

# The Kantian Critic and the Rhapsodic Critic: a script for a lecture performance

O Crítico Kantiano e a Crítica Rapsódica: roteiro para uma palestra-performance

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## Abstract

Since Kant, art criticism is based on the erasure of the singular, embodied and desiring subject in the name of a detachment that favors a supposedly neutral and transparent language. Presented as a script for a lecture performance, this article contrasts to the traditional practice of Kantian criticism another possibility of a critical approach (called “rhapsodic criticism”), exemplified in the text structure itself.

**Keywords:** Theatrical Criticism. Rhapsodic Criticism. Dramaturgy.

## Resumo

*Desde Kant, a crítica de arte se fundamenta no apagamento do sujeito singular, corpóreo e desejante em nome de um distanciamento que privilegia uma linguagem supostamente neutra e transparente. Apresentado como um roteiro para uma palestra-performance, este artigo contrapõe à prática tradicional da crítica kantiana uma outra possibilidade de abordagem crítica (denominada “crítica rapsódica”), exemplificada na própria estrutura do texto.*

**Palavras-chave:** Crítica Teatral. Crítica Rapsódica. Dramaturgia.

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The lecture performance is a device that has been used with increasing frequency in the last decade, both by artists and by researchers interested in diluting the boundaries between scientific research and artistic creation, breaking the traditional model of distant criticism that still predominates in the greatest academic journals and symposia<sup>2</sup>. The presentation of this article in the form of a script for a lecture performance thus acquires a double objective: on the one hand, it contrasts two ways of conceiving art criticism, examining their positive and negative aspects; on the other hand, it is an example of how a text and a performance can have both artistic and scientific scope, without necessarily having to renounce either of these two instances.

The following script must be performed at a congress, symposium or scientific colloquium as an invisible theater modality<sup>3</sup>, that is: there will be no indication that it is a performance. The Kantian Critic will present himself as a researcher with his own name and academic credentials who will enunciate a lecture or a communication with a sufficiently generic title so that it will fit the initial observations that demonstrate his characteristic *modus operandi*. Something like “The tormented body in contemporary playwriting” or “Postcolonial practices: a critical overview” should suffice. The Rhapsodic Critic will be placed in the audience among the other people, and nothing in her initial behavior will distinguish her from the rest of the audience attending the talk.

[The Kantian Critic enters the room and checks all the devices that he intends to use for his presentation: computer, data show, pen drive. His costume is consistent with the strict and objective posture he displays in each gesture: long-sleeved shirt, social pants and leather shoes. He is the image of good taste and professionalism, and when he realizes that the scheduled time will not be respected, he begins to look at the clock repeatedly, expressing his

2. On the importance of the lecture performance in the contemporary scene, see Ladnar (2013) and Catalão (2017).

3. Cf. Boal (2011).

tacit criticism of the disorganization of the event. At last, he begins his exposure in a monotonous and tedious tone, which contrasts with the exciting and vivid images exhibited in the data show. The Kantian Critic stands all the time with his back to the audience, as if talking to the wall or to himself<sup>4</sup>].

Kantian Critic: We will begin our discussion with the analysis of Paperlapapp, presented by Christophe Marthaler and Anna Viebrock at the 2010 Avignon Festival [As he speaks, the Kantian Critic exposes some short shots and videos of the performance]. It is a site-specific performance, which will not be reproduced or transferred to any other place than the Palace of the Popes. In this sense, we must analyze it “both as an installation that subverts space, and as a spectacle that develops in time. There are a number of choral singings, with no parodic effect. The motivation of singing does not come from the dramatic situation: like an opera aria, the performance sung is directed directly to the public, without the deviation of the fiction. The quality of singing often raises applause, as if the audience abstracted loudly the theatrical situation and transformed the tedious spectacle into a series of brief but beautiful musical excerpts. These moments of pure performance relativize the theatrical representation, make it almost ancillary. The long dead times between the fragments slow the pace to leave enough time for the public to leave the room. Some do this involuntarily, in parallel with the actors who at that moment run through the proscenium in endless comings and goings.”<sup>5</sup>

[At this moment, the Rhapsodic Critic raises her hand, casts a timid “Please,” but is ignored impassively. She wears T-shirts and jeans, or a plain dress].

