



# Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

Chapter Three (second part)



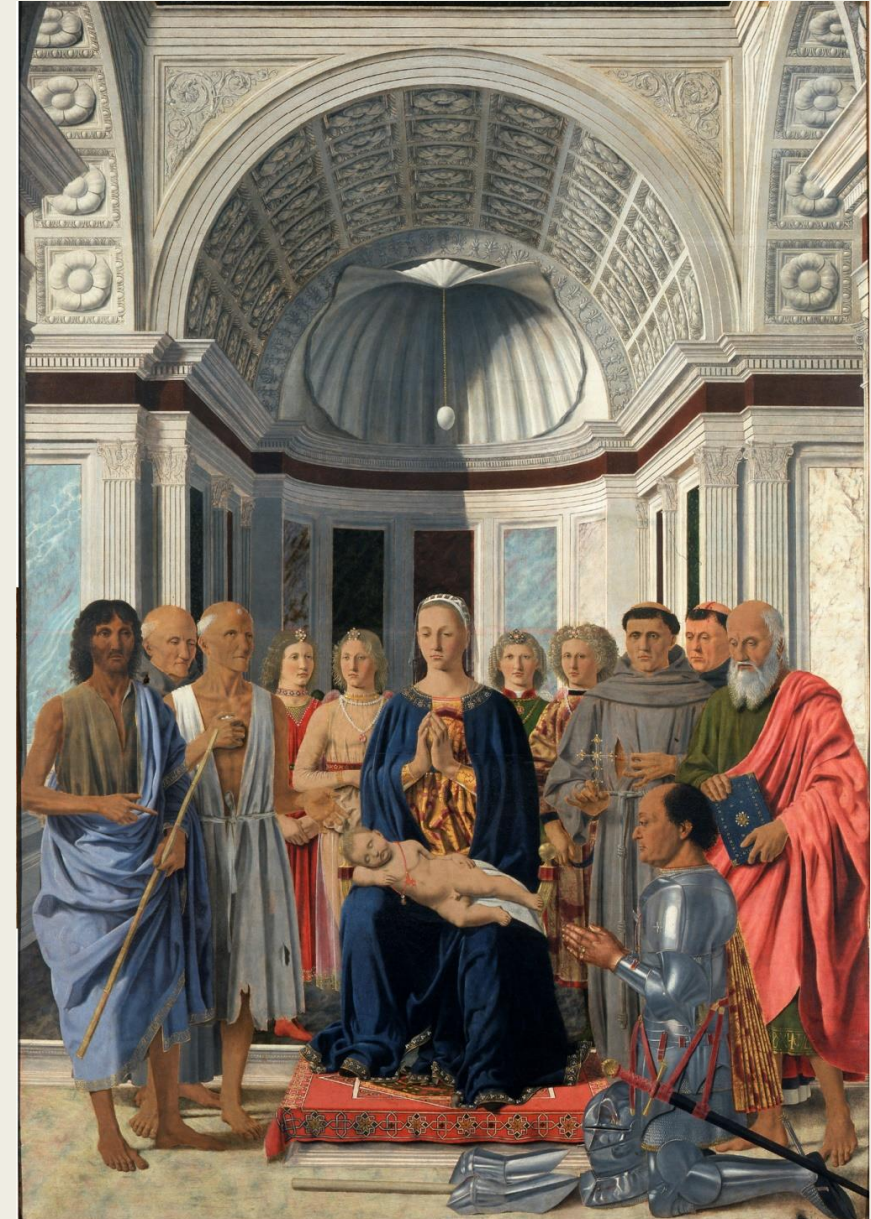
# Chapter overview

- In the second part of chapter 3, Carroll discusses **elucidation, interpretation, and analysis**.
- These parts of criticism are closely related. Elucidation is at times difficult to distinguish from interpretation. And interpretation is a particular case of analysis.
- The topic of interpretation offers Carroll an opportunity to return to the issue of **authorial intention**. As we have seen, philosophers have discussed extensively the importance of authorial intention to the interpretation of artworks.
- Carroll's view is a variety of **modest actual intentionalism**, according to which an artist's intentions are relevant to the interpretation of the artworks she creates. In the final part of the chapter, Carroll examines some reasons in favor of this theory of interpretation.

