer who shares in the self-knowledge of the work of art released through the critical experiment.² Benjamin writes:

“Experiment consists in the evocation of self-consciousness and selfknowledge in the things observed. To observe a thing means only to arouse it to self-recognition. Whether an experiment succeeds depends on the extent to which the experimenter is capable, through the heightening of his own consciousness, through magical observation ... of getting nearer to the object and of finally drawing it into himself.”³

¹ Gilloch 2002, p. 33.

² Idem p. 35

³ Benjamin 1996-9 I, p. 148.

Critique does not imply that a subject knows an object, because in the process of reflection subject and object are one and the same.

Whereas the traditional notion of critique implies a subject that can distance itself from the object and is capable of judgment, Benjamin suggests that the subject in order to criticize needs to expose itself to the artwork. It loses itself in what it criticizes and brings to light what is present in the artwork. As Kaiser and Thiele claim, critique in the present-day globalized world implies that we need to rethink the subject of critique, i.e., consider it without a transcendent value system that motivates it, and in the complexities and intertwinements of economy, culture, politics. They suggest in a Benjaminian manner to engage with the object. My question is what it takes from the subject to engage itself with the object. Is the subject's position as facilitator, that brings the object to self-recognition, enough?

In my reflection, I will not scrutinize and further confront the traditional notion of critique as distancing judgment and Benjamin's notion of immanent critique, but transpose the same question to two other philosophical traditions, namely hermeneutics and poststructuralism. I take hermeneutics in the interpretation that Paul Ricoeur gives to it, as a heir, but also as contemporary reformulation of the Kantian position.⁴ And I take Judith Butler's position as inheritor of Foucaultian poststructuralism. In works such as *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), she asks questions not posed by Foucault, and takes his poststructuralist account of the subject further. I will not detail the relationships between Kant and Ricoeur or Foucault and Butler in this short position paper, but will get straight to the point: what do both think about the subject of critique? I will start with Butler, who of our two novel protagonists comes closest to Benjamin.

Judith Butler in different works reflects upon critique, upon the possibilities namely for a subject that is constituted by hegemonic norms to criticize these norms.⁵ Relating her notion of critique to Benjamin's immanent critique helps to elucidate what it takes for the subject to criticize. In her case, it is not a matter of bringing to light the internal potentialities of something, such as an artwork, but she reflects upon the paradoxical situation that we are inaugurated as subjects by hegemonic norms, the same norms that also need to be put under critique. Questioning these, implicitly means questioning ourselves. For Butler, the subject is not an observer that in engaging with an object articulates and brings to light what is internal to it, but the subject is constituted by norms that condition its coming into existence. She overcomes the subject-object distinction in another way than Benjamin, namely by understanding the self as not external to the complexities and intertwinements of economy, culture, politics. Rather, these complexities form the normative framework for the subject to come into existence. Questioning them, putting them under critique, implies putting its own conditions of emergence under critique. In Benjamin's immanent critique, the subject loses itself in order to bring to light the potentialities and tensions of the artwork. Butler, rather, shows that the subject comes into existence in a performative process of citing the normative practices in the cultural order that it is part of. In the performative process it constitutes itself *and* establishes the norm as hegemonic norm.

⁴ See Halsema 2006.

⁵ See for instance Butler 1997, 2005.

With Butler the question of the subject of critique has changed: while for Benjamin critique implies engaging with the object, as we saw, for Butler – who considers the subject constituted within normative social practices – critique has become problematic for the subject precisely because it is constituted as subject in the engagement with the object that is to be put under critique. For Butler, critique implies two things at once: putting under critique the normative practices that constitute us as subjects, while at the same time constituting oneself as critical subject. There is no critical subject before the act of criticizing.

In one of her recent books, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), she asks for an ethics, and develops a notion of responsibility on the basis of a poststructuralist subject notion. The book shows this double bind of the critical self. Ethics and critique for Butler are closely related. The book is based upon her Adorno-lectures. She starts her reflections with Adorno's notion of ethical violence. Ethical violence for her is related with a firm subject position, that is, a willing, and wanting subject, that is always to be held responsible for all of its actions, it is a self that is coherent and transparent to itself. On the basis of the late Foucault's work, Butler considers the self not as capable of giving a full account of itself, but as a reflexive and narrative self, that while being inaugurated by the norm, also is capable of critically relating to it.