Critical Kantian: “As the public, increasingly sophisticated in Avignon as everywhere, expects a complex, perhaps self-reflective and deconstructive speech, it is baffled because no one tries to prove or suggest anything. Nothing, no metafiction, only the art of being silent and waiting.”<sup>6</sup>

4. I would not insert this seemingly absurd and implausible detail if I had not personally observed it at a conference on contemporary German theater given by the French critic Didier Plassard during the International Theater Festival of São Paulo on March 17, 2017 at Itaú Cultural .

5. Cf. Pavis (2010).

6. *Ibidem*.

Rhapsodic Critic [raising her voice a little so as not to be ignored, but in a courteous tone]: And you, where were you at that moment?

[The Kantian Critic finally turns to the audience, dazed, as if he had been awakened in the middle of a dream].

Kantian Critic: I did not understand ...

Rhapsodic Critic: When the public applauded the arias, did you applaud as well? Or stood apart, just watching?

Kantian Critic: I ... I guess that's beside the point.

Rhapsodic Critic: How come it's beside the point? You just talked about an "increasingly sophisticated public" ... I wanted to know if you belong to this audience or if you just look at it from above, like God, to the point of knowing not only what it expects of a play, but also the effects that the spectacle awakens on it.

[At this point, it is possible that the organization of the event may intervene and politely propose that the discussions be left to the end, after the complete and orderly exposition of the Kantian Critic - who, however, on account of his sense of justice, will be obliged to say that it is a question of answering all the questions that the public is willing to do].

Kantian Critic: I think that criticism, in order to have some scope and a minimum of relevance, must abandon the singular, narrow, partial point of view, and rise to a broader perspective, encompassing the overall view of the spectator ...

Rhapsodic Critic: But how is it possible to postulate a look that is not particular and partial? It is curious that, while asserting the unique and ephemeral character of the scenic experience, your critique attempts to unify the multiplicity of possible experiences into a single authoritative and correct version, plausibly the interpretation of the "man of good taste."<sup>7</sup>

Kantian Critic: What do you propose as a model? To replace criticism with anecdote? Everyone who sees the play tells a story about what they saw and felt, and that is enough?

7. On Kantian criticism and the figure of the "man of good taste", see Agamben (2005).

Rhapsodic Critic: I do not propose a model. But you forget that “the public” is also an anecdote; whether it is a metonymy to designate the critic and his prejudices, or the actual result of the observation of a more or less numerous set of data, “the spectator” is always a fictional creation, formed from inevitable ellipses, extrapolations and simplifications. There is no “spectator”, as there is no “play”: there are singular experiences - with some common traits, of course, but fundamentally distinct and contradictory characteristics.

Kantian Critic: Without simplification of the complexity of the world there is no science. In fact, there is no dialogue at all.

Rhapsodic Critic: The model you use can function satisfactorily when the audience is relatively homogeneous and when the scenic experience tends to be predictable. However, in more performative experiences that require unique responses from each viewer, the inadequacy of postulating a single experience as representative of the “spectator” or the “audience” becomes more evident. Think of plays or performances that are structured as immersive paths<sup>8</sup> or those that require a concrete response from each person present (dancing or not dancing, for example, interrupting a torture session or staying apart): this type of event makes clear that detachment is not a neutral and impartial stance, but a commitment to certain assumptions.

Kantian Critic: Even so, the behavior of the public is not unpredictable; as your own discourse shows, even in these cases the possibilities offered to the spectator are two or three, not ten or a hundred.

Rhapsodic Critic: We may examine the question from another angle: perhaps the fact that it is possible to analyze or describe a spectacle from the point of view of a generic and uniform “spectator” indicates that the scenic experience in question is not so immersive or participatory as we imagined. On the other hand, in cases where there are, in fact, multiple and unforeseeable paths for each spectator,

8.  
Cf. Bouko; Van Haesebrouk (2016) and Bouko; Bernas (2012).

the critic will be more convincing as he assumes the bias of his account, asserting himself as a rhapsode and recreating a singular experience, which will gain a forum of “objectivity” just from the moment it confronts other similarly partial (in both senses of the word) accounts.

