

Part I - Noël Carroll's Account of Art Criticism

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I. Present Carroll's account of art criticism. Particularly, explain (1) in what sense Carroll's account is descriptive; (2) Carroll's view of the fundamental goal of criticism; (3) the parts of criticism and the relations that hold between them.

Noël Carroll's book *On Criticism* is "an exercise in the philosophy of criticism" (Carroll, 2009), in which the author expounds his theory of art criticism systematically. Carroll adopts a descriptive methodology in his account of art criticism rather than a revisionary one. By examining how art criticism is actually conducted by art critics and the role art criticism plays in the past and present, Carroll tries to "develop a framework in which the practices of criticism can be rendered intelligible and ordered" (Carroll, 2009). Instead of developing his theory of art criticism on the basis of certain aesthetical or philosophical principles, Carroll tries to avoid preconceived notions and derive his theory merely from the practice of art criticism, which is the reason why Carroll's theory is considered descriptive. And when facing the blame that his theory serves as an objection to the contemporary view of art criticism and thus can't be descriptive, Carroll argues that it is the current fashion rather than he himself that plays the role of a revisionist, and his theory is merely an effort to set things right.

In Carroll's theory, the fundamental goal of art criticism is to evaluate the success value of the artwork. In other words, evaluation of the artist's creative process is necessary for any art criticism. Contrary to contemporary view that art criticism should focus on the interpretation of the artwork and evaluate its reception value, Carroll demonstrates that the essence of art criticism lies in the analysis of the artist's intentional actions, and it is the artist's successful intentional actions that attach value to the certain artwork. Carroll opposes the

view that critics should evaluate the reception value of the artwork. He argues that art critics' task in nature is to make the audience aware of the artist's achievements when he or she created the artwork and tell the masterpieces from mediocre works with objective criteria. When too much attention is paid to the reception value of an artwork, the art critics are content with merely instructing the audience to acquire the most pleasurable experience from a certain artwork and neglect their own duty, which leads to a lack of objective evaluation. In conclusion, only when we take evaluation of the success value rather than the reception value as the basis of art criticism can we give full play to the role of art criticism.

Carroll then divides art criticism into different parts, namely description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, analysis and evaluation. The evaluation part is necessary in an art criticism, and at least one of the other parts, which are called non-evaluative parts, should be included in the art criticism as well. Carroll demonstrates that the evaluation in art criticism is so-called "grounded evaluation" (Carroll, 2009) considering that the evaluation is backed by solid, rational reasons provided by the non-evaluative parts, which explains why both the non-evaluative parts and the evaluative part are indispensable.

As the name suggests, the description part of an art criticism provides a description of the artwork itself. For example, introduction to the movie's plot serves as the description part in a film review. The description part often plays a significant role in supporting other non-evaluative parts as well as the evaluative part. When the critic aims to classify the artwork into a certain category, he or she usually refers to the description part and tries to find arguments that support his classification from the details of the artwork. Accurate description contributes greatly to correct classification.

The classification part aims to classify the artwork into a specific category that

suits it best. Generally speaking, there are different ways of categorizing artworks according to different standards, and thus an artwork usually belongs to more than one category. All that matters is to classify the artwork reasonably using objective criteria. The classification part is especially important in the process of evaluation because artworks that belongs to different categories are usually created for different purposes, and only by classifying the artwork accurately can we deduce the artist's intention correctly, after which the success value of the artwork is feasible to be determined.

The major concern of the contextualization part is "description of the circumstances—art historical, institutional, and/or more broadly socio-cultural—in which the artwork has been produced" (Carroll, 2009). There are a lot in common between description and contextualization, but the latter one focuses more on the external "environment" in which the artwork is created, while the former one internal features. Contextualization is also essential in the process of evaluation because it is meaningless to talk about the artist's achievements without a basic understanding of the time he or she lived in, and the value of the artwork is often revealed in comparison with other works of the same time. Besides, contextualization is also closely related to classification in that artwork that belongs to a certain style or movement, such as impressionism or cubism, is occasionally unlikely to be classified correctly unless ample information of its background is given.

The elucidation part of the art criticism aims to clarify the artwork's literal meaning. A typical example of elucidation is that the critic makes an effort to identify the identity or prototype of the characters in the picture. Elucidation also supports the evaluation, and it is closely related to interpretation and analysis.

An interpretation is "a hypothesis that accounts 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" (Carroll, 2009). In other words, the interpretation part of art criticism raises a rational conjecture that explains why the artwork has a certain feature. The artwork's meaning is abducted by the critic through the process of interpretation, and thus the artist's intention is able to be recognized, which is necessary for the evaluation part.

The analysis part also aims to figure out how the elements in an artwork imply the artist's intention, but the elements it concerns about can have no specific meaning, such as the melody trend or chord progression of a piece of instrumental music. The elucidation, interpretation and analysis parts are closely related in art criticism, and they all contribute greatly to the evaluation part.

