

**AN ETHICS OF ENGAGING WITH ART:
FROM CRITICISM TO CONVERSATION**

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by
Jeremy Daniel Millington
December 2016

Examining Committee Members:

Joseph Margolis, Advisory Chair, Philosophy
Susan Feagin, Philosophy
David Wolfsdorf, Philosophy
Ian Verstegen, External Member, University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

The dissertation addresses the question, *How should we engage with art?* The thesis is that a practice of engaging with art ought to be sensitive with and to a work of art, and conversation better suits sensitivity than criticism. Conversation does not merely mean a conversation we may have *about* art. Instead, the project proposes that we treat artworks as conversational partners. The construction of the thesis involves three philosophical streams coming together. The first is a survey of prominent philosophical studies of criticism from the late 1930s to the 1960s—a watershed period for the philosophy of criticism—through to contemporary views that bear the legacy of that period, summarized and exemplified in Noël Carroll’s philosophy of criticism. Second, the project contrasts the orthodox view with competing accounts, including those of visual art criticism from the late 1980s and 90s, the critical theory of Terry Eagleton, and the “philosophical criticism” of Stanley Cavell. The third stream consists of testing criticism (and conversation) against the criterion of sensitivity. Taken together, this approach looks at engagement in a more general way than what studies on criticism or other familiar practices tend to countenance. Writers and works that exemplify conversation, such as Wendell Berry, *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940), and *Mary Poppins* (Stevenson 1964) help explicate and uncover limits to conversation as well as what procures it. The project culminates by circling back to the criterion of sensitivity, looking at conversation’s advantages in cultivating a suitably sensitive practice of engaging with art. The primary, substantive claim for conversation as the basis for an

ethics of engaging with art is that conversation encourages a process of coming to an understanding with a work, where our prejudices and judgments are subject to the claims a work may make upon me at any given moment, without ceding to either the finality of judgment or the incompleteness of understanding provoked by over-familiarity, incessant talk, 'talking at' or 'past,' or silence. In the shift from criticism to conversation, we gain a clearer, more equitable understanding of what a work is doing. We curtail prejudice and evaluative bias; we respond more sensitively to the context for engaging with art; and, we ask more questions. Is this a setting where criticism is warranted or useful? Who are my interlocutors? What do they have to say?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is always a question of how deep to go in acknowledging what brings a work to life, knowing I can never measure the full debt I owe to so many people. I'll start by thanking my philosophical interlocutors. Joseph Margolis has been an immensely supportive advisor, offering wise counsel and sharp scrutiny where needed most, and sparkling conversation without fail. David Wolfsdorf and Susan Feagin have offered many detailed, thoughtful comments throughout the life of the project, for which it unquestionably improved. My external examiner, Ian Verstegen, has been a friendly advocate throughout and a useful link to a broader world of art and critical practices. In helping push me along this path before I realized I was on it, I thank George Wilson, Dallas Willard, and Andrew Klevan. As an incomparable source of intellectual and spiritual stimulation, for his willingness to respond to an unsolicited letter, and because my work—in the richest sense of the term—will never be the same, Wendell Berry deserves singular praise. For their contributions to the growth of the dissertation in a variety of capacities, personal and professional, I thank John Dyck, Jeff Ulrich, and Filipe De Sousa; the “man night” group; the community at City Church Philadelphia; my housemates at 4914, Jessie, Joel, Brooke, and Matt. Lastly, I acknowledge the deepest of debts: to my brothers, my grandmother, and my parents, without whom my capacity and love for art and conversation would never have taken hold.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION	vi
CHAPTER	
1: SURVEYING THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE.....	1
2: CRITICAL BOUNDARIES:	
POLITICS, MORALITY, AND THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM.....	40
3: CRITICISM’S WARRANT: SENSITIVITY	81
4: A CONVERSATIONAL PRIMER.....	117
5: CONVERSATIONAL PRAXIS.....	150
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	196
FILMOGRAPHY.....	202

INTRODUCTION

At the broadest level, this project addresses the question, *How should we engage with art?* I answer this in terms of what criticism has to offer in comparison to conversation filtered through the lens of sensitivity, where sensitivity functions as an ethical condition for engaging with art. My thesis is that a practice of engaging with art ought to be sensitive with and to a work of art, and conversation better suits sensitivity than criticism. By conversation, I do not merely mean a conversation we may have about art. I propose instead a practice that treats artworks as conversational partners. To state what may be obvious, this will require some play with the idea of conversation.¹

1. Invoking the idea of “play” will justifiably invite numerous questions for any philosophical project, but especially for one in the philosophy of art. I will not devote serious attention to explicating its wide-ranging usages and philosophical heritage. Some of Gadamer’s remarks on play may be useful, however. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, Second Rev. Ed.*, trans. Joel Winsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 101-134. Consider Gadamer’s observation that “the mode of being of play is not such that, for the game to be played, there must be a subject who is behaving playfully” (103). Though I invoke play as a way to *philosophically* improvise on the idea of a conversation, the notion of play also has indicative connections to conversation itself. I note this because one temptation may be to suppose that my project encourages or requires those engaging with a work of art to pretend or imagine that they are participating in a game, a conversational game, at the expense of some more real or natural or ordinary way of engaging with art, which I do not take to be the case. One of the advantages of play lies in what Gadamer describes as its “medial” or relational, “to-and-fro” character: “the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord” (106). This is an excellent starting point for how readily we can adopt play as a suitable characteristic of our engagement with art, so far as art shares the flexibility and freedoms, and then some, of a wool ball.

The project generates a host of problems that will need some resolution. The question—*how should we engage with art?*—needs clarification. What do I mean by the terms ‘should,’ ‘engage,’ and ‘art’ (and ‘we’)? Why ‘engage’? Why ‘should’? My answer to the primary question also involves explicating three complex, versatile terms—criticism, sensitivity, and conversation. Criticism plays a staggeringly broad, contentious, and varied role in human social and intellectual practice, extending well beyond the boundaries of the artworld, while sensitivity and conversation each play dynamic roles in philosophy and ordinary speech, though no major role in the philosophy of art, so far as I know. How do I propose to navigate these obstacles?

Let’s start by looking at criticism. In the world of art, criticism is everywhere. There are journals, panel discussions, books, popular and professional practices, television shows, and ordinary dialogue all built around criticism. Film critic A.O. Scott recently published a book distilling the virtues of a critical life, titling an accompanying commentary culled from the book, “Everybody’s a Critic. And That’s How It Should Be.”² Scott’s title is perhaps more aspirational than descriptive. He remarks that in our popular discourse, “we are more likely to seek affirmation than challenge. . . . We graze,

2. A.O. Scott, “Everybody’s a Critic. And That’s How It Should Be,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/sunday-review/everybodys-a-critic-and-thats-how-it-should-be.html. See also, A.O. Scott, *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* (New York: Penguin, 2016). Portions of these comments, here and elsewhere, appear already in my “From Criticism to Conversation,” *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 1.3 (November 1, 2016), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/criticism-conversation>.

we binge, we pick up and discard aesthetic experiences as if they were cheap toys . . . which they frequently are.”³ Scott declares, more optimistically, “That everyone is a critic means that we are each capable of thinking against our own prejudices, of balancing skepticism with open-mindedness, of sharpening our dulled and glutted senses and battling the intellectual inertia that surrounds us.”⁴ Should we share Scott’s enthusiasm for criticism and its place in popular discourse?

On the one hand, the world of social media, user reviews, and digital commentary testifies to the persistence of a modern, Western ideal of critical engagement. On the other hand, the vestiges of postmodernism have eroded aspirations toward neutral objectivity built on rational discourse, while solidifying and encouraging the subjective authority of the individual opinion-maker. Think of the average “user review,” with its low bar of entry, algorithmically shaping the creative cultural products of popular attention. This is criticism as consumer reporting (and art as consumer product).

As a precursor to Scott’s claims for criticism, consider some of the early theoretical reactions to the rise of film and other mass arts. In particular, I have in mind Walter Benjamin’s well-known essay from 1938, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”⁵ Benjamin anticipates the proliferation of criticism beyond

3. Scott, “Everybody’s a Critic.”

4. Ibid.

5. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).

elite and professional circles. He links this (expected) rise of critical engagement to the rise of mechanical modes of production, with a special focus on mechanical reproduction's affect on art. For example, Benjamin states that "the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic."⁶ He goes to claim that film, in particular, "encourages an evaluating attitude in the audience . . . because, at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention."⁷ With increased accessibility and representation in everyday aesthetic forms, absent the auratic pulse of a live human presence, the members of the working class were free to have an opinion of their own. This shift toward critically engaged masses meant the erosion of a mode of engaging with art built around passive contemplation, with its dogmatic debt to tradition and centers of authority.

The mechanical model of aesthetic production has flourished well beyond anything Benjamin predicted, and popular criticism has, in a way, flourished alongside it. However, whatever else it was supposed to do, for Benjamin at least, mass critical engagement was meant to be a platform for political revolution. Criticism today often seems to be a catalyst for ever more superficial and negative criticism (e.g., the internet "troll"), lacking political, social, or intellectual substance. Whatever dynamic, sophisticated forms of criticism may exist in pockets of culture, the locus of criticism as a

6. *Ibid.*, 259-260.

7. *Ibid.*, 269.

social practice seems to lie in the thousands of Amazon.com reviews praising *Fast and Furious 6* (a 4.6 star average over 2,566 reviews and counting).⁸

According to Noël Carroll, across the spectrum of critical practices, what characterizes criticism, so long as it is *art* criticism, is the evaluation of works of art and reasons supporting those evaluations.⁹ *Is this good? Why or why not?* The more particular shape those questions (and the answers to them) take shifts with the arena of artistic discourse, from glossy high art magazines to newspaper reviews to couples outside the theater to commercial websites. Philosophy has addressed criticism as a primary subject for the field of aesthetics, especially in the middle-twentieth century and from a spectrum of philosophical approaches (e.g., American and British analytic philosophy of art, critical theory, hermeneutics). Much philosophy of criticism describes general criteria grounded in the art object, its aesthetic features, and the soundness of one's judgments, describing the essence of criticism as it occurs across genre and medium and time and place. There are also numerous *theories* of criticism, which Carroll suggests we distinguish from a *philosophy* of criticism. A theory of criticism corresponds with a specific artistic domain, stipulating a methodology to guide critical practice. Such theories of criticism include, for example, psychoanalytic film criticism or feminist literary theory. At the same time, whether a theory or philosophy of criticism, the

8. As of November 15, 2016. See www.amazon.com/Fast-Furious-6-Paul-Walker/dp/B00H7VB7TS/.

9. Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14.

philosophical questions are consistently the *what* and *how* of criticism rather than the *whether* of criticism. Few ask, *should* we criticize?

This project addresses criticism as the dominant form of engagement in practice and philosophical attention, while also seeking to place criticism into a wider context. I propose conversation as a framework that better suits morality, forming what I call an ethics of engaging with art. This approach is meant to address a gap in philosophical research in terms of how we (ought to) engage with art, looking at engagement in a more general way than what studies on criticism or other familiar practices tend to countenance. Structurally, I devote two chapters each to criticism and conversation, with a chapter on sensitivity lying between them. Broadly speaking, the first two chapters ask, What is criticism? The third chapter asks, When is criticism warranted? The fourth chapter asks, What is conversation, and how does it begin? Finally, the fifth chapter addresses the question, What does conversation with art look like?

I gave a brief picture of criticism already, let me say a little about conversation. I pick out three conditions for conversation: there are at least two participants, the participants share a language, and there is responsive exchange between participants. Initially, I draw on philosophical discussions about conversation that give shape to these criteria, looking at the form philosophical discussions themselves take and the challenges they pose to conversation. What are the terms of discussion? How do we relate to a (written) work? How does a written work relate to us? One attractive approach I draw on is the notion of befriending a work, where conversation is the medium for cultivating

friendship (and coming to an understanding). In the closing chapter, I dwell on writers and works that exemplify conversation with art, where, considered together, we uncover some limits to conversation as well as what procures it. The writers and works that I focus on include Wendell Berry discussing *A River Runs Through It* (Maclean 1976) (and Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River"), Stanley Cavell on *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940), and, at my own invitation, *Mary Poppins* (Stevenson 1964). While the emphasis is on works that are principally (though not necessarily exclusively) verbal (e.g., film, literature, theater), conversation with non-verbal works, such as paintings or certain kinds of music, is plausible on my view. The project culminates by circling back to the criterion of sensitivity, looking at conversation's advantages in cultivating a suitably sensitive practice of engaging with art.

What about the project's ethical dimension? In the third chapter, I construe 'warrant' from an ethical perspective, asking, When is criticism warranted? On the one hand, this has the benefit of contextualizing criticism in a way that internal, professional constraints on a practice may ignore. That is, both the philosophy of criticism and theories of criticism are usually concerned with what makes for *good* criticism without necessarily considering constraints for its practice altogether. We may suppose that bad criticism is never warranted, but even good criticism may not be warranted. On the other hand, the over-compartmentalization of ethics has largely reduced moral issues to a narrow set of social and political phenomena that excludes art criticism from ethical consideration. Morality is left to what Stanley Cavell calls "headline" moral issues, such

as “abortion, capital punishment, or euthanasia.”¹⁰ I follow a novel line of inquiry that looks closely at prevailing philosophical accounts of criticism and measures those accounts according to a prescriptive condition. I focus on a single criterion—sensitivity—that we ought to demonstrate in our engagement with art. Demonstrating sensitivity *to* a work means you are prepared to perceive and respond to a work (and the context of a work) in a relevantly connected way, and insofar as you are sensitive *with* a work, your sensitivity demonstrates care and thoughtfulness in your handling of it. There is a strong, mutually reinforcing relationship between sensitivity-to and sensitivity-with as I describe them: to be sensitive with a work requires sensitivity to it, and sensitivity to a work requires sensitivity with it. I claim that conversation is more conducive to sensitivity than criticism, primarily due to its participatory, responsive character, which may at times involve criticism but also may not.

The construction of my broad thesis involves three streams of philosophical thought coming together. The first stream is a survey of prominent philosophical studies of criticism from the late 1930s to the 1960s—a watershed period for the philosophy of criticism—through to contemporary views that bear the legacy of that period, summarized and exemplified in Carroll’s more recent philosophy of criticism.¹¹ Second, I contrast this with competing accounts, including those of visual art criticism from the late

10. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2004), 11, 248.

11. Primarily, I draw on Carroll, *On Criticism*.

1980s and 90s, the critical theory of Terry Eagleton, and the “philosophical criticism” of Cavell. The third stream consists of testing criticism (and conversation) against the criterion of sensitivity. Let me address a few concerns that this approach might generate and how I see them servicing the overarching thesis and themes of the project.

Regarding the second stream and the counterpoint views, there is both a descriptive and prescriptive element to the survey of these views. I consider them to be a route to understanding the range of forms of engaging with art that are possible but also already practiced. These views tend to be more sympathetic to stretching the boundaries of criticism and engagement away from a focus on evaluation, while also exemplifying the ways in which criticism insufficiently captures the complexity and discursiveness of how we engage with art. Cavell’s readings of the “remarriage comedies” of classical Hollywood, for instance, puts those films into conversation (his term) with American transcendentalism, skepticism, moral philosophy, genre theory, and whatever else strikes him as having the capacity to participate, as if each is in possession of its own distinctive mode of thought, and without any one domain or medium serving to merely illustrate the concerns or concepts of another. This discursiveness is not counter to criticism, *per se*, and it does not offer us a model to copy verbatim. What Cavell accomplishes in his writing is a subversion of some of the dominant tendencies of critical orthodoxy in an indicative way. Cavell dramatizes the potential for a work to speak on its own terms. In

his idiosyncratic weaving and revisiting of familiar works over again,¹² his writing captures an effort to acknowledge what *he* brings to bear in his experience of a work and in light of what he takes a work to be asking of him during any given “reading,” of which he offers several. In reading Cavell, I am reminded of Gadamer’s observation, “We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner.”¹³

Cavell further demonstrates a special awareness of the challenges that our verbal articulation of an experience of a work poses, knowing that a work accomplishes something that our descriptive efforts may evoke but never replace (and which it would be misguided to aim to replace). Criticism and its judgments are certainly woven into his accounts, but the gravitational center of his readings does not lie in unilateral, reasoned evaluations about the value of those works. Instead, there is an openness, where we know that a further response is always possible, our judgments only provisional, and the relationship ongoing—at least so far as the works are capable of sustaining dialogue *and* his own interests precipitate further exchange, or more simply, so long as we *care* about a work.

12. Cavell directly addresses the idea of revisiting works and its significance in *Cities of Words* (14-15). I also have in mind his writing about the same films over time. See, for example, his accounts of *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940) in *Cities of Words* and earlier in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 133-160.

13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 383.

Regarding the project's third stream—its ethical component—we must consider whether or not ethics or morality bears on how we engage with art. And even if we grant that it does, we would still need to identify and explain which ethical criteria are relevant to engaging with art. I choose just one quality that a practice of engaging with art should possess—sensitivity—which is designed to draw criticism and engagement with art out of a narrow focus on aesthetic properties and critical evaluation but without leaving them behind either. Aesthetic theories of art offer one powerful answer to the question, *how should we engage with art?* These theories have come and gone and come back again, as Carroll observes.¹⁴ They define art in terms of an object designed to induce “aesthetic experiences or responses.” Are “aesthetic” responses the principal or an essential form of response to artworks?¹⁵ I favor what could be called an unprincipled or informal approach to what qualifies as sufficiently engaging with a work of art and the kinds of responses that are permissibly artistic ones. In short, the only way to determine what's warranted when engaging with art is to offer a work our sensitivity, and there seems to be no limit to the kinds of responses an artwork and its context may invite. In this sense, the condition of sensitivity is nicely situated to draw out a range of possibilities that are variably aesthetic, sensory, moral, cognitive, perceptual, cultural, and social. I offer

14. Carroll lists Monroe Beardsley's “An Aesthetic Definition of Art” and William Tolhurst's “Toward an Aesthetic Account of the Nature of Art” as paradigmatic aesthetic theories of art (see Carroll, “Art and Interaction,” 6).

15. Carroll, “Art and Interaction,” in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5-6.

sensitivity as a plausible and provisional step in thinking about how our engagement with art invokes a complex set of activities and concerns, though sensitivity is certainly not an ultimate principle of ethical engagement. There are other qualities or capacities that could suitably constrain engaging with art in ways that fit the evolving invitations and requirements of art, ethics, and the cultural and historical situations within which they reside.

Still, you may be wondering, why an *ethics* of engaging with art, and what do I mean by ‘ethics’? Do morality and ethics amount to the same thing? I offer a more sustained defense of the moral framework of the project in the third chapter, but let me briefly introduce two considerations.

First, on one view, we say that ethics and morality are *not* the same. Though both involve normative guidelines or prescriptions, morality is a special class of overriding prescriptions, whereas an ethic generically refers to just any norm within a domain, which may or may not be morally freighted. For this project, then, the objection is that criticism and art bear no obvious or necessary moral significance, except maybe in special cases (say, where the content of a work is morally reprehensible or praiseworthy), and an ethics of engaging with art has to do with excellence or flourishing narrowly confined to the domain of the artistic (or aesthetic). Thus, to ask, *should we criticize?* may be an ethical question but it is not really a moral one. The domain of the artistic or the aesthetic is primary, and the moral implications of whatever norms lie therein are separable.

Second, as a question of philosophical purpose, we may wonder what the value is in looking at engagement with art through the lens of morality. If morality consists of principles for right or wrong, where the particular application (towards criticism and engaging with art) is incidental—in the way that, say, the economic or sociological analysis of art begins with a methodology *and then* finds an object of study—then the moral constraints on art would just be those moral rules we abide by generally. For example, if you shouldn't steal, what's the philosophical upshot of considering theft relative to the world of art?