Kantian Critic: A rhapsode?

Rhapsodic Critic: I call a rhapsodic critic who assumes the uniqueness, partiality, and precariousness of his voice and perception. [She searches among her papers until she finds the right examples]. When Anne-Françoise Benhamou and Antoine Pickels recognize that their speech is conditioned by their professional and ideological formations<sup>9</sup>, when Amelia Jones explains in detail how her biographical circumstances were decisive for her critic interpretation of performance art<sup>10</sup>, when Jean-François Peyret assumes clearly that his critical analysis might be different if the casual circumstances of writing were otherwise<sup>11</sup>, or when Luc Boucris shows how a gust of wind can alter the perception of a live spectacle<sup>12</sup>, the critical text assumes its living, procedural, and performative character, and ceases to be a mere anodyne protocol. When Sophie Hossenlopp admits that “My discomfort and my reluctance to analyze in a methodical and rational way the work of Matthias Langhoff made me reflect for a long time. It seems that the difficulty comes from the very essence of his theater: it is fundamentally anti-systematic, anticonceptual, unconventional,”<sup>13</sup> it becomes evident that an introspective diving can illuminate a concrete work: by examining a specific feeling, the critic comes to a conclusion about the objective achievement of the work. What is at stake is not an external and extraneous object, but a subjective experience.

Kantian critic: Proposing subjectivity as a place of resistance seems to me a little naive.

Rhapsodic Critic: Not as a place of resistance, but as a territory of clash between stereotype and invention. It is not a matter of opposing two well-defined groups of critics (on the one hand, the rhapsodes, on the other, the Kantian

9.  
Cf. Benhamou (2010, p. 25);  
Pickels (2012, p. 140).

10.  
Cf. Jones (1997, p. 11).

11.  
Cf. Peyret (2007, p. 179-181).

12.  
Cf. Boucris (2012, p. 59).

13.  
Cf. Hossenlopp (1997, p. 67).

critics): these are two possible practices for all of us. The same person can alternate between the two practices at different times (and sometimes even in different parts of the same paper!).

Kantian Critic: Let's take another example so that I can show you that your proposal is not viable. [Turning to electronic devices again, he seems to feel more secure as the data show displays images of 2666]. Consider 2666, staged by Julien Gosselin, a twelve-hour play presented at the Avignon Festival in 2016. If each spectator who attended this play was to discuss the fidelity of the adaptation of Roberto Bolaño's novel, the property of the changes of scene, the feelings of tiredness, impatience and surprise aroused by the performance, the acting of the actors and numerous other issues aroused by the work, the volume of material accumulated would simply be unapproachable. The critic must have the rigor and sensitivity to propose an evaluation that takes into account the different possible perspectives on the spectacle, but that presents a satisfactory synthesis of the different possible interpretations. My tiredness at the end of the fourth part of the play (when there were still two hours to go) will only be relevant if I realize that it is not episodic, but structural, if it's a result of the aesthetic options of the director or a side effect felt by other spectators as well. On the other hand, when I point references to Warlikowski, Lawers, Orhn, and Carstoff in its scenography, I do not expect the average spectator to realize all of them; in these references, I may be more personal than impersonal; however, these are objective elements, which I point out based on images and arguments, and which may eventually be refuted by another critic.

Rhapsodic Critic: "Average spectator", "objective elements" ... As you are thoughtful, logical, balanced! But where is the body? Discourse without a body becomes a stereotype.<sup>14</sup>

14.  
Cf. Barthes (1980, p. 93).

[The Kantian Critic observes with a certain perplexity, makes mention of answer, but then seems to change his idea and returns to his exposition].

Kantian Critic: Let's move on to an example where there is room for a body approach in the scene. Created for the sixtieth edition of the Avignon Festival, the performance *Paso Doble*, by Miquel Barceló and Josef Nadj, combines the dance universe with the visual arts [It shows some images and videos of the performance. Again, the use of electronic devices seems to reassure him]. For forty minutes, the two protagonists of this scenic exercise of live sculpture decorate the moldable material, crush it and make an admirable fusion.<sup>15</sup> With each presentation, the artists create an unprecedented work<sup>16</sup> that produces in the spectator a unique and unforgettable experience.

