

CRITICISM

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One sometimes responds to works of art in ways that are idiosyncratic or purely subjective, much as Proust's Swann discovers in Old Master paintings the physiognomies of his personal acquaintances. Other times, one responds to works with the aim of being guided by the artistic merit and meaning they would possess for anyone attending to them under appropriate conditions. When one explains and justifies that work-guided response to others, one engages in a form of criticism. Any example of criticism is likely to have components that depend on its particular vehicle of expression, such as a private conversation, literary review, art historical monograph, belle-lettrist essay, or newspaper listing. However we will focus on three features most instances of criticism share (and in virtue of which they are recognizable as criticism): the identification of art, its interpretation, and its evaluation. It should be noted that each of these aspects has at times been identified with criticism *tout court* and that many contemporary critics deny the centrality of evaluation to their activity. Thus what follows is to some degree an idealization of the practice, one that is meant to capture the rational structure of criticism, but not an account that will perfectly fit how all critics think of what they do.

IDENTIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION

Any critical appraisal of a work of art must identify (describe, characterize, individuate) it in a way that allows readers to imaginatively represent the work to themselves. At one time, in the literary genre of *ekphrasis*, the work of art that a critic conjured up may not have existed independently of his description. In the more typical case readers of criticism do not have, or have not yet had, an opportunity to engage in a first-hand manner with the work of art in question and must content themselves with learning of it through the critic's account. But a reason in principle for why a critic must provide such a non-evaluative identification of the work's features is that there are an indefinite number of ways of describing a work of art and a critic needs to bring the work under at least one description that will sustain, if not justify, the meaning and value she attributes to the work.

Identifying the descriptive features of a work of art—e.g., what a painting depicts, what events occur in a narrative or play, what sort of language, register, or rhyme scheme is used in collection of poetry, and so on—might be easily achieved for traditional stable genres or media of art. But we can see that sometimes a description of a work must distinguish the features of the work of art from features of the ordinary physical object or material the work is identified with. This is often the case with works of the avant-garde, those from unfamiliar artistic traditions, or those that are not created under a concept of a standard medium. For example, a critic may need to decide whether the atypical thickness of the stretchers employed by a minimalist painter contributes to the meaning of his work (as, say, stressing a painting's identity as an object) or whether inconsistencies in a narrative should be ignored or, instead, recognized as expressive features of the work itself. These sorts of indications do not so much describe or explain the work of art as identify what constitutes it (Danto 1981).

A descriptive operation that goes beyond identifying physical or structural features of a

work is the classification of it as an instance of one or more general kinds. These may be genres or media, such as lyric poetry; styles, such as color-field painting; movements, such as punk rock; kinds defined by a common theme, such as suburban anomie; or a common goal as in muckraking novels. In identifying the relevant kind or kinds to which a work belongs a critic imputes certain functions, points, or purposes to the work, i.e., those characteristic of works that belong to such kinds. Or, more tendentiously, to say that a work belongs to a given category may be to commit oneself to explaining the work as arising out of a process in which an artist recognized the relevance of certain regulative constraints and ideals constitutive of that category (Wollheim 1968:171).

In identifying the category or categories to which a work belongs a critic can point to certain features of the work as being salient elements in its meaning, as describing *The Turn of the Screw* as both a ghost story and psychological novella tells us what features of the work are relevant sources of its meaning and what ends it is designed to achieve. Categorizing a work may also distinguish it from other descriptively similar works, where such similarity obscures differences in meaning. A recognition that, in the context in which a work was created, its language would seem antiquated or its visual form obsolete may prompt a critic to consider whether the work does not belong to its apparent categories but, instead, to others (say, of parody or appropriation) that are parasitic on the apparent ones.