One advantage of considering ethics in light of a particular practice is that we may better understand both the practice and the plausibility of our ethic. For example, if “doing well” comprises our ethic, the aspiring criminal, looking to abide by the ethics of criminality, would aim to unpack “doing well” relative to the field of crime: don't get caught, maintain anonymity, cull the favor of authority figures. This (admittedly loaded) example presages the problem an ethic confined to a practical domain may prompt—an ethic that conflicts with morality. Intuitively at least, this strikes me as odd.

Regarding the relationship between ethics and morality, I confess to finding it difficult to understand the weight an ethic carries without running into morality. As I suggested, sometimes we seem to use the term ‘moral’ for a special, general category of especially important ethical issues, such as those Cavell identifies (euthanasia, capital punishment, and so on). Thus, brushing my teeth may be part of an ethics of hygiene, which prescribes best hygienic practices—*you should brush your teeth*—but it does not

have the weight of a *moral* imperative. However, I think we can plausibly draw out the weight of the prescription as we inscribe it within a wider set of questions: is keeping my teeth healthy important, is health important, and so on? Such an ethic only has as much prescriptive power in the end as it connects to those supposedly more elevated moral matters. At the same time, I want to be careful about assuming which particular activities or issues generate significant moral consideration and those that are more benign, such as brushing one's teeth. This is a backwards way of saying that I use the terms ethics and morality interchangeably to mean *what one ought to do*, and that matters of morality may be more ordinary than is sometimes supposed. I also wish to avoid the attenuated, muddled territory where what one ought to do is constrained merely by the criteria of a specified domain and has only a weak relationship to what one ought to do generally. I am supposing then that what one ought to do *just is* what one ought to do, and this is what I mean by ethics *and* morality. Admittedly, this is a general and superficial glance at ethics and morality, and I grant that we may shade "ought" variously—that is, with different weights—and bearing in mind that different obligations or oughts might compete for our attention (here, again, I grant that the value of "morality" may be in designating it as a class of overriding prescriptions relative to weaker ones). I also grant that others may find some use in distinguishing ethics from morality, and I welcome such distinctions as they may seem useful.

As a further clue to the philosophical relationship between art and morality, we may briefly consider what philosophers have done with that relationship already. There

are a handful of dominant lines of inquiry, most of which do not address the question of engagement specifically. For example, there is a resurgent interest in the critical appraisal of the moral content of a work, where works depict, express, or dramatize some moral problem, and criticism engages with those moral problems. Philosophy analyzes the nature of moral content, asking whether or not a work's moral value affects its aesthetic value and whether or not such distinctions make sense (and then the legitimacy of art criticism whose judgments depend upon an assessment of a work's moral content). *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl 1935) is an example of a work that generates moral and aesthetic questions: Can a Nazi propaganda film still be aesthetically or artistically valuable?¹⁶ This field of "ethical criticism" isn't about the ethics of criticism, however. Rather, it deals with the philosophy of criticism of moral problems that artworks trigger.¹⁷

The relationship between art and morality also receives attention in terms of the presentation or presence of works within institutional or cultural spaces, as in debates about archeological pillaging among nations. Here the art is secondary to cultural, historical, and moral questions, though not always or by rule.¹⁸

16. See Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 227-256.

17. See *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Gary Hagberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). Carroll gives an overview of the field of "ethical criticism" in "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" in *Ethics* Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000): 350-387.

18. See Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Stallabrass's book is simultaneously an economic and political analysis of the contemporary visual art world and a critical analysis of the

Some of the work done on the role of emotion and appreciation deals with how we ought to engage with art, though typically framed as an aesthetic or artistic problem but not necessarily an ethical one.¹⁹ They may ask, what are justifiable forms of response to a tragedy or an emotionally charged work of art? Aesthetic theories of art also deal with the kinds of responses that are acceptable or merited by a work of art. These theories tend to be morally neutral in the sense that they construe these problems as problems of understanding what art is, rather than what ought to shape our engagement. Still, there is some conceptual overlap here, especially as I consider forms of engagement, including our responses to art, to be part and parcel with an ethics of engagement. As one point of contrast, J. Hillis Miller argues that works of literature possess an “I must tell you” character, which he describes as an ethical obligation passed onto the reader. Miller then contrasts the weakness of pure, aesthetic responses against a more full-blooded ethical response: “The twentieth-century development of literary study in America has continued to contain in one way or another this tension between seeing literature as self-sufficient and detached, the object of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, and, on the contrary,

“aesthetic” features of works. Opponents accuse him of focusing too heavily on the former and not enough on the latter.

19. See Susan L. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Gaut where discusses “merited response theory” (227-252). One notable, relatively absent presence from my discussion is J. Hillis Miller. See his “The Ethics of Reading,” *Style* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 181-91; see also Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). I will briefly introduce some of his arguments, though they could bear further discussion.

seeing it as capable and indeed obligated to exert political and moral force on the reality of history.”²⁰ These are useful positions to bear in mind, and I will draw on some of this work in the second and third chapters to better understand the range of relevant responses sensitivity permits.

Two final points, one about engagement and one about criticizing criticism. First, I use the term ‘engagement’ to describe that complex territory where a person encounters an artwork and has some kind of interaction with it, as well as with regard to the objects of artistic engagement we produce, such as a piece of criticism. It is very difficult to describe one’s engagement with a work of art without presupposing a particular form of engagement. Carroll uses the term “interaction.”²¹ ‘Engagement’ and ‘interaction’ are both active terms, while others betray the medium or an experiential bias, as in ‘looking,’ ‘watching,’ or ‘listening.’ There are further subtle differences even within the scope of a single category of sensory description. For example, if you say that you ‘saw’ a movie rather than ‘watched’ one, I would guess that you chose to go out to the theater over remaining at home. I prefer the activeness and generality of ‘engagement’ in comparison to more passive and medium-specific terms. ‘Engagement’ also connotatively favors the moral and relational frameworks the project trades in.

Finally, there is an internal, methodological problem that I would like to address about criticizing criticism. This project spends a substantial amount of time criticizing

20. Miller, “The Ethics of Reading,” 189.

21. See Carroll, “Art and Interaction,” 5-20.

criticism and the philosophy of criticism. Is there some hypocrisy in this? On the one hand, philosophical criticism is not the same as art criticism. In constraining art criticism *philosophically*, I am not practicing art criticism as such.²² This at least partially absolves me of the criticisms of art criticism that I identify. On the other hand, I find it reasonable to locate philosophical criticism and art criticism on a continuum, where the argument that constrains and contextualizes one bears on the other. In light of this, the argument as it unfolds from one chapter and section to the next will ebb and flow between a kind of direct, combative philosophical approach and one that eschews explicit pronouncements and some of the conventions of philosophical argumentation (i.e., a list of explicitly stated and numbered premises that leads to a conclusion). A section or chapter may, for example, displace firm conclusions or subvert them in favor of open-ended inquiry, implication, and suggestiveness. Depending on one's methodological expectations, this may be maddening, troublesome, and/or insufficiently clear. I hope that your patience will bear through as I respond to the challenges of criticism and conversation through some teasing and play with forms of philosophical engagement. This is my attempt to reconcile criticism with a desire for conversation and a practice that demonstrates adequate sensitivity to and with its conversational partners, that is, without renouncing the utility and necessity of philosophical criticism in its more direct and combative form. It is a way of holding my judgments loosely. I hope you may do the same.

22. David Wolfsdorf offered helpful suggestions regarding this distinction.

CHAPTER 1

SURVEYING THE CRITICAL LANDSCAPE

The following chapter revolves around a very broad question: What is art criticism? By “art criticism,” I mean criticism generally, as it might apply to any work that can plausibly be called “art”: painting, music, dance, literature, film, television, photography, installation, sculpture. Understanding what criticism is paves the way for the third chapter, which asks: When is criticism warranted? In thinking in such a general way about criticism, there are two contextualizing frames to bear in mind. First, there are pictures of criticism particular to individual mediums of art (e.g., painting, music, dance), as well as specific historical and cultural discourses that are not necessarily medium-specific (e.g., ancient Greek, neo-classicist, Romantic). Literary criticism does not share all of the same preoccupations as film criticism, and eighteenth-century metaphysicalist poets, insofar as they had a critical practice, had different concerns than early twentieth-century formalists. Second, there is a core to criticism that some philosophers and theorists argue persists. This core of criticism crosses historical and cultural lines, connecting film with literary criticism and eighteenth-century metaphysicalism with formalism (and so on). This view is criticism as reasoned evaluation.¹

1. The terms “evaluation” and “judgment” are sometimes used interchangeably, though they may be distinguished as well. For example, we may construe the value of a particular judgment in different ways. Judgment may function merely as an act of determination that is, if not value-neutral, value-variable.

At odds with the orthodox view are a variety of critical practices and theories. In a chapter titled, “On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism,” James Elkins describes contemporary visual art criticism as a seven-headed “hydra,” of which one prominent head is critics’ avowed *disinterest* in judgment.² In supporting this claim, he states, “In 2002, a survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program found that judging art is the least popular goal among American art critics, and simply describing art is the most popular.”³ One of the aims of this chapter and the next will be to outline the features of competing views that emphasize description over evaluation.

Regarding individual critical histories, whether culture- or medium-specific, I cannot hope to summarize and encapsulate all of those histories here. Instead, I will be following the bread crumbs of Noël Carroll’s *On Criticism*, using his book as a point of departure and return. I contrast Carroll’s view, and the philosophical heritage from which it arose, with strains that displace judgment or renounce it altogether. These alternative views come from the aforementioned visual art criticism, Terry Eagleton’s Marxist criticism (in chapter 2), and the “philosophical criticism” of, for example, Stanley Cavell (though Cavell takes on a more central role in the fourth and fifth chapters).

In order to say when criticism is warranted—what I am calling an ethics of engaging with art—we need a sense of what criticism is. Another approach, which is not

2. James Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism,” in *The State of Art Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 80.

3. *Ibid.*, 79.

the one I take here, would be to take the orthodox philosophical view of criticism and weigh its value according to some ethical paradigm or principles, circumventing the need to assess what criticism is. What then is the use of surveying criticism, in its orthodox and competing conceptions, just as a philosophical subject in itself? One reason, which is perhaps more pragmatic than philosophical, is that I am interested in the predominant practices for engaging with art and the predominant philosophical discussions about engagement. I presume that criticism is the predominant practice for engaging with art, at least the one that receives the most philosophical attention, and the orthodox view purports to represent criticism, as an artistic-social practice, in its most common form.⁴ If the orthodox view falsely represents what criticism is, insofar as that is its aim, then a critique of it will have narrower implications.⁵

Another reason for offering a survey of criticism is that it opens the door to thinking about engagement with art more liberally, as guided by and informed by flexible and evolving aims and activities. Advocating for any single view of criticism perpetuates the view that criticism just is *x*, that engagement with art revolves around that practice, and that those activities that do not conform to *x* are irrelevant or deviant, which they

4. I suppose that criticism is dominant based on the philosophical evidence. Apart from criticism, only its component parts receive any attention, granting that, on the orthodox view, all other activities (description, interpretation, etc.) are construed as component parts of criticism.

5. Carroll briefly considers evidence that contemporary professional and scholarly criticism has disavowed its historical task of evaluation, but dismisses this as a blip on the historical radar. See Carroll, *On Criticism*, 15.

may be if criticism really just is *x*. I do not attempt to solve what criticism is in a definitive, neat way or to advocate for any specific, alternative theory of criticism. Some of the practices that characterize the responses to criticism's orthodoxy help make the orthodox view clearer and shape the final third of the project, where I develop an alternative way of thinking about engagement with art built around conversation.

I grant that there is at least one advantage to having a neatly defined “quintessence” for criticism,⁶ which Carroll observes: it allows us to distinguish one concept, criticism, from others, such as art history or visual studies, and on the basis of a clearly defined criterion—the reasoned evaluation of a work of art. Here though we might distinguish between a historical, sociological analysis of criticism and a philosophical argument regarding the nature of criticism. Carroll further distinguishes his *philosophy* of criticism from a *theory* of criticism in terms of his normative ambition, where he argues for what criticism is and what it *ought* to be. I have no qualms with Carroll's philosophical project, insofar as he describes a particular kind of activity that is conceptually distinct (and names it). However, it would be difficult to argue that criticism has always been *and ought to be* reasoned evaluation unless we presuppose that criticism has a timeless essence to which all instances of critical practice ought to adhere. Carroll may ascribe an essence to criticism, and there are reasons to do so, but this does not settle the issue in any fundamental way unless we grant more fundamental premises. It is

6. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 18.

difficult to imagine demonstrating a first principle that would require holding to a simple, unchanging view of criticism. Richard Shusterman pushes against the “questionable assumption that criticism is or should be simple and uniform,” noting that “different contexts” tend to draw out different aims and strategies, and justifiably so.⁷

With these qualifications in mind, which I do not defend in depth, I intend to defend some countervailing views against some of the claims of Carroll’s philosophy of criticism, while acknowledging the centrality of the orthodox view. I describe some of the practices that have characterized criticism that do not fit the orthodox model and which undermine the notion that criticism just is or has been reasoned evaluation. In making sense of the so-called deviations in criticism’s history, I presume that the critical practices and theories of criticism that de-emphasize evaluation, and which Carroll criticizes, evolve (reasonably) with changes in the artworld they purport to be about, as well as in response to various cultural and social factors. That is, I note that criticism develops the way any human practice does, according to aims and desires that shift over time and in response to a variety of factors (cultural, political, social, etc.). In this sense, shifts in critical practice are not merely shifts in attention toward new phenomena, but of methodology that evolves with and shapes the work or works toward which it draws its attention. One example of this that I discuss occurs in the visual art criticism of the 1980s that reacts against the criticism of the 1960s, when the uniform philosophical view of

7. Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 46.

criticism fortified. This at least makes some sense of the statistic Elkins and Carroll cite, whereby 75 percent of contemporary art critics “reported that rendering evaluations was the least significant aspect of their work.”⁸ Can we simply explain this away as a conceptual blunder? In the end, it is not necessary for my argument that criticism have (or not have) a simple, ideal form or essence. In drawing on selective pieces of criticism’s history, I hope to soften the crispness of the uniform view to encourage a wider context for understanding how we think about engaging with art, one that also makes sense of the fluctuations in theories of criticism and critical practices without dismissing them.

A final caveat, or concern, that these opening remarks are meant to emphasize, is that it might be easy to ignore, philosophically and practically, those practices we deem irrelevant to engagement with art if we exclude them by definition. As king of the mountain, criticism tends to either subsume or exclude other practices and ways of thinking about engagement.

With all of these qualifications in mind, the argument of the third chapter—when criticism is warranted—will be localized to the picture of criticism that emerges in this chapter, however clouded or clear. There are numerous theories of criticism from the twentieth century apart from the ones I consider (e.g., structuralist, deconstructionist, Feminist, psychoanalytic). The theories I contrast are primarily limited to the Anglophone philosophical world of the last seventy-five years. This survey will thus be

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

representative of a small handful of key philosophical and theoretical perspectives but not certainly not exhaustive.

Common Core

This section offers an overview of what I take the orthodox view to be in philosophy of criticism and its historical lineage, with a primary focus on the kinds of issues philosophies of criticism are likely to address. I start with criticism's place within the broader field of philosophical aesthetics, where it peaked in the 1960s.

In his 1965 account of the philosophical domain of aesthetics, Joseph Margolis offers a perfectly reasonable, if “unprincipled,”⁹ set of issues with which aestheticians grapple:

Whatever philosophical generalizations the field will support can very easily be made without [a circumscribed field of Aesthetics] ... we already know, in a way that hardly needs to be made clearer, what the principal sorts of subjects are that philosophers will raise questions about if they intend to contribute to aesthetics—works of art, the artist at work, the audience that responds, the critic that comments.¹⁰

The list of central issues Margolis lists noticeably does not include interpretation. The assumption is that interpretation is an activity infused in each of the latter practices, “the audience that responds” and “the critic that comments.” Debates about interpretation

9. By “unprincipled” I simply mean that Margolis does not insist on the transhistorical necessity of just these issues for the field of Aesthetics.

10. Joseph Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 13.

focus less on what it is—conventionally, the act of determining or explaining meaning—and more on the conditions of interpretation and its presence, or lack of presence, in a variety of practices, actions, or events. In the passage from Margolis, for example, interpretation is not an alternative to either audience response or critical commentary. It is a feature of those practices, however small or large a role it may play within them and whatever its relationship to the other activities that comprise audience response and critical commentary. I bring up interpretation because it has received ample attention during philosophy of criticism’s prolific run from the late 1930s through the 1960s,¹¹ even if often as a problem internal to criticism.¹²

In the distinction between “audience response” and “critical commentary,” Margolis signals another common feature of the philosophical work on criticism: the distinction between professional or scholarly criticism and the more general domain of ordinary or “folk” criticism. A “response” suggests a more general category than a “comment,” mirroring the generality of an “audience” in contrast to the lone, professional “critic.” Furthermore, a comment seems to be just one kind of response, the kind we expect from a critic. We could also respond to a work of art with a question, a story or anecdote, a feeling or emotional outburst, silence, laughter, violence (e.g., burning books,

11. Carroll describes the “heyday of the philosophy of criticism” as the 1950s and 60s. I extend it back to accommodate major works in aesthetics that feature criticism, in particular, those from John Dewey and Theodore Meyer Greene, which I draw upon shortly.

12. It has also been the subject of much debate outside of aesthetic debates or those in the philosophy of art.

punching or throwing paint on canvases). Of course all of these could be construed as forms of critical response, as in the throwing of tomatoes or spitting on a work (i.e., the work stinks). In Margolis's sense, a "comment," paired with an "account" (which I will describe shortly), seems to be in line with what Carroll, in his 2009 book, *On Criticism*, calls a "reasoned evaluation" or an informed judgment.¹³ In criticism proper, we verbally make an argument for a work's value in terms of the artist's achievement.

Packaged within the central task of reasoned evaluation, Carroll includes "a number of activities, including description, elucidation, classification, contextualization, interpretation, and/or analysis."¹⁴ Evaluation is necessary for criticism, while these other activities we solicit in support of the task of evaluation. This is, Carroll contends, what distinguishes criticism from other discourses, which may contain evaluations but are not ordered around them.

For Margolis, in the professional domain of criticism, whether scholarly or popular, evaluation is the second of two "phases," the first being "giving an account of a work of art."¹⁵ The accounting, Margolis notes, is a prerequisite to offering an appraisal, even if the "two often function together" in practice. An "account" for Margolis is just those activities Carroll lists in support of evaluation: description, interpretation, analysis, etc. On these views then, one of the expectations of professional criticism is that one

13. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 14.

14. *Ibid.*, 43.

15. Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*, 13.

offer a justification of one's assessment, an "account," according to established guidelines or conventions. Folk criticism may contain reasons in support of its evaluations, but the standards and expectations for the reasoning will be more varied and informal. Philosophy of criticism plays the role of analyzing guidelines, though the line between philosophy of criticism and philosophical criticism in the arts is sometimes blurred, as we will see.

A number of important philosophical works from the middle-twentieth century ascribe to the criticism-as-reasoned-evaluation view, forming the foundation for Carroll's position. In John Dewey's seminal 1934 book, *Art as Experience*, he states plainly, "Criticism is judgment, ideally as well as etymologically."¹⁶ Carroll similarly draws on etymology as evidence, "The term 'critic' derives from the Greek *kritikos*—one who serves on a jury and delivers a verdict."¹⁷ We have competitions for art that are "juried" in something approximating this sense, though there also seem to be limits to the accuracy and usefulness of the critic-as-juror model (e.g., jurors are typically not required to give reasons for their verdicts; are artworks best thought of as being on trial?). The legal backdrop also suggests something about the mood that criticism casts, where an artwork remains in purgatory until exonerated by divine critical decree.

In T.M. Greene's sprawling 1940 book, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, Greene emphasizes the role of criticism within aesthetics. He describes three phases in the work

16. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 298.

17. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 14.

of criticism, completed in a final stage consisting of judgment.¹⁸ In Monroe Beardsley's well-known *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Beardsley distinguishes between "critical interpretation," which is non-normative (as in, a description of a work of art), and what he calls "critical evaluations," which are normative.¹⁹ While this may initially seem to indicate that interpretation and judgment are stand-alone critical activities for Beardsley, "critical evaluation" is the apotheosis of the book's treatment of criticism as a whole. That is, interpretation and description are steps in the process of criticism that ultimately culminates in judgment.

If there is a core to criticism that philosophers and theorists seem to uphold, especially during this peak period, it is the view of criticism as reasoned judgment or reasoned evaluation: critics offer evaluative judgments of a work and reasons to support them. A critical evaluation is about the success of a work of art (or a body of works or a "movement" of art), about whether it is good or bad. Art critic Clement Greenberg remarked that "the first obligation of an art critic is to deliver value judgments."²⁰ The term "value judgments" might suggest that there are other sorts of judgments besides value judgments, but, in these accounts of criticism, judgments are evaluative relative to

18. Theodore Meyer Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* (New York: Gordian Press, 1973).

19. Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), 9.

20. Quoted in Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 6.

the discourse in question. A legal judgment may differ from an aesthetic judgment, for example, but both are evaluative: a legal judgment is evaluative relative to the law, an aesthetic judgment relative to aesthetics. For my purposes here, I take it that, in the philosophical discourse on criticism, artistic judgments evaluate a work's artistic value, granting that what counts as "artistic" is not easily settled (to say the least).

Debates that swirl around this core of criticism primarily disagree regarding the justification or legitimacy of one's evaluations and the nature of that evaluation, while sometimes emphasizing varying or competing function(s): What is criticism *for*? What makes a judgment better or worse? What is criticism critical *of*? In this very brief sketch of the orthodox view, I will say a few things about the first two questions, starting with criticism's function and then regarding standards for judging.

Whatever the activity or work that comprises criticism, the uses of criticism are varied. To what end does one criticize? Margolis remarks that "a critic is fundamentally a teacher."²¹ This is a claim found in numerous accounts of criticism, including more recent ones, such as Carroll's and Marcia Muelder Eaton's. Eaton discusses criticism in the context of education, whereby a critic teaches an audience to find their own way to worthwhile experiences of a work of art: "the best critics so enthrall us with their descriptions that they encourage us to continue the quest on our own."²²

21. Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*, 67.
 22. Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 213.

This suggests another question regarding criticism's purpose. Does the usefulness of a critic lie in telling me which works of art offer valuable experiences—like a consumer report on the best frying pan, which, if I buy it, opens the door to my own culinary successes—or does it lie in aiding me in making my own critical assessments? Carroll slips into calling readers of criticism “consumers” of it—not a completely incidental choice of words—where we get the most from criticism that tells “us what is valuable in a work,” and where “evidence” and “good reasons” lead us to the “discovery of value” on our own.²³ On the one hand, such “discoveries” may seem hollow if the criticism is prescribing a path too narrowly, as if there were a singular prize to be won and only one way to get there. On the other hand, this may also show that consumer reporting and the independent discovery of value are not exclusive aims—one may naturally lead to the other. A critic's assessment and accompanying logical support may entice me to consider a work more carefully (if, for example, a new film by a director I typically enjoy receives an unfavorable “review”). However, if the latter is the case—that a critic's job is to lead me to valuable *experiences* of a work (from their *descriptions* on Eaton's view, which obscures the evaluative task)—explicitly evaluative criticism may obstruct such a process. I may become too preoccupied with seeing the value where the critic found it. The goal is to assent to the same evaluative claim as the critic rather than experience the work in a valuable way (however we want to characterize “valuable”).

23. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 45-6.

I am reminded of the experience, especially in high school, of having works of literature tainted by the weight of a teacher's praise. *Will I ever enjoy Catcher in the Rye after Mrs. Easton's hype?* The baggage of greatness, or condemnation, can substantially affect one's experience of a work, sometimes negatively, though not always. This is Carroll's motivation for emphasizing the reasoning process in criticism. Overwhelming praise for a work may also lead me to revisit something previously neglected, especially if the praise is accompanied by good reasons (the assumption being that people are compelled [more] by good reasons [than poor ones]). *Mrs. Easton really did love Catcher in the Rye (and made a good point about the quality of its narrative structure); I should try it again.* Ignoring such (good) reasons would make me irrational (absent some other, more compelling reasons).

Margolis brackets the issue of whether or not the "evaluative" aspect of criticism is a necessary or primary function of the critic-as-teacher. Here I want to emphasize a distinction between the properties of critical activity (or critical work, as in a written review) and criticism's function. To be critical may mean to evaluate or judge, but the function of those judgments is, on these views, *educative*. The educative function of criticism can take on multiple guises. It may mean, as it does for Arthur Danto, that one's role is to educate an audience about the context within which an artwork rests (historically, culturally, politically), or, as Eaton suggests, it may draw one's attention to the "intrinsic properties" of a work (not that these are mutually exclusive tasks). James Elkins describes the difference between "local" criticism and "ambitious" criticism, the

latter offering sweeping, historically-minded judgments about a work and its cultural place, while the former limits itself to a particular work/gallery/exhibition/show.²⁴ In both cases, evaluation is apposite, though the goal of the criticism is substantively different. This distinction between the activity or work and the function of criticism will be important insofar as one is able, or not able, to educate without making judgments or, more generally, to separate what criticism is from what its function(s) is(/are).

What can we say regarding the reasoning process and the legitimation of judgments? Many of the philosophies of criticism from the 1930s through the 60s tended to emphasize, or at least aim toward, systematization, rational judgment, and rigorous standards, as if criticism were a branch of or aspiring toward science or formal logic. For example, Beardsley describes the view that critics, in giving “Objective reasons for their critical evaluations,” operate on “some underlying principle of reasoning” to which they expect others to accept (if reasoning rightly).²⁵ A “principle of reason” could be seen as indicating something stronger and more particular than, say, practical reasoning or common sense. It at least contrasts with justifications built around appeals to tradition or authority; though, one’s appeal to authority or tradition may itself be justified on rational grounds, but this is different than a pure appeal to tradition or authority as justificatory on their own.

24. Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgment,” 78-9.

25. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 470.

Describing some of the roots of the shift *away* from evaluation, Shusterman argues that many of these philosophies of criticism took as their aim a value-neutral assessment of the (evaluative) practice of criticism, which simultaneously muddled the territory between academic criticism and the academic or scholarly (read: philosophical) assessment of criticism itself:

It was not the philosopher's job to contest the critics' expert verdicts. She might try to extract and formulate some evaluative standards from the critical practice she analyzed, but she was not expected to offer original ones of her own. The interest in evaluation also suffered because of academic criticism's own reluctance to evaluate. Since it aspired (as a university-based discipline) to some sort of scientific status, and since the then-reigning dogma held science to be value-neutral, academic criticism essentially confined itself to finding facts and new interpretations.²⁶

Systematic philosophical assessments of criticism often correlated with systematic metaphysical accounts, with careful delineations about the nature of art and its works. Greene closes his book with a fold-out diagram close to two feet long, detailing the ontology of a work of art in neatly categorized boxes with stately, fully-capitalized lettering for each major heading—"MATTER," "FORM," "CONTENT,"—with sub-categories and sub-sub-categories that account for, e.g., "ALL ARCHITECTURAL STRUCTURES," "ALL SCULPTURE," and "All types of universals."²⁷ In this it resembles an engineering schematic or a biological chart of species. The formalism of

26. Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*, 27.

27. Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, back matter.

Bloomsbury critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell similarly invokes the use of diagrams and charts to reinforce the precision of their analyses.²⁸

This systematic approach should be viewed in contrast to the view of criticism as an art or near-art form, some of which has its roots in the “poet-critic” tradition of the Classical world, French writers in the mode of Baudelaire, and the Romantic criticism of the nineteenth century.²⁹ The “philosophical criticism” I discuss later draws on these traditions in various ways, often in contrast to the so-called analytic(-philosophical) criticism Shusterman describes.

In his “polemical introduction” to the *Anatomy of Criticism* from 1957—another evocative title that appropriates biological language—Northrop Frye proposes that the “scientific element in criticism ... changes its character from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic, as well as safeguarding the integrity of that subject from external invasion.”³⁰ Battlefield imagery aside, Frye’s introduction is, in part, a response to the alternative view of criticism that treats criticism as art rather than science. This emphasis on binary oppositions, as in “the casual” and “the causal,” the random or chaotic and the orderly or the planned, is also characteristic of the systematic

28. For an overview, see Solomon Fishman, *The Interpretation of Art: Essays on the Art Criticism of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Herbert Read* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1963).

29. See Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgment” and John Coplans, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000).

30. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 7.

approach. Frye's view leans toward the systematic. On his view, "popular critics," writing for newspapers and magazines, are the chief arbiters of (mere) public taste. These popular critics erect "monuments of contemporary taste" rather than general understandings (about literature, the art object, genre...).³¹ The forms of writing popular critics employ have little to do with the objective, scientific research that a scholarly critic should be expected to conduct and which leads to "general understandings." Frye does not, we should note, argue that popular criticism avoids its responsibility to judge or to support its judgments with reasons (though they may be weak); it is rather that the function of those judgments and the object (or the subject) of judgment differs from scholarly criticism. Roughly, we might call this the difference between advancing knowledge in a field and offering an opinion.

These systematic philosophies and theories of criticism evoke the methodological problem of criticism and its subject. How should criticism be done? What does criticism legitimately target as the object of its evaluations? Where does philosophical criticism and the philosophy of criticism sit in relationship to what is otherwise simply "criticism"? Can either be value-neutral? Some of the strands that emerge in opposition to criticism-as-reasoned-evaluation deviate only insofar as they claim that description and interpretation are evaluatively loaded. Explicit pronouncements about the value of a work are thus redundant or naïve (about their neutrality). Deconstructionist and post-modernist

31. Ibid., 9.

criticism in the 1980s and 90s evolved out of just these kinds of concerns about the impossibility of value-neutrality and the inescapability of subjective, relative perspective. Shusterman's earlier comment about analytic aesthetics draws on the body of work that has undermined the value-neutral theories of science and, by extension, value-neutral theories of other forms of scholarship, including the scholarly criticism of art.

If criticism in the objective, scientific mode aims to study art in the way that, say, biology studies the natural world, then what separates scholarly criticism from a science of art? Frye supposes that what Aristotle does in his *Poetics* is basically the same as what a biologist does, "picking out its genera and species, formulating the broad laws of literary experience."³² Notice the invocation here and earlier of causes, laws, and formulae. Margolis calls this the "taxonomic" view of art,³³ which Greene's diagram rhetorically invokes. This attempt to mirror science is what Carroll argues leads to the "value-neutral" theories of criticism: insofar as science is value-neutral, so criticism must be. Carroll further claims that "the urge in the humanities to emulate the hard sciences has slackened," though it lives on in some theoretical purviews that are, on his view, "different from criticism."³⁴ Some of Cavell's work, which I examine in greater detail in

32. Ibid., 14.

33. Joseph Margolis, "Moral Values in the Arts: A Manifesto of Sorts," *Aesthetic Pathways* 1.1 (2010): 30-57.

34. Carroll lists Arthur Danto's theory of "deep interpretation" as one example (*On Criticism*, 43). See Arthur Danto, "Deep Interpretation," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

the fourth and fifth chapters, is simultaneously a work of criticism and a philosophy of criticism. This philosophical criticism engages a work and the conditions for its own articulation simultaneously, as intertwined and self-reflexive. The self-reflexivity is what makes his work—and, for him, the works on which he dwells—*philosophical* (rather than, say, scientific).

Very briefly then, we have the spectrum of issues that a philosophy of criticism analyzes and a sense of the orthodox view. Philosophy of criticism is a central feature within the domain of aesthetics; it looks at the cultural and historical arenas within which criticism takes place (popular, scholarly, professional, folk; modern, Romantic, ancient, etc.); it asks what sort of activity or work comprises criticism (evaluative, interpretive, descriptive, written, verbal); it asks about the proper object of its attention (art objects, works, movements; historical, cultural, and political contexts); it asks about criteria for success (what makes for *good* criticism; what are appropriate methodologies); and it asks to what uses the work of criticism may be put. Finally, philosophy of criticism sometimes mingles criticism with its philosophy or theory of criticism. Correspondingly, critics also engage in reflections about the conditions for and nature of their practice within works of criticism, especially, for example, as critics moved into academic and institutional positions.

Circling the Common Core

In a 2001 Round Table discussion amongst artists, art historians, and critics about the “conditions of art criticism,” Helen Molesworth comments, “I don’t want to pronounce criticism dead before we’ve even quite decided what it is.”³⁵ The discussion begins with a citation from Paul de Man’s 1967 essay on the crisis of criticism. The participants neither deny de Man’s conclusion nor the fact of a present crisis, even if the nature of the crisis differs, and even if the participants disagree about the nature of the contemporary crisis. Echoing the title of de Man’s essay, Elkins remarked in 2004, “Art criticism is in a worldwide crisis.”³⁶ On the one hand, some participants in the Round Table point toward critical practices that devalue judgment’s place in criticism. Hal Foster recalls art criticism from the 1980s: “One of the projects of my generation of critics . . . was to work against this identification of criticism with judgment. That was the part of the long reaction against Greenberg.”³⁷ As an example of that reaction, Foster mentions “Donald Judd’s criterion of ‘interest’,” which Judd thought of as eschewing the criticism artists were likely to encounter in the 1960s, such as Greenberg’s, emphasizing judgments about the quality of a work: “this is good” or “this is bad” (and here’s why).³⁸ On the other

35. “Round Table,” 207.

36. Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgment in Criticism,” 71.

37. “Round Table,” 209.

38. Judd’s “criterion of interest” is arguably still a judgment, that something is “interesting.”

hand, Foster's account affirms the prominent place judgment held in criticism's history by noting its dissident voices as being just that—dissident.

Art historian David Joselit echoes this while introducing another concern, “Traditionally [criticism's] function has been to judge or to parse ... but what is hard to maintain today is criticism as a mode of judgment that carries weight.”³⁹ The debate subsequently focuses on the function of criticism and its audience: who is criticism for and what should it do?

In 1948, Arnold Isenberg had a similar concern to Joselit's regarding the value of one's judgments: “the theory of art criticism ... has been seriously hampered by its headlong assault on the question of validity. We have many doctrines about the objectivity of the critical judgment but few concerning its import.”⁴⁰ Isenberg later argues that it isn't enough that a critic's judgments be true or plausible, they must also be “keen and original.”⁴¹ Isenberg and Joselit are asking similar questions but with different emphases. They are both asking, who is the audience for criticism, and what makes it worth reading? One could, after all, make perfectly sound, well-supported judgments of a work of art that are trivial or, to use Judd's criterion, uninteresting. There is, then, a consistent identification of criticism-as-reasoned-evaluation, but this coincides with

39. David Joselit, “Round Table,” 203.

40. Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism: Selected Essays of Arnold Isenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 156.

41. *Ibid.*, 298.

alternative accounts that are reactive to that orthodoxy. In particular, one way the boundaries of critical practice blur emerges with skepticism about the value of the judgments criticism offers, “their import,” if not the fact of judgment itself.

For Joselit and the members of the Round Table, there is insufficient attention drawn to the way in which critics write that results in either critical invisibility or a kind of criticism that is uncomfortably wed to capitalist market values and functions. The issue is not just a matter of whether or not one offers sound judgments of a work but how one articulates those judgments. Another Round Table participant, Robert Storr, comments, “If criticism is not being taken seriously, part of the fault may be that the things being said, or at least the language and style that are used to say them, are no longer effective or useful.”⁴² The audience not taking criticism seriously may be, depending on the critic and the critical forum, artists, critics, or the public. The participants are reluctant to advocate what they call a “bellevistic” mode of writing, which is popular but insufficiently rigorous or takes as its object (illicitly) something other than artworks, such as visual or consumer culture, with attention to artworks playing only a superficial role.

This echoes some of Carroll’s concern about differentiating the discourse of criticism from the discourse of art history or visual studies. The reluctance to trade in populist writing, whatever that may be, is tied into the confusion over audience. Who is criticism for? Does the audience for criticism have any correlation to the methodologies

42. In “Round Table,” 203.

and principles that guide its practice, or ought to guide its practice? Regarding the first question, one simple answer is that popular criticism is for a popular audience, scholarly criticism for scholars. The Round Table participants are also concerned that artistic practice interact with art criticism, as they claim it did in the 1950s and 60s. Think here of Greenberg's intimate role in the development and reception of Jackson Pollock, or of the French New Wave directors of the 1950s and 60s that began as critics and wrote about each other's films in the *Cahiers du Cinema*.

Regarding the second question, whether or not or how the audience for criticism shapes the principles, methods, or style of criticism, there seems to be no fixed or necessary relationship between the two, though there is clearly *some* relationship. The professional, scholarly criticism of one era certainly can differ from the professional, scholarly criticism of another era. We need only look at the body of art criticism teased so far, i.e., in the shift from Greenberg to his successors and opponents in the 80s and beyond. Benjamin Buchloh describes these generations as separated by a "chasm."⁴³ While some question the accuracy of Buchloh's claim, their responses highlight the tenuous relationship between audience and critical function. Joselit describes his approach as "disciplinarian," which has less to do with the "quality" of an aesthetic object than with understanding and interpreting (and judging) how works locate themselves relative to (art) history and visual culture. Joselit's work is thus historical,

43. "Round Table," 220.

scholarly, and discursive. George Baker describes his practice as *recovery*, where he discovers and highlights suppressed or silenced work. Baker thus emphasizes a broader social function by comparison but with a narrower focus on the appraising of works. These practices each involve the judgment of works even while the audience and function for their critical practices differ. The possibilities and variations in this relationship between audience and function are incredibly diverse. These are just two possibilities.

Buchloh and the Round Table also map the shifting relationships between critical practice and audience as it occurred in the move toward academic careers for both artists and critics. While the visual art critic of the 1960s may have been writing for print magazines, such as *Artforum*, and regularly interacting with artists, the critics coming out of the subsequent period and beyond are, as Joselit and Molesworth lament, ignored by artists and bound to academia, which they describe as, at best, a parallel track to criticism. Elkins similarly notes, “Art criticism is massively produced, and massively ignored.”⁴⁴ On the whole, these critics reiterate their desire for a strong, dialectical relationship between artist and art criticism: art criticism is for artists and artists need critics. Molesworth comments: “I always thought one of the criteria for great criticism was that it was the kind of thing that artists would read seriously. I was never really interested in the audience of *The New Yorker* per se ... I didn’t think that that was where great criticism happened—great criticism was an essay that artists read.”⁴⁵

44. Elkins, “On the Absence of Judgment,” 73.

45. “Round Table,” 221.

Shusterman provides a narrative about the history of the ontology of art that parallels the dissolution of the relationship between artist and critic. In his analysis of the philosophy of criticism after its peak—after, that is, artists divorce themselves from “serious” criticism and criticism disperses into a variety of contexts, including the academy—he states that analytic philosophy of criticism “can be read as a progressive turn away from the perceptual surface to deeper imperceptible depths.”⁴⁶ This period in analytic philosophy of criticism operates on an ontology of art whereby “no set of perceptual properties seems both necessary and sufficient for being a work of art.”⁴⁷ The critic then emerges as a necessary intermediary, skilled in deciphering the meaning “behind” those perceptual features “we all see.” This is part of what Eaton has in mind as she talks about a critic’s *descriptions* enthralling us and leading us to our own worthwhile (valuable, authentic, substantial, meaningful ...) experiences of a work. This role of the critic as a decoder had the effect of suggesting to artists that their works were not sufficiently expressive on their own, that a critic was a necessary part of the artistic experience. This is consistent with some of the backlash Molesworth laments.

