



Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

Chapter Three (first part)

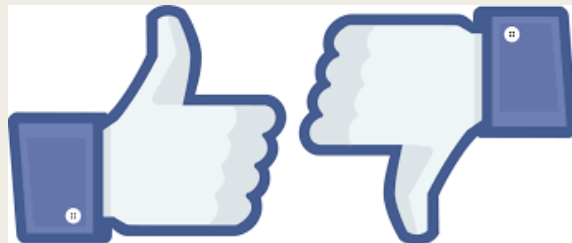


Chapter overview

- This chapter introduces the **parts of criticism**, that is, the various things a critic does when she discusses an artwork.
- According to Carroll's framework, criticism includes **at least one** among description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis. Let us call these the **non-evaluative** parts of criticism.
- In addition to these parts, criticism **necessarily includes evaluation**. Evaluation may be **explicit** or **implicit**. In the latter case, there will be no definite part of the critic's work that directly evaluates the artwork under consideration. In these cases, the critic's verdict will be apparent from one or more of the other parts of criticism. Carroll does not discuss evaluation in this chapter, although he will do so in the rest of the book.

Grounded evaluation

- As we have already seen, Carroll takes the evaluation that is found in art criticism to be a kind of **grounded evaluation**, that is, an evaluation that is backed by reasons.
- Non-evaluative elements, such as a description or interpretations of the work, are necessary in order to ground evaluation. It is because of this that Carroll considers the non-evaluative parts of criticism to be **necessary** to a piece of art criticism (at least one of them must be present).
- “[...] without saying something about the work of art by way of discussing it in terms of one or more of these operations, the critic’s remarks would be virtually uninformative—little more than a gesture of thumbs up or down.” (p. 85)



Description

- A **description** is any part of a piece of art criticism that says what the work is like.
- The object of discussion will change considerably from one art form to another. While the description of a painting will focus on visual features of it, the description of a novel will discuss its plot and characters.
- Description is the most obvious component of criticism, and it is likely to be present in any piece of criticism. In fact, even criticism that avoids evaluation (and that therefore would not count as criticism on Carroll's view) will include a description of the work.
- Like any other non-evaluative part of criticism, description may ground evaluation, but it often also grounds other non-evaluative components. For instance, a critic's **classification** of a work will likely depend on a description of it.

“A cautionary tale about bad relationships and worse vacations, “Midsommar” gets its creep on early. When it opens, Dani (Florence Pugh), its deeply troubled axis, is having a lousy day that rapidly turns devastating. Her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor), who’s on the verge of breaking up with her, isn’t much help, though he eventually comes through. Months later Dani is still having a rough time while Christian continues eyeing the closest exit. Their uneasy dynamic intensifies and changes during a catastrophic trip to a small, strange community in Sweden, where the expected summertime fun gives way to terror.”

