Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

Chapter Four

Chapter overview

- In this final chapter, Carroll discusses evaluation, the central and defining part of criticism.
- The main challenge he has to face is the charge of **subjectivism**. If evaluation is essentially subjective, it cannot constitute the basic element of criticism, at least insofar as this is considered an objective practice.
- The idea that the evaluation of art is subjective comes from Early Modern accounts of beauty as dependent on an individual's reaction to an object.
- Carroll also discusses the worry that evaluation would require **evaluative principles** in order to be objective. Some philosophers have argued that in art there are no general evaluative principles. This would mean that there can be no objective evaluation.
- Once again, Carroll appeals to the classification of artworks into categories. These can provide us with category-specific evaluative principles in which to ground our evaluations.

Problems for objective evaluation (1)

- 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.

- In order to defend his account, Carroll needs to show that the evaluation of art is not subjective. The first reason to think of evaluation as subjective is found in a particular view of artistic taste.

Taste and beauty

- In 18th century European aesthetics, **taste** is the faculty that allows us to experience beauty.
- In various European languages, the word for taste as the **faculty of beauty** or aesthetic evaluation (品味) is the same as the word for taste as a **sense modality** (味覚).

['taste' (English), 'goût' (French), 'Geschmack' (German), 'gusto' (Italian).]

- Perhaps prompted by this linguistic fact, philosophers in the 18th century produced accounts of aesthetic taste that stressed its parallel with gustatory taste.

David Hume (1711-1776)

Hume on beauty

- According to Hume, beauty is not a property of objects, but rather a particular sensation that some objects may arouse in us (just like pain is not a property of the objects that cause it).

- On Hume's view, the art critic, or more generally the person of taste, is someone who is particularly capable of detecting objects that can produce the sensation of beauty.

"Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek in the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter."

(David Hume, *On the Standard of Taste*, 1757)

Carroll on Hume

- Carroll rejects both Hume's exclusive focus on beauty, as well as the central contention that beauty is a subjective sensation.

- The rejection of the former claim is itself one of the reasons to reject the latter. If evaluating artwork is not just about assessing their beauty (the pleasurable feelings they arouse in us), but also about detecting many other qualities (formal complexity, profundity, expressiveness, etc.), then the analogy with gustatory taste that underpins Hume's investigation of aesthetic taste will start to break down.

"That is, one argument leading to the conclusion that all criticism is subjective goes like this. All criticism is an exercise in Taste (since it is a matter of being sensitive to beauty understood as a sensation of pleasure). All Taste is subjective. Therefore, all criticism is subjective." (p. 162)

(Carroll is questioning the first premise of this argument)

Carroll on beauty

- Carroll notes that beauty is only one of the virtues that the critic detects in successful artworks, and in fact it is entirely absent from some great artistic masterpieces.

- Beauty seems to be entirely absent from some art forms, such as slapstick comedy, and yet we evaluate works in these art forms just like we do with any other.

"It is extremely important to remember that there is a great deal to criticism beyond finding beauty. Indeed, I suspect that by far the major portion of the criticism of the arts is unconcerned with beauty. When one commends Shakespeare for his psychological perspicuity, we are certainly not talking about beauty" (p. 161)

Mr. Bean

Problems for objective evaluation (2)

- A different problem for objective evaluation is represented by the alleged absence of general and objective critical principles (rules on the basis of which we may objectively evaluate art).
- The argument could go like this:

> P1. Either critical evaluation is based on objective evaluative principles, or it is based on the subjective preferences of the critic.
>
> P2. Critical evaluation is not based on objective evaluative principles.
>
> C. Critical evaluation is based on the subjective preferences of the critic.

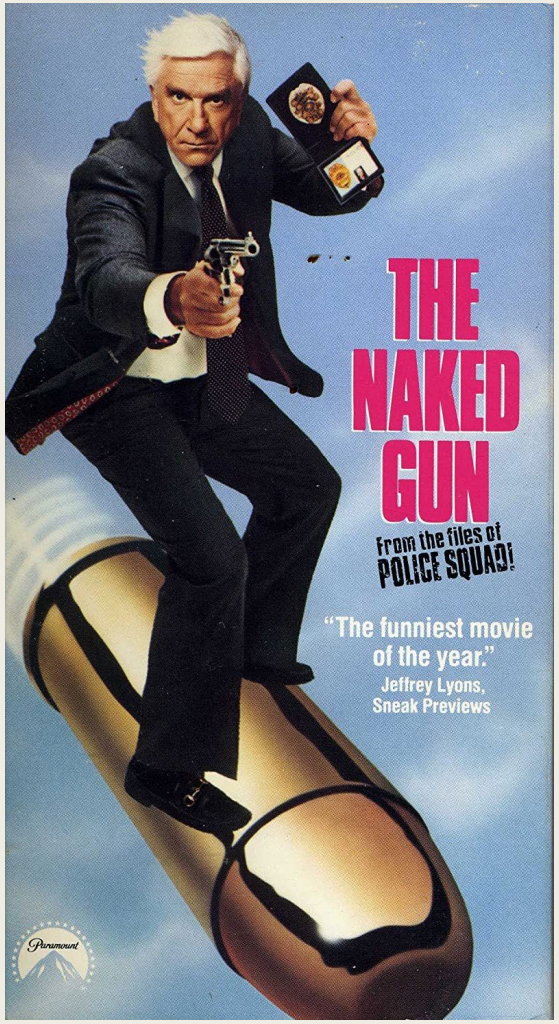
According to Carroll, the problem with this argument is with P2, as it is false.

