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Original Research Article

Correspondence of the Components of External Evaluative Art Criticism with Mulla Sadra's Four Intellectual Journeys in Transcendent Philosophy

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Abstract

Introduction: Following the separation of art history from art criticism, art criticism in the contemporary world has evolved into an interdisciplinary field, incorporating a wide range of theories and approaches. It has played a significant role in shaping the perception and artistic taste of a wide range of both specialized and general audiences when encountering works of art. This highlights the necessity of systematization and dynamism in art criticism through reliance on theoretical foundations. The Transcendent Philosophy (al-Hikmat al-Muta'āliya) is among the sources that offer considerable potential to address this need. Accordingly, the present study seeks to correspond Mulla Sadra's Four Intellectual Journeys (al-Asfār al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a) with the stages of evaluative external criticism, aiming to answer how the components of external art criticism can be aligned with Sadra's Fourfold Intellectual Journeys.

Research Method: This qualitative research employed a descriptive-comparative approach. The correspondence between the stages of the fourfold intellectual journeys (Asfār al-Arba'a) and the stages of external evaluative criticism was carried out using the framework of Kerry Walk (1998), which identifies five key criteria for correspondence: Frame of reference, ground for comparison, hypothesis, organization scheme, and linking of A and B.

Findings: The stages of description, classification, examination of causal conditions, explication, and interpretation within external evaluative art criticism correspond to the First and Second Journeys. Similarly, the stage of analysis corresponds to the Third Journey, and the stage of evaluation corresponds to the Fourth Journey, encompassing the two arcs of ascent and descent within Sadra's Intellectual Journeys.

Conclusion: The present study demonstrates that the path of perfection of the soul, through substantial motion, its ascent from the sensible to the intelligible, and its resurrection and gathering, can be mapped onto a parallel movement within the artwork, as apprehended through external evaluative criticism. Just as the soul is corporeal in origination and spiritual in subsistence, progressing through substantial motion from corporeality to union with the Active Intellect, casting off its material body and attaining perfection in immateriality, so too the artwork, though corporeal in its sensible medium, embarks upon a motion through the process of critique. Within the medium of philosophy, this culminates in a unifying and final hypothesis. By transcending its corporeal dimension, the artwork enters the domain of the intellect and inaugurates a new life within humanity's cultural existence, taking form in the consciousness of subjects; that is, within the intelligible realm.

Keywords

Art Criticism, External Evaluative Criticism, The Four Intellectual Journeys, Substantial Motion

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Introduction and Problem Definition

The direct influence of the views of art critics on the artistic experience and the semantic disclosure of the artwork, whether for the general audience or even for artists themselves in the contemporary world, and the alignment of their perception, is a sign of the importance of art criticism and the necessity of paying serious attention to it. Art criticism, after its separation from art history, developed in an interdisciplinary manner within various academic branches, becoming associated with diverse theories and approaches that focused on aesthetics beyond mere visual appreciation. The central issue, however, is that the dynamism of art criticism depends upon «systematic laws and concepts» and «grounding in theory». The present study addresses the need for a theoretical framework in art criticism that draws on Iranian–Islamic philosophical knowledge, as outlined in sources such as Transcendent Philosophy (al-Ḥikmah al-Mutaʿāliyah). In this work, Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mulla Sadra) aligned philosophical and intellectual inquiries with mystical journeys. The dual sense of the word safar (journey) and sifr (book, scripture) further indicates the connection between philosophy (rational method) and mystical wayfaring in his epistemology. His system begins with an inquiry into the states of existence and explains the process of the soul's perfection within the doctrine of substantial motion. In his exposition of the Four Intellectual Journeys, namely, general metaphysics, natural philosophy, divine science, and psychology and bodily resurrection, he describes the origin and the destiny of the soul and its movement from the realm of multiplicity to the realm of unity, that is, from prime matter to union with the Active Intellect, and then its return among multiplicity in the arc of ascent and descent. The philosophical ground and the logical requirements present in both art criticism and the Four Journeys, together with movement toward the Ultimate Reality, apprehension of the telos, disclosure of the true values of existence, the guidance of creation, and judgment in the Fourth Journey, are precisely the elements that strengthen the hypothesis of similarity between these journeys and the stages of external evaluative criticism. Although an artwork lacks a soul, like every existent in the order of being, it possesses the capacity for movement, according to Mulla Sadra. Within this process, art criticism provides a framework through which the artwork, once perceived by the subject, is set in motion along an Intellectual Journey, from the actually-sensible in its medium toward an intellectual apprehension within the intelligible realm. Just as, in the arc of ascent, the rational soul unites with the Active Intellect, apprehends all contradictions, differences, disharmonies, and harmonies of existence within an absolute unity, and then, upon returning to creation, conveys what it has received, expounding felicity and wretchedness, origin and destiny of the world in the form of legislative prophecy. External evaluative criticism, as a methodical and hierarchical process, seeks to extract from within the juxtapositions, oppositions, and formal harmonies perceptible through the senses in the material components of the artwork, a unifying hypothesis that can account for all those contrasts and concordances. Following the revelation of the telos, it then articulates, in the final judgment, the achieved values of the work. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between the constituent stages of external evaluative criticism and the Four Intellectual Journeys of Mulla Sadra.

