

The Custodian of Consequence: Reframing the Role of the Critic By Dorian Vale

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Part I: The Critic as Conqueror

From its earliest days, art criticism carried the weight of conquest. To speak about art was never a neutral act; it was to assert dominion over what couldn't speak back. In Plato's *Republic*, the poet was condemned as dangerous, a deceiver of appearances. Plato's concern wasn't merely aesthetic but political: art destabilized the order of truth. The philosopher's task, therefore, was to control, police, and banish, to conquer art in the name of higher forms.

Aristotle responded differently in his *Poetics*. For him, poetry wasn't a mere copy but an imitation capable of revealing universals. Yet even here, the critic's role was to analyze, classify, and regulate art into categories. The ancient critic assumed mastery, rendering the work into an object of knowledge.

Christian thought extended this impulse. Augustine feared the seductions of beauty; Aquinas subsumed art into theological order, tethering aesthetics to divine teleology. Even when art was elevated, it was elevated as property of doctrine. The critic was interpreter, but also guardian of orthodoxy. Another face of conquest.

The Enlightenment reframed conquest through rational systems. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* defined aesthetic judgment as "disinterested pleasure," yet this disinterestedness was itself a conquering move: it universalized individual taste into the law of reason. Hegel went further, situating art as a historical stage in Spirit's unfolding. In Hegel's arc, art's destiny was to be overcome by philosophy. The critic became historian of conquest, placing artworks into a teleological march toward dissolution.

By the twentieth century, conquest had hardened into disciplinary authority. Clement Greenberg proclaimed formalist orthodoxy, reducing painting to flatness, sculpture to material truth. Michael Fried defended modernism as "presentness," condemning theatricality as betrayal. These weren't neutral observations; they were decrees. The critic appeared less as companion and more as judge.

Poststructuralism seemed to challenge this sovereignty. Roland Barthes declared the "death of the author," freeing the text from tyranny of intention. Derrida dissolved stable meaning into *différance*. Yet the effect was not liberation of art, but enthronement of the critic. In a universe of

endless signs, the critic became the high priest of interpretation. Interpretation itself became the act of conquest.

From Plato to Greenberg, from Augustine to Barthes, criticism has largely imagined itself as *mastery*: over truth, over form, over meaning. The critic conquers, and the artwork becomes province.

This history has produced brilliance: Greenberg trained the eye; Barthes destabilized intention; Derrida exposed the play of language. Yet brilliance born of conquest is brilliance that extracts. It leaves the work shorn of mystery, reterritorialized within regimes of explanation.

In our present moment, the age of conquest has collapsed. Saturated by commentary, exhausted by interpretation, art no longer needs conquerors. It requires something rarer: *custodians*.

Part II: Defining Custodianship

What, then, is a **custodian-critic**?

The word “custodian” comes from *custodire*, to guard, to watch, to protect. It implies stewardship, vigilance, care. Unlike the conqueror, the custodian doesn’t seize meaning but safeguards consequence.

Custodianship in Post-Interpretive Criticism (PIC) has four pillars:

1. **Restraint**: resisting the compulsive urge to interpret when interpretation would diminish presence.
2. **Proximity**: remaining close enough to witness without exploiting. Levinas reminds us that ethics begins in proximity to the Other’s face; so too must the critic recognize the artwork’s silent demand.
3. **Attention to Residue**: understanding that art often lives not in immediate meaning but in afterlife — memory, emotional trace, haunting. Here Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) intersects with Benjamin’s “aura,” both describing survival beyond the moment of encounter.
4. **Moral Responsibility**: criticism is never innocent. Language has consequences. A phrase can honor, or it can wound. A text can preserve dignity, or it can desecrate.

This isn't passivity. Heidegger, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, argued that art discloses truth (*aletheia*) and that our task is to "let the work be a work." The custodian-critic extends this insight: the critic's work is to preserve the disclosure rather than cover it with interpretation.

Adorno, too, warns in *Aesthetic Theory* that art's truth-content resists conceptual closure. To conquer art with language is to betray its autonomy. Susan Sontag sharpened this further in *Against Interpretation*: "Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art." For her, criticism should move toward an *erotics of art*. An attentiveness that preserves intensity rather than smothering it.