The reasons for this shift toward looking beyond the “surface” of a work, if this is indeed an accurate assessment, are manifold. I will briefly describe some possibilities. Shusterman’s analysis emphasizes a philosophical shift toward “hidden” meanings, or

46. Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*, 20.

47. *Ibid.*

meaning “behind” or “in front of” a work.⁴⁸ This is the de-aestheticizing of art signaled by, for example, the Dadaists and other conceptual art. One cannot simply assess a work based on a pure perceptual experience, if such a thing were ever possible. One must be familiar (variously) with the social or cultural context within which a work rests, the conceptual language and theoretical discourse of the work in question, and the conditions that help designate it as a work of art in the first place. How a work *appears* will be shaped by these factors, and these works dramatize that fact. In the absence of familiarity with the relevant discourse(s) an artist works within, one needs a critic to point to the work’s meaning, to explain and unpack the context that makes it intelligible. (Though I am primarily drawing on discussions about visual art, this applies equally to literature and music.) As both art and criticism draw themselves into ever-deeper and intellectually freighted territory, one’s ability to *see* a work for oneself, meaningfully, becomes more and more threatened.

A proto form of this thesis appears in Greenberg’s iconic essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” where he divides the world of modern art into two categories, so named in the title. Art was either populist, accessible, and entertaining, operating on familiar, trite formulations everyone could easily “read,” which effectively denied it a place in the canon of art-proper, or it was avant-garde, specialist, and progressive, and thus largely

48. See especially Chapters 1 and 4 in Joseph Margolis, *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

inaccessible, if not also contemptible, to the public. There are or were works between these two poles, which Greenberg calls populist art, but these were special cases.⁴⁹

Critical theorists of the mid-twentieth century have also insisted on looking beyond the perceivable features of a work, especially regarding the “mass” arts—those works that are designed for a large audience and are themselves easily reproducible, such as photography or the mass-market paperback novel. Mass arts are themselves insufficiently critical, according to perhaps the most well-known of critical theorists of this period, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. On their view, such un-critical works—un-critical of exploitative, capitalist conditions—are tantamount to non-art.⁵⁰ They argued that mass works, especially those of Hollywood cinema, were produced within a complex sphere of “culture-making” that deliberately obscured their meaning and significance within a capitalist system designed to preserve the power of elites. Put another way, mass movements appropriated radical or revolutionary art (i.e., genuine art) and marketed those forms as a commodity. One consumed culture rather than made it. Criticism of such work is necessary, on this view, as a way to expose the hollowness of work that otherwise *appears* to be art in its appropriation of conventional forms.

49. Greenberg lists John Steinbeck’s novels as a primary example. See Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 544.

50. For a brief summary, see Stephen Bonner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 84-88.

Looking at the legacy of critical theory in the last twenty years, Hal Foster argues that critical engagement has waned, especially in the U.S.: "... the relative irrelevance of criticism is evident enough in an art world where value is determined by market position above all; today 'criticality' is frequently dismissed as rigid, rote, passé, or all of the above."⁵¹ In characterizing the art world of the last twenty-five years, Foster regularly draws on the term "post-critical." The post-critical era is characterized by the loss of critical authority, which he further links to the troubled status of artistic judgment, including the aforementioned dominance of market values. Beyond that lies the mutual interaction of theoretical shifts within the academy (towards a "debilitating relativism"), political shifts in response to (e.g.) 9/11 (toward excessive "affirmation"), and shifts in art production (toward the "death of irony"). Of course criticism and its evaluations persist, (perhaps) especially outside of the artworld niche Foster describes (in, say, popular, mass arts), though his assessment is not completely unfamiliar in a more general sense.

On the one hand, criticism's pervasiveness is evident in the ubiquity of web "comment" sections, review aggregator websites (Metacritic.com and Rottenatomatoes.com), as well as the numerous magazines, newspapers, and web publications devoted to criticism. To repeat Elkins' comment: criticism *is* massively produced. Popular movies that stream online regularly receive hundreds of reviews. Noah Baumbach's *While We're Young* (2015), streaming on the commercial web retail website

51. Hal Foster, Chapter 5 in *Bad News Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2015).

Amazon.com, has (as of this writing) 1,260 user reviews.⁵² This is an incredible amount of critical attention (if we grant it the title of “critical”; the absence of reasoning in support of the “ratings” may rule out many if not most of the reviews). On the other hand, the absence of critical *authority* is evident in that same ubiquity. Everyone can be a critic.

“Criticality” is lost in the sense that the reviews lack features most philosophical views emphasize, orthodox or otherwise, and, for Foster (we would imagine), as such criticism operates within the confines of a commercial retail space. In other words, such critical engagement lacks compelling and careful reasoning in support of its claims. Consider a few of the one-star reviews of Baumbach’s film (out of five possible stars; these are quoted here in their entirety):

A for effort; D for premise and outcome in my view

Crap, didn't even finish watching.

When they drop the “F bomb” the first few minutes of the movie I know it’s not for me!

Glad this was on Prime, would have been upset if I had paid to see it. Surprised that Ben Stiller was associated with this because I’m a fan of his comedies. I recommend watching *Along Came Polly* instead.

A number of reviews indicate the user did not finish the movie. Separate users claim to have quit after “a few,” 5, 10, 15, and 30 minutes, with some making it halfway before

52. See http://www.amazon.com/While-Were-Young-Ben-Stiller/dp/B0107ORBQ4/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1451678239&sr=8-1&keywords=while+we%27re+young

quitting. That one should have a sufficiently complete experience of a work is such a basic criterion of criticism that it is often implied rather than stated. Another theme of the negative reviews, also indicated above, is the presence of foul language and references to sex or drugs. These reviews rarely indicate much more than that such content is present; that is, they ignore the *way* in which the movie treats foul language, sex, or drugs. The entirety of one particular review simply says, “Foul language” (1-star).⁵³ The word “boring” appears in numerous other negative reviews. One particular stretch of reviews (numbers 231-240) includes eight individual one-word reviews, all negative (presumably): “terrible,” “boring,” “Boring!!” “Garbage,” “Terrible,” “Horrible,” “Horrible,” “Horrible.”⁵⁴

This kind of “user” criticism of movies fails the standards for criticism philosophers and professional critics emphasize, though they reflect, in some way, the dominance of critical engagement and its evaluative core. Meanwhile, the work of much professional criticism has either given up judgment as a responsibility (in part, as a gesture of protest against consumer-style one-star, one-word “reviews”) or lost itself in academic and professionalized niches that speak with and to an audience that is insular, obscure, and technocratic.

53. See http://www.amazon.com/While-Were-Young-Ben-Stiller/product-reviews/B0107ORBQ4/ref=cm_cr_pr_btm_link_21?ie=UTF8&filterBy=addOneStar&showViewpoints=0&filterByStar=addOneStar&pageNumber=21.

54. Ibid.

From Audience to Function

Professionalism is meant to confer authority on art and criticism in a way that the casual “user” review lacks, where there are few if any conditions for offering criticism. If professionalism restores authority, it can also alienate an audience. The technical and formal languages that coincide with a professional discourse can make it indecipherable to those outside the field. People sometimes talk as if a necessary condition for “fine” or “high” art is that it is indecipherable to all but the highly educated and elite, and the criticism that addresses such work talks at a similarly “high” and inaccessible level. With work specifically designed to challenge and resist easy description and understanding, critical decipherment can be an important bridge to a general audience. This is where, for example, Danto’s position and institutional critique emerge. To understand what a work of art means, one must understand the cultural, social, historical, and political contexts within which it rests. A critic may aid in this process, but she may also further alienate an audience through the specialized language of a professional discourse. This returns us to the question, In what ways does an audience shape the criticism one produces?

David Joselit refers to “academia’s relative disdain for the general audience,” especially in terms of its “narrowly defined discursive channels.”⁵⁵ Martha Nussbaum criticizes a form of feminist scholarship (not specific to art though it includes art criticism), primarily in the work of Judith Butler, that trades on ambiguity and the

55. “Round Table,” 223.

absence of clear argumentation: “Feminist thinkers of the new symbolic type would appear to believe that the way to do feminist politics is to use words in a subversive way, in academic publications of lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness. These symbolic gestures, it is believed, are themselves a form of political resistance.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, Nussbaum states that

in both the continental and the Anglo-American philosophical traditions, academic writers for a specialist audience standardly acknowledge that the figures they mention are complicated, and the object of many different interpretations. They therefore typically assume the responsibility of advancing a definite interpretation among the contested ones, and of showing by argument why they have interpreted the figure as they have, and why their own interpretation is better than others.⁵⁷

Professional fields often develop technical languages that non-professionals are unlikely to understand, and the vocabularies and strategies of one genre of criticism may not overlap much with another’s. Those who write criticism for gallery shows are unlikely to share all of the same methods and terminology as critics of other media, such as dance or popular movies. At the same time, with popular criticism (i.e., those writing for a general audience), the critic takes on the task of deciphering, clarifying, and emphasizing features of a work for an untrained audience that otherwise misses what’s going on in an artwork. This means that a popular critic’s work must avoid insularity, or at least work on some common ground.

56. Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: the Hip, Defeatist Feminism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic* 220, no. 8 (February 22, 1999), 38.

57. *Ibid.*

One way in which the function of criticism may differ while its basic activity of reasoned evaluation remains stable, is by looking at the cultural and social spaces within which it occurs, such as the professional, scholarly domain versus the ordinary, “folk” domain. Frye further distinguishes the scholarly domain of criticism, written by academics, from its popular professional practice, such as newspapers or magazines (i.e., the popular criticism the Round Table eschews).⁵⁸ There are also practices and works of criticism that sit between the ordinary, folk judgment of art and popular criticism, such as hobbyist blogs, book clubs, and student societies.⁵⁹ The spectrum of artistic practices do, in this sense, seem to mirror the spectrum of critical practices. In what sense do these critical positions line up either methodologically or functionally?

Carroll states, “Assisting audiences in apprehending and understanding what is valuable in the works at hand is the primary function of the critic and her critical work.”⁶⁰ Scholarly, professional criticism is written for other scholars, and, on a charitable view, one writes to advance knowledge within a field. (We could also say that one writes to fulfill one’s professional responsibilities, for prestige, to create controversy, etc.; however, these might be better characterized as reasons that motivate criticism rather than the function of it). This differs from the social function Carroll describes, in that the

58. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 10-11.

59. Consider review aggregator website RottenTomatoes.com, which parses “top critics” (i.e. those paid by news outlets for their commentary) from “all critics” (i.e., any regular contributor of movie reviews).

60. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 45.

function of popular criticism is to aid an audience's experience of a work, to aid in appreciation or enjoyment, or toward negative values, as the case may be. This may involve the knowledge that scholarship generates, but it is not oriented around it. By contrast, nobody would deny a scholarly critic success if readers failed to enjoy or appreciate the work under consideration (unless we construe appreciation as meaning "coming to understand," without any particular value attached to it). We might wonder about the value of the knowledge generated if there were no change in appreciation, positively or negatively, but this isn't a typical or expressed measure for success in scholarship.

Greene warns against pressing such a difference too strongly, between the scholar's role in offering and assessing evaluations and the layman's role in experiencing a work. He states:

It might perhaps be argued that the professional critic's special prerogative is to offer and defend judicial estimates, and that the layman's chief interest in art is properly confined to artistic re-creation and enjoyment. But such a distinction between the layman and the critic would, if pressed, radically distort the unitary nature of man's response to art. In actuality, the layman is continually appraising what he apprehends and enjoys, and most professional critics have chosen to be critics, partly at least, because of their unusual capacity for artistic re-creation and enjoyment. ... Everyone who approaches art seriously is a critic.⁶¹

The negative reaction to criticism as evaluation in part stems from a reluctance to prescribe values to an audience, though these objectors vary in their diagnoses and

61. Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, 373.

prescriptions for criticism. Some theories emphasize the value-ladenness of description and interpretation, while others emphasize the absolute relativity of all value judgments. The emotive theory, for example, claims that “this work is good” means something like “I like how I feel about this work.” That first group of objectors argue that judgment is already sufficiently infused in the very act of choosing to attend to features of a work. The critic who says, “look at the red square” already confers value on the red square, positively or negatively, depending on, say, the context and tone of the description. To offer explicit pronouncements as to the specific value of the red square is redundant and unnecessary, or at least those who think their descriptions are neutral are deceiving themselves.

Carroll points out that *merely* drawing attention to a feature of a work neither exorcises evaluation (it’s consistent with his view) nor confers any particular value on a work.⁶² I think this is right, though certainly it is possible that drawing attention to some feature *can* confer a specific value, depending on the way in which one draws attention, or even to what one draws attention. Imagine a painter known for working with circular canvases who debuts a new work, also on a circular canvas, and a critic responds, “Circles again?” This may not be sufficient for proper criticism but it does reflect the economy with which words and tone can deliver a verdict. Oppositely, the failure to draw attention, to ignore something altogether, can also be a powerful form of condemnation.

62. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 20.

This can occur on a macrocosmic level with regard to entire works or a body of works. For example, someone might claim that tattoo artists fail to receive serious or sufficient critical attention from the artworld. To acknowledge and discuss tattoo art, positively or negatively, would be an admission of its place and value within the artworld. Such attention or lack of attention can also occur on the microcosmic level, where we choose to attend to some features of a work but not others (an inevitability in some sense). In keeping with these observations, Carroll is careful to stipulate that evaluations do not need to be explicit to still be operative: “One rarely finds an academic critic at a conference or even in the classroom wrapping up a critical presentation by saying ... *King Lear* is a play that possesses genuine value, in fact, a great deal of it.”⁶³

For those working against criticism as evaluation, they may contend that, for the sake of preparing an audience to make their own assessment of a work’s value—a function Carroll emphasizes—a critic ought to suppress or suspend judgments as much as possible. Offering explicit pronouncements about a work’s value either interferes with this task or condescends. A critic’s goal then is expert knowledge about the “objective” features of a work, and the critic’s descriptions and interpretations should be value-neutral or underplay the role of evaluation.

Some criticism renders explicit judgments as a kind of service. They help one decide whether or not to engage with a work at all. The function here is akin to consumer

63. Ibid., 21.

reporting (remember that frying pan that leads to my culinary flourishing). We see this, for example, with popular movie and book reviews. My favorite critics help me decide what's worth my time to watch or read, that is, sparing me the experience of a bad work altogether. The benefit, if there is one, of the hundreds of online reviews of a movie is in the aggregate: on the whole, do people tend to think this movie is good? If not, I skip it.

Some of the functions of criticism are scattered throughout the preceding pages. Let's take stock. They include an educative function, which consists in guiding an audience in their experience of a work (depending on the theory, toward an experience that is authentic, valuable, substantive, meaningful, correct, appropriate), or to aid an audience in coming to a reasonable assessment of their own, if not also a worthwhile experience. There is criticism's scientific, scholarly function, where it identifies and categorizes artworks and movements in the way a biologist studies and categorizes the biota. There is a kind of social-metaphysical function, where criticism helps explicate what comprises art (relative to history, culture). Criticism may also serve artists, participating in a creative and critical dialectic. What other purposes might criticism serve, and does judgment retain its privileged place?

In the next chapter, I will focus on two particular boundaries that further clarify where orthodox criticism veers off. The two boundaries come in the shape of political and moral criticism. Can politically or morally charged criticism still be sufficiently focused on artistic evaluation to be art criticism? Oppositely, can art criticism afford to

ignore political or moral content? Lastly, I will return to issues in the language of criticism in closing out the survey of criticism.

CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL BOUNDARIES:

POLITICS, MORALITY, AND THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM

This chapter is an extension of the issues from the prior chapter, which surveys some of the landmarks of criticism and the philosophy of criticism over the last seventy-five years. There we located an orthodox view of art criticism's core: the evaluative judgment of a work of art grounded in reasons. One of the notions that unsettled the orthodox view had to do with the limited function of criticism and critical practices that operated in broader or more discursive territory. Here I focus on two particular critical boundaries, the political and the moral, before closing with a focus on the language of art criticism.

The connection between the political and moral domains and the language of criticism is somewhat tenuous. I include them here together primarily as a way to understand criticism in dimensions thus far left untouched. The first two parts are primarily concerned with the degree to which (and the ways that) a critic may be wrapped up with politics and morality and still meet the conditions for practicing *art* criticism. By "wrapped up with," I mostly mean one of two things. The political and moral domains may, first, relate to criticism as objects of attention, where critics focus on the political and moral content of a work, and, second, politics and morality may ground criticism's function, where criticism itself serves a political or moral purpose. If criticism is overly

preoccupied with political or moral content or purposes, does it lose its title to art criticism? In what way is the language of a critic already bound to or reflective of political, moral, social, and intellectual commitments? Are these evident or embedded in descriptive and interpretive choices? I concede that the chapter will elicit more questions than it resolves. All the same, I hope this continuing survey of criticism will point us in the direction of a sufficiently complex and rounded view of what criticism is, even as it flirts with conceptual and practical deviancy.

Politics and the Scope of Art Criticism

In the preface to his book, *The Function of Criticism*, Terry Eagleton writes: “The argument of this book is that criticism today lacks all substantive social function. It is either part of the public relations branch of the literary industry, or as a matter wholly internal to the academies.”¹ Art critics, both popular and scholarly, are often financially dependent and professionally supported by related fields and institutions (e.g., art history departments, galleries, museums, newspapers). This is an issue the critics, artists, curators, and art historians of a 2001 Round Table emphasize, pointing to gallery shows and museum exhibitions that publish lavish catalogues containing a critic’s remarks.² These catalogues draw criticism into the commercial arm of the artworld, potentially

1. Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From ‘the Spectator’ to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), 7.

2. “Round Table,” 202-203.

compromising efforts to remain neutral, outside observers, or at least discouraging criticism that may be at odds with the values of the market. Benjamin Buchloh echoes a similar concern to Eagleton's about the social function of art criticism when market values come to dominate:

The judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access to the apparatus of the culture industry (e.g., the international biennials and group shows) or by the collector's immediate access to the object in the market or at auction. Now, all you have to have is the competence of quality judgments and the high-level connoisseurship that serves as investment expertise. My exaggeration—and admittedly it is an exaggeration—serves to say that you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts. You don't have criticism of blue chip stocks either.³

Criticism on this view isn't necessarily an extension of economic interests but it is nullified by them, and though Buchloh's concern is for the contemporary visual art world, the questions are essentially the same. From what position does a critic write and work? What should criticism aim to accomplish? How are these connected to context, either of the work or the critic?

Eagleton has a specific history and practice in mind when he talks about the shortcomings of literary criticism. He has in mind the history of the European critic of literature, especially in "England since the early eighteenth century."⁴ He draws on that history, however, to highlight a role criticism may yet play in the "public sphere." By looking at what Eagleton esteems from the history of English (literary) criticism, we get a

3. "Round Table," 202.

4. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 7.

useful picture of where the nature and function of criticism meet and one way in which Noël Carroll's approach to criticism, emphasized in the previous chapter, distinguishes itself.

What does Eagleton's historical analysis show us then? First, Eagleton is a Marxist critical theorist in the sense that he resists constraining the territory of literary criticism to the *merely* literary. Very broadly speaking, the critical discourse that prevails in his analysis is historically focused on material and economic conditions and class-consciousness. Eagleton shows that literature for the early British literary critic is a sort of kindling that ignites the fire of discursive, public discourse—it's not just about the books (in one sense anyway). He notes that, amongst the various qualities a literary critic of the eighteenth century may have had, "the critic must resist specialization."⁵ The critic is instead someone who can "ramble or idle among [all]... the idioms and social practices" of one's culture.⁶ This resistance to specialization counters the scientific criticism Northrop Frye and others later move toward. However, lest we think this spells the suspension or softening of judgment as a substantive and necessary feature of criticism, Eagleton states, "The critic as flâneur or bricoleur ... is still the critic as judge."⁷ In this, Eagleton mirrors much of what others have said regarding criticism.