Problems for objective evaluation (2)

P2. Critical evaluation is not based on objective evaluative principles.

- In Carroll's reconstruction, P2 is built on the assumption that there are no general evaluative principles in art (the **Isenberg-Mothersill principle**). The idea is that critical evaluation cannot be based on general evaluative principles, because these do not exist.
- Note that Carroll could do two things to question the truth of P2. He could claim that there are general evaluative principles (that is, he could reject the Isenberg-Mothersill principle), or he could accept that there are no general evaluative principles (or be agnostic about their existence), while at the same time denying that this entails the truth of P2.
- To pursue the latter option, Carroll has to show that there are principles that guide the evaluation of artworks, and that these principles are different from the general ones excluded by the Isenberg-Mothersill principle.

The Isenberg-Mothersill principle



- This is the idea that there is no feature or set of features that *always* contribute to an artwork's success.
- We may say that of *The Naked Gun* (1988) that it is good because it is funny, but in doing so we are not applying a general principle such as "if an artwork is funny, it is good". A good thriller is normally not funny, and instrumental music or architecture are even more rarely so.
- More importantly, features that are valuable in one case may be flaws in another. Psychologically complex and realistic characters are a valuable trait in most novels, but they would take much fun away from sit-coms such as *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory*.

The Naked Gun (1988)

Category-specific critical principles

- Carroll accepts the Isenberg-Mothersill principle, construed as the claim that there are no general critical principles that hold for all artworks, but he also observes that the critic needs much less than universal principles, for principles that are specific to the **category** an artwork belongs to are often sufficient to make sense of the work of the critic as an evaluation grounded in objective principles.
- Category-specific principles often have to do with the **purpose** or **goal** of works in that category. For instance, one of the goals of horror movies is to scare viewers, so to be scary is a valuable feature of artworks that are classified as belonging to the category "horror movie".

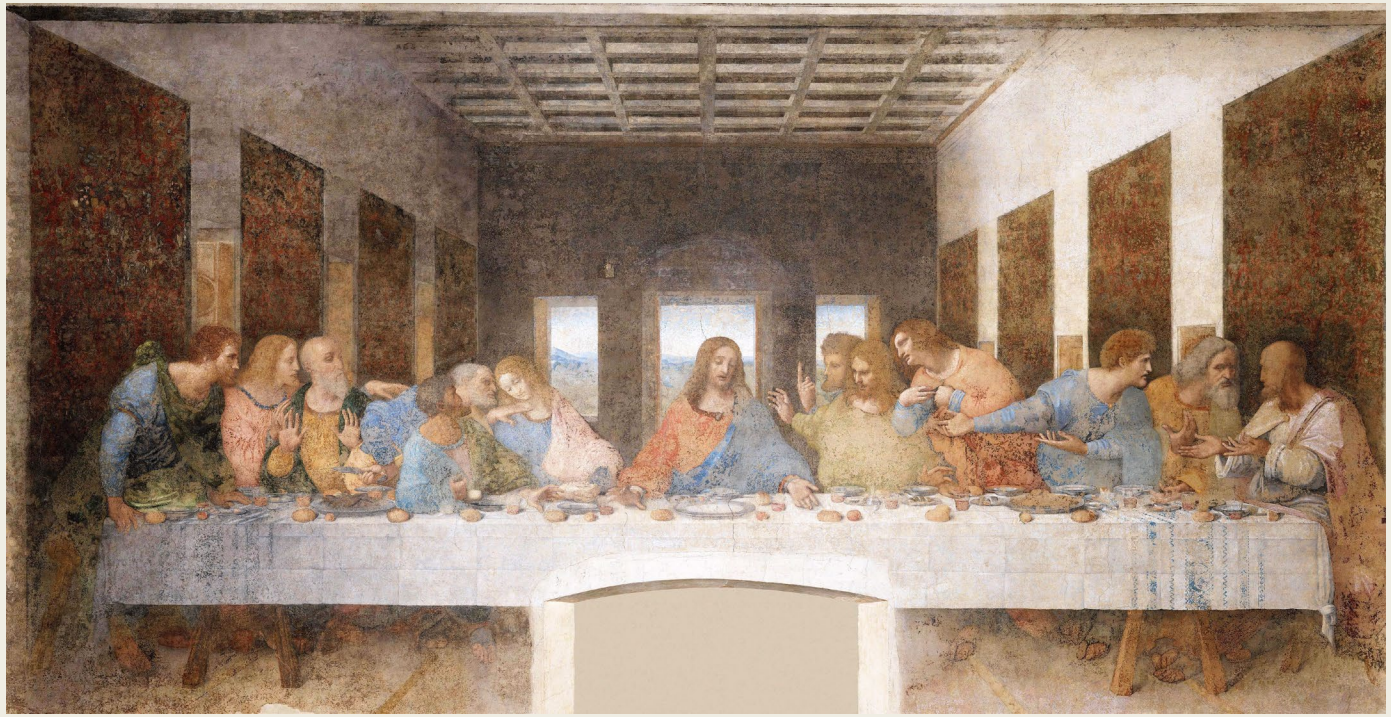
"Therefore, if the critic can objectively—that is to say, in a way that is inter-subjectively verifiable—establish that an artwork belongs to a certain category and, furthermore, that that category or those categories have certain purposes that are best served by the possession of certain features, the critic will have the logical and conceptual wherewithal to issue objective verdicts." (p. 170)