Research Method

The present study undertakes a comparative analysis of contemporary texts in the field of art criticism with the text of the Transcendent Theosophy, composed in the eleventh century A.H. Accordingly, a qualitative analysis is required, employing a descriptive-comparative method to draw upon the intellectual resources of the past. The comparative framework is

based on Kerry Walk's model of comparison (1998), which identifies five factors: 1. Frame of reference, 2. Ground for comparison, 3. Hypothesis[1], 4. Organization scheme, and 5. Linking of A and B. This model enables the presentation of raw materials, similarities, and differences in a coherent, logical, and methodical structure (Walk, 1998). The frame of reference provides the umbrella under which the two selected domains for comparison are juxtaposed, within which the relevant information concerning A and B is organized. The grounds of comparison express the rationale and intelligibility underlying the choice of the items being compared. The organization scheme may proceed in two forms: Point-by-point or text-by-text. Finally, the linking of A and B specifies the mode of reasoning through which similarities and differences between the compared elements are articulated. In the first stage, art criticism in general and external evaluative criticism are defined and clarified. Subsequently, the sequential stages of this critical method are outlined and then correlated with the journeys of the soul as elaborated in Transcendent Theosophy.

Research Background

In pursuit of grounding criticism in theoretical foundations and uncovering systematic concepts from indigenous intellectual resources, several studies have turned to comparative approaches. Among these are works that examine the correlation between the paradigm of mystical journeys and approaches to art criticism, including the article entitled «A comparative Study of Theosophist's Quadruplet Journeys, in Mulla Sadra's Perspective, And Joseph Campbell's Theory of Monomyth» by «Rafiei Rad and Namvar Motlagh» (2021), «Hemmatjou» (2012) study entitled «A Comparison of the Epic and Mystical Journeys», and «Eskandari» (2019) research entitled «The Hero's Journey in the Mythical Section of the Shahnameh and Its Comparison with the Mystical Journey of the Birds in Attar's Conference of the Birds». Similarly, «Namdarian et al.» (2021), in their article entitled «An Analysis of the Manifestation of the Theory of the Four-Fold Journeys in the Architecture of Naqsh-e Jahan Square», demonstrate a correspondence between architecture and the Four Journeys. Through allegory and embodiment of the Ascension, the journey begins from the Qeysarieh Bazaar and returns to it, whereby the passerby, like the spiritual wayfarer, returns ultimately to the self. «Saki» (2017) research, entitled «The Possibility of Deducting a Theory of Beauty and Art in Mulla Sadra's Philosophy with Emphasis on the Concept of Abstract Imagination», considers the artist to be identical with his imaginative work, which, aided by the Active Intellect, moves from deficiency to perfection and attains concrete realization. The origin of art, in this view, lies in factors such as the human capacity to manifest attributes like innovation, imaginal depiction, and creativity, as well as the innate and revelatory nature of art and the influence of the imaginative faculty. «Azizi» (2016) study entitled «The Manifestation of Mulla Sadra's Theory of Substantial Motion in the Isfahan School Miniatures», examines Sadrian concepts such as substantial motion and the movement toward perfection in selected Safavid-era paintings. Similarly, «Mohammadpour» (2014) research entitled «A Study of the Concepts of Motion and Growth in Arabesque and Khatai Motifs from the Viewpoint of Mulla Sadra's Theory Substantial Motion» and «Yousefzadeh» (2019) work entitled «Creation and Perception of the Work of Art and Its Relationship to Felicity and Misery with Emphasis on Sadra's theory in Psychology (ʿIlm al-Nafs)», both emphasize that the only proper method for interpreting an artwork is esoteric interpretation. The approach of these studies extends not only to religious art but to all forms of artistic creation, regarding Sadra's psychology as highly capable of addressing artistic problems. Moreover, by employing the arcs of descent and ascent, these works establish an analogy between divine

creation and artistic creation. Issues such as the relationship between content and form based on manifestation in the process of descent within the artwork, the mirroring function of the artistic work, Sadrian existential hermeneutics, and the existential rank of the interpreter of the artwork are presented as key findings. In the research mentioned above, the processes of artistic creation and perception that essentially do not fall within the concept of Tanzīl (such as abstraction, post-painterly abstraction, and similar modes) were not considered. «Asadi» (2011) study entitled «An Examination of the Influence of Mulla Sadra's Philosophy on the Paintings of the Isfahan School», as well as the article by «Razmkhah et al.» (2023) entitled «Reflecting the Philosophical Components of Mulla Sadra in the Content and Form Elegance of the Isfahan School Paintings», conclude that the works of Reza Abbasi and his students demonstrate connections with Sadrian concepts of beauty. Accordingly, previous research has sought either to describe the mechanisms of artistic creation (by the painter) and perception (by the audience), or to derive aesthetic principles; others, through uncovering aesthetic and philosophical components, have examined their influence in the Isfahan School. Still others have attempted to draw analogies between the movement of the passerby in Isfahani architecture and the mystical journeys in Sadrian philosophy. Nevertheless, the present study, before proposing a model based on scientific principles for critiquing artworks, emphasizes the necessity of examining the possibility of aligning the very nature of art criticism with Sadra's Fourfold Intellectual Journeys.

