



Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

Chapter One



Chapter overview

- The first chapter is mainly concerned with a defense of the idea that evaluation is central to art criticism.
- Over the course of the last century, art criticism has become more **descriptive**, abandoning its former evaluative nature.
- Carroll looks at arguments that may be advanced in favor of this change, and explains why he thinks they fail.
- A central element of Carroll's rebuttal of such arguments is the appeal to **categories of art**. This is a central feature of the book. Carroll believes that the categorization of artworks into categories (art forms, genres, oeuvres, movements, etc.) is necessary to the evaluation of artworks.

The 'art' in 'art criticism'

- Art criticism is presumably criticism *of the arts*, but what are the arts in question?
- Carroll says that he is mainly interested in criticism of the arts belonging to the so-called **Modern System of the Arts**, which emerged around the 18th century in Europe.
- These are literature, drama, sculpture, painting/drawing/printmaking, music, dance, film, and photography (these two obviously weren't there in the 18th century).

The 'criticism' in 'art criticism'

- The type of criticism Carroll has in mind is essentially **verbal**, that is linguistic, either spoken or written. He therefore explicitly excludes non-verbal forms of critical commentary.
- But there are many verbal acts that concern artworks. What is it that sets apart criticism from other categories of linguistic discourse about art?



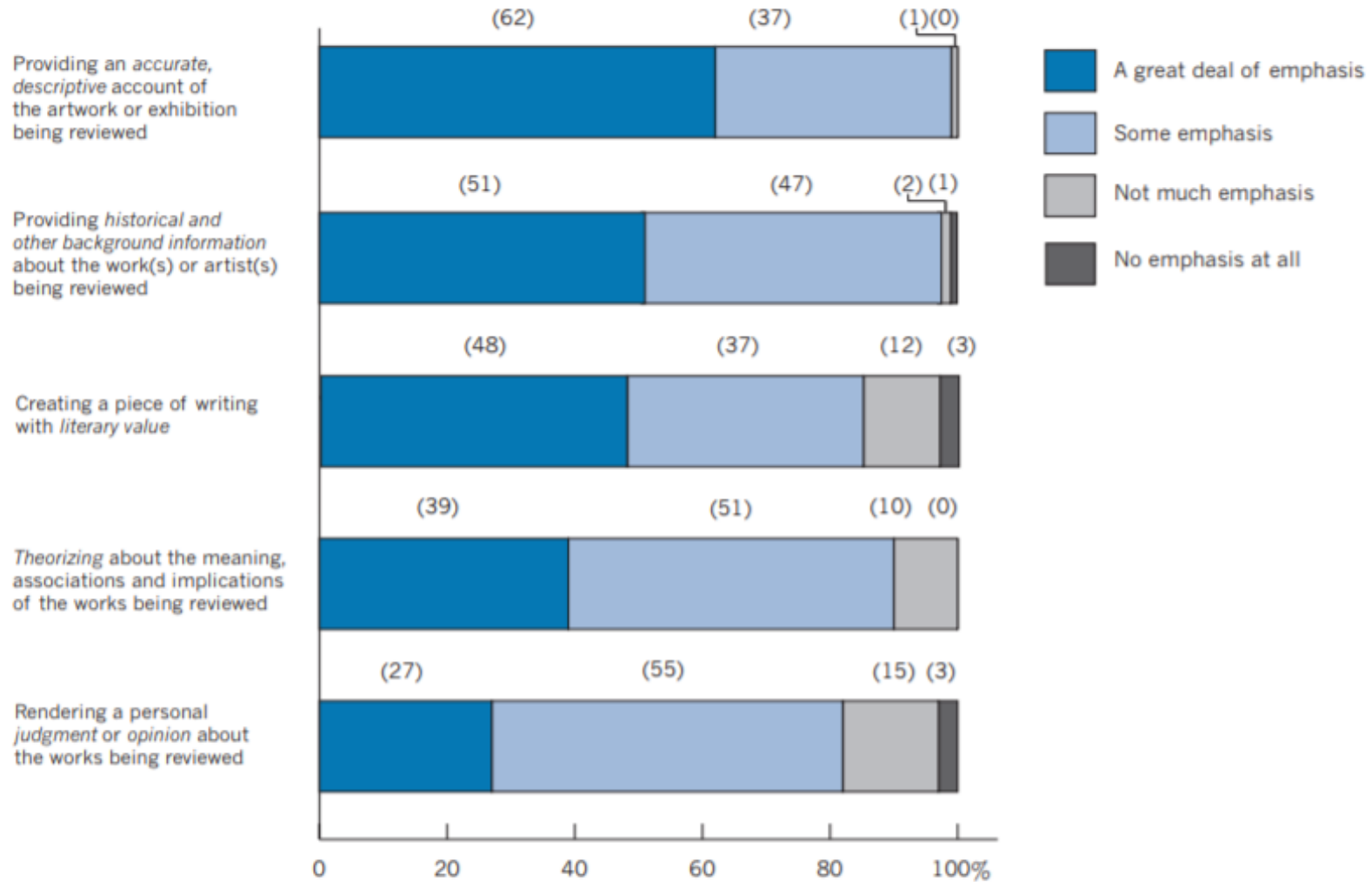
Marcel Duchamp, *L. H. O. O. Q.* (1919)