# Elucidation

- **Elucidation** is the clarification of a work's literal meaning.
- When a critic explains the meaning of a term used in a novel or poem, she is engaging in elucidation. Likewise, elucidation is involved when the critic identifies the figures represented in a painting.

Piero della Francesca, *Pala Montefeltro* (1472-74)



# Interpretation

- Interpretations are **explanatory** in nature. They try to explain why the artwork has the features it has, whenever this is not already obvious. Moreover, interpretations explain the work's features by appealing to the work's **meaning**.

“An interpretation is a hypothesis that accounts, in terms of some notion of meaning or significance, for the presence of the element or combinations of elements in an artwork where the presence of the pertinent elements is not immediately evident to the interpreter and/or to some presumed audience.”

(p.117)





Pablo Picasso, *The Old Guitarist* (1904)



A faintly outlined female face is visible around area occupied by the guitarist's neck. The critic may explain that this is because the painting was painted on a previously existing composition. This explanation does not account for the feature (the female face) by appealing to the work's meaning. It is therefore *not* a case of interpretation.





Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863)

# Interpretation

- An artwork's interpretation is typically established by **abduction** (a kind of inference to the best explanation).

*As you are about to eat your tuna sandwich, the phone rings. When you get back, the tuna sandwich is open, and half the tuna is gone. You think: it must have been the cat.*

“Typically interpretation involves the process of abduction — hypothesizing from the various parts of an artwork to the theme or message or idea or concept that best explains why the assemblage of parts before us coheres together as a whole, i.e., what theme, or message, unifies them.” (p. 110)

- Interpretation is therefore more **global** than elucidation. It is normally also far more **controversial**.



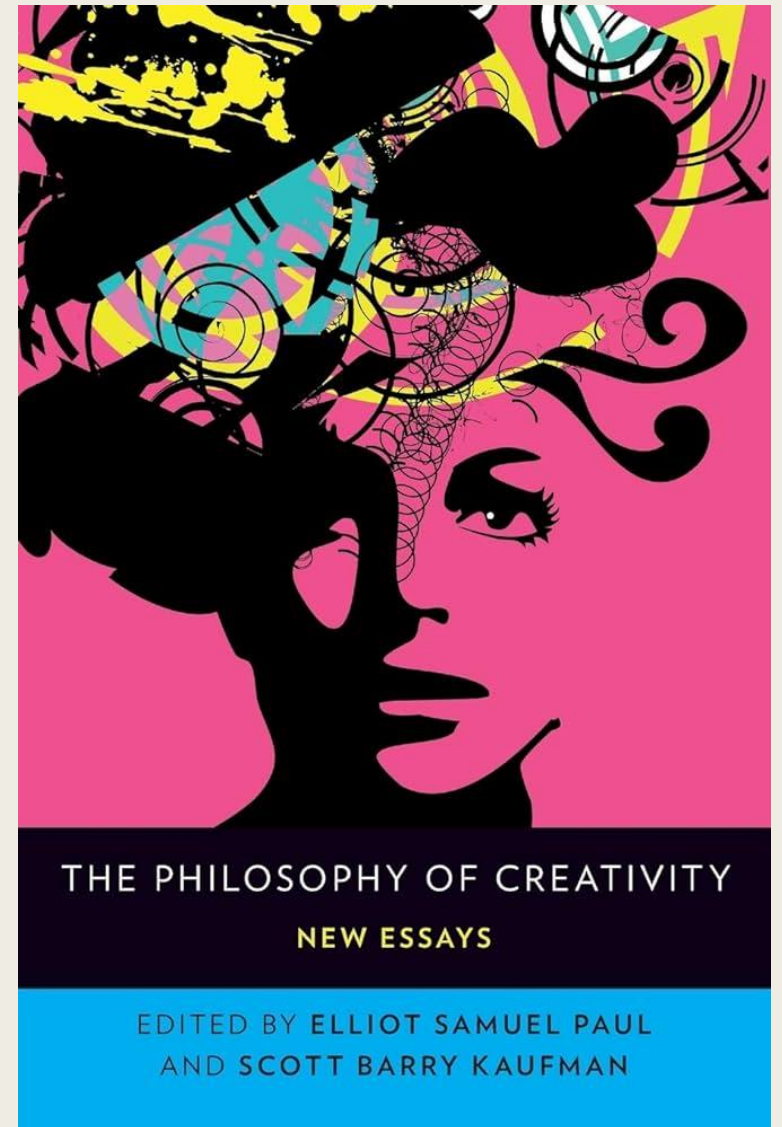


# Interpretation

- Elsewhere, Carroll claims that interpretation involves a special kind of imagining, which he terms **thematizing imagination**.