5. Ibid., 18.

6. Ibid., 19.

7. Ibid., 20.

What distinguishes Eagleton's conception of the critic from Carroll's then? One possibility lies in the political and social function Eagleton emphasizes. That function is one of shaping some kind of cohesive public sphere, or what could otherwise be called a culture. This critical function presents a dilemma (possibly two). Eagleton states, "The very act of criticism, in short, poses a pressing ideological problem: for how is one to criticize without lapsing into that sullen sectarianism which has lain waste the English social order?"⁸ Eagleton is speaking to the specific task that Addison and Steele set out for themselves in establishing their respective publications, *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, where political and social transformations created the space (or the need even) for such efforts at social cohesion. As an activity built around judgment, however, criticism encouraged divisiveness, just insofar as judgments (unless they are popular ones) draw dividing lines, and all the more so with discursive criticism that "rambles" among a range of extra-literary subjects. In the local context at least, Addison and Steele were not operating in a sphere of easily accepted, popular opinion-making. They encouraged public debate by drawing works into broader social and political issues, as opposed to the narrow analysis of aesthetic or formal features.

To ease the problems of criticism's divisiveness, Eagleton notes, early critics aimed to include all citizens in the critical discourse as equal participants: "it is not the privilege of a certain social class or professional clique."⁹ The professional critic

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 21.

operating under such conditions is less the purveyor of ultimate, “Olympian authority” and more one who “conduct[s] the general discussion.”¹⁰ This view may seem to run against the grain of the critic-as-educator—the critic that teaches an uneducated or untrained audience what to look for in a work—though it depends on how one construes education. One option is to say that a good teacher is not merely an expert who dictates facts to be remembered but is instead a guide to reflection and conversation.¹¹

The first dilemma asks, How does a critic cultivate social cohesion through a practice that invites dissension? This brings us to the second dilemma of the early critic, which is especially pressing for contemporary criticism. If intellectual amateurism, however broadly-minded, is a requirement for a socially-minded critic, how are a critic’s judgments legitimated? The dilemma stems from the intuition that one clear way to justify a judgment would be to appeal to one’s expertise and authority, to one’s professional qualifications. John Dewey recognized this tension, stating, “Desire for authoritative standing leads the critic to speak as if he were the authority for established principles having unquestionable sovereignty.”¹² Absent the straight appeal to authority, expertise, or status, what options remain?

10. Ibid.

11. Helen Molesworth elaborates on a version of this idea as a hope for criticism, where artist, critic, public, and the work are all involved in a “conversational gambit” (“Round Table,” 221-2).

12. Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 299.

Eagleton's answer is fairly consistent with where Carroll ends up, "The currency of this realm is neither title nor property"—or, as the case may be now, academic or professional status—"but rationality."¹³ Still, according to Eagleton, there were prerequisites for employing or legitimizing one's rationality in eighteenth-century British discourse—namely, property.¹⁴ This aims to provide one answer to the practical and historical question of how to legitimate critical judgments within the specific time and place on which Eagleton focuses, but this does not resolve the issue of critical authority and professionalization as criticism moves out of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, Eagleton traces professionalism as it develops and takes hold of critical discourse (and here the analysis has relevance beyond his historical focus). This leads to another way of framing the issue of the function and form of criticism. How does professional criticism avoid isolating itself from other discourses, from becoming, in Eagleton's terms, a matter "internal to the academies"? Inversely, how does criticism avoid operating within too loose and discursive a framework, or one that is overly amateurish or superficial?

An exemplary critic for Eagleton is Raymond Williams, whose work is always "more than literary."¹⁵ Hold that ideal up while considering the following claim from

13. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 26.

14. For a more detailed discussion, see George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

15. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 108-115.

Carroll: “I maintain that artistic evaluation is always apposite when criticizing an artwork, whereas many of the dominant theories of criticism do not.”¹⁶ This seems to establish a point of clear distinction between Carroll’s view of criticism and Eagleton’s: criticism that is strictly *art* criticism versus criticism for the sake of political (or social or cultural) critique. The question is, What properly falls within a critic’s purview, such that one is an “art” critic and not merely a critic whose work involves art incidentally, superficially, or tangentially?

Let’s start with a return to the issue of the component parts of criticism and the infusion of judgment within them. Carroll states, “historically, criticism has been generally aligned with evaluation.”¹⁷ This is consistent with Eagleton and others so far. Carroll is focused on the “achievement of the artist, so conceived as a mixture of object and intentions.”¹⁸ In criticism proper, we “discover” value in the artist’s achievement.¹⁹ For Carroll, countervailing views are built around interpretation as the primary task of criticism. He sets up his “philosophy of criticism” in opposition to these “theories of interpretation.” Some instances of legitimate criticism may not contain interpretation at all, he notes.²⁰ In part, Carroll justifies this distinction in terms of historical precedent.

16. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 6.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 7.

20. *Ibid.*, 5-8.

Criticism as interpretation is merely a “fashionable” trend (a phrase he repeats) within academic circles of the “last two decades or so” (i.e. the 1980s and 90s).²¹ Carroll’s project is, admittedly, a “rational reconstruction” with a normative ambition and not a sociological history of criticism. Carroll’s view is especially disparaging of those critical models in which political or ideological evaluations are equal to or supersede the role *artistic* evaluation plays. This does not mean, Carroll argues, that political “evaluation is never an appropriate dimension of criticism.”²² However, it’s not clear from these passages how Carroll construes the relationship between the “artistic” and the “political,” and later passages suggest a more openly oppositional stance to politically-oriented criticism.

Carroll’s concern seems to be with the politically-oriented critic that surveys the work of art through a lens that shows no particular concern for the work of art just as a work of art. The object of this critic’s political gaze is arbitrary.²³ This sounds similar to the picture Eagleton paints of the socially-minded critic of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, who could apply a critical eye to any number of cultural products or social phenomena with little adjustment. Carroll’s criticism echoes Frye, who chides the critical “determinist” who (merely) adopts a “critical attitude”—“Marxist, Thomist, liberal-

21. Ibid., 6.

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 4.

humanist, neo-Classical, Freudian, Jungian, or existentialist.”²⁴ Frye states that a critical attitude is “where a scholar with a special interest in geography or economics expresses that interest by the rhetorical device of putting his favorite study into a causal relationship with whatever interests him less.”²⁵ This seems to be what Carroll has in mind as he differentiates his “philosophy of criticism” from “a critical *theory*—like Althusarian Marxism,” which “tells you how to interpret *any* artwork.”²⁶ The suggestion then is that *some* artworks will have political content that warrants criticism emphasizing a work’s political content. By contrast, other work may possess little or no political content, such that, to offer politically-oriented criticism is to engage in a discourse distinct from *art* criticism. This is evident in Carroll’s previous claim, where “philosophy of criticism” plays a different role than a “theory of criticism,” the latter providing a critic with the tools to evaluate “any” work.

Still, can we construe Carroll’s opposition to political criticism another way? This takes more careful analysis of what Carroll means by “political” versus “artistic.” Is it the political attributes of the work or the critic that are salient, e.g., the difference between a Marxist critic, who may assess “any” work (or cultural object or phenomenon) through a Marxist lens, and an artist whose work reflects a Marxist ideology, such as Diego Rivera or Sergei Eisenstein?

24. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 6.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 4 (my emphasis).

Let's consider the slant on which artistic and political criticism sometimes coincide, which I think is the direction Carroll leans (though his handling of "political" isn't especially perspicuous²⁷). He first describes political criticism in contrast to "reasoned" evaluation.²⁸ According to Carroll, reasoned evaluation requires objectivity, meaning that independent observers can arrive (if they reason rightly) at the same conclusions.²⁹ Carroll claims that instances of critical consensus establish the legitimacy or possibility of objective reasoning, in that, those with varying agendas and interests all seem to agree that, say, Mozart is artistically excellent.³⁰ He similarly remarks, "Does anyone deny that *Hedda Gabler* is at least a good play?"³¹ Critical convergence is thus a demonstration that criticism is grounded by its focus on intersubjectively verifiable reasons. His argument here is plausible but not airtight. If those with varying agendas and interests agree in their evaluations, it may be for idiosyncratic reasons, where, if probed, we would not want to accept the legitimacy of their evaluation despite our agreement. If suddenly I find myself agreeing with a mortal enemy, my first assumption is not necessarily that we found some common ground of objective reasoning (though of course

27. Carroll offers a brief definition of what he means by politics, though in service of a negative claim that makes it unclear whether or not it's a definition he would hold to. He calls politics any form of "group-ideological tendencies" (*On Criticism*, 41).

28. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 5, 38.

29. *Ibid.*, 34.

30. *Ibid.*, 37.

31. *Ibid.*, 35.

the collection of people who agree that Mozart is excellent need not all be mortal enemies).

Carroll looks at political-ideological machinations as a competing explanation for critical convergence, in which those in power manufacture critical convergence or subconscious forces secretly determine our tastes, contrary or without regard to reason.³² Feminists, for example, might argue that the consensus about Mozart is the product of a patriarchal system that favors the appraisal of male artists. It's hard to parse what political evaluation means here. At one turn Carroll describes an art historical theory—the historical explanation of why everyone agrees Mozart is excellent—and at another he describes a set of critical judgments—regarding Mozart's excellence. The two may overlap. That is, we can offer an explanation as to why everyone agrees Mozart is excellent without saying whether or not those judgments are legitimate or what the relevancy of those reasons are for criticism beyond an historical period. A feminist critic may offer a particular evaluation (a piece of historical *criticism*) of a work in light of feminist ideals and relative to compatibly plausible histories (that is, without denying their plausibility or explanatory accuracy or power).

Insofar as Carroll wants to distinguish art history from criticism, this comes across as oddly jumbled. Carroll casts the political explanation of critical convergence in a negative light: “the conspiracy theory of convergence makes the canon more coherent

32. Ibid., 37.

than is plausible.”³³ He seems to be claiming that if political machinations were sufficient to explain critical convergence (i.e., on a micro level, with regard to specific artists or works), the canon would have more coherence than it does. This is not an altogether clear argument, however. On the one hand, Carroll claims that critical convergence undoubtedly occurs, as he suggests regarding *Hedda Gabler*. On the other hand, the canon lacks coherence as a whole, that is, between the works that comprise it—there is no single quality all great works necessarily share. But, is there reason to suppose either, firstly, that political machinations or social forces are too weak to explain critical convergence in individual cases but strong enough to entail a coherent canon as a whole, or, secondly, that “reasoned evaluation” accounts for critical convergence in individual cases but wouldn’t lead to a coherent canon? If the reasons for arriving at a judgment are allowed to vary, even while the individual evaluation is consistent (e.g., we all agree Mozart is excellent, even if our reasons aren’t all the same), then the latter issue is less problematic. However, granting leniency at the level of criteria for judgment opens the door to exactly the kind of critical methodologies Carroll wants to deny, where reasons are not objective. Lastly, why suppose there is a lone explanatory scheme that makes sense of either phenomena?

This brings us back to the question of political criticism as a form of art criticism. I suggest that the phenomenon of critical convergence is complex enough to warrant an

33. Ibid., 38.

equally complex set of causes and conditions. Rather than construe political criticism, in the historical mode, as a rival scheme to reasoned evaluation, we ought to see them as possibilities that are equally salient, independently or jointly, but which cannot be measured except on a case by case basis. Carroll appears to lump together a host of politically-oriented theoretical paradigms and assumes that if any one paradigm is insufficient to explain *all* instances of critical convergence, it's either unnecessary or insufficient for any instance of critical convergence. Patriarchal dominance may, for example, explain *some* cases of critical convergence, even if only in part. That is, it's not hard to imagine all critics agreeing if the critics in question uniformly share the same class, race, and gender. Carroll's criticism may be justly motivated by "critical theories" that sometimes aim to explain away, with a sweeping, reductive gesture, substantial landmarks on the art historical landscape in terms of a single favored explanatory paradigm (e.g. Marxist, feminist, etc.). It's doubtful anyway that reason alone explains all cases of critical convergence, insofar as the "reasons" belong commonly to all critics of a work. I grant that Marxism and feminism (for example) may not comprehensively or sufficiently explain the history of art and its value, but it seems plausible that it offers a good explanation of some aspects of art and criticism and their histories. The fundamental point that I am driving towards is that there is no principled way to rule out a politically-oriented critical methodology without consideration for particular works and cultural contexts. In that sense, we can be Marxists without being conspiratorial ones.

While Carroll dismisses criticism that fulfills or represents politically-centered ideologies as their primary aim, Eagleton shows that some early criticism had social cohesion or a unified cultural sphere as its express aim, even if not its only aim. In claiming that “modern [European] criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state,” Eagleton is not exempting reasoned evaluation from political criticism. In light of this, perhaps we need more careful distinctions about how function and form relate. The function of criticism may be successfully carried out through a variety of means. For example, an “artistically” oriented criticism in Carroll’s sense may have a potent political function, whether toward social cohesion or whatever else.

Carroll offers an example that’s useful in understanding another potential dividing line between political criticism and art criticism. He states:

I find it eminently possible to profess that Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Old and the New* are both *artistically* valuable in that both have discovered powerful cinematic strategies with which to embody their themes—the carnal suffering and sacrifice of the Christ-become-human, on the one hand, and the urgent need and promise of agricultural collectivization for the infant Soviet state, on the other, though I am both an atheist with respect to the Christ and an anti-Stalinist with respect to the Soviet collectivization. I can acknowledge that both films possess artistic value.³⁴

Here Carroll seems to be construing “artistic” as a category wholly distinct from the political or ideological, though he could also mean that these films possess artistic value on only some particular level that does not include artistic-political or artistic-religious

34. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 39.

values. Carroll deliberately chooses films that have clear political and ideological commitments to demonstrate the separability of political value from artistic value, however. This further suggests it isn't political content in criticism that Carroll objects to so much as criticism that is grounded by its own political framework (i.e., the politics of the critic). However, Carroll's initial move—to champion the artistic content despite(?) his contrary religious and political views—does little to show that we (ought to?) set aside political commitments in artistically-focused criticism. Supposing the works in question encourage or rely upon some degree of acceptance for their religious or political commitments, Carroll's extraction of the "artistic" content from those commitments, as if these were extraneous, seems odd. In fact, in film critic Roger Ebert's review of the movie, he makes a contrasting claim, stating, "'The Passion of the Christ,' more than any other film I can recall, depends upon theological considerations."³⁵ To some degree then, Carroll focuses on just those elements I would expect an atheist and anti-Stalinist critic to focus on: the *themes* of "the carnal suffering" of Christ in Gibson's film and the "need and promise of agricultural collectivization" in Eisenstein's.

Carroll states that some critics happily flaunt "their political, economic, social, and ideological interests ... but this hardly shows that all critics are political."³⁶ Here we may grant that some critics make their political, economic, social, and ideological

35. See Roger Ebert, "*The Passion of the Christ* Movie Review," *RogerEbert.com*, February 24, 2004, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ-2004>.

36. *Ibid.*

interests explicit subjects within their criticism, while others do not. But, politically “neutral” criticism, as in Carroll’s assessment of the Gibson and Eisenstein films, equally (if perhaps more subtly) reflect particular political realities and social conditions, especially those of the critic. The ability, or permissibility, to ignore the political and ideological content of those works reflects Carroll’s position within a society and a historical moment where free speech and religious pluralism are valued: he can afford to be indifferent to the political and ideological content of the films. The point is not that this is a bad position to be in—it may be a very good one!—rather, critics are always in a position where politics, both their own and the work’s, are available and operative in critical engagement, whether we acknowledge them or not.

We may take Carroll’s point to be that criticism need not always or necessarily operate in terms of directly expressed religious or political talking points. Relatedly, perhaps each work would be worse if their artistic quality was inextricable from their religious or political commitments.³⁷ These are fair concessions to some degree, though it undersells a deeper ontological question, which we’ve been circling, about how the political (social, cultural, moral ...) context of a work may be said to belong to it, as a feature an art critic may engage with, and then how do the same questions extend to critics and their own political positions? Are those critics who consistently engage the context and conditions for artistic production, political or otherwise, introducing some

37. This would be consistent with Carroll’s “moderate moralism.” See his “Moderate Moralism,” in *Beyond Aesthetics*, 293-305.

extraneous or incidental content into their criticism? Is this really art criticism at all? Of what would pure *artistic* criticism consist? Let's look at another case of overlapping categories in the discourse on art and criticism.

Morality and the Scope of Art Criticism

Marcia Muelder Eaton attempts to (re)integrate aesthetic and moral properties: "One can look at a painting or landscape, listen to a song or poem and, while paying due attention to shapes or rhythms or repetitions, also think about grandma, sex, oppression, or anything else. ... Aesthetic values are different then, but they are not necessarily separate from, other values."³⁸ Eaton is especially sensitive to the ways in which moral (or ethical³⁹) properties entail aesthetic and artistic values. The two are not merely analogous, though there are many parallels between the work of art criticism and, say, moral reflection.⁴⁰ As she argues, "What I want to insist is that we do not dismiss a priori as nonaesthetic those experiences that involve both attention to the work and attention to the world at the same time."⁴¹ Eaton's conceptual categories are still quite neatly delineated. That is, we could push the first-order ontological questions further. For example, we might grant the usefulness of distinguishing aesthetic from moral properties on purely

38. Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*, 99.

39. Eaton uses the terms 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably.

40. See Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*, 91-92.

41. *Ibid.*, 95.

pragmatic grounds, while still insisting that one need not hold onto such distinctions as if they are necessarily or always useful or real. An example will be useful here.

In her chapter, “Integrating Aesthetic and Moral Value,” Eaton asks, “What happens when someone looks at a brightly colored abstract painting and learns that it was produced by dying goldfish?”⁴² (There is an ambiguity in the example. Eaton could mean that an artist used dying goldfish in the process of creating a work, or she could mean that dying goldfish unintentionally resulted in a “painting” somehow. I assume the former.) Eaton considers four possible reactions. First, we might ignore the means of production: we’re enamored with the result. The painting is beautiful and how it was made doesn’t matter. Second, we might be so appalled at the means, we can’t bear to consider the result. Third, we might fluctuate between dismay at the means and appreciation for the result. Fourth, our enjoyment may dissipate at first but linger even after learning about the means of production: I’m bothered by how this painting was made, but I still find it beautiful and mostly hold onto that pleasure.

Eaton insists that all of these responses are plausible and acceptable. The first response registers as roughly amoral, or at least morally indifferent, while the other three entail some kind of moral and aesthetic overlap. The first response recalls Carroll’s argument that he can ignore the political and religious commitments of some films in favor of other, “artistic” properties; although, again, consistent with his moderate

42. Ibid.

moralism, I would assume that some sufficiently strong moral *content* in a work would be relevant and demand our (artistic) attention. The point is more that objectionable content does not always stop us from (only) paying attention to those features we do appreciate. For Eaton, the second and fourth responses carry just as much legitimacy, even as they reject a strong distinction between the aesthetic and moral properties of the work and, furthermore, between intrinsic and extrinsic properties (content and context)—they are *distinguishable but not inseparable*.⁴³ In those instances, there are not aesthetic marks that belong to the artistic domain and marks made by dying goldfish that belong to the moral domain, each of which we attend to as distinct features and thus as belonging to separate modes of discourse, one art-critical and another moral.

