



# Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

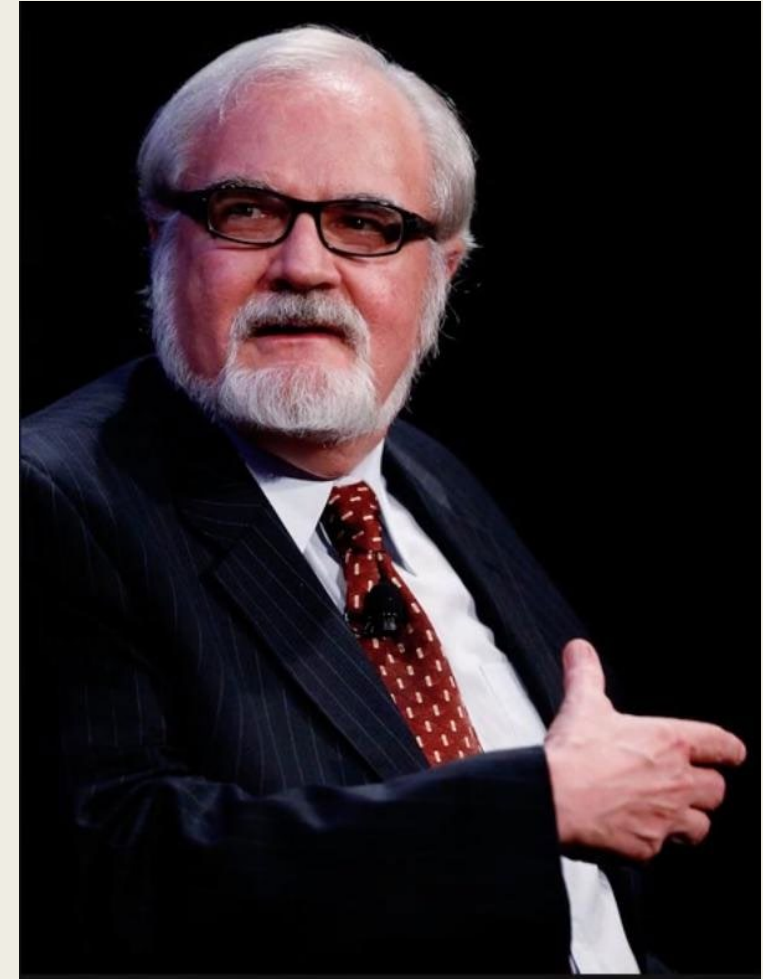
Introduction

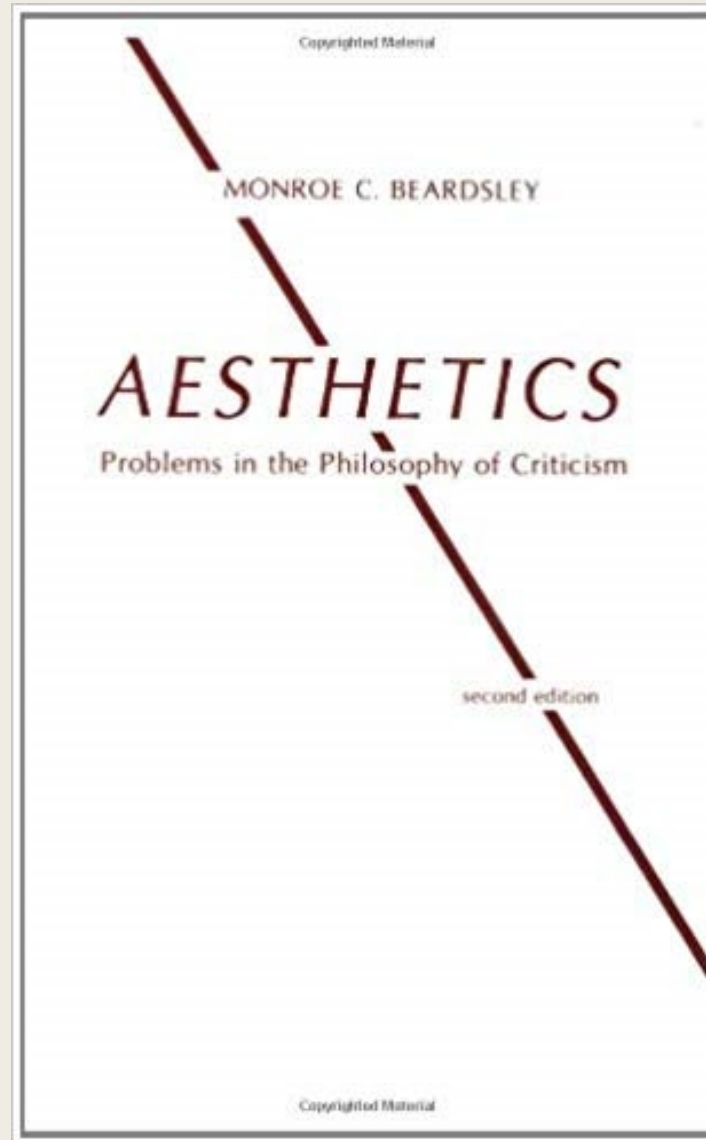


# Art criticism and philosophy of art

- Carroll observes that **art criticism** was a central concern for philosophers of art in the 1950s and 60s. Exemplary of this is the work of the philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley (1915-1985).
- From the 1970s, philosophy of art shifted its attention to problems concerning art's essence and **definition**.
- Carroll's book is an attempt to bring criticism back under the attention of philosophers of art.

Noël Carroll





Monroe C. Beardsley's *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958)

# Descriptive meta-criticism

- As the book's title suggests, *On Criticism* is not itself a work of art criticism, but rather a philosophical work that takes criticism as its object. Carroll calls it also an exercise in **meta-criticism** (p. 1).
- Carroll's aim is that of a **rational reconstruction** of art criticism as it occurs in our artistic culture (p. 3). In other words, Carroll adopts a **descriptive** methodology: his notion of what criticism should be is derived from the way criticism is actually carried out.
- The opposite of a descriptive methodology is a **revisionary** methodology. In this case, one figures out a concept of what criticism should be, independently from the way criticism is actually conducted, and then argues that the practice of criticism should conform to that ideal.

“My intention is to try to develop a framework in which the practices of criticism can be rendered intelligible and ordered—at least to the extent that it is feasible to do so—while, in the main, also respecting the ways in which criticism is actually conducted (as well as taking seriously our abiding intuitions about it). I will not attempt to impose upon the practice an ideal of criticism hatched on the basis of some epistemological first principles drawn from elsewhere.” (p. 3)

# Meta-criticism vs. theories of criticism

- A philosophy of criticism, or meta-criticism, is different from a theory of criticism, such as Marxist criticism, Psychoanalytical criticism, etc.
- A theory of criticism describes the way in which one should carry out the practice of art criticism. For instance, what elements one should look for, and how these should be interpreted and/or evaluated. Different theories of criticism give different answers to these questions.
- By contrast, meta-criticism is concerned with the structure and goals of all art criticism, regardless of the particular theory one adopts. The idea is that art criticism is constituted by certain operations, and has certain goals, which are the same across all possible approaches.





M. Marquet, 122 r. Boulevard de la Vierge

M. Destouches, 28 r. Paradis 115

La promenade du critique influent.