“...the thematizing imagination takes notice of the way in which the narrative content and style operate in concert via a presiding concept, theme, or purpose. The best appreciation of a work is typically the one that is able to thematically organize the most elements of narrative content and style under its rubric.”

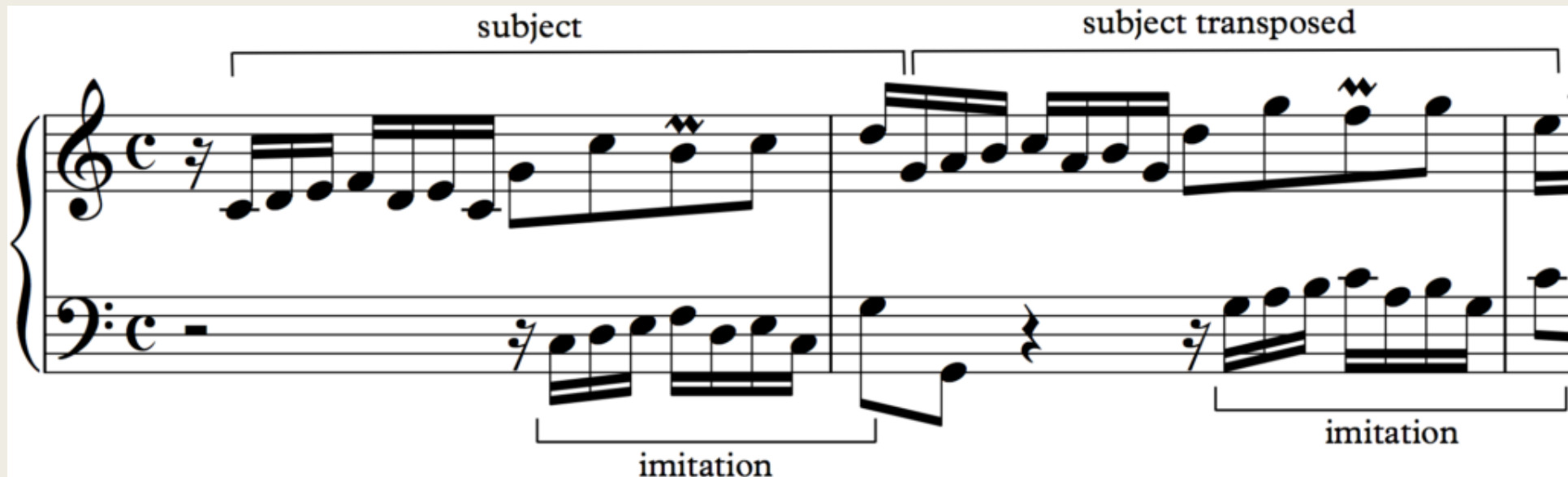
(Carroll 2014, 79)





# Analysis

- **Analysis** is the process of understanding how the work's parts contribute to its intended goal.
- Interpretation is a subset of analysis, in that it is also concerned with explaining how the work's elements fulfill the work's goal(s). But analysis is a broader category, for the work's point might not be to have any specific meaning, but rather to be formally pleasing, arouse an emotional state, etc.
- Following Carroll's distinction, at least some **instrumental music** may be an art form that is analyzed, but not interpreted (under the assumption that it does not possess any particular meaning, but rather aims at being formally and/or expressively interesting).



Musical analysis of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Invention No. 1 in C Major*, BWV 772 (1720)

# Elucidation vs. Interpretation

- Carroll asks if it is possible to distinguish between elucidation/description and interpretation by holding that the first two may be **true or false**, whereas interpretations may only be more or less **plausible**.
- There is a definite answer to the question “Who is the man kneeling before the Virgin Mary in Piero’s *Pala Montefeltro*?”. The answer is: Federico da Montefeltro, duke of Urbino. Answers that misidentify the figure are false descriptions of the painting.
- Against this, Carroll think that it is possible to talk of true and false interpretations. For instance, that George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) is about totalitarianism is a true interpretation of the work, as every critic agrees with it.