It is unclear where mere description of a work leaves off and interpretation begins. Some aspects of a work, such as the meaning of a symbol or the implicit associations triggered by a term, may have been intelligible as a matter of course to the artist's contemporaries but require extensive forensic analysis akin to interpretation for us to understand that art today. Also, some art forms and individual works of art may call for less interpretation than others, their meaning being as easily recognizable as the meanings of words to a native speaker. However, a notional distinction between the two operations is that description identifies a work in a way that fixes the work, at least for the period the critic engages with it, as an entity to be interpreted. Interpretation presumes the existence of a stable description upon which it depends. A critic may, for example, describe how a naturalistic portrait by the painter Chuck Close is composed of a multitude of the artist's colored fingerprints. This description would then subtend an interpretation of the work, as, perhaps, a witty riposte by the artist to those who complained that his photorealist style precluded genuine handiwork.

In the process of interpreting a work, a critic's descriptions do not merely serve as clues or guides to discovering a meaning. Rather, through her descriptions a critic explains how the meaning of the work—what it is about, what it expresses, says, shows, and so on—is embodied in the work's material and structural makeup. That is, an interpretation of a work assigns meaning to a work in a way that both makes sense of why it has the features it does and shows how those features together convey that meaning. It is a mark of a successful piece of criticism in its non-evaluative dimensions that its descriptions, classifications, appeals to context, and so on, are mutually supporting. For a guiding assumption in the attribution of meaning to a work is that the expressive means a creator chooses are rationally related to her expressive ends.

However, this degree of interdependence among the different aspects of criticism suggests to some theorists that the result of the combined operations of criticism is not constrained by truth so much as consistency. Rather than any given component serving as a fixed constraint on the results of the others, it might be suggested that each is in practice adjusted in turn so that a harmonious conjunction of the results of each distinct operation is achieved. And, as there may be multiple internally consistent sets of the outputs of those operations of

criticism, it may be suggested that the choice of which particular set of mutually supporting description, classification, appeal to context, and so on, is put forward as a critical analysis of the work is determined by some evaluative end, e.g., an unacknowledged political or social function that such an analysis serves (Fish 1980). For example, one art historian might describe how an impressionist painting registers the changing conditions of light, rain, and wind in the environment in which it was created, and thus attribute to the painting a heightened realism and immediacy. By contrast, another art historian might note how the work presents only barely discernable indications of such modern technologies as railroad bridges, and thereby interpret the work as a nostalgic and distorting attempt to obscure the contemporary industrialization of the countryside.

It isn't clear if this account captures anything peculiar to the operations that go into the discovery of the meaning of works of art, for a similar epistemic worry can be raised in any context in which empirical description and theoretical explanation stand in terms of potentially mutual revision. In any case, in practice, it is not obvious that just any output of one of the operations of criticism can be adjusted so as to fit with any others (Carroll 2009: 99-101). A critic who sought to classify *Anna Karenina* as a picaresque novel would find it exceedingly difficult to plausibly redescribe its genesis, plot, and expressive features (as opposed to ignore them) in ways that fit with that categorization.

Many critics think that the job of criticism is complete once they have provided a description and interpretation of the work: an account of what the work is about, or what it is designed to achieve, and how that meaning or achievement is realized in the particular medium, form, structure, and so on, that constitutes the work (Danto 2007). For some critics, this purported abstention from evaluation reflects a wariness in attributing objective status to critical evaluations when they are compared to the more easily defended objectivity of the description and explanation of a work. For others it is merely a reflection of the division of labor between those curators, theatrical producers, editors, and so on who perform the role of evaluating works in terms of whether they merit an audience's and critic's attention, and the critic's role in explaining how the work is to be understood such that its merit can be recognized.

Such critics are right in denying that their job is to render *verdicts* on a work's artistic value. For, just as our interest in a work's meaning is not in the meaning per se but, rather, in how that meaning is embodied in the work, so our interest in a work's artistic value is typically not an interest in the mere assignment of that value (say, with an eye to ranking works of art). Rather, our interest in the evaluation of a work is an interest in *how* the evaluation is merited by the particular nature of the work, what makes the work "work": what is valuable in the way its form embodies or expresses its meaning, or in the experience that it furnishes. Moreover, even in describing and interpreting a work, a critic must offer at least one kind of normative evaluation, namely, an appraisal of whether or not the, say, representational, expressive, or experiential purpose or point of the work is successfully realized. Describing whether and how the features of a work contribute, for example, to the evocation of a certain attitude toward its subject is to evaluate the work in terms of how well it functions.