Theoretical Foundations

External Evaluative Criticism and Its Components: Art criticism has been defined as a dialogue within the domain of art aimed at understanding, experiencing aesthetic pleasure, and consciously appreciating artworks, while simultaneously enhancing the function of art (Burt, 2012, 77; Desmond, 2011, 42; Anderson, 1991). It is also described as a practice that articulates the strengths and weaknesses of an artwork (Davariardakani, 2005, 10). In contrast to figures such as Danto, Frank Rich, and Jowitt, some scholars regard the very essence of criticism as the evaluation and discovery of the values inherent in an artwork, along with their reasoned articulation (Carroll, 2008, 46-47). One may distinguish two types of evaluative criticism: Criticism «based on aimless personal reaction» and criticism «grounded in prior principles» (Elkins, 2003, 518). In internal evaluative criticism, the critic focuses exclusively on the aesthetics of the work itself; consequently, this approach encounters challenges related to subjectivity. By contrast, in external evaluative criticism, the critic, in a realist, demonstrable, and communicable manner, establishes that the artwork belongs to a particular category of art, and that this category or categories possess specific purposes which are best fulfilled through particular features. This implies that the critic possesses the logical and conceptual resources necessary to issue externally grounded judgments (Carroll, 2008, 179). Some theorists divide the critical process into four components: Description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation (Feldman, 1980, 21-39). Yet, more comprehensively, the components have been delineated as «description», «classification», «contextualization», «elucidation», «interpretation», «analysis», and «evaluation[2]» (Carroll, 2008, 84). In the «description» stage, the whatness of the artwork is articulated through the cognitive presentation of its objective and tangible elements. Next, in the «classification» stage, the initially perplexing artwork is situated within specific categories, such as artistic form, genres, styles, movements, and the like. Through comparison with the purposes of those categories, the achievement of the artist is discerned. In the «contextualization» stage, the artwork is examined within its historical and social context, considering historical conditions, artistic institutions, and the socio-cultural

environment in which the work emerged. In the «elucidation» stage, the critic identifies the true meaning of conventional or arbitrary symbols, iconic signs, and associations within the artwork, based on available sources. Explanation is thus a critical act that focuses precisely on the explicit signification of semantic, iconic, or pictorial symbols within the work. By contrast, «interpretation» seeks the meaning of what has been established in the explanatory stage more broadly, extending beyond the domains of linguistics, semantics, iconography, and associations of meaning. In interpretation, a unifying and fundamental hypothesis (derived through the process of hypothetical reasoning) is constructed from the constituent elements of the artwork to explain as fully as possible the message, theme, ideas, or concept that accounts for why these diverse elements have coalesced into a coherent whole. For instance, by identifying the unifying hypothesis in certain miniatures of the Herat School, it becomes clear that the function of the tree motif in these paintings is to echo the narrated event of the accompanying literary story (Rafiei Rad, 2020). «Analysis» is the critical act of explaining how the constituent parts of the artwork function together to fulfill the telos and purpose of the work. Finally, in the stage of «evaluation», the critic, based on what has been established in the preceding stages, identifies the category to which the artwork belongs, derives an understanding of its telos and purpose, and, by discerning the work's ends, can begin to investigate whether the artwork has been successful on its own terms (Carroll, 2008, 86-100, 215). For example, in «The Intervention of the Sabine Women» by Jacques-Louis David, the unifying hypothesis is the establishment of peace and the prevention of massacre in ancient Roman history through the mediation of women. The telos of the work, however, lies in the appropriation of Roman history during the Thermidorian period to convey a message of reconciliation between the Jacobins and the supporters of Robespierre and Marat, as well as other victims of the Terror. Similar instances can be observed in Persian miniature painting. For example, in Safavid miniatures, the recurring depictions of the Shah's interaction with his spiritual guide, the pīr or murshid (Shayestehfar et al., 2022), alongside elements representing the display of royal authority in garden miniatures, reveal the telos of these works: to produce multi-functional visual representations serving as a powerful medium of political communication for the Safavid court (Nouri et al., 2022).