Eaton's example highlights the challenge of what it means for a work to possess a property and for one to "perceive" it. In some metaphysical schemes, a relationship doesn't constitute a first-order property of an object. However, we can skip this debate if we grant that the object of criticism is more than just the object anyway—it's the achievement of the artist manifested in the work, as Carroll stipulates. We're always attending to what is and is not present, those elements that include and go beyond the "object" before us (especially for works that have duration). The four reactions Eaton describes seem plausible and substantively different, numbers one and three notwithstanding, which depend upon more rigid boundaries between the means of

43. *Ibid.*, 97.

production and the resulting work. However, if, in the second and fourth reactions, the dying goldfish carry a unified moral-aesthetic role—where these are *inseparable*—those who ignore the moral “content” of the work would seem to be either negligent, naïve, or morally reproachable (presuming that the greater the injustice, the greater the critical responsibility to engage with that aspect of a work; dying goldfish may not be enough for some). I offer no theory for determining when a work of art is sufficiently morally-loaded such that it requires critical attention (to its process of creation), but the fine-grained difference that this—and the earlier discussion on the social and political domain—is meant to underscore is that there is no work on which politics and morality has no bearing whatsoever, though we may sometimes (justifiably) choose to ignore such properties or values as the work and its context warrants ignoring them. (I will unpack the conditions for this to some degree in Chapter 3.)

My claim ultimately contrasts with Eaton’s position. She states, “Many works ... do not have a moral content; indeed, some art forms per se may, as Peter Kivy insists for pure music, preclude it.”⁴⁴ Note, the moral or political content of a work is not my overarching concern here. However, there is a point Eaton emphasizes just prior to this passage that usefully sets the stage for how we can tie these strands together: “On [van Gerwen’s] view ... art is open to moral criticism because it is artistic action that produces works of art, and all human actions per se are open to moral criticism.”⁴⁵ The tendency,

44. *Ibid.*, 138.

45. *Ibid.*, 137.

or at least the challenge, thus lies in what sort of priorities we can set with regard to our engagement with a work of art. If I say that my engagement with a work of art is political, how do other discourses—artistic, aesthetic, moral, social, religious—weigh against that, or coincide with it? Does it sometimes, always, or never preclude these? What must the content of my criticism possess in order to qualify as engaging with *the work*?

Our answer to that question likely depends on our beliefs about the ontology of artworks; the terms of our engagement with a work likely depends on what that work, that *thing*, is. To be clear, nobody is denying that context matters in the assessment of a work; though, they may debate what constitutes context and the nature of our “perceiving” it or its significance for critical practices. I confess that this is a rather superficial glance at what comprises the content and context for an artwork. I point to it to emphasize that the way one thinks about engagement with a work of art bears a close relationship to what one takes an artwork to be. The various philosophies of criticism surveyed here and in the previous chapter similarly rely upon, even when they fail to make them explicit, a variety of political, moral, intellectual, and ideological commitments that are embedded in their philosophy, theory, or practice of criticism. To draw this back to Eagleton, the social function of art criticism is called for in part because of the social and political role that works of art play and the social and political reality within which they rest, and these are not just elements that a work facilitates for a social or political (art?) critic. We can readily grant that the content and function of one’s

criticism need not mirror or blindly adopt every political or moral problem a work takes up, invokes, or encourages. However, to ignore such content or context should not be done on the assumption that either it is extraneous to a work or that when we reason well, we stand outside of or are exempted from social and political realities.

The Language of Criticism

In this final section, I take a turn towards the language of criticism. The link between this and the prior sections is perhaps not immediately apparent. The question is, what do we glean about criticism by focusing on criticism's language and style? In that sense, this is a kind of alternative approach to the same set of issues, but rather than focusing on the boundaries of discourse for art criticism, we focus on the form that discourse takes.

In a collection of essays on the language of film criticism, Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan remark, "Most academic writing aims for a prose that is neutral, objective or informational."⁴⁶ Academic criticism, they suggest, has been distrustful of criticism that is *overly* subjective and evaluative. Academic criticism favors strategies that treat films illustratively, in terms of what they "show" or do, typically ideologically: "It is felt, perhaps, that serious academic analysis should differentiate itself from the evaluative reactions of the ordinary film viewer—'he's really good in this', 'this is

46. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, eds., *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

definitely her best film’—or the ‘opinionated’ newspaper reviewer.”⁴⁷ Clayton and Klevan, working from a strategy Cavell develops, identify three stages of criticism, not unlike Carroll’s: “its testimonial or proclamatory aspect (a ‘declaration that [an artwork] provide[s] me with ... pleasure’); its rhetorical or petitioning aspect (‘a judgment I demand that others agree with’); and its justifying or evidential aspect (‘which grounds my experience in the details of the object’).”⁴⁸ The first and second aspects, though especially the second, roughly correspond with Carroll’s “evaluative” condition, while the third aspect matches his “reasoned” criterion. What distinguishes them then? One notable difference is in their treatment of “objectivity,” which leads us back to the ontological and the justificatory debates: Are artworks the type of thing about which we can offer objective assessments?

The first condition Clayton and Klevan identify, where we testify to the *pleasure* an artwork provides, already suggests a slightly different approach. They argue that film criticism is neither subjective nor objective: “the ‘subjective-objective’ relation is one of those false dichotomies that nevertheless holds surreptitious power.”⁴⁹ Criticism is not objective in the sense that your engagement with a work is *your* engagement, and it is not subjective in the sense that your engagement is entangled with “the world, shaped by it

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 3.

49. Ibid., 2.

and participating within it.”⁵⁰ Carroll’s terminology seems at first to be in conflict with these claims. He insists quite openly on the objectivity of his philosophy of criticism. However, Carroll’s position may not actually differ from Clayton and Klevan’s (or Cavell’s) as much as it appears to at first glance. Drawing on the eighteenth century philosophical roots of the subjective-objective debate, Carroll notes:

Subjective here does not mean uniquely personal and even idiosyncratic, as it usually does to us today. ... In the case of [critical] convergence, it is consistent with the proposition that critical judgments are subjective (in the eighteenth century sense) that there could be bridging laws connecting the regular correlation of art objects with certain properties to uniform sensations across normal human populations, which laws, in turn, could be inter-subjectively verified and use as major premises in evaluative arguments.⁵¹

Objectivity for Carroll thus “means something like inter-subjectively verifiable.”⁵² By comparison, and again drawing on Cavell, Clayton and Klevan state, “The judgment of value is ... understood not as mere whimsy, but as capable of reaching *intersubjective* accord.”⁵³

There is an alliance between the respective views sketched here, however weak, but I don’t want to rush past some subtle and important differences. These differences are evident as much in the tone and style of the writing, both in the philosophical and theoretical work itself and in the criticism each prizes, as it is in the qualifying terms and

50. Ibid., 3.

51. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 33.

52. Ibid., 34.

53. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 3.

justifying schemes they propose. While Carroll looks for “bridging laws” and discounts “non-cognitive emotions,” “personal preferences,” and “idiosyncrasies,”⁵⁴ Cavell and Clayton and Klevan are likely to emphasize “pleasure,” “personal experience,” “feeling,” and “likes and dislikes.”⁵⁵ Quoting Barthes, Clayton and Klevan offer a defense of subjectivity so-conceived:

A subjectivity which is systematized, that is to say *cultivated* (belonging to a culture), subjected to enormous constraints, which themselves had their source in the symbols of the work, has, perhaps a greater chance of coming close to the literary object than an uncultivated objectivity, blind to itself and sheltering behind literalness as if it were a natural phenomenon.⁵⁶

Better that one’s criticism reflexively bear the mark of the critic—regarding one’s experience of a work, one’s feelings, idiosyncrasies, preferences, likes and dislikes, pleasures and displeasures—than to bracket these aspects as if they were benign or nonexistent. They are not distractions that falsely color one’s experience of a work, per se, though they may need to be accounted for. Indeed, this is what Cavell takes to be fundamental to the work of criticism. Is my experience, in the thickest sense of that term, validated by the work? “Ultimately, criticism is observational and responds to the work as it *appears*.”⁵⁷ Inserting the critic’s subjectivity into critical practice does not mean that

54. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 30-34.

55. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 3-7.

56. Quoted in *ibid.*, 4.

57. *Ibid.*, 5 (my emphasis).

criticism is then ultimately *about* the critic. It's an acknowledgment that not all criticism is simply Criticism, it is "*his* or *her* criticism."⁵⁸

In his short essay, "Reading," W.H. Auden laments his obligations to the professional work of criticism.⁵⁹ He lays out what he'd like to know about any critic whose judgments were on display. His questionnaire asks that a critic detail his personal vision of Eden—its climate, economy, public statues (Auden's preference: "Confined to famous defunct chefs"⁶⁰), and so on. Elsewhere he insists that, when faced with a work one has no feeling or taste for, the best practice is to remain silent about it (or to instead "serve up" a work one does prefer). The problem is that the professional duties of a critic do not permit empty newspaper columns, and if we probed the critic on *his* intentions, we may be likely to discover dollar signs just as much as literary and human interests.⁶¹ This is a sly reversal of the debates about the significance of an artist's intention and biography in the role of critical interpretation. If an artwork is only intelligible insofar as we understand something about the intentions and biography of an artist, Auden asks the same of the critic.

The questionnaire format Auden employs is worth noting. It belonged neither wholly to scholarly or popular discourse. Alfred Barr, the director of the New York

58. Ibid.

59. W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), xi-xii, 11-12.

60. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 6-7.

61. Ibid., 10-11.

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 1929-1943, published a questionnaire on Modern Art in a 1927 issue of *Vanity Fair*, but the questionnaire originally stemmed from an art history seminar he taught at Wellesley. It functioned as both a pedagogic tool and a litmus test for the would-be public intellectual.⁶² According to art historian Richard Meyer, “such quizzes were a regular feature of the magazine at the time. ... The questionnaires contributed to *Vanity Fair*’s broader presentation of modernity as both a lifestyle to which readers should aspire and a body of knowledge they needed to acquire.”⁶³ For Auden, the questionnaire reflects a genuine interest in the character of the critic—the questionnaire’s explicit function—while also subverting the pretensions of criticism toward scientific objectivity, further evidenced in the semi-seriousness of his own answers. The questionnaire is an informal and direct way to achieve what George Toles prescribes, “I cannot see the point ... or the theoretical usefulness, of continued reports on what other spectators are supposed to have ‘seen’ in a movie if they are not accompanied by some kind of personal accounting.”⁶⁴

Clayton and Klevan claim, “From the point of view of the critic ... evaluation is not simply something one might do, something optional; it is intrinsic to the viewing experience.”⁶⁵ That is, a critic, experiencing, describing, and interpreting a film, performs

62. See Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 52-68.

63. *Ibid.*, 60.

64. Quoted in Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 99-100.

65. *Ibid.*, 5.

a complex array of activities and reactions that are tinged with evaluative feeling, and this is a process that “affects the moment-by-moment viewing of the film.”⁶⁶ Klevan later states: “Description is not merely a necessary step on the way to the meat of the analysis, it contains the analysis. Through careful choices about how to describe, discriminations are made subtly and implicitly.”⁶⁷ Additionally, whatever description one may offer, “this may be *a* correct description, but not the solely correct one: it is a *way of seeing* the film.”⁶⁸ This suggests that writing that may not otherwise seem to be built around evaluative judgments of a work, writing that “merely” aims to describe one’s experience of a work, already carries interpretive and evaluative weight.

In “On the Object of Criticism,” Carroll states: “What makes the artwork valuable is in large measure what the artist has achieved in the process of producing the work. Thus, the object of criticism is the artist’s achievement.”⁶⁹ Clayton and Klevan similarly discuss “the tension between a film’s aspiration or potential and its actual achievement,” which is “as palpable to a viewer as that generated by plot or character or composition. The viewer monitors the success with which the film handles its elements, and this is not of supplementary interest, but of pressing importance every step of the way.”⁷⁰ While

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 71.

68. Ibid.

69. Carroll, *On Criticism*, 51-2.

70. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 5.

Carroll emphasizes, like Clayton and Klevan, the *achievement* of the artist, he's firmer on how the critical activity that assesses that achievement plays out. Descriptions (often?) operate independently from evaluation for Carroll. This may be because Carroll has in mind a work of criticism, rather than simply the act of criticism broadly construed, as it occurs in our active experience of a work. Consider Carroll's statement that "the most important service that description performs is to segregate out for attention the parts and relations of the work that the critical analysis or interpretation goes on most often typically to demonstrate as belonging to a functionally organized whole."⁷¹ This claim doesn't exclude the dynamic, complex style of description Klevan prescribes, though Carroll's account often suggests a more mechanical, formal process in which the work of the professional critic is delineated into orderly parts and discrete "operations," which "break apart," "separate out," and "show" what is worthy in a work. Interpretative points of view are also "rivals" and "contaminate" description.⁷² In contrast to Clayton and Klevan, Carroll argues that criticism must contain "at least one of six operations [description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, analysis], *plus*, of course, some form of evaluation (either explicit or implicit)."⁷³ In his precise numbering of "operations," the language and tone of Carroll's account echoes the formal analysis Frye and T.M. Greene employ. The last concession, that evaluation may be

71. Ibid., 92-3.

72. Ibid., 122.

73. Ibid., 84.

explicit or implicit, is worth noting as well. It suggests that it may be wrapped up in any of the other “operations” of criticism, as when “the descriptions of the work [are] voiced in evaluative terms.”⁷⁴ Again, the differences here are subtle but significant.

In a related move, Carroll contends with the problem of the hermeneutic circle, in which all descriptions contain interpretation. For example, in choosing to describe some aspect of a work, both in the content and the manner or style of description, I lend weight to that aspect as worthy of attention (either toward a negative or a positive appraisal), at least if my criticism has some degree of coherence. Carroll’s solution presumes that we hold up interpretations independent from our descriptions, but this is exactly the issue at stake: “The interpretation can be held constant while we look for details in the work that we have not described.”⁷⁵ Carroll describes interpretation as if it were a frame we hang over a work having completed an experience of it. If, however, as Clayton and Klevan contend, our moment-by-moment experience of a work is already tinged with interpretive and evaluative moves, even the most polished work of criticism will have already been subject to a range of interpretive and evaluative decisions.

I claim that interpretation functions much more organically than Carroll contends. They accrete and fluctuate over the course of an experience. I may, in fact, have a variety of interpretations that service different aspects of a work. There isn’t necessarily then *the* interpretation of a work that relies on a descriptively neutral experience. Even in the case

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 122.

that descriptions do service a broader or more comprehensive interpretation, what we may call a *work of interpretation*, the descriptions may nonetheless be affected by interpretive points of view more casually or intuitively intertwined with my experience. Clayton and Klevan simply contend that all such descriptions invite us to make careful choices about “how to describe.”⁷⁶ The problem, the problem of the hermeneutic circle, is that, if such descriptions are always interpretively loaded, on what evidence can one ever (reliably?) revise one’s descriptions or interpretations except by appeal to *other* interpretively-loaded experiences? The companion question asks, What would a neutral description look like?

Even the simplest object (image, scene, character, sound, sequence ...) permits a nearly infinite number of descriptions. This is perhaps trivially true simply in light of the fact that language is not static, and so our descriptions will change with changes in vernacular, each of which have connotative and situational variance. Clayton makes the strong claim that “any descriptive word choice necessarily embodies an interpretive stance.”⁷⁷ We may suppose that some descriptions are *more* interpretively neutral than others, but on what grounds? If, for instance, interpretations and descriptions are subject to the same truth conditions,⁷⁸ as Carroll contends, we lose one way in which we might separate the two. Margolis, by contrast, calls interpretations plausible or implausible,

76. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 71.

77. *Ibid.*, 32.

78. See Carroll, *On Criticism*, 123-6.

rather than strictly true or false.⁷⁹ Carroll merely asserts that we distinguish between (and separate?) the two insofar as an interpretation does not describe all the elements of a work, thus an interpretation does not necessarily contain descriptions of a work. It seems to be a mistake, however, to assume that this means we have interpretively-neutral descriptions.

It seems plausible that not all interpretations may contain descriptions, even if all descriptions contain interpretations; though, an interpretation could be construed as describing a work: it describes what a work *means*. A “description” here is meant to tell us what something *is* without saying what it means. The intuition is that we might describe two different objects, such as two baseballs, that “appear to be the same” but mean something different—one is a ball my dad gave me as a kid and another is signed by all of the members of the 1992 Los Angeles Dodgers. Of course the meaning of a thing may be more than what a simple description tells us, but I find it difficult to imagine describing what a thing is without also indicating something about its meaning. With artworks, I may reinterpret one feature of a work in light of others or in light of later observations, which suggests, as I claimed before, that we commonly interpret while we experience and describe a work. We do not merely see or hear, we see or hear in *this* or *that* way.

79. Joseph Margolis, “The Logic of Interpretation,” in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1962), 708-718. See also his “Robust Relativism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35.1 (1976): 37-46.

Let's consider two examples of criticism in terms of the relationship between description and interpretation. Each of the following deals with the same work—moment of a work, in fact—and both concern themselves with what may strike us as straightforward aspects of that work. Here's Cavell describing a scene from *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940):

Tracy (Katherine Hepburn) has already seen that she and Mike (James Stewart) are like one another, as she finds on reading his book of stories in the town library, saying to him that she knows quite a lot about hiding an inner vulnerability under a tough exterior. But what C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) has over Mike Macaulay Connor is that he and Tracy Lord, as he puts it in a kind of displaced prologue to the film, in the offices of *Spy* magazine, grew up together. Sidney Kidd (Henry Daniell), the publisher of *Spy*, is introducing Dexter to Mike and to Mike's steady friend Liz Imbrie (Ruth Hussey), who work, respectively, as writer and photographer for Kidd, though each has better things in mind.⁸⁰

There are moments in this passage that we may, on one view, call out as plainly descriptive and others as more straightforwardly interpretive, and others that straddle the line between the two. On the whole, it is descriptive insofar as it provides us with plot details and characters without explaining what those plot details or characters *mean*—an account of meaning we may otherwise call “an interpretation.” Furthermore, there isn't necessarily any clear or explicit evaluation of their contribution to the work's artistic success, such that we could clearly identify this as a passage belonging to criticism.

On the supposedly pure descriptive end, consider the following line: “Sidney Kidd (Henry Daniell), the publisher of *Spy*, is introducing Dexter to Mike.” This

80. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 135-6.

presupposes, one could argue, no special interpretive point of view. Cavell simply describes what happens. Put another way, such a description places no serious constraints on whatever more comprehensive interpretation one may offer, even one that may conflict with or distance itself from Cavell's ensuing interpretation. Continuing with the previous line, we encounter a description with subtly stronger interpretive gestures: "Sidney Kidd ... is introducing Dexter to Mike and to Mike's steady friend Liz Imbrie, who work, respectively, as writer and photographer for Kidd, though each has better things in mind." The first indication of a move toward interpretation comes in the qualifying terms: Liz is Mike's "steady" friend. This isn't a description the film names; Mike never says, "This is my steady friend, Liz Imbrie." It represents Cavell's "reading" of their relationship. This is further enriched by the closing phrase, "... though each has better things in mind."

Compare this with Klevan's brief summary of similar, seemingly neutral territory in the film:

[Cary Grant] plays C.K. Dexter Haven—former husband to Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn) and now hoping to win her back. Unfortunately, Tracy is to marry George Kittredge (John Howard) but plans have been upset because Tracy has spent the eve of her wedding frolicking with Macaulay 'Mike' Connor (James Stewart). He is a journalist who is reluctantly reporting on her high-society wedding along with photographer Elizabeth 'Liz' Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) who is in love with him.⁸¹

81. Andrew Klevan, *Film Performance: from Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 38.

Setting aside some of the more obvious revelations contained here that Cavell neglects, look at the apparently neutral passages of description, where small differences suggest distinct experiences and interpretative shades particular to each author. Where Cavell gently alludes to Mike and Liz's romantic possibilities (as well as their career ambitions, their reluctance to work for a tabloid magazine, to participate in a black mail)—the “better things in mind”—Klevan follows a more direct approach. He lists each character by given name first (Macaulay, Elizabeth, C.K.) followed by nicknames (Mike, Liz, Dexter) then the actor (parenthetically), and, lastly, Klevan identifies the pressing tension in Mike and Liz's relationship that Cavell conceals: Liz is in love with Mike(!)