Evaluation grounded in reasons

- **Evaluation** is the feature of art criticism that differentiates it from other verbal acts that take artworks as their objects.
- The evaluations offered by art criticism are normally backed by **reasons**. The art critic motivates her evaluation of a work, grounding it in features of the work.
- While critics may evaluate the entire oeuvre of an artist (the totality of the artist's works), or even a whole artistic movement, the most common and fundamental type of art criticism is directed at the evaluation of an **individual artwork**.
- In holding evaluation to be not only essential to art criticism, but also its most important part, Carroll is going against the 20th century tendency to consider evaluation as a marginal aspect of art criticism.

fig. 4.4 CRITICISM: WHAT MATTERS

HOW MUCH EMPHASIS DO YOU PLACE ON THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS OF CRITICISM?

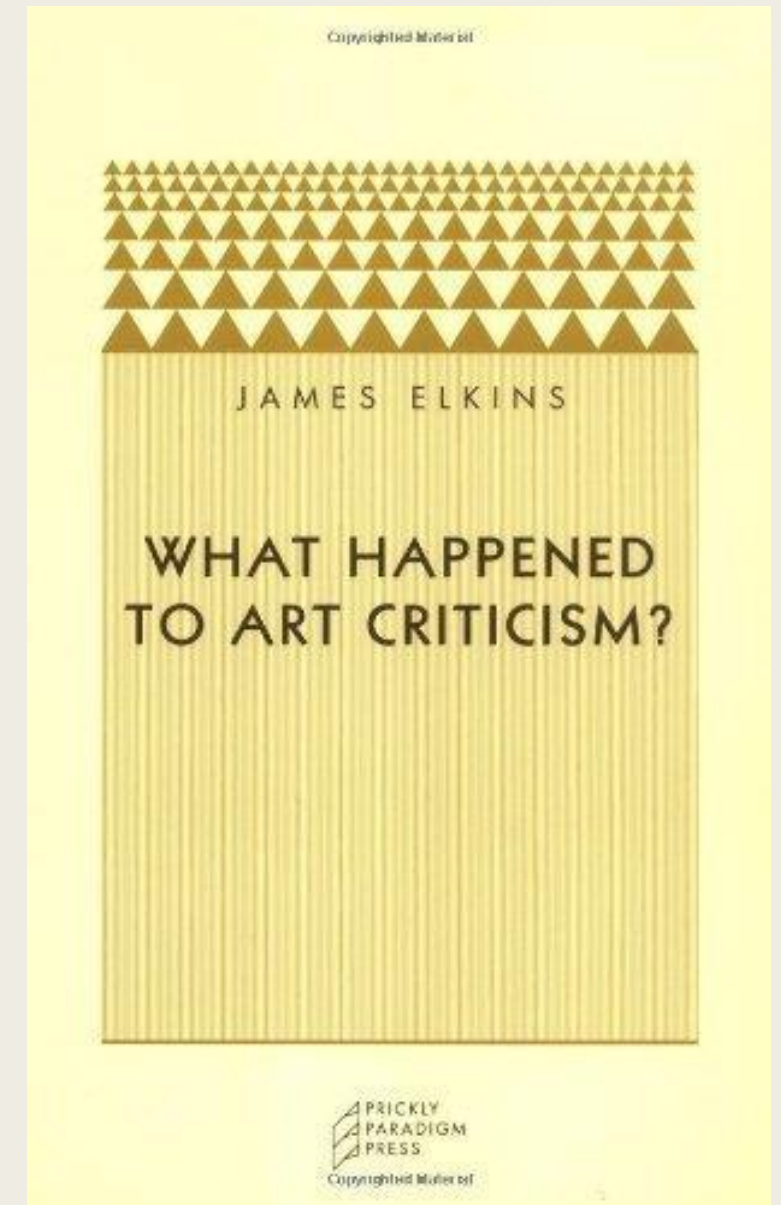


- The art historian James Elkins describes the same change in art criticism as the one described by Carroll.