2. Correspondence between the Four Intellectual Journeys and the Stages of External Evaluative Criticism: Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn (Mulla Sadra) delineates the fourfold division of journeys as al-sayr min al-khalq ilā al-ḥaqq (journeying from creation to the Truth), al-sayr fī al-ḥaqq bi-l-ḥaqq (journeying in the Truth by the Truth), al-sayr min al-ḥaqq ilā al-khalq bi-l-ḥaqq (journeying from the Truth to creation by the Truth), and al-sayr fī al-khalq bi-l-ḥaqq (journeying within creation by the Truth) (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 5). The first two journeys belong to the arc of ascent, namely the movement from multiplicity toward unity (from creation to the ultimate reality), while the third and fourth are situated within the arc of descent, namely the movement from unity back to multiplicity. In contrast to the asfar (journeys) of Ibn Arabī, which are predominantly mystical, Mulla Sadra's Four Intellectual Journeys pertain to intellectual-philosophical journeys rather than purely mystical ones. His approach to these journeys, moreover, follows a research-oriented model with an interdisciplinary orientation in philosophy (Faramarz Qaramaleki, 2006, 24-28). In what follows, a point-by-point organizational scheme will be drawn between the Four Intellectual Journeys and the stages of external evaluative criticism.

A. The ground for Comparison: In examining the ground for comparison, and in accordance with Kerry Walk's comparative method, one can point to the existence of the Third and Fourth Journeys, namely 'return' and 'guidance', in the Four Intellectual

Journeys. Unlike Ibn Arabī's delineations, these include the Third and Fourth Journeys, in which the gnostic returns to creation and, through his legislative prophacy and divine vicegerency, distinguishes between felicity and wretchedness, origin and end, and the trajectory of all things toward their telos, thereby guiding creation. This, when mapped onto the process of critique, evokes the evaluative act as its analogue. Furthermore, one may point to the similarity between the problem of the soul's motion in substantial motion and the movement of the artwork from the sensible realm to the intelligible realm, a matter which will be elaborated in subsequent sections. Likewise, the term 'al-Ḥaqq', understood in its rational-philosophical sense as «thoughts and utterances in accordance with reality», rather than its strictly mystical meaning, provides the grounds for aligning the Four Intellectual Journeys with the stages of external evaluative critique, the aim of which is the discovery of the genuine values of the artwork.

B. The linking of «A» and «B» in the Correspondence of the First and Second Journeys (Arc of Ascent) with the Stages of External Evaluative Criticism: The First and Second Journeys in the Four Intellectual Journeys correspond to the stages of «Description», «Classification», «Contextualization», «Elucidation», and «Interpretation» in external evaluative criticism. In the journeys, the First Journey addresses the nature of existence and its essential concomitants, a discussion falling under the domain of general metaphysical principles. Sadra defines 'general metaphysics' as knowledge of a set of principles, laws, and universal judgments indispensable to every scientific discipline, ignorance of which inevitably leads to error and deviation within that discipline. He designates this universal science as the 'supreme science', as well as 'theology in the general sense' and metaphysics (Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, 1996, 25). Within this First Journey, Sadra regards quiddity as accidental and subdivides it into «general» and «specific». The «general» is further divided into what is essential, comprising «genre», «genus», and «property», or what is «accidental», encompassing «general accident» and «specific accident». In the same journey, Sadra defines «cause» based on his doctrine of the «primacy of existence» and expounds the four causes of defects, namely the «efficient cause», the «final cause», the «material cause», and the «formal cause» (Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, 2004, 113-115). In the Second Journey, Sadra turns to natural philosophy, or ṭabī iyyāt, asserting that since the tenth century, philosophy has been divided into four branches, one of which is natural philosophy. This discipline concerns itself with the reality, divisions, kinds, and properties of body and corporeal powers (Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, 2004, 25). He also examines and defines the supreme genera, namely «substance», «quantity», «quality», «place», «position», «time», «action», «affection», «possession», and «relative», as well as the universal mental concepts of the five substances: «body», «intellect», «soul», «prime matter», and «form», all within his theoretical framework grounded in the principiality of existence. In correspondence with external evaluative criticism, the stage of «description» of the artwork can be aligned with considerations such as the «material cause» in the First Journey, and with the examination of «quantity», «quality», «place», «position», «time», «possession», and «relation» in the Second Journey. Likewise, «classification» of the artwork, through the search for its general quiddity in terms of «genre», «genus», and «property», along with the identification of «specific property» (e.g., style in a work of art), corresponds to the First Journey. The stage of «contextualization» in criticism can be aligned with factors such as the «efficient cause» and «final cause» in the First Journey, as well as with «affection» in the Second Journey. Finally, the stage of «elucidation» in criticism corresponds to the «formal cause» in the First Journey. In the Second Journey, the soul, within the arc of ascent, by its presence in one of the stages of the order of being,