15.  
Cf. Ardenne; Barceló (2009).

16.  
Cf. Mervant-Roux (2008, p. 44).

Rhapsodic Critic: In which spectator? In the "average spectator" or in you, singular spectator?

Kantian Critic [beginning to get impatient]: What difference does the denomination make? Do not you understand what I'm saying?

Rhapsodic Critic: The denomination makes all the difference! When you name it you confine it<sup>17</sup>. I understand (and I think most people here also understand) that when you say that the work "produces in the spectator a unique and unforgettable experience" you are talking about your unique and irreproducible experience. The problem is that this generalizing discourse that you use tends to homogenize the experience itself that is proposed as a multiple and unpredictable one. If there is, in fact, a unique work at each performance, what is the meaning of speaking in the name of "the spectator"? How to speak about "a work"? The inadequacy is not of your perception (which seems to me sharp and penetrating), but of your chosen form, which does not allow the singularity of your perspective to be assumed as such.

17.  
Cf. Pinotti (2016, p. 12).

Kantian Critic: What do you propose then?



Rhapsodic Critic: What do I propose? A new form of criticism, open to the singularity of each artistic experience.

Kantian Critic: This is also a generalization.

Rhapsodic Critic: Right. I propose that each critic put to himself the same challenge that authentic artists assume at each work: to invent a unique form, molded with the very flesh of that specific experience. Do not you find it curious that some critics praise unconventional and risky artistic practices in a completely conventional style without any shadow of boldness?

Critical Kantian: The function of criticism is distinct from the function of art.

Rhapsodic Critic: Maybe it is. But I wonder if the pedagogy of desensitization that is taught to all who wish to become “respectable critics” and that teaches them to assume a supposedly “transpersonal” perspective, in which subjectivities are flattened and the raptures are contained, brings us closer or moves us away from an understanding and a more intense experience of artistic practices. When you make a thoughtful description of the positive and negative aspects of 2666 staging, for example, I can’t help but feel that you are not going to the theater to transform or even cultivate yourself: you are already cultivated and refined, and you go to the theater to convey a little of your good taste to the poor mortals.<sup>18</sup> But to be cultured and to be sensitive are two different things; the sensibility can’t surface at a distance: it is not a judgment; is an affection<sup>19</sup>.

Kantian Critic: Affections are not arguments. If you say “I liked” and I say “I did not like it”, there is no possible discussion.

Rhapsodic Critic: There are many supposedly objective critiques that are just more or less sophisticated paraphrases of “I liked” or “I did not like”. But I do not propose that critics only say if they liked a performance or not; on the contrary, I would like them to describe to me in detail how they were affected. It turns out that I was in Avignon

18.  
Cf. Sloterdijk (2012).

19.  
Cf. de Duve (1998, p. 35)

in July 2016 and I was able to watch the 2666 staging, and if I were to write a review about my experience as a person (rather than as “average spectator”, flattened in the supposedly neutral genre but always associated - as the “disinterested critic” - to the white Western man<sup>20</sup>), I could not fail to recount my return home on foot at two-thirty in the morning, afraid of every shadow, after having heard the minute and terrible description of the murders of dozens of women in Santa Teresa. You will say that this is not part of the work, but it certainly was part of the event that I experienced. And a scenic performance is not a fixed object, but an experience that occurs with certain people in specific circumstances.

20.  
Cf. Jones (2005, p. 20).

Kantian Critic: But it is not possible to deny that all the effective realizations of a play, however variable, follow a certain pattern and present certain regularities that the critic can take as representative of the work.

Rhapsodic Critic: In this case, why to watch the performance? It would not be enough to read the book on which it was based, or (if it is not based on any previous text) to read the press release that explains not only “what the piece is about” but also how it should be interpreted?

Kantian Critic: You exaggerate to become more persuasive, but the fact is that, amid all the variety of possible experiences (which are not as many as you imagine or pretend to imagine) there is a common substrate - performative, yes, open to certain unpredictability, but which can (and should) be encompassed by a critical discourse that suppresses subjective variants and aspires to objectivity.

