“What’s the point of an island”

Eric Loret

Translator: Phoebe Clarke

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Texte original d'Eric Loret paru en français sous le titre « Une île pour quoi faire » dans *Petit manuel critique*, Paris : Les Prairies ordinaires, 2015, p. 7-11 et 20-22, (Essais)

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Même si « écrire de la critique est, sauf sous forme d'essai, une activité périmée » (*Petit manuel critique*, p. 182), Eric Loret cultive la grande ambition de la modestie de la critique, pour peu qu'elle sache « ne pas servir et connaître la liberté de l'inutile ». En revendiquant son inscription dans la sphère de la « publicité » kantienne, elle interroge et nourrit les représentations collectives. Plutôt qu'à prétendre fourbir un jugement quantifié, la critique n'envisage le jugement qu'assorti de sursis. Portée par une écriture déterminée et une énergie dialectique stimulante, la position critique volontaire telle qu'elle se précise au fil des pages du *Petit manuel critique*, dont nous avons ici choisi de traduire vers l'anglais un extrait, ne démerite pas de son titre, sous son air bonhomme de « manuel ». On attendra une suite qui saurait reconnaître les formes et modes d'existence d'une telle critique, non normative, non prescriptive, et qui saurait, comme ces pages savent le tenter, entretenir une position d'énonciation claire qui vise, plutôt que le jugement, le partage d'une attention esthétique exigeante, nourrie, sans craindre contradiction et débat.

Christophe Domino

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Original text by Eric Loret, published in French as « Une île pour quoi faire » in *Petit manuel critique*, Paris : Les Prairies ordinaires, 2015, p. 7-11 and 20-22, (Essais)

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Even though "writing criticism, except as an essay, is an out-of-date endeavour" (*Petit manuel critique*, p. 182), Eric Loret aspires to a modest sort of criticism that understands "how not to serve, and recognises the freedom of uselessness". By claiming its affiliation

to the Kantian sphere of "publicity", it questions and develops collective representation. Rather than pretending to hone in on a quantified judgement, criticism merely considers judgement as a suspended sentence. Shored up by a resolute style and stimulating dialectical energy, the strong-minded critical position expounded in the *Petit manuel critique* proves worthy of its title, despite the ingenuous evocation of a handbook through the use of the term "*manuel*". We await further developments that take into account the forms and modes of existence of this type of non-normative, non-prescriptive criticism which, as this excerpt attempts to show, entertain a clear position of enunciation aimed at sharing a demanding and sustained aesthetic attention rather than judgement, without fear of contradiction and debate.

Christophe Domino

- 1 People often ask: "What book (or film, or record, etc.) would you take to a desert island?" The most sensible answer is: "None." Provided, of course, that we agree on what deserted means here. To wit: an inaccessible place where one is indeed alone, and, most importantly, where one is sure never to see a human being again in one's life. Otherwise it's just a walk in the park, a slightly protracted wait.
- 2 If one wanted to be clearer, one could say: "What book (or film, or record, etc.) would you like to find after having been shipwrecked, alone, on a desert island?" Because bringing along a book (etc.) implies that the Robinson Crusoe game will not last. If I am sure that people will come and save me, I can read while awaiting my rescue, and if I am not sure, I can pretend: pretend I am not alone, pretend I will be saved, deny that I have been abandoned. But if I should indeed stay alone on the island forever, reading a book or contemplating a painting would become meaningless activities, because the pleasure they could give me would never be shared with another human being again. In fact, apart from purely physiological survival, wouldn't any activity become meaningless, inasmuch as meaning is a construct devised by the many, and in this case one would have no Other to relate to? And there would be no pleasure either, since intellectual pleasure consists precisely in the creation of meaning. In order to continue existing as a human being, the eighteenth-century castaway Robinson Crusoe had to invent an imaginary friend, domesticate an animal, or go insane.
- 3 The second problem this question poses lies in the singleness of this artwork, be it discovered or taken along to begin with. One is asked to establish a hierarchy, to decide which artwork is the best, the absolute, the one that requires nothing but this silent island. This comes as no surprise, as many people love to judge artworks and establish scales of satisfaction. But, from a logical viewpoint, the first element in a ranking cannot exist without the rest of the list, which makes simultaneously being the first and the only item on the list rather difficult. Besides, imagining that just one artwork could suffice for a whole lifetime is related to the mistake of believing that one could enjoy it absolutely, with no Other in sight. This also means that reading or listening to the same work again and again could only echo what we remember of previous hearings or readings, without ever interacting with new ideas; and that the pleasure derived could never be transformed or renewed. An adulterated version of Kant's description of the "sublime" as "absolutely great" and "great beyond comparison" can be identified in this question¹. This is where our denatured ideas of masterpiece and genius come from.
- 4 Indeed, the third difficulty lies in the fact that the book that is supposed to fulfil me (if such a thing is possible) may suit me but no one else. It is wrong to believe that certain