attains knowledge of the realities of things. From Sadra's perspective, knowledge is not the mere production of an image of the phenomenon in the mind; rather, it is an existential union between the knower and the known, both of which are gradational and ordered by degrees (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 324). Sadra maintains that for the soul in this world, there is a worldly mode of existence that is dynamic, intrinsic, and substantial, which gradually transitions from this stage to the next, culminating in the soul's perfection and completion through its connection and union with the Active Intellect. Thus, the substantial motion of the soul proceeds step by step, from the stage of prime matter to corporeality, to the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and finally the rational soul, and upon reaching its perfection, the soul, by abandoning the elemental body, attains union with the Active Intellect. The soul, therefore, is a being that is corporeal in origination, arising at the beginning from this very material substrate through successive formal transformations and passages from one level to another. Yet this same soul, in its transition to the intellectual level, becomes spiritual in subsistence, such that in its subsistence after the dissolution of the body, it is no longer in need of any body or material substratum (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 86, 354-360). On the other hand, there exists no being in the order of existence that is fixed, static, or devoid of motion, and the resurrection of each thing is toward an end befitting to its very essence (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 1996, 395). Accordingly, the work of art, though lacking a soul, may nevertheless be conceived as possessing a kind of motion. Before its encounter with the knowing subject, the artwork is nothing more than a composite of material elements—color, canvas, sound, human figure, or other media and materials—within the sensible realm (the sensible in act), and it abides in a state of semantic quiescence (the intelligible in potency). Yet, the very moment it confronts the subject's mind, it initiates a process of signification, which, in proportion to the multiplicity of subjects, will itself be multiple. As though akin to the soul, the artwork likewise begins, within the horizon of critique, a movement from the sensible toward the intelligible. In the Second Journey, the unifying hypothesis reveals what the meaning, content, message, judgment, or essential concept of the artwork truly is. In fact, this unifying hypothesis fully explicates the artwork, such that all contradictory, multiple, discordant, or harmonious elements are unified within it. This union between the artwork and the act of critique parallels the very notion of 'knowledge' in Sadra's philosophy. For instance, one may point to Post-Impressionism, which emerged in art criticism through the works of painters such as Van Gogh. If we suppose that all of Van Gogh's works, along with those of his contemporaries, were to be destroyed in an instant, the unifying hypothesis of Post-Impressionism would remain entirely intact, for Post-Impressionism, having attained existence in the intelligible realm, no longer requires the corporeality (the material body) of those works. Indeed, the artworks of this style, within the intelligible realm, subsist under the unifying hypothesis of Post-Impressionism, thereby possessing an «intelligible body» that reflects all the essential features and properties of those works, though now articulated in the philosophical medium of language. It may even be claimed that the judgment as to whether any newly created artwork is «Post-Impressionist» is made not based on Van Gogh's or others' material works, but rather by measuring its nearness to, or distance from, this intelligible body of Post-Impressionism within the intelligible realm. In this way, just as the soul, upon reaching union with the Active Intellect in the realm of unity, abandons its elemental body (resurrection) and, by its own creativity, generates for itself an imaginal body, so too the artwork, hrough the discovery of a unifying hypothesis that gathers all its elements into a single unity, abandons its material corporeality in the sensible realm and commences a new life within the intelligible realm (the subject's mind), thereby attaining a new body. Thus,

just as the worldly and the otherworldly are two distinct stations of the soul's being, so too the corporeality of the artwork and its meaning or concept under the unifying hypothesis represent two ontological modalities of the artwork. Moreover, even if one were to deny such a strict ontological unity between the unifying hypothesis and the artwork, the unity reached at the end of the Second journey remains comparable to the unity of elements in criticism as subsumed under the unifying hypothesis.

C. The Linking of «A» and «B» in the Correspondence of the Third and Fourth Journeys (Arc of Descent) with the Stages of External Evaluative Criticism: The Third Journey begins with the demonstration of the existence of the Necessary Existent and, after elaborating upon Its attributes, knowledge, and power, ultimately addresses the question of the telos of the world. Sadra maintains that since the Necessary Existent is true simplicity (the absolute simple reality), it is, in a more elevated and subtle mode, the very perfection of all things, and nothing can be negated from it except deficiency and privation (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 91). Moreover, beings possess love and yearning for the completion of this perfection (ibid., vol. 5, 168), and the ultimate telos of this nearness is to accept the true theophany and attain encounter with the Necessary Existent (ibid., 180-181). Thus, in the Third Journey, the gnostic, through knowledge of the ultimate telos of beings, which is their encounter with the Necessary Existent, gains insight into the place, origin, and finality of each particular part and into both the manifest and hidden mechanisms of the world. For this reason, the Third Journey corresponds to the stage of «analysis» in artistic criticism. A critical analysis of an artwork involves discovering the telos of the artwork itself and explicating how the work functions, that is, how its manifold elements cooperate to fulfill its end and purpose. If critique, up to the stage of «interpretation» (the conclusion of the Second Journey), remains in a mode of discovery and ultimately becomes absorbed in the truth attained, then in the arc of descent, namely from the stage of «analysis» onwards, it turns toward a conscious exposition of the findings and an evaluative address to its audience. This corresponds to the station of sobriety in the descending arc. The Third Journey, building upon the foundations established earlier, is essentially evaluative in nature. With the soul's descent toward the realm of creation, it is accompanied by a summons to the Ultimate Reality and by both legislative and ontological guidance. The content of this journey begins with the study of the soul, from its origination in material substrates, and extends through the completion of its stations and its return to the ultimate telos. Thereafter, the mode of bodily resurrection is explained in eleven principles, along with the nature of felicity and wretchedness. The felicity of the soul is defined as an independent immaterial existence, endowed with the capacity to conceive intelligibles, to attain knowledge of the realities of things, and to behold the intelligible realm and luminous essences. Likewise, the notion of the Path is explained in terms of the theoretical and practical faculties (ibid., 126). In this journey, moreover, there is reference to a kind of «measure-like vision», whereby figures such as the prophets, through their union with the Active Intellect, grasp the mode of balancing between the two realms: The world of dominion and sensible witness and the world of the unseen (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 317). Thus, resurrection is understood as the soul's emergence from the dust of environmental forms, its release from the true grave, namely, immersion and imprisonment in the limiting forms and configurations that had become the soul's disposition in the sensible world (Sadr al-Din Shirazi, 2004, 237). The gnostic, upon union with the realm of unity, returns to the multiplicity of the world of creation and enters into dialogue with his audience. To him, every object in the world is intelligible by being placed in relation to the perfectional experience attained during the ascending arc. Thus, he perceives the beginnings and ends,