Considering the self in a radical manner as constituted by normative practices, leads her to a notion of the self as constituting itself while giving an account of itself in an ethical or political way. The self answers to a call (of the other in ethics, of the one that calls on it to give an account of itself), or it speaks itself out against the norms that inaugurated it, and that make out, what she earlier called, its "social existence".⁶ In doing so, the self also creates itself. "It speaks itself, but in the speaking it becomes what it is", writes Butler.⁷ The late Foucault's analysis of the confession (*exomologèsis*)⁸ leads her to a self that is reflexive in the sense that it is addressed in a radical sense, and that in the process of speaking itself out, also constitutes itself. Critique for Butler implies that the self is capable of putting into question the norm that inaugurates it. It does not exist as subject before the act, but comes into existence in the act. The subject of critique, in other words, is constituted as critical subject in the act of criticizing, but there is no subject before the act.

But if the critical subject comes into existence in the act of criticizing, what makes that it is critical, that it can be critical? Why do some selves criticize and others not? Do we not need to specify the capacities of the critical self in order to understand "the subject of critique"? In Ricoeur's work, I have found an answer to these questions, in his reflections about critique in hermeneutics and in his account of the ethical self namely.⁹

⁶ Butler 1997, p. 28.

⁷ Butler 2005, p. 113.

⁸ Butler does not refer to the notion of confession as examined by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* I, but in texts such as "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self." (Foucault 1999). In the first, he indicts confession as "a forcible extraction of sexual truth," in the latter he understands confession as act of speech in which the subject "publishes itself" (Butler 2005, p. 112).

⁹ See Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", in Ricoeur 2008, pp. 263–299. See for the notion of "distançiation" also his "The Hermeneutical Function of Distançiation" in the

For Ricoeur, there is a subject that exists independently of the norm, or as he writes, of “discourse”. It even is necessary to presume such as self, in order to think the possibility of critique. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics intrinsically implicates the possibility of critique. That possibility lies precisely in the subject’s capacity of distanciation. Whereas Gadamer does not recognize the critical instance, because the hermeneutical experience for Gadamer refutes *Verfremdung*, Ricoeur develops a dialectic between the experience of belonging and alienating distanciation.

Ricoeur argues that distanciation belongs to interpretation, as its condition, instead of contradicting it, as Gadamer claims. Distanciation is implicated in the fixation that is implied in writing, in the material sense, but also because the text is autonomous from its author and the meaning that (s)he gives to the text. Furthermore it is autonomous with respect to the cultural situation and sociological conditions of the production of the text, and with respect to its original addressee. It is precisely because of the autonomy of the text to the meaning its author gives to it, to its original addressee, and to the conditions in which it is produced, that critical distanciation is included in interpretation. “The emancipation of the text constitutes the most fundamental condition for the recognition of a critical instance at the heart of interpretation: for distanciation now belongs to the mediation itself,” claims Ricoeur.¹⁰ He, furthermore, contends that in hermeneutics the text is considered as opening up a world in itself, and that this includes the possibility of critique of the real. “[T]he power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in principle a recourse against any given reality...”¹¹ Especially poetic discourse has this subversive power to suspend the reference to ordinary language and everyday reality, and to release a reference of a second order. Ricoeur also explicitly works out the relation between subjectivity and interpretation. Understanding oneself does not imply projecting oneself into the text, but rather exposing oneself to it: “it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds that interpretation unfolds.” For Ricoeur, “it is the matter of the text that gives the reader his or her dimension of subjectivity.” The confrontation with texts introduces the self to imaginative variations of the ego. In reading “I unrealize myself,”¹² he writes.

While for Butler the subject of critique comes into existence in the act of criticizing and critique implies discussing the social norms that inaugurate it as subject, Ricoeur makes clear that it are the materiality of the text and the subject’s capacities to distance itself from it, that make up the critical capacity. For hermeneutical thinker Ricoeur, the self finds itself as self and formulates itself as (narrative) self by means of the text,¹³ and is capable of taking a distance from the text. Of course the differences between both accounts of critique are broader than

same volume, pp. 72–85. For his ethical self see Ricoeur 1992 and the essay “From the Moral to the Ethical and to Ethics” in Ricoeur 2007, pp. 45–57.