June 24, 1865

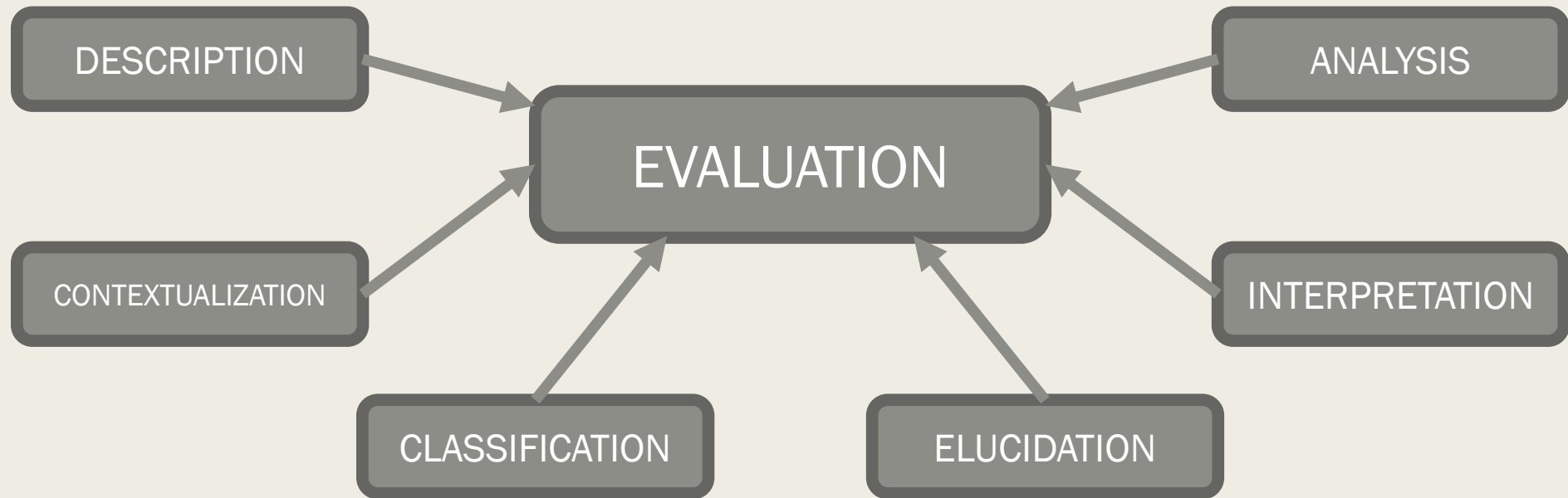
Honoré Daumier, *La promenade du critique influent*, (1865)

# Interpretation vs. evaluation

- Carroll observes that contemporary art criticism seems to be centered around the **interpretation** of artworks. He claims instead that the crucial element of criticism is **evaluation** (p. 5).
  - This may be thought to be in tension with Carroll's descriptivist methodology. How can he claim to be simply reconstructing the practice of criticism, and then reject the contemporary view that criticism is centered on interpretation?
  - Carroll answers by noting that the tendency to flatten criticism on interpretation is a recent one. Most art criticism has concerned itself with the evaluation of artworks.
- “...the pertinent data should come from a long view of the history of criticism and not merely from snapshots of the academic criticism of the last two decades or so. And in this regard, I maintain that I am not the revisionist here; current fashion is.” (p. 6)



# The parts of criticism



“The other activities in which critics engage—including description, contextualization, classification, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis—are hierarchically subservient to the purposes of evaluation.” (p. 9)

# The problem of objective evaluation

- An account of criticism as essentially evaluative faces the objection that evaluations of art are not **objective**.
- The argument could go like this:
  - P1. Art criticism is an objective practice.
  - P2. If a practice is objective, it does not depend on a subjective component.
  - C1. Art criticism does not depend on a subjective component.
  - P3. If art criticism depended on evaluation, it would depend on a subjective component.
  - C2. Art criticism does not depend on evaluation.

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  - P2. Art criticism is an objective practice.
  - C1. Art criticism does not depend on a subjective component [from P1 and P2].
  - P3. If art criticism depended on evaluation, it would depend on a subjective component.
  - C2. Art criticism does not depend on evaluation [from C1 and P3].

# The problem of objective evaluation

- Carroll questions the subjectivity of artistic evaluation – he would therefore question the third premise (P3) of the argument in the previous slide.
- He argues that, once we classify artworks according to the **categories** they belong to, we can obtain objective principles of evaluation.
- Examples of these artistic categories are art forms, genres, styles, and movements. While we may lack principles for an objective evaluation of artworks in general, within these categories we can make evaluations, and even draw comparative judgements between artworks.