

Midterm Assignment

PART I.

A Presentation of Carroll's Account of Art Criticism

Carroll's book *On Criticism* is not a work of art criticism but rather an exercise in philosophy of criticism, where criticism is taken as an object. In his book, Carroll studies art criticism through a descriptive method, which is called descriptive meta-criticism. This descriptive methodology means that theory of art criticism is derived from its actual practice, instead of from 'epistemological first principles drawn from elsewhere'¹. In other words, descriptive methodology is a way from practice to theory. Based on this method, Carroll develops a framework to make practice of criticism ordered and understandable.

It is evaluation that Carroll thinks the fundamental goal of criticism. There are many aspects that criticism is related to, but evaluation, in Carroll's view, is the most central and fundamental one. Evaluation is the key feature that sets art criticism apart from other verbal acts that concern artworks. For example, a verbal act that contains only description and historical contextualization may be regarded as art history instead of art criticism.

Carroll's opinion is opposite to contemporary art criticism practice focused on interpretation of artworks, which seems to contradict his descriptive methodology. However, Carroll argues that when shifting our attention to the entire history rather than recent years, most art criticism is centered around evaluation.

To defend his idea that evaluation is the fundamental goal of criticism, Carroll notes that evaluation should be grounded in reasons and evidence and take individual artwork as its object. He examines several arguments that could possibly challenge his idea and clarifies why they are unconvincing. Most importantly, he argues that evaluation is not totally subjective and there do exist principles of evaluation internal to various categories.

Carroll further demonstrates that it is success value rather than reception value of artworks that should be evaluated in art criticism. Success value is related to the artist's creative process, where the artist performs his or her intentional actions. That is to say, success value is determined by the artist's achievement displayed in the work. Artworks possess success value if the artist's intention is successfully achieved. In this way, the critic's role is to give the audience a taste of the artist's achievement in the artwork to help the audience better understand it. In contrary, reception value is related to the audience's appreciation process, which means that an artwork possess reception value if it provides the audience with pleasurable experience. Focused on reception value, a critic's goal is to guide the audience in methods deriving the most pleasurable experience from the artworks. Carroll opposes reception theory that the value of artworks is determined by the audience's response. He proves his opposition by showing the limitation of word 'pleasurable' and the importance of originality and historical influence of artworks.

In Carroll's book, the parts of art criticism include evaluation, description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation and analysis. Evaluation, either explicit or implicit, as previously mentioned, is the fundamental goal of art criticism and is therefore indispensable. Criticism must also include at least one of the remaining parts, called non-evaluative parts which ground the evaluation. Since evaluation has already been discussed thoroughly, we will focus on non-evaluative parts of criticism.

Description tells what the artwork is like, so, it is the most obvious part of a piece of criticism. Even criticism that holds different views from Carroll will still include description. The object of description varies across different art forms. While a description of a piece of music may

¹ Noel Carroll. *On criticism*. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009:4

concentrate on its auditory features like melody and rhythm, a description of a drama may tell its plot and characters. Description may ground evaluation like other non-evaluative parts of criticism, and also supports other non-evaluative aspects of criticism. This is why description is likely to be included in any piece of criticism. Description can be selectively biased, shaped by the critic's preconceived views, but Carroll argues that this bias is prevalent across various intellectual activities and therefore does not pose a fatal threat to objectivity.

Classification is to place an artwork into its proper category. Here, categories include not only art forms like music, films, novels, etc., but also genres like comedy, fantasy, romance, etc., and styles like impressionism, modernism, expressionism, etc. An artwork usually belongs to more than one category. For instance, *Mr. Bean* belongs to film as well as comedy. Carroll further notes that evaluation is largely influenced by classification. As mentioned above, although there may be no general evaluative principals for all art forms, Carroll believes there do exist principles for certain category. As for the problem of a hermeneutic circle, Carroll observes that a particular classification does not prevent us from recognizing aspects of the work that do not align with it. To get the correct classification of an artwork, accurate and selective description is necessary.