The evaluation part is the essence of art criticism. Carroll agrees on the view that there are no such things as general principles in art evaluation, but he is strongly against the idea that evaluation cannot be objective. He demonstrates that once the artworks are categorized correctly, then critics are able to evaluate their success value with objective principles. To classify artworks accurately and objectively, art critics can appeal to structural, art-historical and intentional reasons. By demonstrating the possibility of objective evaluation, Carroll shows that the fundamental goal of art criticism to evaluate the artwork's success value is able to be achieved.

In conclusion, Carroll adopts a descriptive methodology in his account of art criticism and divides art criticism into different parts. He also proves that the fundamental goal of art criticism, which is evaluation of the artwork's success value, is able to be achieved in an objective way.

REFERENCES

1. Carroll, Noël. *On Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Part II - Art Criticism Analysis

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“How Did We Get Here?”¹

Ours is a generation overwhelmed by frustration, unrest, dread, and tragedy. Fear is wholly pervasive in American society, but we manage nonetheless to build our defenses in subtle ways-- we scoff at arbitrary, color-coded "threat" levels; we receive our information from comedians and laugh at politicians. Upon the turn of the 21st century, we have come to know our isolation well. Our self-imposed solitude renders us politically and spiritually inert, but rather than take steps to heal our emotional and existential wounds, we have chosen to revel in them. We consume the affected martyrdom of our purported idols and spit it back in mocking defiance. We forget that "emo" was once derived from emotion, and that in our buying and selling of personal pain, or the cynical approximation of it, we feel nothing.

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. In the passage above, the critic is describing the dilemma of present American society, in which people struggle to defend the commonly-existed fear, only to find themselves sinking deeper and deeper into desolation, emptiness and numbness. This passage serves as an important background for the album *Funeral* by Arcade Fire and helps the audience better understand in what circumstances the album is created, and the critic is implying that the value of *Funeral* lies largely in its feature to affect people in such an indifferent society.]

We are not the first, or the last, to be confronted with this dilemma. David Byrne famously asked a variation on the question that opens this review, and in doing so suggested a type of universal disaffection synonymous with drowning.

¹ **Review of:** *Funeral* (2004), 48 min 2 s, produced by Arcade Fire; **Source:** (<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/452-funeral/>)

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. Here the critic is relating Arcade Fire's album *Funeral* to another rock band Talking Heads' song in an implicit way, and indicates that the dilemma is universal and has attracted the attention of different rock bands. David Byrne mentioned by the critic is a member of the outstanding 80s rock band Talking Heads, and the title of this piece of art criticism "How Did We Get Here" comes from the lyrics of Talking Heads' famous song *Once in a Lifetime*.] And so The Arcade Fire asks the question again, but with a crucial distinction: The pain of Win Butler and Régine Chassagne, the enigmatic husband-and-wife songwriting force behind the band, is not merely metaphorical, nor is it defeatist. They tread water in Byrne's ambivalence because they have known real, blinding pain, and they have overcome it in a way that is both tangible and accessible. Their search for salvation in the midst of real chaos is ours; their eventual catharsis is part of our continual enlightenment.

[INTERPRETATION and EVALUATION. The critic is discussing the band and the album's mental traits and is generalizing the album's theme, which is not explicit in the album *Funeral*, yet is consistent with the album's features. There are also evaluative elements in this passage considering that the critic is occasionally expressing his admiration to the album's deep connotation and exquisite expression.]

The years leading up to the recording of *Funeral* were marked with death. Chassagne's grandmother passed away in June of 2003, Butler's grandfather in March of 2004, and bandmate Richard Parry's aunt the following month.

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. The critic is introducing the band Arcade Fire's core members, Chassagne, Butler and Richard Perry's life experiences as the background of the album's creation to help the audience better understand the emotion expressed in *Funeral*.] These songs demonstrate a collective subliminal recognition of the powerful but oddly distanced pain that follows the death of

an aging loved one. *Funeral* evokes sickness and death, but also understanding and renewal; childlike mystification, but also the impending coldness of maturity. The recurring motif of a non-specific "neighborhood" suggests the supportive bonds of family and community, but most of its lyrical imagery is overpoweringly desolate.

[INTERPRETATION. The critic is explaining the spiritual connotations of the album in his own understanding. The emotions expressed in the album are implicit and different people may have different understanding of the album's theme, but the critic's view is no doubt enlightening and quite plausible.]

"Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" is a sumptuously theatrical opener-- the gentle hum of an organ, undulating strings, and repetition of a simple piano figure suggest the discreet unveiling of an epic. [DESCRIPTION and ANALYSIS. The critic is mainly describing how the music at the beginning of "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" sounds like, but by analyzing the musical instruments the band uses, the critic is also explaining how Arcade Fire achieves its goal to unveil this epic album in a unique way. So the DESCRIPTION part and the ANALYSIS part are mixed together, and the former is the basis of the latter. From the positive words such as "sumptuously" and "epic", we can also consider this part EVALUATION to the song "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" in a way not so obvious.] Butler, in a bold voice that wavers with the force of raw, unspoken emotion, introduces his neighborhood. The scene is tragic: As a young man's parents weep in the next room, he secretly escapes to meet his girlfriend in the town square, where they naively plan an "adult" future that, in the haze of adolescence, is barely comprehensible to them. Their only respite from their shared uncertainty and remoteness exists in the memories of friends and parents.