Most theorists who endorse the central role of evaluation in the critical enterprise see description and interpretation as logically, if not practically, distinct from evaluation. An evaluation is grounded in and justified by the descriptive and interpretative operations performed on a work. However, those who subscribe to a value-maximizing theory of interpretation hold that the practice of interpretation, rather than merely grounding or offering reasons for an evaluation, has an ineliminable evaluative dimension itself.

EVALUATION

Broadly speaking, a value-maximizing theory of interpretation holds that it is one of the constitutive norms of interpretation that it aims to heighten a work's artistic value. One version of such a theory enjoins critics to interpret a work against the grain, perhaps ignoring historical constraints on what could have been intended, if that makes possible a rewarding experience of the work, or some other kind of positive appraisal (Barthes 1975). A more modest theory proposes that it is an internal feature of our very engagement with works of art as works of art that we seek in them, or in an experience of them, a maximal degree of artistic value consistent with what we know about the works (Davies 1991: 181-206; Lamarque 2002). Accordingly, other aspects of our engagement with works—such as our practices of interpretation—should be guided by that search for artistic value. It is a reason for preferring one interpretation over another, when each is consistent with the known facts of the work, that the first interpretation lends the work greater artistic value or makes possible a greater artistic experience.

A problem with this approach, however, is that it isn't clear that our aim in engaging with works of art is to maximize such artistic value. We may care about works of art for many reasons other than what makes them artistically valuable, without those reasons falling outside of a proper engagement with art *qua* art. A work may command our attention *qua* art for, e.g., what it reveals about a vanished way of life, the character of its creator, or the role it played in virtue of its artistic qualities in some significant historical event. In any case, even if there is an interpretative norm of maximizing artistic value, it may apply only to that kind of artistic value that a work merits under a specifically intentional description, i.e., one that characterizes the work as an achievement. Let us now turn to that characterization.

To evaluate a work of art as an achievement is to appraise it not for any artistically valuable feature it may have or experience it may afford, but primarily for those that are the result of a successful performance, one that has the creation of the work with such artistic value as its aim.

That some such characterization of art is an element in critical practice is reflected in the way works of art are regularly described not just as lacking artistic merit but as exhibiting specific failures, e.g., of impact, technique, expression, and so on. Such appeal to artistic defects presumes that works can fall short of some standard, broadly conceived, that they are supposed to satisfy. That is, such works are appraised not for just any artistic values they may have but for those values they succeed in realizing under an intentional description (Carroll 2009: 48-83; Sparshott 1982). It would be implausible to maintain that the only features of a work relevant to its appraisal are those that are in accord with the artist's intentions in creating the work, for some room needs to be made for happy accidents and unintended features that enhance the work's artistic value. Still, such an evaluation treats those unintended features as relevant objects of appraisal only under descriptions that reveal how they enhance or detract from the overall (intended) artistic achievement evidenced in the work.

One measure of a work's achievement may be its realization of certain specifically *aesthetic* values. A critic may, for example, call attention to the tedium of a film's action sequences or the tightness of a novel's plot, identifying such response-dependent but objectively possessed features of the works in question as elements that detract from or contribute to the work's artistic value. A longstanding tradition of theorizing about criticism sought to show how ascriptions of such aesthetic features to a work could be in principle justified through a joint

appeal to the work's non-aesthetic (merely descriptive) features and to certain principles ("principles of taste") that specified that insofar as a work possesses those non-aesthetic features it possesses those aesthetic features (Beardsley 1962). One such putative principle might be that insofar as a work of sculpture exhibits the proportions prescribed by the "golden ratio" it will appear harmonious. Such principles were elusive, but many philosophers thought that only via appeal to some sort of deductive or inductive argument employing such principles in the attribution of aesthetic features to a work could aesthetic evaluation issue in judgments that are genuinely normative for others.