# Elucidation vs. Interpretation

- Another possible argument in favor of the idea that interpretations are not the sort of thing that can be true (whereas descriptions and elucidations are), is that sometimes we will find two (or more) **equally plausible** interpretations of the same work.
- Carroll concedes that this may happen, but denies that it proves that interpretations cannot be true. The fact that the two interpretations are equally plausible depends on our **epistemic situation** (what we know and understand about the work at that moment). This does not exclude that one day the situation will change in such a way as to show the falsity of one interpretation and the truth of another.

# Authorial intention (again)

- As we know, there are various theories of artistic interpretation, intentionalism and anti-intentionalism being the two most important approaches.
- Carroll had already defended the importance of authorial intention when he was arguing in favor of criticism as an assessment of the work's **success value** (as opposed to its **reception value**).
- In the rest of the chapter, Carroll examines a few more reasons to hold an intentionalist position. On the one hand, he rejects some anti-intentionalist objections. On the other hand, he develops some challenges for the anti-intentionalist.

# Interpretation and meaning

- Both Carroll and anti-intentionalists agree that interpretation is concerned with an artwork's **meaning**.
- Particularly, there is a kind of meaning that has been considered paradigmatic to the understanding of meaning in art: **linguistic meaning**. Artists may be thought of as trying to say things with their art, much like we ordinarily say things using words.
- From this standpoint, the debate about the role of intentions in interpretation will be solved on the basis of the role of intentions in the determination of linguistic meaning. If linguistic meaning is determined by appealing to a speaker's intentions, then we have plausible reasons to think that this will also be the case for artworks. But if linguistic meaning is independent of a speaker's intentions, then it looks like we should also be anti-intentionalist about the interpretation of art.



# Linguistic meaning and intentions

- The anti-intentionalist observes that linguistic meaning is determined by **conventions**, which take the form of syntactic and semantic rules (recall that anti-intentionalism is sometimes called **conventionalism**).
- If a speaker wants to convey a given linguistic meaning, she will have to follow the relevant linguistic conventions, otherwise the resulting utterance will not possess the intended meaning.
- This idea may be extended to art forms that do not (exclusively) employ language, such as music. There are musical rules, just like there are linguistic ones, and if a composer wants to express a given meaning in a piece, she will have to follow those rules.

# Linguistic meaning and intentions

- But there are problems for the anti-intentionalist's strategy. While it may be true that there are some conventions in music and painting, it doesn't look like they extend far enough to capture the meaning of everything composers and painters do.

What are the conventions that determine the meaning of this lithograph by Hans Hartung?



Hans Hartung, *L 102* (1963)

# Linguistic meaning and intentions

- Some rhetorical devices, such as **irony**, deliberately go against the conventions that govern linguistic meaning.
- To understand irony it is necessary to understand the speaker's intention in uttering a given sentence.

“What a beautiful day!”





# Art and language

- But parallel between art and language is more complicated than it seems.
- First, most art does not employ language. Works of instrumental music, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. do not need linguistic elements. So, while it may be true that we should think of artworks as vehicles for meaning (just like words and sentences are), it is not obvious to claim that their meaning is determined in the same way as linguistic meaning.
- Note that, even when works in the art forms above *do* include language, its contribution to the work's meaning is influenced by aspects of the work that are not linguistic – for example, two songs with the same lyrics may convey a very different meaning, if their melodies differ in terms of their expressive properties (e.g. the first one is happy, the second one sad).

# Art and action

- As we saw, the anti-intentionalist tries to vindicate the parallel between art and language. But there is a different strategy that equally accounts for that parallel, and it is a strategy that is much more compatible with the intentionalist proposal.
- The idea is that art-making is a particular kind of **human action**, just like acts of linguistic communication are. To understand the actions performed by others, we need to guess their intentions.
- The parallel brings us back to Carroll's earlier idea that the evaluation of art is a matter of an artwork's **success value**.

# Modest actual intentionalism

- The variety of actual intentionalism defended by Carroll is normally called **modest actual intentionalism**.
- It differs from **absolute actual intentionalism** because it distinguishes the artist's actual intention from his **stated intention** (what the artist says she wants to do).
- Actual intentions may be both determined by investigating stated intentions, as well as by analyzing the artwork itself.