the felicity and wretchedness, and the destinies of all things with a «measure-like vision», unveiling these truths to his audience so that they, too, through awareness of the values disclosed, may recognize their own path of perfection and ascend the gradations of existence in accordance with such evaluations. In a parallel manner, artistic critique, having already uncovered the telos and unifying hypothesis of the work in the preceding stages, now proceeds to 'evaluation'; it judges whether the artwork has succeeded on its own terms. The critic, by discerning the end and purpose proper to the kind of work under consideration, is thereby directed to those features of the work that must be described or analyzed in order to substantiate the evaluation. In this way, external evaluative critique at this stage helps the audience perceive what within the artwork possesses genuine value. Moreover, by articulating the value achieved through the work, it enriches the audience's perception of value, guiding their cultural and intellectual engagement beyond immediate comprehension.

Findings

Sadra's outlook on the origin and end of human beings within the world, articulated through the Four Journeys, is commensurable with the stages of art criticism due to its distinctive philosophical underpinnings; this philosophical ground furnished the frame of reference in Kerry Walk's comparative method. The rational basis for pairing these two domains relates to Sadra's innovations, such as the explication of substantial motion, the semantic fluidity of the term truth/the Ultimate Real, and its linkage to Sadra's reconception of knowledge, and the mystic's return and guidance of human beings in the Fourth Journey, which together constitute the basis and ground of comparison. On this foundation, the correspondences and the A-B connections, obtained through the research method using a point-by-point organizational scheme, are presented in Table 1. On the left side of the table appear the seven stages of external evaluative art criticism, and on the right, the Four Intellectual Journeys set out in the book «Transcendent Philosophy». The cells between them indicate how A and B are connected. In addition, to further clarify the critical act at each stage of art criticism, the aim and function of criticism in the respective stages are specified.

Table 1. Comparative Instances with a Point-by-Point Organizational Scheme and the Linking of A and B in the Stages of Critique, their Aims and Functions, with the Four Intellectual Journeys. Source: Authors.

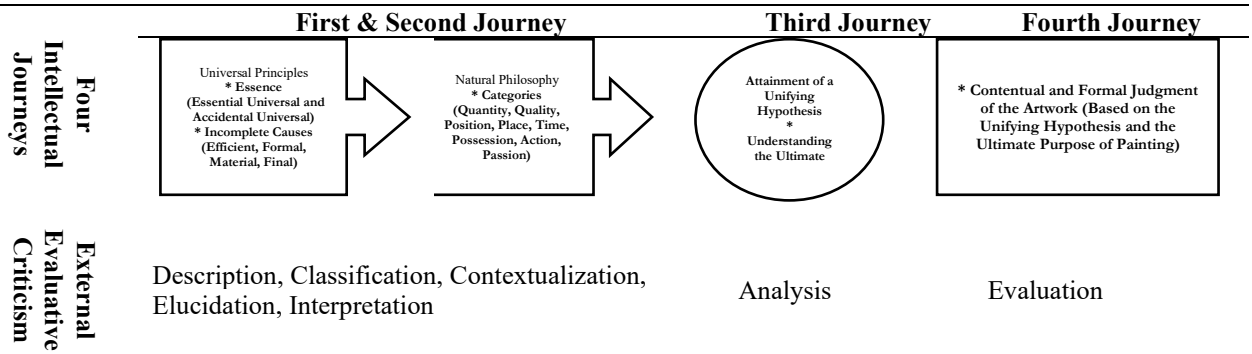
Components	Critical Act	Aim and Function in Critique	Contents of the Transcendent Philosophy	Journeys
Description	Presenting the whatness of the artwork from a cognitive perspective, describing its objective and tangible elements such as color, composition of figures, forms, manner of construction, aesthetic qualities, expressive qualities, proportions, narratives, and the like.	- Preventing the audience's absolute ambiguity regarding the critic's discourse. - Unfolding the components of the artwork for their eventual use in the stages of interpretation and analysis, aimed at assessing the attainment of unity within the work.	- Examining the essence (general and essential): Genre, genus, property, and specific accident. - Investigating the causes of defects in the artwork (efficient cause, formal cause, final cause, material cause). - Analyzing the categories within the artwork (quantity, quality, relation, place, time, action, affection). - Discovering the unifying hypothesis on the basis of the preceding stages, as preparatory causes.	First Journey General Metaphysics