“Art writing 'that attempts *not* to judge, and yet presents itself as criticism, is one of the fascinating paradoxes of the second half of the twentieth century.” (Elkins 2003, 35)

- In support of the idea that art criticism cannot limit itself to description and historical contextualization, Elkins argues that this would fail to distinguish criticism from art history.

“After description, the second most-emphasized goal of art criticism in the Columbia University survey is “providing *historical and other background information*”: an ideal I would identify as art history. “A piece of art criticism should place a work in a larger context,” as one respondent puts it. That purpose is entirely unobjectionable, because historical context is unavoidably part of assessment. It is *necessary* for art criticism, but strictly speaking, it cannot be *sufficient* because then art criticism would simply be art history.” (Elkins 2003, 36)



The necessity of evaluation

- Similarly to Elkins, Carroll argues that art criticism without evaluation would become identical to other verbal practices that take art and their object.
- The point is that, if art criticism exists as a specific verbal practice, it must have some identifying feature.

“I want to argue that criticism necessarily or essentially requires evaluation, notably evaluation or appraisal grounded in reason and evidence. But why think that? Well, because otherwise art criticism is not really distinguishable from comparable forms of discourse about art” (p. 16)

Against evaluation – the arguments

- Carroll considers arguments in favor of the idea that art criticism should not engage in evaluation, or that this is not art criticism's distinctive feature.

(1) The **selection=evaluation argument**. One may argue that all discourse about art selects artworks, movements, artists, art forms, etc. that are worthy of discussion. This is an implicit (positive) evaluation of the artworks, movements, etc. in question. Therefore, evaluation is not a unique feature of art criticism.

Against this argument, Carroll observes that:

- Art critics often do not select the artworks they discuss, they are assigned them by other people or institutions.
- If selection is evaluation in the sense of “being worthy of attention”, this is a positive evaluation. But art criticism often produces negative evaluations, so it must be engaging in a different type of evaluation.
- The evaluation that comes with selection is not grounded in reasons, whereas the one found in art criticism is.

Against evaluation – the arguments

(2) A defender of the view that criticism is not essentially evaluative could also argue that evaluation seems to be absent from much recognized art criticism.

Against this argument, Carroll observes has various strategies.

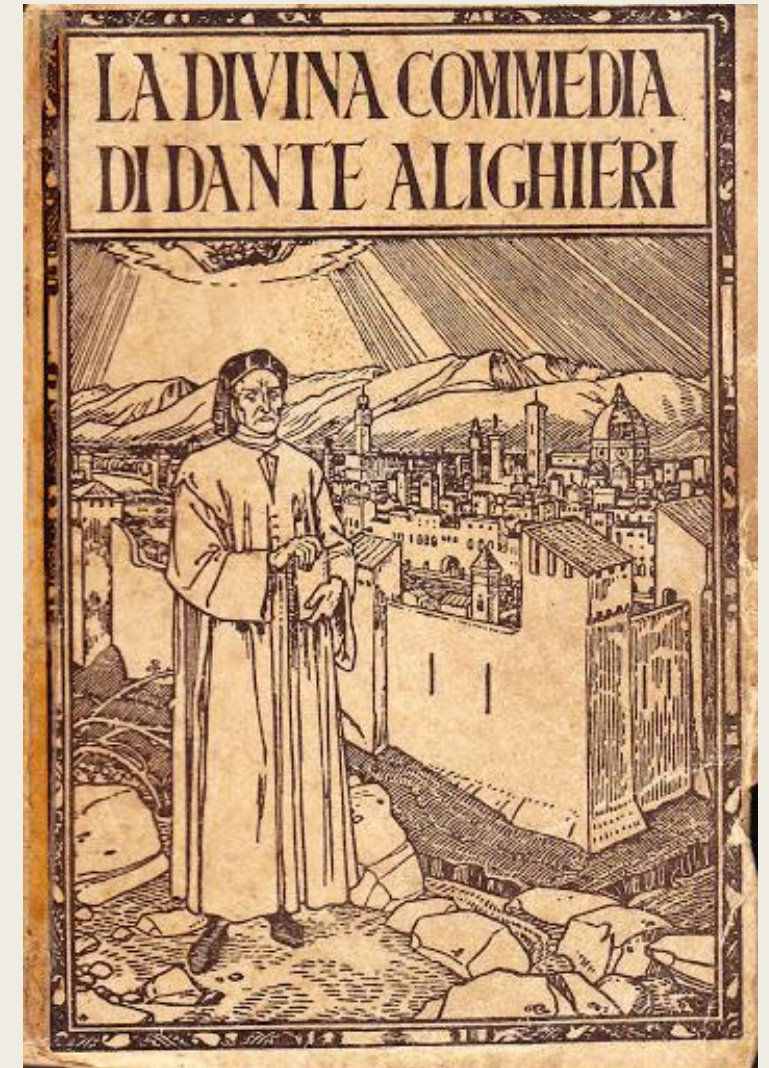
- While Carroll is committed to a **descriptive** account of art criticism, he also stresses that his goal is a **rational reconstruction** of it. Therefore, he is ready to deny that the label ‘art criticism’ should apply to things we currently describe as art criticism. From this standpoint, the fact that some art criticism is not evaluative does not represent a problem for Carroll’s view.
- Carroll also observes that evaluation is **implicit** in much art criticism. While there is no explicit formulation of a value judgment, an evaluation clearly transpires from the critic’s remarks.