The two accounts are not rivals so much as different paths through the same park (not that we couldn't imagine rival descriptions). Klevan's account, which begins with conventional and formal clarity, is preoccupied with a larger goal of articulating how the film and its performers make meaningful use of the medium's conventions and form. His description, mirroring his reading (or interpretation) of the film, does not reduce the film to its conventions or its form. Not so much hidden as concealed within the description, and the frame, are moments and features that emerge only from close attention. To say, as Klevan does, that Cary Grant “plays” the character C.K. Dexter Haven may seem ordinary enough, but it has at least two effects. First, it recalls a convention of theater, where *The Philadelphia Story* originates. In linking the film to its origins in theater, Klevan establishes the basis for his assessment of the film's achievement in staging, or, more precisely, the conventions of theatrical versus filmic staging, in which, “the film

quite deliberately makes use of the stage convention [of] ... [e.g.] waiting in the wings.”⁸² Third, “play” forms a happy couplet with his later description of Tracy’s “frolicking,” the significance of which should not be lost, for Klevan has our attention fixed on the question of both suitability—what is fitting for a genre, a medium, a description, a character, a friend or a spouse, of one’s standing in society—and the edges of performance—the expectations and prescriptions of a script, an audience, (high-)society, a blackmail scheme and its tabloid posturing—all of which a gait, one’s way of walking, discloses, and over which photographers have long obsessed.⁸³ Tracy’s frolic is a form of play, which is to say, it’s a risk and a foil to her established persona, which is impervious and goddess-like. Acting on possibilities opens up both what she might see and how she might be seen, for better or worse. She often reflects, for example, on her posture and positioning and what she’s “made of”: is it bronze or flesh-and-blood? In her moment of greatest crisis, on the cusp of change, she cries, “I’m standing here, solidly, on my own two hands and going crazy.”

Cavell’s description, which does not begin where the movie begins, similarly mimics and embodies those elements of the film that comprise his particular interpretation and appraisal, one in which familiarity and knowability are challenges to be upheld and revisited, if not appraised. In reading Cavell’s description, we move, as the

82. Ibid.

83. See Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003).

characters do, as one might while watching the film, from a point somewhere in the middle of a seemingly familiar scene, encountering familiar and known actors (“What has Cary Grant got that James Stewart hasn’t got?”), then characters (Tracy, Mike, Liz), and, finally, their proper names (Tracy Lord, Macaulay Connor, Elizabeth Imbrie) and relationships to one another. That is, Cavell starts from a detail, a concrete particular, something familiar, which we often suppose we know well enough at a glance, and moves to a more formal identification. By jumbling these aspects, as he explicitly does in emphasizing the film’s “displaced prologue,” Cavell matches his account with his experience of the film and its exploration of the conditions for marriage through the conditions for knowledge, for reacquainting oneself with that which is familiar but simultaneously unknown, alienated, or distant (like its star actors, a high-society wedding, the ordinary objects on screen, spouses or one’s potential spouse) and acknowledging that such knowing is never settled, it needs “continuous reaffirmation,” however present it remains before us.

Looking at each of these accounts gives us some reason to suppose that even in the most seemingly ordinary descriptions, down to the word, critics manifest distinctive interpretive and evaluative perspectives. This is evident in their choosing *what* to describe, *how* to describe, and, as these examples show, *when* to describe. One may object that my examples are cherry-picked. After all, it is easier to demonstrate that *some* descriptions are interpretively loaded than it is to show that *all* descriptions are. Here I can only appeal to the cases at hand as typical; they fairly represent the activity of

describing and the work of description as it appears in criticism. There may of course be other kinds of descriptions, but there are no wholly-neutral descriptions. An important task may be to consider the coherency and consistency of our descriptions from one moment to another, as well as the interpretive and evaluative implications they carry. That descriptions easily but covertly carry such interpretive and evaluative baggage is not a curse of language, but it does require on-going attentiveness both to the object of our attention and to the words we employ to account for our experience.

Towards Some Conclusions

In this chapter and the last, I have been building the case to show that criticism is always part of a cultural, social, and political history and context that shapes the meaning of both its own activity and works (written pieces of criticism) and the artworks on which it focuses. Carroll's philosophy of criticism offers many laudable claims and concessions, especially as he attacks those practices that show insufficient attention toward a work's particular achievement in favor of a critic's pre-determined political or ideological agenda. Still, his view strikes me as insufficiently sensitive to the variety of critical practices that do exist, especially those that fluidly move between a variety of aims and discourses over and above (or sometimes in tandem with) reasoned evaluations. I have looked at other philosophies and theories of criticism in order to show that criticism is more complex, interwoven, varied, and subtle than Carroll (at least sometimes) suggests.

In attending to the language of criticism, we see the significances that tone and style carry, as well as the kind of improvisations or changes in criticism that are likely to arise as conditions and contexts change.⁸⁴ Regarding analytic film criticism, Clayton and Klevan claim, “In the main the style of the individual critic and the specificity of his or her language are regarded as subsidiary We conscientiously extract the ‘relevant’ points and arguments, abridge, digest, synopsise, and then (perhaps) test them against the ‘objective’ evidence provided by the film.”⁸⁵ This is, they claim, the model for *bad* criticism. By contrast, criticism that disregards explicit evaluative pronouncements avoids devolving into to the mechanical operations of a critical equation, addressing and responding instead to the same unending and open-ended territory of meaning and interpretation that the work of art itself may carry and that we encounter in any expressive or lingual enterprise. This may not displace evaluation altogether, but it does profoundly color our sense of *how* reasoning and evaluation operate in criticism and the significance we attribute to it.

What is criticism then? Criticism is an evaluatively-charged, reasoned, verbal account of a work of art indebted to one’s interpretively-tinged experience, which may reflect and reveal something about the work, other works, context, the critic, history,

84. Arnold Isenberg wrote of “certain works on aesthetics by American philosophers—where one cannot help feeling that the analysis has been spoiled by sheer lack of sophistication or of genuine critical responsiveness to art” (*Aesthetics and The Theory of Criticism*, 296). Choices of style and tone are as important for philosophy as it is for criticism.

85. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 18.

culture, society, politics, morality, economics (and so on...) so as to achieve, in many cases, an educative function, such as aiding others in the experience or evaluation of a work. It is intended for an audience that may include the artist or artists, other artists, other scholars or other critics, a public sphere, a creative elite, those who have already engaged or will engage with a work, or those who may never engage with a work. The success of criticism will indefinitely vary according to local aims and conditions (e.g., those of the critic, the critic's audience, the work itself, those of the professional, cultural, or social setting).

CHAPTER 3

CRITICISM'S WARRANT: SENSITIVITY

In this chapter, I address what warrants criticism as a practice of engaging with art. The problem I am framing is distinct from simply asking what makes for good or bad criticism. I am asking whether or not even good criticism might be unwarranted. I am not making an argument regarding the value of art and whether or not we ought to engage with art at all. The question is, *If I were to engage with art, how should I do it?* I pick out one quality by which we can measure the warrant for a practice of engaging with art, which is sensitivity. The degree to which your engagement lacks sensitivity, it is unwarranted. I consider sensitivity a moral quality insofar as it involves a prescription for human action. Supposing that not all prescriptions for human action are moral ones, what makes the prescription of sensitivity regarding art a moral one? I will address this briefly, though I acknowledge that I cannot comprehensively address all of the questions it likely raises. My basic claim is that in the practice of engaging with art, we ought to demonstrate sensitivity, and this is not solely an artistic or aesthetic requirement—it is an ethical one. I focus mainly on what it means for sensitivity to belong to a practice of engaging with art, with some discussion as to why it belongs. Finally, I consider how criticism measures up to sensitivity, granting that in some cases criticism may demonstrate sensitivity, while in other cases it does not.

Sensitivity is unsurprisingly versatile and complex. It may be used to disparage or praise, and it is equally at home as a cognitive, affective capacity—to be sensitive *to* something—as well as an attitude or quality characterizing one’s actions or, if you practice it regularly, belonging to one’s character (i.e., to be “a sensitive person”). Sensitivity has some clear non-moral usages, where it is merely the capacity to respond to specific phenomena. For example, the gears on my bicycle are especially sensitive in the sense that they respond to the slightest touch, whereas the gears on other bicycles do not. I explore how this relates to the morally-freighted sense of sensitivity from two angles.

First, sensitivity is most clearly morally significant as a demonstration of care and thoughtfulness. Second, sensitivity functions as an affective capacity. Sensitivity in this second sense is drained of some of the moral color of the first sense, though not by rule or always. My claim is that the demonstration of care and thoughtfulness corresponds to sensitivity *with* a work, while the affective or responsive capacity corresponds to sensitivity *to* a work. The former is intertwined with the latter, however. You cannot be sensitive with a work without being sensitive to it. However, being sensitive *to* just any phenomena does not necessarily meet the criterion of sensitivity *with*. If I praise you for your sensitivity with a friend going through difficult times, it means you were sensitive to, say, her situation, picking up on cues that would otherwise be missed. However, if you were primarily sensitive to the neatness of her clothes, ignoring her emotional state, you fail to be sensitive with your friend. Furthermore, if you pick up on the right cues but fail to provide a relevantly connected response (e.g., you lack empathy), then you also fail to

demonstrate sensitivity with her. This is the same conceptual scaffolding I build out for engaging with art: we ought to demonstrate sensitivity with art, and insofar as we are sensitive in our engagement, we employ specific sensitivities to a work that are relevantly connected.

One caveat is that I do not claim that the quality of sensitivity is fundamentally or trans-historically unique or necessary, and I make no claims about its gravitas as a moral rule. Like other measures of morality, some circumstances seem to possess greater stakes than others. For example, sometimes it matters tremendously whether or not we lie (e.g., while testifying in a murder trial), while at other times it may matter less (e.g., *Do I look good in this jacket?*).

I have several motivations for introducing sensitivity. One motivation is based on the flexibility of the term, which we just considered, where it may indicate a responsive capacity that is narrowly sensory or cognitive, and it may refer to a quality of one's actions or character that involves a particular attitude. I am further motivated by my experiences as a one-time undergraduate painter (suffering through studio critiques), as a faculty member (contributing to the suffering in studio critiques), and as a patron-consumer of art. In each case, criticism often predominates and sensitivity is easily neglected, to the detriment of both social and artistic engagement. I can imagine other qualities worth cultivating apart from sensitivity, such as intelligence or humility, some of which may play crucial roles in one's ability to demonstrate sensitivity. I can also imagine other traditions or developments in art evolving in a such way that other qualities

may be more relevant, appropriate, or useful. Granting these concessions, I argue for sensitivity as a salient measure of an ethics of engaging with art, especially as a route to constraining criticism's hegemony.

Sensitivity in General

What is it to be sensitive *with* or *to* something? To have sensitivity *with* something implies a relationship in which the exerciser of sensitivity controls some object or situation, as in a form of handling, where we demonstrate care and thoughtfulness. From another angle, the call to be 'sensitive with' something often coincides with some sensitive *thing* toward which we must exercise care and thoughtfulness. Regarding the sensitive gears on my bicycle, sensitivity means I have to exercise special care in using them because they are sensitive. 'Sensitivity to' is skewed towards the capacity to perceive or respond to specific phenomena. If the gears on my bike are sensitive, that means they are extraordinarily sensitive to my touch. Susan Feagin describes sensitivity along these lines, drawing out its shading within human psychology and action. She describes sensitivity as the "psychological state or condition that makes it the case that one will have a particular kind of emotional or affective response to a certain sort of phenomenon or situation, or, to what elicits the response."¹ Feagin's account is useful in its emphasis on sensitivity's distinct components and their relationship. There is the

1. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 74.

possessor of the sensitivity, the phenomenon by which one is affected, and the response to the phenomenon. The nature of the affective response can take on different shapes: sometimes the affective response just is the capacity to perceive a phenomenon; while in other cases, the affective response is the perception of a phenomenon *and/or* some other affect (e.g., emotional, practical). This also means that sometimes our affective responses are not necessarily conscious or deliberate. I want to walk through these possibilities, looking at common usages and examples to establish the relevant possible meanings for sensitivity for the purposes of this project.

In one sense of the term, sensitivity remains relatively neutral about the degree or nature of a response. For example, to say that my eyes are sensitive to light may just indicate that they are able to react to the presence of light—full stop. Idiomatically (in English at least), we may say in this case that my eyes are “light-sensitive” rather than “sensitive to light.” Often what we mean by sensitive is ‘prone to reacting strongly,’ as in, *more than most people, my eyes react to light*. Furthermore, my sensitivity to light could mean I see very well, or it could mean that I struggle to see well except under certain conditions (e.g., if my eyes are *overly* sensitive to light). Without consideration for specific cases, sensitivity does not always mean reactive in any particular way—only that the subject is very likely to react.

As Feagin suggests, we often, though not exclusively, use sensitivity with reference to the capacity for emotive responses. If I say that Jane is sensitive to bullying, we may presume that Jane is prone to recognizing bullying—the phenomenon—and

emotionally reacting to it—the affective response. Although, to say that Jane perceives or recognizes bullying *and* reacts emotionally may not be right. Both are plausible construals of sensitivity. It could be that she responds emotionally to bullying without consciously registering that bullying is occurring in each instance. On one construal, the sensitive capacity makes Jane especially skilled at recognizing bullying where others are unlikely to perceive it, but with no necessary or particular emotional response. On another construal, Jane’s sensitivity likely includes the cognitive capacity to recognize bullying alongside an emotional response (or possibly an emotional response variably connected to or disconnected altogether from the cognitive, conscious recognition of the phenomenon; whether or not one is a cognitivist about emotions, we can say that emotions are connected to causes, which we may not necessarily recognize or direct our attention toward). The particular emotional response, even within the spectrum of (presumably negative) possibilities, may vary from person to person or even from one instance to another. To say that someone is sensitive to a phenomenon such as bullying implies no specific (negative) emotion. Jane may react with fear, while her sister, also sensitive to bullying, may react with anger. Jane’s being sensitive to bullying may also mean she responds positively, but, from what we understand about bullying, this would be a strange use of the term. Perhaps if Jane is a researcher studying bullying, she would become especially sensitive to recognizing it (the cognitive capacity to perceive a phenomenon), and her immediate, emotional response to her perception of it may be excitement or satisfaction (e.g., at the discovery of another case, aiding her research).

We may also say that someone is sensitive *about* something, suggesting a more general reactive or perceptual capacity. If Jane is sensitive *about* bullying, she may react to a news story about the bullying of children at a school, even if she is not herself the target of the bullying or especially sensitive to being bullied. It may be the case that sensitivity used in these senses—*to* or *about* some phenomena—often corresponds with negative responses rather than positive ones. The example of bullying is a loaded one, but even if we say that Jane is sensitive to or about roller coasters or live music (unusual as this may be), it would be odd to construe that as her capacity to react positively to them. I would assume that roller coasters and live music cause her some distress, at least if phrased in terms of her being sensitive ‘to’ or ‘about.’ This is admittedly speculative, and there may be contextual usages that work otherwise.

As I state above, a person’s sensitivities may involve a wide range of reactive possibilities that are either not exclusively emotional or possess no distinctive emotional character at all. If we say, “Harry is a sensitive listener,” we are not necessarily saying that he perceives and responds emotionally to sound or speech. We may be invoking a cognitive and intellectual capacity to hear and comprehend, say, the meaning of someone’s speech. The cognitive capacity may in some cases involve or coincide with an emotional response, but it may not. If we are talking about Harry’s sensitive listening relative to his interest in songbirds, the sensitivity may have no consistent correlation with a specific emotional response, even if it sometimes results in one. In this case, Harry is sensitive to sounds but only on a perceptual and intellectual level: he has an

exceptional capacity to pick out and recognize the sounds of individual birds, some of which he may like and others he may not, and yet others that he is indifferent toward. (Admittedly, developing sensitivity to phenomena to which one feels indifferent would be strange; a point worth remembering as we think about sensitivity with art.) His affective response is thus variably related to emotion; primarily, it is a cognitive ability to recognize certain sounds and associate them with individual birds. If we are talking about Harry's sensitive listening relative to persons, this may suggest that Harry both hears what is being said and understands or comprehends the speech with some sufficient degree of care and thoughtfulness, expressed through a connected feeling. His sensitivity is an empathic ability. Only context will show both what the character of the sensitive capacity is and the complexity of the affective response.

This should suffice as a basis for exploring the meaning and range of cases where sensitivity arises. How does this function relative to artworks?

Sensitivity and Artworks

Sensitivity appears naturally and regularly in discussions about art and aesthetics, yet there seems to be little systematic treatment of it. To be a sensitive reader or critic is almost uniformly thought to be a good thing. In T.S. Eliot's 1920 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot praises "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation"

(directed at a poem, versus the poet).² Film theorist and critic Robin Wood credits V.F. Perkins with displaying his “customary sensitivity and precision” (in an account of a scene from Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt*, 1943).³ Insensitivity is likewise viewed as a failure. Berys Gaut claims, “we should not countenance just any art-critical practice as legitimate: there are a number of dubiously coherent practices (such as deconstruction), and we should allow for the possibility of otherwise mistaken or insensitive practices.”⁴

What characterizes sensitivity relative to art?

I recommend we look at sensitivity and art in terms of the two senses described in the prior section: sensitivity *to* and *with* art. First, sensitivity to works of art involves an affective capacity on behalf of those engaging with a work. Are you able to perceive or respond to a work in relevantly connected, specially-attuned ways? Second, sensitivity with a work has to do with a way of handling; namely, that one treat a work with care and thoughtfulness. One attractive option is to view the latter as a framework of sensitivity that structures the specific cognitive sensitivities a work requires, merits, or rewards. By exercising sensitivity *with* a work, we recognize what it is we can or should be sensitive *to* in a work. Building on this, it is worth considering what kind of phenomena we might expect one to be ‘sensitive to’ and the complexity or extent of our affective responses

2. T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 11.

3. Robin Wood, “Hitchcock and Fascism,” *Hitchcock Annual* 13, (04, 2005): 25-63.

4. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40.

(sufficient to meet the moral condition of sensitivity with art). Does sensitivity to a painting mean I have an exceptional capacity to perceive color and composition, as well as to respond with relevantly connected interpretive gestures or emotions (or can the latter alone be sufficient)? Does sensitivity to a tragedy mean not just that I am attuned to narrative construction and character development, but that I weep at the hero's demise? This chapter will not resolve these specific questions in full. Instead, I describe the problems sufficient to understand the breadth of what sensitivity may require, concluding that there is no determinable set of acceptable responses, and this just is what sensitivity requires us to consider.

Let's start with an intuitive notion of the kind of thing we might expect someone to be sensitive to while engaging with art. Suppose that a condition of sensitivity regarding painting means that I should be sensitive to color. If, on a trip to the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, where many of Picasso's "blue" works reside, I fail to notice that many of the paintings are in shades of blue, I fail to be sensitive to the work (whatever else I may notice; though, I am open to the possibility that some circumstances or interpretive moves may acceptably circumvent or account for this). Alternatively, let's imagine that I notice all of the variations of blue and carefully distinguish between them, creatively and precisely describing tens of hundreds of individual tints, tones, and shades of blue. Is this demonstration of an exceptional perceptual ability sufficient for sensitivity *with* a work? Does sensitivity require the perception of a more comprehensive or special range of phenomena belonging to these works? Furthermore, does it require a response to

or elaboration on these perceptions, or a fuller set of responses, such as an explanation or understanding of the possible *meanings* of the shades of blue?

At first blush, there seems to be no principled answer to these questions, since the ways in which color may function in painting will vary indefinitely (certainly between one work and another, but also from one context to another, even for the same work). As impressive as it may be to perceive and describe tints, tones, and shades of blue encyclopedically, if my sensitivity only went as far as this, I doubt I meet the condition of sensitivity *with* Picasso's "blue" paintings. The problem, in the case of the Picasso paintings at least, is that there are numerous other features that I fail to notice, including the use or effect of blue across the works. Perceiving color alone is insufficient given presumptions about what's important in the paintings and what any given moment calls for. Sensitivity thus seems to require special attunement not to just any feature or features of a work, but to those that bear some significance (conceding that "significance" is vague or under-determined, and that we may not be able to know what we need to be sensitive to until we exercise sensitivity—a circularity problem?).