PIC radicalizes this: it insists that criticism isn't only aesthetic but ethical. Custodianship isn't interpretation withheld out of humility, but restraint enacted out of duty.

Part III: Why Custodianship Now

Why does art today demand custodians rather than conquerors? Because the world has changed.

In modernism, conquest was a strategy of survival: art sought legitimacy, and critics like Greenberg or Fried carved canons with surgical severity. In poststructuralism, conquest was revolt: interpretation multiplied as liberation from authority. Both had their place.

But today we face the opposite crisis: not scarcity of interpretation but **excess**.

Museums are lined with wall texts. Journals teem with theory. Every biennale issues manifestos. Every artwork arrives entombed in commentary. Foucault described this as "regimes of truth": discursive structures that pre-frame how something can be seen. Our institutions now enact this violence daily: the artwork isn't experienced but consumed through interpretive scaffolding.

Heidegger warned of "enframing" (*Gestell*), where the world is reduced to resource, a standing reserve. Interpretation now enframes art into content, taming its strangeness. Sontag's warning is realized: interpretation has become industrialized.

At the same time, the subject matter of much contemporary art has shifted: memorial, trauma, testimony. From Doris Salcedo's chairs wedged into Bogotá's Palace of Justice to Alfredo Jaar's images of Rwanda, art often addresses wounds of history. To conquer such works interpretively risks reproducing violence. As Judith Butler reminds us, grievability requires careful framing; not all loss is equally recognized. The critic's words here carry moral weight.

The critic today must therefore abandon conquest. To add more interpretation isn't liberation but noise. What art requires are custodians: writers who know when to withhold, who guard silence, who protect fragility.

Part IV: Case Studies

Duchamp: Interpretation as Parody

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) epitomizes the collapse of conquest. By presenting a urinal as art, Duchamp staged a trap: the critic, compelled to interpret, would reveal their own hunger for mastery. The endless proliferation of explanations, institutional critique, semiotic play, theological inversion, all became part of the parody.

Nietzsche warned that we invent truths to survive chaos. Duchamp exposed that critics invent interpretations to survive silence. But silence, here, was the point. The custodian-critic recognizes this. They don't rush to explain but preserve the emptiness Duchamp disclosed.

Margolles: Restraint as Dignity

Teresa Margolles works with residues of narco-violence: morgue water (*En el aire*, 2003), blood-stained cloths (*Plancha*, 1997), tiles from murder sites (*What Else Could We Talk About?*, Venice Biennale, 2009). These aren't metaphors but literal traces of the dead.

To interpret them as "fragility of life" or "ephemeral beauty" is obscene. It trivializes corpses into concept. Here Adorno's dictum resonates: to aestheticize suffering is barbaric. The critic must withhold.

Levinas teaches that the face of the Other commands: "Thou shalt not kill." Margolles radicalizes this; even the residue of the dead commands dignity. The custodian-critic ensures that silence is preserved.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: Over-Interpretation as Violence

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *The Class* (2005) shows her lecturing to corpses. *Two Planets* (2008) films Thai villagers responding to canonical Western paintings. *Village and Elsewhere* (2011) places the mentally ill in dialogue with society.

The works are fragile, intimate, disarming. Yet institutions often frame them reductively: "East-West allegory," "postcolonial critique," "political metaphor." Each curatorial flourish distances the viewer from the raw encounter.

Sontag's warning becomes urgent: interpretation tames. Here the critic must resist. Custodianship means holding space for the intimacy of corpses treated as students, or dogs filmed as dignified beings. To conquer such works with explanation is to betray them.

Part V: The Custodian's Responsibility

To write about art is to stand in proximity to fragility. The artwork isn't merely an object but an encounter: a threshold where silence, memory, and residue gather.

Language, once applied, has consequences. It can preserve or desecrate. It can amplify presence or smother it. To be a critic is therefore to accept responsibility.

The age of the conqueror-critic is over. In its place stands the **custodian of consequence**. Their task isn't ownership but stewardship, not mastery but care. They testify to what lingers without claiming to control.

As Walter Benjamin wrote, the critic is the one who "reads what was never written." The custodian-critic reads without erasing. They write not to shine brighter than the work but to ensure the work is not dimmed.

The critic's task isn't to say more than the work, but to ensure the world doesn't say less.

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17075469>