Against evaluation – the arguments

(3) A complaint voiced especially by artists is that evaluative criticism is **prescriptive**: it tells artists what to do and what to avoid, and thus stifles creativity. A related objection is that evaluative criticism imposes rules on art, whereas art should have no rules.

Both points differ from the previous two arguments because of their **normative** dimension. They are not about whether criticism *is* or not evaluative, but rather about whether it *should* be evaluative.

- Against the first complaint, Carroll observes that evaluative criticism signals flaws and problems in artworks, but does not tell artists how to solve such problems.
- In response to the second objection, Carroll concedes that critics sometimes appeal to principles in evaluating artworks. However, these principles are of such a general nature that they do not threaten the autonomy of artists – they are evaluative guidelines, rather than guides to action.



Fra Angelico's painting *The Beheading of Saints Cosmas and Damien* (1440) and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* can both be praised on account of their compositional unity. Principles such as compositional unity are general enough that a critic may employ them without prescribing particular solutions to artists.

Against evaluation – the arguments

(4) Another possible arguments against evaluation in art criticism also rests on skepticism with regard to general principles of evaluation. One could argue that there are no rules for the evaluation of artworks, because each artwork is unique, and thus incommensurable to other artworks.

Carroll's replies to both challenges by appealing to **categories of art**, a central concept in the book's argument.

- Works of art are not isolated, incommensurable entities, because they are grouped by genre, art form, artist, movement, etc., and may be evaluated as members of such categories.
- Categories of art also help Carroll deal with the second objection. Even though there may be no general principles for the evaluation of art, there are principles of evaluation internal to the various categories.

Against evaluation – the arguments

(5) A final possible view against the idea that criticism is or should be based on evaluation holds that criticism is too **subjective**. The critic's positive evaluation of a work is merely the expression of the fact that an individual or group likes a given work, rather than a verdict grounded in reasons.

Carroll traces back this line of argument to 18th century aesthetics. Philosophers such as Hume and Hutcheson, who described beauty as a sensation experienced by a subject, rather than as a property of an object.

- In response, Carroll argues that this would not prevent us to find inter-subjective agreement with regard to the accomplishments of this or that artwork. Agreement in this case would not be based on rational principles valid objectively (such as mathematical laws), but rather on norms deriving from normal human constitution.
- In support of this view, Carroll observes that we find in fact considerable agreement with regard to the value of the best works in the Western artistic canon.

Against evaluation – the history

It is interesting to ask *why* art criticism in the 20th century rejected evaluation. Carroll offers some answers, but a more exhaustive list of reasons is found in James Elkins 2003 book *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (pp. 43-48). Here are three of them:

1. Art galleries profit by selling artworks. If critics write negative reviews, it is less likely for an artwork to be sold. This, combined with increasing financial difficulties for art galleries, has resulted in an environment that discourages critics to evaluate artworks (or at least that only allows for positive evaluation).
2. Critics became aware that the art market is the fundamental force in determining the value of artworks. Evaluation thus became irrelevant, as the value and exposure of artworks is ultimately determined by the art market.
3. The numerous art styles that proliferated in the United States from the 1960s made it impossible to adopt criteria for the evaluation of artworks. The fragmentation of the artworld thus led critics away from evaluation and brought them closer to description and interpretation.