Other theorists tried to show that deductive or inductive argument was the wrong model to explain how a critic can persuade us that a work has some aesthetic quality. Theorists proposed that critics offer only what purport to be reasons for their aesthetic judgments. What critics do is cause--not rationally persuade--us to perceive the object in question as they do, perhaps through "directions for perceiving" (Isenberg 1949: 336). The problem here is that if critics do not offer reasons for their aesthetic evaluations, but only the means to elicit experiences similar to theirs, it is not clear how a critic's judgments can have a normative force, one that invites agreement.

One answer is that we can appeal to the regulative notion of an ideal critic making her judgment under ideal conditions, and it is a particular critic's closeness to such an ideal that gives her evaluations such a normative force. That is, we may think of an ideal critic as one who makes her judgments under such favorable conditions as being unbiased, perceptually discriminating, sensitive to the way artists employ the medium of the work in question, and so on. The suggestion, drawing on David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," is that the standard for an appropriate response to a work is set by the response that an ideal critic would have under such ideal conditions (Hume 1985). Of course, critics do not typically satisfy such ideal conditions and it is not clear how we would know if they did. Indeed, it is a feature of the history of criticism that often a critic's fully vindicated success in appropriately evaluating art of one kind offers no predictive value in determining whether the critic will appropriately evaluate art of another. Ruskin wrote with deep appreciation of Turner's achievement but unjustifiably disparaged Whistler's paintings as a pot of paint thrown in the public's face; Clement Greenberg exhibited extraordinary critical acumen in recognizing the achievements of the abstract expressionists when their status in the artworld was uncertain, yet he remained oblivious to the artistic virtues of major landmarks in pop, performance, and post modern art that came later.

However the authority of aesthetic judgment is to be construed, it should be understood as pertaining not to artistic evaluation as a whole but only to one part of such evaluation. This is for two reasons: (i) aesthetic value is only one of many kinds of values that a work may have as a work of art; and (ii) one cannot infer alone from the presence of an aesthetic feature in a work whether the work, in virtue of that feature, has greater or lesser artistic value. Beauty may be an artistic virtue when present in a war memorial but a defect in a depiction of the destruction and suffering the war brought about. If there are no features—aesthetic or descriptive--about which one can make a non-trivial generalization that their possession by any work contributes to its value *qua* art, how can a description of such features serve to justify a critic's artistic evaluation?

One proposal is that in describing and interpreting a work a critic does not defend her evaluation of it as a good work of art *qua* art. Rather, a critic describes and interprets a work so as to show that it has the good-making features *qua* art of a particular kind. Here, the proposal is that different kinds, categories, or genres of art are each indexed to different points and purposes that are "general enough" to serve as standards in light of which a critic can justify her

evaluation (Carroll 2009: 29). In his *Poetics*, perhaps the first treatise based on such genre-relative criticism, Aristotle shows how the study of each type of poetry requires attending to its particular *telos* or aim, and he explains the comparative successes of different tragedies as due in part to how well their features contribute to their genre-specific ends (Aristotle 1984). Like Aristotle, contemporary critics can identify a given work as belonging to a given category or genre of art, and evaluate it with reference to its satisfaction of whatever makes instances of such a genre good *qua* instances of that genre. An evaluation of a particular detective story can be justified by noting whether it has the good-making features (e.g., a compelling, perhaps flawed, detective; clues that readers can follow) criterial of success in that genre.

Such reference to a work's category or categories in evaluating it is not ad-hoc, for identifying a work as belonging to a category—such as still-life, sonata, agitprop, romance novel, royal portrait, body art, and so on—commits a critic to an explanatory hypothesis about the origins and creation of the work, including what kinds of artistic value the work was created to realize. Of course, any given work may belong to more than one category, and there are higher-level kinds of kinds. Thus, it is possible for a work to be successful as one type of thing but unsuccessful as another or to fall short of satisfying all of its animating aims because they are mutually incompatible.