absolute artworks are unanimously admired, as if, like a mystical revelation, one could not escape their greatness. Therefore, asking what my favourite book is can tell you a lot about my personality and taste, but will be useless as a guide to finding your way through literature. The most pitiful question one can ask a professional critic is, "What good books or shows are there at the moment?" - except, of course, if the critic and her interlocutor have the same taste (that for which there is "no accounting"), or if the question concerns a group exhibition, in which case there will be something for everyone.

- 5 The matter of artworks and desert islands, like all false issues, is an invitation to reflect upon the real use we make of art. The activity of enjoying a piece of art can apparently hardly exist without being shared. Sharing can consist of a remark, a smile, a few words, a gesture or a long palaver². Critical discourse is one way of sharing — but it isn't the only way. Nowadays, criticism is something like an episode from Robinson Crusoe rather than a way of sharing: a *vox clamantis in deserto* with nothing much to say, because for such a long time it has not been addressed to anyone in particular. As far as institutional and professional criticism is concerned, most magazines devoted to art, cinema and literature have seen a sharp decline in their readership, although (with the exception of cinema) their former readers have not shifted to the Internet. Critical discourse appearing in the "old media", which is now perceived as institutional, is subsumed within a more general political distrust and is vilified as such; sometimes rightly, because of favours granted among critics and conflicts of interest among the media, publishing and the film industry.
- 6 By the same token, this disaffection with classical criticism corresponds to an upsurge in "domestic" criticism in blogs, forums and on social media, which often mimes the mannerisms of traditional criticism and reproduces its worst flaws, dealing out disapproval and praise on the sole criterion of personal taste. Because social networks paradoxically seem to encourage speaking out rather than listening, exchanges that hope to address and welcome all comers barely exist. Though it is free of any kind of authority and accessible to all, this new kind of criticism is not necessarily successful: even when it does overcome its egotistical tendencies and its confrontational relationship with the old media, it almost only expresses itself on the outskirts of legitimacy, as comments and answers to "authorised" texts, for instance. But when online criticism does reach as wide an audience as a journal³, it must face its readers' and viewers' hatred, much like its traditional counterpart. At this stage, it generally becomes wary of questions concerning taste and starts looking for "objective" judgment criteria. Since this type of criticism does not know what value it should attach to taste and emotions as such, it tries to give quantifiable justification to the pleasure or displeasure it feels. Artworks are judged not according to what they are, but according to what they should be, to their ability to adhere to the requirements of a recipe. Robinson Crusoe thus becomes a productivist critic since, as Marx observed, he keeps a detailed inventory "of the objects of utility that belong to him, of the operations necessary for their production; and lastly, of the labour time that definite quantities of those objects have, on an average, cost him."⁴
- 7 What can be salvaged, despite its faults, from the traditional methods of criticism in order to construct a new kind of criticism created by everyone and able to generate processes of legitimisation that would ensure its sharing? The idea of a "critique of taste" is an old one, even more so than the island question first raised by Kant. Determining a rule to discuss that which cannot be discussed is indeed a political necessity. But it is above all an apparently impossible task: as Bourdieu demonstrated, taste is socially and politically determined, and it is only possible to say which taste we want depending on the politics