Manohla Dargis’s review of *Midsommar* (2019) for *The New York Times*

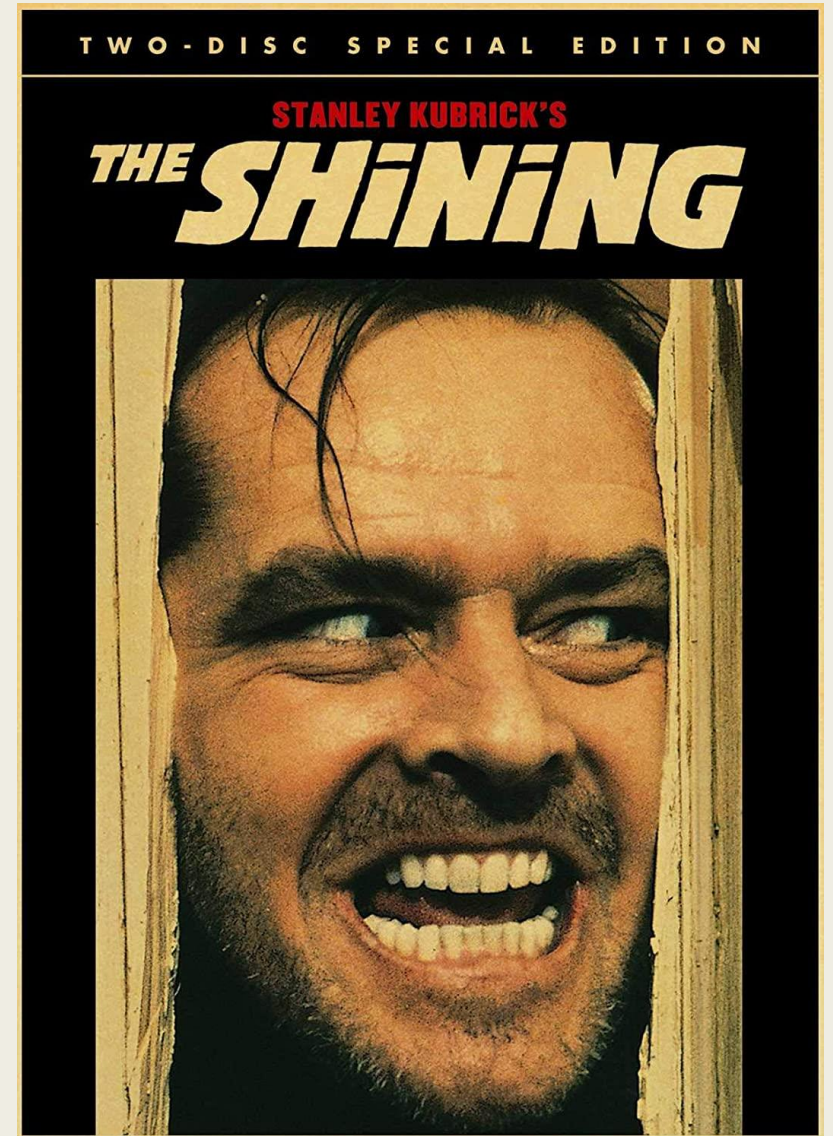


A problem with description

- Carroll considers a possible worry concerning description: “Description is not only necessarily selective; it is selective in an epistemically suspicious and contaminated fashion.” (p. 90)
- The worry is that a critic may start with a preconceived view with regard to some other parts of criticism, and this will lead her to tailor her description to that view. Elements of the work that support that view will be described and highlighted, whereas elements that do not support the view will be ignored or dismissed.
- Carroll recognizes that this may happen, but also notes that this sort of bias is not a fatal threat to the objectivity of criticism, as the same bias appears in all sort of intellectual activities.

Classification

- To **classify** an artwork is to specify the **category** it belongs to.
- Categories of art are of many kinds. There are **art forms** (music, painting, drama, film, etc.), but also **genres** (horror, comedy, thriller, adventure, etc.), as well as **styles** or **movements** (minimalism, impressionism, modernism, pop art, etc.).
- Each artwork will normally belong to more than one category. For example, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) belongs to the categories "film" and "horror".
- Classification has a major impact on evaluation, as the achievement of an artwork are partly related to the intended goals of the categories it belongs to.



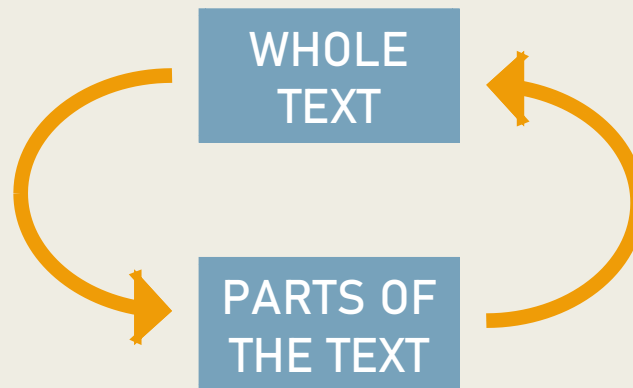
Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980)



Ed Wood's *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959)

Classification: a hermeneutic circle?

- The concept of “hermeneutic circle” was developed by 19th century German philologists and philosophers to explain a prominent feature of **textual interpretation**.
- One way to describe the hermeneutic circle is the following. When we try to determine the meaning of a text, we must start from its component parts (words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc.). But once we have reached an understanding of the whole text, our interpretation of its component parts may change, and the circle will start again.



Classification: a hermeneutic circle?

- Carroll considers the possibility that a hermeneutic circle may be involved in the critical operation of classification. He writes: “ [...] in order to describe the work correctly, it seems that we need to know the category the work instantiates; but we only know the category the work inhabits on the basis of our description.” (p. 99)
- Similarly to the problem he already noted in the case of description, the worry here is that, regardless of the description (or classification) we start from, we will be unable to step out of the circle, and will therefore be incapable of judging its correctness.

Classification: a hermeneutic circle?

- How does Carrol resolve this apparent circularity in our classification and description of art?
- Carroll notes that a given classification does not blind us to the aspects of the work that do not fit well with that classification. For instance, if the naturalistic style of Salvador Dali's painting leads a critic to momentarily classify them as realistic, this will not prevent her from noting the various features that are incompatible with that classification.
- This is similar to what happens in other areas of intellectual investigation. It is possible that an established scientific theory will lead a scientist to pay less attention to facts that are in contrast with that theory, but the facts will not disappear altogether, and sooner or later they will likely be noticed.



Salvador Dalí, *Moment of Transition* (1934)

Description and classification

- We saw earlier that description does not only ground evaluation, but also the other parts of criticism.
- Classification is a case in point, because accurate and selective description is often important to determine the correct classification of an artwork.



A still from *The Shining* (1980)

Contextualization

- As we saw, description is the part of criticism that is concerned with the presentation of the artwork's features.
- Contextualization is similar to description in that it is also a matter of presenting an artwork's features. But whereas description is concerned with the **internal** features of the artwork, contextualization is a kind of **external** description, that is, the “description of the circumstances—art historical, institutional, and/or more broadly socio-cultural—in which the artwork has been produced.” (p. 102)
- We should keep in mind that, according to Carroll, the evaluation of an artwork has to do with the evaluation of an artist's achievement. Contextualization is essential to determine what an artist has achieved, as what counts as an achievement at one time may be rather commonplace and unremarkable at a later time.

Contextualization and classification

- We just said that contextualization is related to **description**, in that it may be considered a description of the external features of an artwork, its relations to socio-cultural and institutional forces, and so on.
- But contextualization is often also related to **classification**. For example, the critic Clement Greenberg's examination of the goals pursued by some 20th century painters century led him to define the artistic category of "modernist painting". According to Greenberg, modernist painting is characterized by an awareness of flatness as the fundamental feature of painting as an art.



Morris Louis, *Untitled* (1954)

Édouard Manet, *The Fifer* (1866)





Kenneth Noland, *Gift* (1961-62)

Class discussion

- As we have seen, Carroll thinks that the evaluation that is involved in art criticism is grounded in reasons. To say that an artwork is good is not merely to say that you approve of it (at least, that's not enough if you want to be an art critic).
- Why could Carroll's claim can be considered close to Kant's view of the judgement of taste? And in what sense it could instead be thought that his view is incompatible with Kant's?

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