With kinds of art in which the criterial features are largely stable, a critic's judgment that a work is a good instance of its kind can have a normative hold on us. We ought to agree with her evaluation of the work insofar as it is based on a correct characterization of whether the work exhibits the good-making features of its kind or kinds.

However, one concern with the above schema is that it seems that in many traditions of art it is possible for a work to fail to have the good-making features or criteria of a particular genre, style, medium, or category that it belongs to and yet still be a good instance of that kind. A work of art may be good *qua* instance of its genre even as it rejects (modifies, elaborates, challenges, and so on) the heretofore good-making characteristics of that kind. That is, the good-making characteristics associated with categories of art are often susceptible to revision through works that are instances of those very categories (Gilmore 2011). An artist may, for example, draw on the resources associated with a category of art without taking on board all the norms of that category. Also, we may find cases in which we want to say that a given work does belong to a given genre but is so successful as art that it "transcends" its category. For example, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and the collages of the Russian constructivists are indisputably instances of political propaganda but many critics find that an appeal to any traditional understanding of that categorization obscures, rather than explains, what makes those works compelling (Sontag, 1966).

Thus, at any moment in a tradition the existing good-making characteristics of a kind offer *potential* and perhaps practically reliable ways for a particular work of art that is a member of that kind to succeed as a work of art, but those good-making characteristics do not impose limits on what *can* be a good work of art of that kind. Original works of art may have great artistic value according to criteria that are incommensurate with those by which earlier works of the same genre or category were judged.

Many theorists might acknowledge the above point but note that the histories of the arts are not composed of radical breaks but of continuities. A good critic is able to identify the traditional lineages an apparently novel work belongs to, and evaluate it in light of the ends of its predecessors. Thus, a critic might recognize that, despite adopting radically new modes of depicting pictorial space, cubist painters never departed from rendering their subjects in

customary genres of still-life, portraiture, and landscape. However, this doesn't solve the problem of how objectively to ground the evaluation of novel works of art in their capacity as novel works—that is, for the original sources of value they offer. We can and do evaluate unprecedented works as in many respects continuous with works earlier in their traditions, but that alone ignores what makes them new. Original artworks are often original precisely in introducing new criteria which, by their lights, they and other artworks ought to be judged (Steinberg 1972).

It may seem that in justifying an appraisal of a work through appeal to a subtending description and interpretation, a critic gives audiences reason to appraise the work in a like manner. But that is too strong a demand to place on the justification a critic offers. Audiences may have aims in engaging with a work in light of which they ought not to conform their evaluations to those the critic offers. Rather, we should say that when a critic justifies her appraisal of a work she offers audiences reasons to appraise the work as she does--reasons that could be their own reasons for responding to the work--insofar as they share the ends internal to the practice of criticism.

The above account of criticism emphasizes how its evaluations may be rationally defensible and thus carry a normative claim on agreement from others. However, critical evaluation may also have an inescapably subjective element, in which its hold on others is less secure. We can see this in the two kinds of questions that a critic may ask. The first question is: What is the level of achievement of a work of art relative to the standards of the category or categories to which it belongs? The second question is: Is that an achievement that matters? The answer to the first question can demand agreement on rational grounds. The answer to the latter question, which is a question of what kinds of artistic achievements we *should* value, seems essentially contestable in a heterogeneous society—a matter of individual desires and preferences rather than inter-subjective norms. We may evaluate any work of art in light of its satisfaction of whatever ends are internal to its kind. But whether such an achievement is a worthy one—one that should be valued--is a question answered with reference not to art's ends but the ends of art's audiences.

RELATED TOPICS

The Aesthetic, Value of Art, Empiricism: Hutcheson and Hume, Interpretation, Sibley, Taste

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