To some extent, contextualization is similar to description because both of them describe the features of an artwork. However, while description focuses on the internal features of artworks, contextualization focuses on the external features of artworks. The external features refer to 'description of the circumstances'², including historical, institutional or socio-cultural conditions in which artworks are created. These conditions are closely related to the artist's creative intention, which is an important component in the evaluation of success value of an artwork, as mentioned above. Also, contextualization is helpful for classification because it provides additional and external information to help the critic to categorize an artwork more precisely.

Elucidation and interpretation are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Elucidation aims to clarify the literal meaning of the symbols in an artwork and unveil the 'correlation between fixed conventional and iconic symbols and what they symbolize'³. For instance, elucidation of a poem focuses on finding the meaning of a particular word or sentence. Interpretation is explanatory work that explains the features of artworks based on the meaning of artworks. In other words, interpretation aims to answer why an artwork contains several features. For example, in narrative artworks, interpretation involves discovering the meaning of the actions of characters. In this sense, interpretation is more global than elucidation. Moreover, Carroll believes that interpretation is generally more controversial than elucidation, as interpretation often relies on abduction, leading different people to hold different views on the same artwork. It is worth noticing that though interpretation is controversial, Carroll believes that it is possible to judge whether an interpretation is true or not.

Analysis tries to explain how the components of an artwork contribute to its intended goal and how its goal organizes its components. Unlike interpretation that focuses on meaning, analysis considers a wider range of aspects of artworks. For example, some art is purely decorative and contains no internal meaning, but analysis can explain the color, texture of it. Strictly speaking, interpretation belongs to analysis.

In summary, evaluation is the fundament of art criticism. Non-evaluative parts of criticism, including description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis, all ensure that evaluation is grounded in reason. Non-evaluative parts are not entirely unrelated to each other; sometimes, they are even difficult to distinguish.

Part II

² Noel Carroll. On criticism. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009:102

³ Noel Carroll. On criticism. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009:109

Film Review of 'The Substance'⁴

Colorful, distinct, satirical, provocative, bloody and disgusting are all words that can be used to describe Coralie Fargeat's wacky and deliberately sickening body-horror, "The Substance" (2024).

[CLASSIFICATION and EVALUATION. This part classifies the movie as a body-horror film. In addition, it uses several adjectives ('colorful', 'bloody', etc.) to evaluate the overall features of the movie. This EVALUATION is grounded in CLASSIFICATION. Although the several adjectives seem to be a summary of the whole article, this CLASSIFICATION is the main reason that grounds EVALUATION.]

The film follows Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), an aging celebrity fitness guru, as she discovers a black market drug that promises to restore her to a younger and superior version of herself, Sue (Margaret Qualley). However, the drug comes with a specific set of rules that, if broken, have the potential to result in life-altering side effects. When Sparkle begins to disregard these regulations, things take a turn for the worse.

[DESCRIPTION. This passages above describes the main plot of the movie. It introduces the main characters Elisabeth and Sue, and also the basic settings of the movie.]

What starts as a visually refreshing yet relatively simple commentary on unhealthy obsessions with age and beauty, slowly spirals into a brutal, uncomfortable and necessary takedown of corporate misogyny. The film comments on the societal pressures placed upon women to both look and act a certain way, the world's long-standing fixation with defining women by their physical appearances and the ridiculously short lease women are given in the entertainment industry, especially when compared to men.

[DESCRIPTION and INTERPRETATION. The first sentence is a DESCRIPTION that describes the general structure of the movie. Then, the remaining part(INTERPRETATION) directly states the movie's themes, which are about 'societal pressures placed upon women to both look and act a certain way' and 'long-standing fixation with defining woman by their physical appearance[...]'. With the movie's themes in mind, one can understand the features of the movie more easily.]

The latter of which can even be seen in the career of the film's lead, Moore, who has seen a sharp decline in mainstream opportunities since the turn of the century, despite being one of the most profitable actresses throughout the 1990s. It's only fitting that her return to the spotlight comes in the form of a film like this: one that is unapologetically devoted to her and the many similarly mistreated women in "showbiz."