Rhapsodic Critic: You used the right word: *suppress*. The supposedly objective discourse is only affirmed through the suppression and erasure of individual marks. But it is as contingent and arbitrary (and therefore partial) as any other discourse. You can't see a play, a performance or anything else from the outside, because to see it you must be within a body, an experience, a situation necessarily partial and limited.<sup>21</sup>

21.  
Cf. Nagel (1986, p. 18).

Kantian Critic: Yes, I could describe the chair in which I sat down to watch the play, the conversation I had with the man who sat next to me (a very nice Belgian, who said he was from Brussels, “the capital of Europe - or of what’s left of it “), I could talk about my cold or about the heat it was doing that day; however, as a critic (and as a writer in general), I must be able to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, the accessory from the essential.

Rhapsodic Critic: Your critical discourse seems to regard the body as a distraction, something that must be left in the shade for us to concentrate on the play; but the center of the theatrical experience is the body - not only the actor’s body, but also mine, which pulsates, sweats, shakes and refuses to remain apart from the scene. [At that moment, the Rhapsodic Critic abandons her place in the audience and goes up to the stage from where the Kantian Critic delivered his lecture. He looks puzzled as she snatches the microphone from him, sits on his lap and starts teasing him as she continues to speak, with an ironic security that contrasts with the shyness of the Kantian Critic.] This need to put oneself at a safe distance, this urge to not to be carried away by the emotion or the seductions of the spectacle, is not this a new version of the traditional distrust of reason in relation to everything that is alive, intense and unpredictable?

Kantian Critic: But that’s ...

Rhapsodic Critique [still provoking it]: “Spectacularize the scientific debate”? You should have read the paper<sup>22</sup> in which Marvin Carlson shows how the attack on the theater (or the fear of its power of seduction) goes back to Plato. Should not we, the critics of the performing arts, be the first to oppose this fear of spectacularization? Those who are afraid of art are the Fake Bullshit Mob<sup>23</sup>, not you and me!

Kantian Critic [with a voice suddenly hoarse, almost to the point of fainting]: But scientific practice has certain norms ...

Rhapsodic Critic: The norm excludes contingency, dif-

22.  
Carlson (2012).

23.  
The Rhapsodic Critic seems to refer here to the Free Brazil Movement, which is enunciated as a movement for a "Free Brazil", but which has promoted a series of actions of virtual bullying against artistic manifestations supposedly unseemly.

ference, divergence, diversity<sup>24</sup>. Mathematicians prove their theorems through deductions, but sciences such as evolutionary biology or geology are no less rigorous by appealing to narratives.<sup>25</sup> [She finally rises from his lap, as if enthusiastic about her own flow of ideas. He takes the opportunity to drink some water]. You put yourself apart from the experience, but the only proper way of reflecting on a process is to recognize yourself as a process, as someone who is inside the river, not on land. [The Rhapsodic Critic takes the glass or the water bottle from the hands of the Kantian Critic and pours it into his head]. If the experience of a performance can be ambiguous, disturbing, and contradictory, why should the text that narrates, comments or analyzes this experience be linear, logical, or thoughtful?

<sup>24</sup>.  
Cf. Perrin; Guerry (2013).

<sup>25</sup>.  
Cf. Morson (2013, p. 33).

Kantian critic [bounces a little after drying himself with a paper towel]: If your arguments are really good, your performance is superfluous; if they are weak, there is no performance that will save them from being demolished - if not by me, now, certainly later, by someone sharper than me.

Rhapsodic Critic: My performance is argumentative, just as every argument is performative. I do not care so much about being right as about moving reason to unforeseen (and sometimes not at all reasonable) places. Where there is body, there is uncertainty, and I prefer the living contradiction to dead normatization.

[The Rhapsodic Critic leaves the scene resolutely, without looking back. The Kantian Critic stands silent for a moment, stunned, then observes his notes and devices before finally speaking again].

Kantian Critic: Let's suspend our exposition for a few minutes, but we will soon return with some observations about the methodology of scientific practice. Thank you.

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