[DESCRIPTION and INTERPRETATION. First, the critic is describing the content of the song "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" by roughly paraphrasing its

lyrics, which serves as the DESCRIPTION part, and then he is trying to explain the deeper meaning of the lyrics ("Their only respite from their shared uncertainty and remoteness exists in the memories of friends and parents."), which is suggested by the critic rather than expressed explicitly in the album. So there exists the INTERPRETATION part as well.]

The following songs draw upon the tone and sentiment of "Tunnels" as an abstract mission statement. The conventionally rock-oriented "Neighborhood #2 (Laika)" is a second-hand account of one individual's struggle to overcome an introverted sense of suicidal desperation. The lyrics superficially suggest a theme of middle-class alienation, but avoid literal allusion to a suburban wasteland-- one defining characteristic of the album, in fact, is the all-encompassing scope of its conceptual neighborhoods. The urban clatter of Butler's adopted hometown of Montreal can be felt in the foreboding streetlights and shadows of "Une Annee Sans Lumiere", while Chassagne's evocative illustration of her homeland (on "Haiti", the country her parents fled in the 1960s) is both distantly exotic and starkly violent, perfectly evoking a nation in turmoil.

[DESCRIPTION and INTERPRETATION. The critic is briefly describing the song "Neighborhood #2 (Laika)", more precisely, its lyrics, and is focusing on the INTERPRETATION of the song's implicit meaning at the same time. Can the description "conventionally rock-oriented" at the beginning of this passage considered as CLASSIFICATION? Considering that the critic seems to have no intention to actually categorize the album into a certain music style, this is probably not an example of CLASSIFICATION. There also exists an element of CONTEXTUALIZATION at the end of the passage above, when the critic briefly introduces Butler and Chassagne's life experiences in the past.]

"Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)" is a shimmering, audacious anthem that combines a driving pop beat, ominous guitar assault, and sprightly

glockenspiel decoration into a passionate, fist-pumping album manifesto. [DESCRIPTION and ANALYSIS. The critic is describing the music of the song "Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)", and he is also analyzing the musical instruments used by the band and their sound effect. This part also includes EVALUATION of the song "Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)", and the critic evaluates the song as "a shimmering, audacious anthem" at the beginning of this passage.] The fluidity of the song's construction is mesmerizing, and the cohesion of Butler's poignant assertion of exasperation ("I went out into the night/ I went out to pick a fight with anyone") and his emotional call to arms ("The power's out in the heart of man/ Take it from your heart/ Put it in your hand"), distinguishes the song as the album's towering centerpiece.

[DESCRIPTION and EVALUATION. The critic is quoting the lyrics of the song "Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)", and is describing how Butler's voice sounds like. He also comments that "the fluidity of the song's construction is mesmerizing", which serves as the EVALUATION.]

Even in its darkest moments, *Funeral* exudes an empowering positivity. [The sentence above seems to be EVALUATION at first sight, but after careful examination, it mainly refers to the emotion expressed in the album *Funeral*, and thus should not be considered as EVALUATION.] Slow-burning ballad "Crown of Love" is an expression of lovesick guilt that perpetually crescendos until the track unexpectedly explodes into a dance section, still soaked in the melodrama of weeping strings; the song's psychological despair gives way to a purely physical catharsis. [DESCRIPTION and INTERPRETATION. The critic is describing the sound effect of the song "Crown of Love", and is offering an INTERPRETATION at the end of this passage. By describing the gradual increase of the volume using the word "crescendo" and explaining its effect, the critic also adds ANALYSIS element into this passage.] The anthemic momentum of "Rebellion (Lies)" counterbalances Butler's plaintive appeal for

survival at death's door, and there is liberation in his admittance of life's inevitable transience. "In the Backseat" explores a common phenomenon-- a love of backseat window-gazing, inextricably linked to an intense fear of driving-- that ultimately suggests a conclusive optimism through ongoing self-examination. "I've been learning to drive my whole life," Chassagne sings, as the album's acoustic majesty finally recedes and relinquishes.

[DESCRIPTION and INTERPRETATION. The passage above is mainly INTERPRETATION of the song "Rebellion (Lies)" and "In the Backseat", in that the intention of the band and the theme of these two songs are not explicit. The critic is also describing the song's content by simply quoting the lyrics at the end of this passage.]

So long as we're unable or unwilling to fully recognize the healing aspect of embracing honest emotion in popular music, we will always approach the sincerity of an album like *Funeral* from a clinical distance. Still, that it's so easy to embrace this album's operatic proclamation of love and redemption speaks to the scope of The Arcade Fire's vision. It's taken perhaps too long for us to reach this point where an album is at last capable of completely and successfully restoring the tainted phrase "emotional" to its true origin. Dissecting how we got here now seems unimportant. It's simply comforting to know that we finally have arrived.

[EVALUATION. The final passage is a conclusive EVALUATION of the whole album *Funeral*. Although it seems the critic is not commenting directly on the album, it's obvious that he holds an attitude of approval towards the band Arcade Fire and its album *Funeral*. The critic expresses his EVALUATION in a way full of poetry and philosophy.]