[CONTEXTUALIZATION and DESCRIPTION. Here, the critic is relating the movie to its leader actress Moore, whose career is almost identical to that of the main character Elisabeth of the movie, which is regarded as CONTEXTUALIZATION. Meanwhile, this paragraph also mentions some detail of the movie, considered as DESCRIPTION.]

The film also acknowledges the significant toll that corporate misogyny has on the way women see themselves. Sparkle's self-loathing behavior is a consistently present aspect of her character that stems from her interactions with others throughout the film, women included. Even when faced with opportunities to rebound, her insecurities and shame are thrust into the foreground, distancing herself further and further from her true self.

[INTERPRETATION and DESCRIPTION. This part mentions one of the movie's theme 'significant toll that corporate [...] women see themselves', which can be seen as INTERPRETATION.

⁴ <https://udreview.com/movie-review-the-substance/>

Meanwhile, the other sentences are a DESCRIPTION of the movie, grounding the INTERPRETATION above.]

“The Substance” is bold, unforgiving and unafraid to address its thematic contentions head on. The film satirizes its male characters, painting almost all of them as either immature, greedy or creepy, and over-sexualizes its female characters – albeit, in ways that might be seen as excessive – observing the fact that their bodies are continuously valued over their personalities, skills and accomplishments.

[INTERPRETATION and EVALUATION. The first sentence is clearly a piece of EVALUATION. The critic praises the boldness, unforgivingness and fearlessness of the movie, grounded in the INTERPRETATION in this and the next paragraph. Other sentences are INTERPRETATION that explains the meaning of some of the film’s features, including satirical portrayal of men and the hyper-sexualization of women.]

Whether it’s casting directors making disgusting and insensitive comments about a young woman’s facial features or Harvey (Dennis Quaid), a fitness program producer, telling Sue “pretty girls should always smile,” the film makes it obvious what it’s trying to project – so obvious that it can only be seen as a calculated choice.

[INTERPRETATION. This paragraph is same as the previous one, which explains the meaning of one of the movie’s shots or filming techniques. Here, the critic explains the meaning of two shots by showing that they symbolize the male gaze toward women.]

It’s overly explicit, even to the point where it’s exhausting, but never to the point where its exhaustion is counteractive. Instead, the film weaponizes the fatigue it imposes on audiences by feeding into it with its slowly escalating body horror and anxiety-inducing cinematography.

The film also leans into its levity on countless occasions, poking fun at its story’s absurdity and grounding itself in a world that feels more accommodating to its ridiculous nature. As a result, there is hardly a moment that feels out of place or inordinately inane.

The result is a film that concludes itself with a final act that refuses to end. For better and for worse, the last act goes on forever, becoming bloodier and nastier with each passing second. The film even buckles under its own weight at marginal intervals, only for it to get back up and continue wreaking havoc.

[ANALYSIS and EVALUATION. Most of these three paragraphs are considered as ANALYSIS because they explain how some features of the movie achieve some of its goals. They are ANALYSIS instead of INTERPRETATION or ELUCIDATION because the features mentioned in these three paragraphs are not related to the movie’s theme. The first sentence of the first paragraph is EVALUATION, which is grounded in the ANALYSIS.]

However, what this film lacks in restraint it makes up for in just about everything else. It’s fun, engaging and consistently rewarding, never getting too attached to a specific phase or idea. While I’d consider it difficult to recommend to anyone who isn’t freakishly comfortable with gore and dreadful imagery, it’s undeniably a one-of-a-kind filmgoing experience that will likely rank among my favorites of the year.

[EVALUATION. The last paragraphs is considered as EVALUATION. The critic praises that the movie is ‘fun, engaging and consistently rewarding [...] phase or idea’. What are the grounds of this final EVALUATION? Firstly and obviously, this EVALUATION is grounded in the previous three ANALYSIS paragraphs. In addition, CLASSIFICATION in the first paragraph may also contribute to this EVALUATION. Since the movie is categorized into body-horror, the movie successfully achieves the goal of body-horror films to keep audiences anxious and nervous, as well as director’s intention.]