Classification	Placing the artwork under specific categories and explicating the aims and foundations of that type of art, in order to uncover the artist's achievement.	- Arriving at an understanding of the rightful expectations of the artwork, for the purpose of evaluating its success. - Adapting the critique by determining the specific genre of the work.		
Contextualization	Examining the historical conditions of art, artistic institutions, and the social and cultural environment influencing the creation of the artwork.	- Mapping the logic of the situation and the manner of the artist's choices in fulfilling the exigencies. - Understanding the artist's ideal through situating the work within its historical and social context.		
Elucidation	Identifying the true meaning of the various signs and symbols present in the work of art.	- Achieving an accurate understanding of the signifying elements within the work, grounded in available sources. - Preparing the proper groundwork for formulating the unifying hypothesis in interpretation.		Second Journey Natural Science
Interpretation	Constructing a hypothesis from the various components of the artwork concerning its theme, message, idea, or concept, in order to explain the unity of its parts within a unified whole.	- Discovering the message, idea, theme, or concept of the artwork by relying on the preceding stages. - Articulating the overall meaning of the artwork as derived from prior inquiry and investigation.		
Analysis	Passing beyond the apparent meaning of the work and uncovering its ultimate end and purpose, along with explaining how the components of the work function together to fulfill that end and purpose.	- Demonstrating the absence of prominent features in the artwork that conflict with or are irrelevant to its end and purpose. - Establishing the unity of intention, thought, or design throughout the entire work. - Enhancing the audience's understanding and preparing the ground for evaluation.	- Demonstrating the existence of the Necessary Existent, explicating Its attributes, knowledge, power, and so forth. - Uncovering the ultimate telos of the world: the reception of true theophany and the encounter with the Necessary Existent.	Third Journey Divine Science

Evaluation	Evaluation of the degree of success of the work in relation to the unifying hypothesis and the telos and purpose of the artwork, by means of the information obtained from the preceding stages.	- Bringing the artist's achieved value closer to the audience's received value. - Providing awareness of the emergence of new artistic forms, genres, styles, and movements. - Assisting the audience in perceiving the values of the work. - Valuing the work within cultural life.	- The evaluative nature of the Fourth Journey. - The descent of the soul toward creation and engagement with the audience. - A balance-oriented insight into how to mediate between the two realms. - The call to Truth and guidance, both legislative and existential. - Explanation of the mode of bodily resurrection in eleven principles. - Elucidation of the nature of felicity and wretchedness. - Definition of the Sirat (the Path). - The prophets' knowledge of the realms of dominion and testimony, as well as the devine realm.	Fourth Journey Science of the Soul

The points of difference between the Four Intellectual Journeys and the stages of critique may be summarized in three aspects. First, in Sadra's philosophical foundations, substantial motion is particular to the human soul, whereas the work of art, as a corporeal entity, is devoid of a soul. Second, the soul, prior to its corporeal occurrence, undergoes the arc of descent, that is, the movement from existence to prime matter, but the work of art does not undergo such a process. Third, in Sadra's framework, every soul is defined by a single substantial motion, whereas a work of art may experience different movements depending on the multiplicity of subjects (critics). This is because different critics, in diverse temporal, spatial, and political conditions, encounter the work and, in the first and second stages, gather other kinds of information. Subsequently, based on different arguments and lines of reasoning, they may arrive at various unifying hypotheses and final causes, resulting in diverse evaluations. Table 2 presents an overview of the stages of the critique model based on the Four Intellectual Journeys in correspondence with the stages of external evaluative criticism. Accordingly, in the First and Second Journeys, the investigation of matters such as essence, the four deficient causes, and the ten Aristotelian categories within the work of art enables the critic to access the details required for description, classification, contextualization, and elucidation. Then, drawing on these, the unifying hypothesis is formulated during the stage of interpretation. Subsequently, the apprehension of the work's final cause, together with the manner of attaining it, is examined, which corresponds to analysis in art criticism. Finally, the work is evaluated based on the unifying hypothesis and the attainment of its ultimate purpose, which corresponds to the concluding stage of critique.

Table 2. Overview of the Stages of the External Evaluative Critique Model Derived from the Four Journeys of Ṣadr al-Din Shirazi and its Correspondence with the Stages of Art Criticism Based on Kerry Walk's Method. Source: Authors.



This method has been used in the analysis of contemporary Afghan painting. An example is the analysis of a work by Abdolaghfur Breshna (Rafiei Rad & Shad Ghazvini, 2025).