10¹ Idem, 291.

11¹ Ibidem.

12¹ The above quotes are all from Ricoeur 2008, 292–293.

13¹ Ricoeur develops the notion of the narrative self in *Time and Narrative* (1988) and *Oneself as Another* (1992).

I work out here. It can, for instance, be asked whether Ricoeur takes into account enough the normativity of discourse, and whether he does not forget about its excluding potential.¹⁴ He, rather, considers discourse as a laboratory for thought experiments and variations of the self. Butler, in contrast, articulates the limits of the narrative capacities of the self, and understands discourse as at once constitutive for the self and as excluding possibilities of social articulation of the self. What I want to bring forward here, however, is a question that comes up from the confrontation between the two perspectives upon critique.

I will reformulate that question, by taking into account Ricoeur's notion of ethics, and the ethical capacities of the self. We have seen than for Butler ethics and critique are related. Ricoeur considers both spheres to intersect partly,¹⁵ but that is not what matters here. The question is what it takes for the subject, or self,¹⁶ to be critical. Ricoeur reinterprets Kantian ethics in a radical sense to an ethics that is based upon a hermeneutical self, that understands itself by means of texts and symbols. His self is narrative, and reflexive: it gathers itself after having acted, in its account of itself namely, and considers itself as actor. Yet, Ricoeur remains a Kantian in suggesting that the self can act as "counterpart" of the norm. Ethics needs to presume such a self that in a sense is independent of the norm that constitutes it, he claims. In discussion with Levinas, he in this respect speaks of "conviction". "... [M]ust not the voice of the Other who says to me: 'Thou shalt not kill,' become my own, to the point of becoming my conviction?" he writes.¹⁷ For Ricoeur, similar to Levinas, "being enjoined" forms the structure of selfhood,¹⁸ but with the remark that ethical subjectivity includes something more. The self that detests itself is unable to hear the injunction coming from the other. For the ethical self to emerge we need to suppose the "benevolent spontaneity", with which it recognizes the call of the other.¹⁹ The ethical self, in short, needs the conviction of its own capacities (i.e., attestation), the basic trust "I can."

The subject that is capable of taking a distance from the text, from discourse, in Ricoeur's ethics returns in the idea that ethics presumes a self that can act as *counterpart* of the norm. For Ricoeur, ethics basically demands not a constant self (a self that is *idem*), but a self that is capable of holding a promise (*ipse*) –which is the self constancy needed if circumstances change radically. He writes that ethics demands a self that can hold on to a basic belief in its own capacities of acting ethically.

14¹ See Halsema forthcoming.

15¹ See Ricoeur's "Ethics and Politics" in Ricoeur 2008, pp. 317–328.

16¹ Ricoeur uses "self" as an alternative for the concepts "I", "ego", "subject." He writes: philosophies of the subject "formulate the subject in the first person – *ego cogito* – , whether the 'I' is defined as an empirical or a transcendental ego, whether the 'I' is posited absolutely [...] or relatively [...]. In all of these instances the subject is 'I'" (Ricoeur 1992, p. 4). In contrast, he speaks of the "self" in *Oneself as Another*, his major book about personal and ethical identity.

17¹ Ricoeur 1992, p. 339.

18¹ Idem p. 354.

19¹ Idem p.190.

The confrontation between Ricoeur's hermeneutical account of critique and ethics and Butler's poststructuralist one, helps to reformulate the question of the subject of critique: does critique presume and need a self that can act as counterpart of the norm and that can take a distance from the object, or does the possibility of critique lie in that what constitutes us, that is, in what Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself* also calls, our "relationality," our common constitution?²⁰ Just as the notion of immanent critique understands the self as facilitator and the critical potentialities to be present in the artwork, Butler's account of critique presumes that it is in the normative practices that constitute the subject, that its opportunities for criticizing lie. But would rethinking the subject of critique in the present circumstances not imply rethinking the concept and possibility of distanciation as well, *while* taking into account that we are constituted within the entanglement of the different spheres of economy, politics, ethics, ecology, culture?

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Annemie Halsema teaches at the Department of Philosophy,
VU–University Amsterdam (j.m.halsema@vu.nl)

²⁰ Butler 2005.