Evaluation and Description in Art-Historical Discourse

The paper will address two questions relating to the topic of evaluation in the academic discipline of art history. The first is the relative indeterminacy, from a social and institutional point of view, of this disciplinary discourse. In Britain and America, the “fine arts” have formed a part of higher education for little more than a hundred years. However, the historical character of the new disciplinary area was not immediately established. And until the second half of the 20th century the majority of scholars writing in English on the history of art were not professional art-historians in the sense of having received and/or being engaged in university training in this discipline. Many were either independent scholars from diverse backgrounds or belonged to another recently formed profession, that of the museum curator. Though less fluid than a hundred years ago, the professional careers of museum curator and academic art-historian are still not wholly distinct: there are still cases of scholars moving from one to the other. The discourse of art history is thus not exclusively academic, in the specific sense relating to higher education, but is shared by members of different professions, with different social functions, and who necessarily have different relations to works of art.

The second question concerns the mode of evaluation most peculiar to the discourse of art history. In a previous paper (Tucker, 2002) I attempted to distinguish this mode of evaluation from the two principal modes currently recognized by discourse analysts, summarized as modality and affect (Hunston & Thompson, 2000: 3-6, 20, 24), and to show that in art-historical discourse evaluation participates in, rather than modally qualifies, the construction of knowledge claims and (in terms borrowed from Martin, 2000: 155) indirectly evokes, rather than directly inscribes), affect. In particular, art-historical discourse achieves these two goals concurrently by employing a mode of description aiming not to inform the reader of the basic facts concerning the size, shape, colour, spatial collocation etc. of an object he/she cannot see, but to recommend a particular representation of an object (the work of art). Descriptive focus of this kind then allows the writer to advance more general characterizations of the work with a view to enhancing its (historical) intelligibility.

The paper will address the first question by considering art-historical articles taken from specialized journals that are differently connoted from a professional and institutional point of view. It will thus examine texts from recent issues of unequivocally academic journals, such as Art History and The Art Bulletin, but will compare them with texts from (longer established) journals such as Apollo and The Burlington Magazine, closer professionally to the environment of the museum and historically to the tradition of connoisseurship, more closely focused on the careful discrimination of style, subject, circumstances of production and technique.
The paper will address the second question by focusing, across this range of texts, on passages of description, with a view to testing two hypotheses. The first is that, though direct or inscribed affect clearly has an important place in strictly critical discourse on visual art – discourse concerned with the merits and demerits and comparative success or failure of works of art and related questions of taste – this kind of evaluation is marginal in art-historical text. (I will not attempt in this paper to examine the process of marginalization whereby in the course of the early nineteenth century a critical discourse of taste, deriving from the art academies of the 18th century, was gradually displaced by a subjective and interpretative mode of descriptive characterization which has its contemporary counterpart in the rise of what Genette calls “explanatory and symbolic” description in literature [Genette, 1969: 58].)

The second hypothesis is that a distinctive trait of art-historical description, distinguishing it from non-interpretative or merely informative description, is that it incorporates a narrative, or potentially narrative, element. In other words, the interpretative description of works of art is concerned to represent action, gesture and attitude and typically employs verbs of action (in systemic-functional terms, material process verbs), where informative description, concerned with the codification of spatial relations and elementary characterization, employs the verb be and other copular verbs in attributive clauses, typically supplemented by prepositional phrases introduced by with to indicate permanent attributes (the car is black with white trimmings). This incorporated narrative element remains only potentially narrative in the sense of not being represented as a logico-temporal progression by reference to a time of orientation. The usual tense for this kind of description is indeed neither the conventional ‘historical’ past or the present progressive (present-in-present), which would imply the reader/spectator’s awareness of current process and would be the unmarked present for material process verbs (Halliday, 1994: 116). The usual tense is rather the (here marked) present simple. This choice of tense is a signal of the special function of the narrative element in this kind of description, which is to suggest an adequate representation of (artistically represented) action understood as one of a work’s permanent modes of signification.

Lastly, a further point to be borne in mind is that the ‘action’ which art-historical description thus ‘narrates’ may be of two orders, one corresponding to the fictive action represented in the work (in the case of a representational or figurative work), the other to the artistic medium itself and the organization of that medium by the artist.

References