Conclusion

The present comparative study was conducted using the principles of Kerry Walk's comparative methodology, in which the «frame of reference» was established upon the issue of similarity between rational transformations and substantial intensifications in the Four Intellectual Journeys (Asfār al-Arbaʿa) and art criticism, as well as the replacement of the philosophical approach with the mystical approach to the problem of the Four Journeys. Moreover, art criticism, as a philosophical text, constituted the foundation and grounds for comparison, while the 'organizational scheme' in comparing these two domains was carried out in a point-by-point manner, and the linking between A and B was made through logical argumentation of propositions. Accordingly, in mapping the components of external evaluative criticism to Mulla Sadra's Four Intellectual Journeys, the following results were obtained: In the First Journey, the knowledge of General Metaphysics is devoted to the encounter with material entities, the passage through multiplicities, the severance of attachments, and the removal of both luminous and dark veils between the self and the truth. At this stage, quiddity (both general and essential), including «genre», «genus», «property», and «specific accident», as well as the causes of defects, namely the «efficient cause», «formal cause», «final cause», and «material cause», are examined within the work. In criticism, likewise, the four stages of «description», «classification», «contextualization», and «elucidation» address the internal and external intelligibility of the artwork. Confrontation with material objects, the narration of levels of created multiplicities, the unifying integration of plurality through differentiation, classification, and individuation, as well as the recognition of the causes of the artwork creation (historical, institutional, cultural), together with the semantic analysis of its elements in art criticism, function analogously to the observations and cognitions of the gnostic in his passage through multiplicity in creation, serving as preparatory causes for the unveiling of truth. Subsequently, in the Second Journey of the ascending arc, the categories of «quantity», «quality», «position», «place», «time», «affection», and «action» are examined in the work. In art criticism, the stage of «interpretation» is devoted to the discovery of the fundamental unity of the manifold elements within the artwork by formulating a unifying hypothesis encompassing its theme, message, opinion, or concept, thereby providing a harmonious totality from the diverse components of the work. Thus, if the human soul, in the ascending arc, is like matter that begins its journey from the multiplicities of the sensible world and,

through union with the intelligible, acquires a new form and thereby attains substantial perfection, so too does criticism, after passing through the internal and external cognitions of the manifold components of the artwork in the three preceding stages, upon reaching the stage of «interpretation», assume a new form. At this point, the dispersed and manifold elements of the artwork are unified into a harmonious totality, and criticism itself enters into a kind of union with the artwork from the perspective of message, theme, opinion, or concept. The Third Journey begins with the demonstration of the existence of the Necessary Existent, the exposition of its attributes, knowledge, and power, and culminates in the articulation of the ultimate telos of the world, namely the acceptance of true manifestation and the encounter with the Necessary Existent. This journey corresponds in art criticism to the stage of «analysis», which is initially devoted to discovering the telos, and thereafter to explaining how the artwork, under the guidance of the unifying hypothesis, coheres into a unified whole in pursuit of this ultimate telos and purpose. The Fourth Journey concerns the descent of the soul toward creation, its engagement with the audience, and its invitation to truth through legislative guidance. Its nature is thus inherently connected with the discernment of values and acts of judgment. In this journey, reference is made to a "measure-like vision" in discerning the balance between the two realms, the elaboration of bodily resurrection in eleven principles, the exposition of the nature of felicity and wretchedness, and the philosophical definition of the path (*ṣirāṭ*). This journey is thus analogous to the stage of «evaluation» in criticism, where three dimensions of disclosure are addressed: The structural, the historical-contextual, and the intentional (the artist's aim). These guide the audience to focus on whatever within the artwork possesses value, thereby aligning, or at least approximating, the received value with the achieved value of the work. Furthermore, according to Sadra, beings possess multiple forms of resurrection, and likewise, the artwork, on the basis of diverse judgments, may yield different teloi and unifying hypotheses, such that its values vary in accordance with differing conditions. In encountering the artwork, every subject may «say something», but this is not necessarily criticism. Criticism, as described here, separates the artwork from everyday discourse and moves it, in its very essence, from the sensible to the intelligible realm. This bears a close resemblance to the soul's existential ascent in substantial motion. Accordingly, just as the soul is corporeal in its origination and spiritual in its subsistence, achieving perfection in substantial motion through a progression from corporeality to union with the Active Intellect by abandoning the material body and attaining immateriality; so too does the artwork (though corporeal in nature) begin a journey within the framework of criticism that leads, in the philosophical medium, to a unifying hypothesis and ultimate telos. By shedding its corporeality, the artwork gains a new life in the realm of intellect and within the cultural life of humanity, beginning anew in the minds of its subjects.

Author Contributions

The present study is derived from the postdoctoral research in art studies conducted by the first author under the supervision of the second author as advisor at Alzahra University.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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Appendix
1. Due to the qualitative nature of this research, the thesis stage has not been proposed.
2. Abduction reasoning: The reasoning process determines which of several possible explanations for a phenomenon should be chosen and the others discarded. (Lycan, 1988, 129; Psillos, 2002, 614; Josephson, 2003, 5)

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