The objectivity of classification

- If the objectivity of criticism depends on category-specific critical principles, it is important to show that the operation of classifying artworks into categories is also an objective one.
- If the basis of classification turned out to be subjective, the subjectivism that we have kicked out of the window (critical evaluation) would come back from the main door (classification).
- Two or more different classifications of the same work would be equally valid, because there is no objective way to settle the matter, and each evaluation would go on to produce different evaluations, because the critical principles relevant to each category are different.
- Carroll offers three kinds of reasons that we appeal to when classifying artworks: **structural**, **art-historical**, and **intentional**. These confer objectivity to the practice of classification.

Structural reasons

- If an artwork possesses many of the features that are typical of artworks in a given category, this gives us a **structural reason** to classify the artwork as belonging to that category.



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (late 1490s)

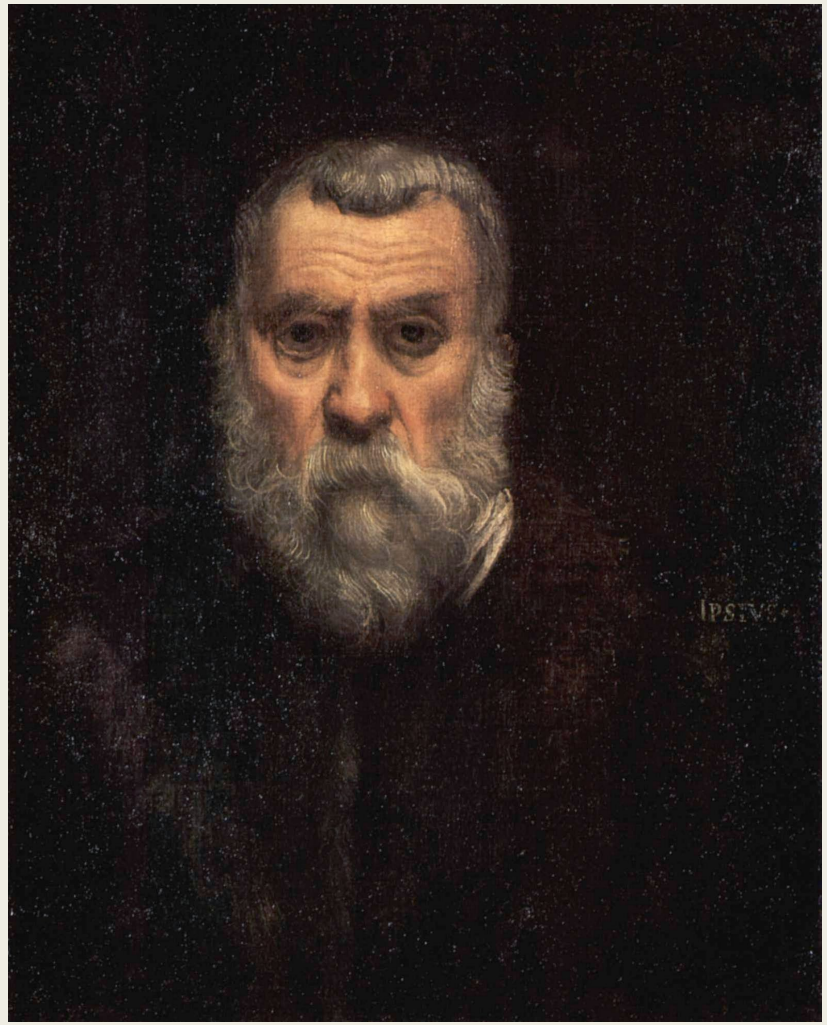
Art-historical reasons

- **Art-historical reasons** for classification depend on the time and context of production of the work we are classifying. The possibility of **anachronistic** classification shows that classification is sensitive to facts we can in principle ascertain, such as an objects time and place of production.

Detail of Henri Matisse's *Portrait of Madame Matisse* (1913), and Gabon mask (Central Africa), placed side by side in the catalogue of the exhibition "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" (MoMA, 1984).

Intentional reasons

- In line with his broader commitment to intentionalism in interpretation, Carroll also holds that there are **intentional reasons** to classify artworks as belonging to one or the other category.
- These reasons appeal to the author's intention with respect to her work's category membership. Authorial intention may be more or less conclusively guessed on the basis of the author's explicitly stated intent, from the mode and place of display of the work, or from the work's content.



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Self-portrait* (1588)