we want, not which politics would ensue from a nonexistent "natural" taste. However, the claim that taste is wholly cultural upsets what individual experience teaches us: the awe and jubilation we feel before what we call "beauty" seems to be shared by all humankind, even if it does not always apply to the same objects. So it is tempting to state that a universal does exist, not of a "taste for *something*", but of taste *tout court*. For instance, though the food in such and such a part of the world may seem vile to me, I can clearly see that culinary pleasure is common to everyone, all over the world, although admittedly to different degrees, depending on class, culture, etc. Experience also suggests that I can enjoy Schumann and Taylor Swift in the same way, and that they can also be enjoyed in different ways.

- 8 The idea is therefore this one: on the one hand, to try and understand, *to the quick*, what the pleasures we take from art are (which would obviously include knowing what the term "art" means, even if we can sense that the definition might be somewhat circular, because art would be defined by a certain type of pleasure). One would then establish "critical principles" that would allow everyone to speak of experienced pleasure in the clearest and most methodical way possible. On the other hand, one would define the type of desired social cohesion and the relevant representations on which it would be founded, because sharing is obviously not only speaking and being heard, nor is it listening proportionally to how much we wish to be heard: it is also means distributing tasks to achieve a project. Criticism by everyone and with everyone, therefore, with a view to a single oeuvre: the world.

9 [...]

- 10 However, as noted above, at a time when the new media allow everyone to play God and decide what is good and what is not, the kind of criticism directed towards the distribution and discussion of taste is no longer topical. Although the war of all against all is a reality, it cannot claim to be a political project. Instead, one should search for what Jacques Rancière has long referred to as the "distribution of the sensible" that strives toward an "aesthetic republic". This process is described in *Le Fil Perdu*, among other works. Although Rancière does not imply that his advice can be applied to a critique of taste, it does seem to pave the way for it: "The main thing is to set out, to act like a researcher, carefully watching for any symbol traced by another hand, for any nearby speech, and, as an artist, to try and arrange the signs that are able to speak to another mind."⁵

- 11 What we aim for is a democracy of equal intelligences, an "unprecedented community of individuals hazarding ways of reaching each other through the forest of symbols and shapes, a community made up of multiple journeys and encounters, under the sign of equality"⁶, as Rancière puts it. Of course, "any symbol traced by another hand" and "any nearby speech", attempt to displace criticism from the framework of legitimate objects and masterpieces alone, but also guards them against mass-produced cultural goods that no "hand" designed, at least no hand that "hazards" to "reach" the hands of others. This should not prevent us from examining the pleasure and use we all find in these kinds of objects. Furthermore, "arranging the signs that are able to speak to another mind" implies being an artistic spectator and inviting the person we ask to "come and look" to converse and disagree with us. In the case of ordinary, media, and academic criticism, this means knowing how to leave one's discourse open, hinged on the question William James asked as a pragmatic solution to any philosophical question: "In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true?"⁷

NOTES

1. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J.H. Bernard, London: Macmillian, 1914, "Analytic of the Sublime", §25, p. 86
2. A note by Wittgenstein on the comprehension or the explanation of a musical phrase: "Sometimes the simplest explanation is a gesture; on another occasion it might be a dance step, or words describing a dance." (*Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 69e)
3. For example Durendal's Youtube channel, affiliated to www.cinephile.info, offers several different programmes (*The Cinema of Durendal, Why I'm Right and You're Wrong, Retrospective...*) and has 80,000 followers.
4. Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Book I, Section 1, chapter 1, IV, on: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>, p. 50
5. Rancière, Jacques. *Le Fil perdu*, Paris : La Fabrique, 2014, p.88. (Not yet published in English)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 93
7. James, William. *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Longman : Green & co, 1907, p. 48