One way to pinpoint the significant features of a work, to which we ought to be sensitive, is in terms of the responses it prescribes. Berys Gaut defends a version of "merited response," which deals with the kinds of phenomena we justifiably respond to in a work and the content of such responses. Gaut argues in favor of ethicism, which is the notion that some works of art merit responses that attend to the ethical content of a work of art. I do not want to confuse the (ethical) imperative to engage with a work

sensitively—my claim in this chapter—with what Gaut describes, where an artwork calls for attention towards its ethical content. For Gaut, some works “prescribe” ethical responses, in the sense that they prescribe responding to the ethical content of an artwork. He does not call such prescriptions moral ones, and they are not the only kind of response we might expect a work to prescribe. For example, Gaut outlines a picture of the imaginative responses we might have to the world of a novel:

The attitudes of works are manifested in the responses they prescribe to their audiences. . . . *Jane Eyre*, for instance, prescribes the imagining of the course of a love affair between Jane and Rochester, and also prescribes us to admire Jane’s fortitude, to want things to turn out well for her, to be moved by her plight, to be attracted to this relationship as an ideal of love and so forth.⁵

Gaut’s example focuses on imaginative responses that are internal to the world of a novel (e.g., “to want things to turn out well for her,” “admiring Jane’s fortitude”), such that we can distinguish between admiring a character *as if she were real* and admiring a character because of the creative brilliance with which a writer rendered the character. In the latter, we admire the achievement of the artist more directly, while the former contains at best an implicit admiration of an artist’s achievement. Along those lines, I can admire an evil character in terms of the writer’s skill in creating the character (without admiring the character’s evil), and I can also admire a character (as if she were real) that exists in an artistically bankrupt work; though, I expect at some stage the ineptitude of one’s artistic abilities makes it impossible to render a character I admire. Furthermore, I may condemn

5. *Ibid.*, 230.

an artist's attitude towards an admirable character, however artfully conceived, if, say, the author showed contempt for the admirable character.

Thus far on Gaut's picture, particular responses to a work of art may sometimes operate within the internal "world" of a work, while at other times our responses deal with the artist's treatment of that world or attitude towards it (as long as it makes sense to distinguish between these—some works may not represent or contain "worlds" per se). Besides providing a platform to defend ethicism, this also gives us some sense of the complex nature of how a work prescribes responses and how we in turn navigate those prescriptions. Gaut elaborates on the full range of what may comprise a response to a work:

The notion of a response is to be understood broadly, covering a wide range of states directed at represented events and characters, including being pleased at something, feeling an emotion towards it, being amused about it, approving of it, and desiring something with respect to it—wanting it to continue or stop, wanting to know what happens next. Such states are characteristically affective, some essentially so, such as pleasure, while in the case of others, such as desires, there is no necessity that they be felt, although they generally are.⁶

The shape of a merited response will vary according to what a work "prescribes," though not every response a work "prescribes" is merited.

Consistent with Gaut's account, I grant that sensitivity does not require that I respond emotionally any time a work invites or prescribes emotional engagement or particular emotional reactions. In the event that a work is being emotionally

6. *Ibid.*, 231.

manipulative, for example, sensitive readers will recognize the ploy and keep their emotions in check, even if the sensitive reader is perhaps (understandably) duped on occasion while in the midst of reading.

Carroll similarly describes a “morally sensitive” audience that is likely to pick up on “moral defects” in a work of art. He says, “moral defects in a work result in morally sensitive audiences being unable to experience the aimed-at response.”⁷ The scenario does not tell us the kind of moral views a morally sensitive audience is likely to hold or the way in which a morally sensitive audience responds—only *that* they respond. A work may prescribe a particular moral response, and a morally-sensitive audience may react to the moral content without ascribing to the work-prescribed view. Among the members of a morally sensitive audience, individual views may conflict profoundly, some gleaming with approval and others glowering with condemnation in the face of a work’s moral attitudes. This suggests that we may need a stronger condition for what counts as being sensitive to (and with) a work. If the sensitivity is drawn either too broadly or too narrowly, we may restrict views we want to let in or permit responses we want to rule out.

I bring up the Gaut and Carroll accounts to highlight two points. First, sensitivity to a work will involve consideration for the responses a work prescribes, which are complex and may evolve with one’s experience of a work over time (and a work’s

7. Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 228-229.

shifting prescriptions). Such prescriptions are not necessarily primary or binding, and an adequate general sensitivity with a work should help us discern when to ascribe to and when to reject a work's prescribed responses. At the same time, our pre-existing sensitivities to different kinds of phenomena, moral or otherwise, ought to be checked against the work and its prescriptions. This is part of the background for Gaut's admonishment of insensitive art-critical practices, which I quoted at the start of this section. They have not been sufficiently sensitive to the prescriptions of works, whether or not they abide by or condemn them. These ought to be considered at least for the sake of rejecting or ignoring them thoughtfully and with care, rather than because of, say, a predetermined interpretive or critical theory from which one approaches a work.

Second, there is a problem regarding the vagueness of our affective responses. That is, to say only *that* we are sensitive to a phenomenon may fail to provide constraints on the content of a response sufficient for an ethics of engaging with art, instead merely requiring *that* one respond. This leaves open the possibility that sensitivity may equally belong to those with a charitable attitude as to those with a manipulative one. I am inclined to deny that the audience member with a manipulative attitude is "morally sensitive" to a work merely because she exhibits the capacity to respond to moral content (though this is certainly one sense of the term). Likewise, the capacity to respond to color in a painting may not tell us anything about the nature of that response and its connection to the work (think: cheerfully enjoying Picasso's blue paintings because you just *love* the color blue.) This is a recipe for an *insensitive* audience member, whose sensitive

capacities are not *relevantly* attuned to the work. For sensitivity to function as a moral criterion for our engagement with art, a stricter or more particular interpretation of sensitivity seems necessary. Our sensitivities must be carefully and thoughtfully grounded in the work and what we can plausibly show to be significant about it.

To develop sensitivity sufficiently beyond the fact *that* one responds to a work, I want to elaborate on the more complex kinds of responses a work may call for. This will help avoid the charges of either being too demanding in what counts as a relevant response or too restrictive. There are cases where sensitivity may call for responses that are not emotional, perceptual, or strictly cognitive. Consider political or activist art. If political or activist art invites my participation in a political or social issue, mere understanding or perception may be insufficiently sensitive with and to the work. *I need to join the cause!* However, I am not claiming that if a work takes up a clear political or activist position, that I have to agree with that position or take action according to its prescriptions. As we just observed, just because a work prescribes a response does not give license to that response (*the artwork told me to do it!*). It also does not mean that any one particular response must be evoked in order for one to be sensitive to it (even if I happen to be sympathetic to a political work's ideology or call to action). Consistent with what I take to be the baseline for sensitivity, if I do not at least see *that* a work is calling for political or social action, I am insensitive to it. Still, in some cases, it seems plausible that different forms of practical action may in part comprise a relevant response and thus demonstrate sensitivity to and with a work.

Consider some cases. Numerous environmental documentaries have appeared since the early 2000s that focus on climate change and human culpability, such as *The 11th Hour* (Connors and Petersen, 2007). The title evinces a clear call to immediate ecological intervention. If I am sympathetic to the positions and calls to action that every environmental documentary pitches, am I to take up those environmental causes to meet the condition of sensitivity *to* or *with* a work? Should I work to dismantle dams after watching *DamNation* (Knight and Rummel 2014), fight for dolphin rights after watching *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009), and befriend a farmer and start a backyard garden after watching *Food Inc.* (Kenner 2009)?⁸ On a weak view, we may insist that practical responses are not required, though they may be one acceptable way to demonstrate sensitivity to a work: I see how serious my complicity in climate change is after watching *The 11th Hour*, and I respond to the work by altering my behavior. A stronger view says, depending on, say, the strength and significance of the truth communicated in a work, we are right to require more than just an acknowledgment of *what* a work says or does. But is this insensitivity *to the work*? We may want to rule out works that demand elaborate practical action or powerful emotional responses as necessary conditions of our

8. One objection I expect these examples generate is that documentaries, as vehicles for political action, are not functioning as works of art but rather as political tools or propaganda. Even if we grant documentaries the status of art, our aesthetic or artistic obligations are towards its artistic or aesthetic content. This objection strikes me as a far too limited view of how artworks function—and incoherent in many cases (e.g., *The Battleship Potemkin*)—though that is as much of a defense as I will offer.

sensitivity to them; it is either a sign of bad, overly-ideological propaganda, or simply too strong a condition of ethical engagement.

In the broadest sense, to repeat what should be a familiar refrain now, it is difficult to prescribe a definite set or kinds of responses that one must have to sufficiently fulfill the requirement of sensitivity to a work. A range of responses may justifiably and relevantly connect with a tragedy or political art or an environmental documentary (or whatever work we happen to be engaging with). A demonstration of care and thoughtfulness with the work, which I describe as sensitivity *with* it, should help us determine what kinds of responses are encouraged and warranted. Certainly, if we are unable to make a case for the significance or relevance of some phenomenon to which we are sensitive (especially if other phenomena are clearly and demonstrably more important or valuable), we should deny that sensitivity has been met. Sensitivity requires the ability to discern which phenomena are ultimately worth considering, that is, which sensitivities-to are relevant.

If sensitivity with a work requires that we are sensitive to relevant phenomena (and in the right way), how can we know what the relevant phenomena are until we perceive them? That is, if we don't already possess relevant sensitive capacities, how can I even know that I ought to be able to perceive or respond to those features of a work? This is the problem of circularity I teased earlier. One aspect of this problem may have something to do with those moments when my personal, idiosyncratic sensitivities do not line up with the presumptively significant features of a work: everyone else thinks *Tinker*

Tailor Solider Spy (the novel or the film) is about espionage, but I think it's about "male distrust, duplicity and anxious misidentification."⁹ A plausible answer may be that we may demonstrate sensitivity through our responses to a feature of a work so long as the feature is genuinely present, and, perhaps, so far as we can make a convincing case for its relevance (not altogether different from the earlier condition that we offer reasons in support of our evaluations in criticism). The relevance of a feature and its connection to our response may not always require argumentation or justification, but given the potential range of responses that are possible (essentially, countless), it would be helpful to have a procedure for establishing that our sensitivity is genuinely 'to the work'. That is, we want a suitably flexible range of potential responses without letting anything go. A sensitive reader, watcher, or listener should not be chastised out of hand for showing sensitivity to what others deem inconsequential or trivial within a work.

In practice, the general criterion of sensitivity with a work should help determine the suitability, usefulness, or value of individual perceptual sensitivities or affective responses. Still, it remains the case that the only way to discern which sensitive capacities a work merits requires testing some out. In many cases, context will guide us toward which sensitivities are likely to be required, merited, or rewarded. For example, I know

9. See Mark Kermode, "Mark Kermode's DVD Round Up," *The Guardian* (January 28, 2012), www.theguardian.com/film/2012/jan/29/mark-kermode-dvd-round-up. This was an on-going debate between British film critic Mark Kermode, radio presenter Simon Mayo, and the audience for their radio show. Kermode has insisted that the film version, directed by Daniel Alfredson (2011), wears the "guise" of a spy film.

that a film will typically require listening and looking. On a more sophisticated level, though, I know that a film directed by Martin Scorsese will likely reward different sensitive capacities than a film directed by Steven Spielberg: with Scorsese, I calibrate my sensitivity to violence; with Spielberg, I attune my sensitivity to father-son relationships. These are cues I can pick up from background knowledge and sensitivity to a work and its context.

So far, we've primarily looked at specific features that our sensitive capacities might target (or fail to target), and the framework that helps us discern which are relevant. Another challenge is the problem of over-sensitivity. With over-sensitivity, we may have the capacity to respond to relevant phenomena, but our responses may be excessive or too discursive. Think of the charge of "reading into" a work. The complaint often targets scholarly critics, whose interpretations go too far beyond what a work seems to merit (according to the challenge). The debate between under- and over-sensitivity often seems to vary according to one's level of exhaustion with a hermeneutic school. Enough free-wheeling, post-modernist, anything-goes "readings" of a work and interpretive simplicity may feel welcome. Enough over-simplification and deference to explicit, stated intentions and one may lean the other way.

In answering the charge of "reading into" works, Cavell makes the case that ordinary readers tend to be too restrictive in their readings. To paraphrase, he says that we mean much more than we say, and the careful accounting of our experience of what

we say is welcome, necessary, and unending.¹⁰ He says, “my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread.”¹¹ In a book for aspiring poets, Stephen Fry, an actor and television personality, advises readers to “be always alert to language”: “Others may let words go without plucking them out of the air for consideration and play, we [aspiring poets] do not.”¹² He continues, “You cannot pay too much attention to every property of every word.”¹³

Granting that both under- and over-sensitivity are possible, what are the conditions of each? A partial answer to that has already been met in the pages above. Under-sensitivity means the absence of the capacity to respond to relevantly significant features of a work, granting that what counts as relevantly significant is determinable but never determined. Over-sensitivity involves either attending to features of a work that have insufficient significance, as in our encyclopedia of blues in Picasso, or ascribing features to a work it simply does not have, granting that a work’s “features” are determinable but never determined.

Let’s summarize and tie up some loose ends. Sensitivity *with* a work has to do with demonstrating care and thoughtfulness in our handling of a work, which guides the particular sensitivities we cultivate and employ in responding to a work. A demonstration

10. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-12.

11. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 35.

12. Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Traveled* (London: Arrow Books, 2007), 316.

13. *Ibid.*, 317.

of care and thoughtfulness in handling a work may also refer to our physical or bodily engagement, such as maintaining an appropriate distance (e.g., don't touch a painting, don't block someone's view, don't interfere with the performers). Different works will invite and call for different ways of sensitively engaging with them. What seems intuitively clear about the requirements of sensitivity with a work in one case may not translate to other cases. For example, it's often the case that I shouldn't talk during a performance of a play, but to refrain from talking while viewing a painting may or may not matter, or it may even be welcome. Certainly in some movie theaters and with some movies, audience participation is part of the experience (e.g., midnight screenings of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*). I am, in the end, not interested in generating rules on this level or with any high level of particularity. The exercise of sensitivity with a work guides such discriminations, most notably in our sensitivity to a work.

Context and Criticism's Warrant

When and how does criticism fail to demonstrate sensitivity *just as* criticism? I see no initial or outright contradiction between sensitivity and criticism. We sometimes associate criticism with a kind of brashness counter to an attitude of care and thoughtfulness. However, criticism certainly may show sensitivity *to* a work, and good criticism likely requires it. Are there instances where critical engagement may hinder sensitivity to a work, even if not by rule? My claim is that at least some works do not invite, permit, or reward criticism, such that, sensitivity with a work will show us when to

suspend, curtail, or forgo criticism. Criticism, as we sketched it in the first two chapters (and on the orthodox view), is the reasoned evaluation of a work of art. The countervailing views either displace judgment as embedded in the acts of description and interpretation, thus potentially negating the need for explicit pronouncements about a work's value, or they simply discount evaluation as the primary function of criticism. I consider two ways sensitivity points away from criticism in its orthodox conception. One is where we look to the work and its context. The other approach is to look for cases where criticism actually hinders sensitivity to a work.

In keeping with the loose ends closing the last section, I suppose that sensitivity will involve attending to the context for a work. "Context" may refer to the context of the work's production or display, as in the historical and cultural context that belongs to it. It may also refer to the local context within which I encounter a work, such as my trip to the museum. Both may be operative. Sensitivity to context gives us clues as to the suitability of criticism or whichever mode (or modes) of engagement may be most appropriate.

What circumstances call for the suspension, curtailment, or forgoing of criticism? The scope of acceptable answers to that question may vary depending on how liberally one wishes to construe the function(s) of art. Works designed to partake in rituals may acceptably receive critical attention at some junctures, but the purpose of our engagement with them does not reduce to critical contemplation and assessment; it has to do with our ritual engagement. If I attend Mass, I am not there to offer commentary on the music and architecture—I am there to worship. Of course, a poorly written song or an inadequate

space may hinder one's ability to worship, and some criticism may be warranted *at the right moment*, but, in the context of Mass, even if I enjoyed the music or space, the purpose is not an appraisal. Thus, to demonstrate care and thoughtfulness in my handling of the music or space at Mass, I engage with each in light of their context and the function it points towards (i.e., I worship).

If Mass is not narrowly "artistic" enough to count towards engaging with *art*, consider the variety of ways in which a novel may function. Different moments in the span of my experience with a novel suit different aims. On a first reading, I may be getting my bearings, doing some interpretive work to understand the novel. I may also make some judgments regarding its value, though, if I am careful, I may wait until I felt confident about, say, the plausibility of my interpretive reasoning. On subsequent readings, I may read for the pleasure of it, which may involve some critical engagement even if that is not the operative mode. If a friend lends me a novel, this is not necessarily an invitation to produce a work of critical commentary. *Thank you for lending me your copy of [your favorite book]; here's a thousand words on the deficiencies of its narrative arch.* Of course, some critical engagement may be appropriate or welcome in this context, too, especially positive critical attention. Maybe we share a word about what we both liked. But, just as often, the broader scope of the artistic experience is one that is social, and critical engagement is secondary (e.g., I read the novel to share an experience with a friend, to understand his taste or engage his interests).

As a further contextual cue limiting criticism, we may wish to look at the discourses Carroll discounted from the domain of art criticism earlier (in Chapters 1 and 2). Wherever these are preferred, criticism is at least displaced. For example, if I have a professional role as an art historian or curator, my role is not strictly a critical one (though, again, it may involve some critical moves). The art historian's job is to offer an historical account of a work in a way that does not necessarily revolve around judgments about the value of artworks.¹⁴ A curator's job is to select and arrange works in a way that (e.g.) contributes to the mission of the institution or organization exhibiting the work. We may suppose from their inclusion—in an art history text or museum exhibition—that those works are valuable, but this is likely an assumed value rather than a stated objective.

Is sensitivity with or to a work what constrains criticism in these instances? Perhaps this is better cast as mere duty? I see no reason to exclude sensitivity from a consideration for duty. To be sensitive in my handling of a work, I need to be cognizant of my obligations towards it (e.g., an art historian should be sensitive to her role and her sensitivities to artworks under examination should be attuned towards art-historical

14. In the first two chapters, I cast some doubt about how cleanly art history distinguishes itself from criticism. In practice, the two are not always easily distinguished. Richard Meyer points to a decisive moment in the 1960s when art history departments produced doctoral dissertations on living artists. See *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 1-10. In particular, Meyer points to Rosalind Krauss's doctoral dissertation and corresponding publications, where, he states, "We see art history becoming criticism" (10).

tasks). In answer to the question, am I demonstrating sensitivity with a work, I thus consider what my role is relative to it.

Another reason we may resist critical engagement is that an artist may not want the work to be criticized (this does not always or necessarily mean that we ought not criticize it, of course). Such a desire likely corresponds with a desire not to receive negative criticism, though not necessarily. Being sensitive to the work and its context shows us what mode of engagement is apt. For example, if an artist is developing a new body of work, she may invite questions but not critical comments. Questions may be rhetorically phrased in such a way they take on a critical character, but they need not be, and an adequate sensitivity to the work will help draw out questions that will be useful to the artist (e.g., Can you tell me about your process?). Oppositely, an artist may actively crave critical engagement, but the work (or the one engaging with it) may not be in a state where criticism is sufficiently sensitive. Even in the case where a work is successful, we may be justified in withholding praise. If I work with a student artist who is still developing her skills and artistic identity, I may be inclined to encourage the student to keep working rather than rely on critical feedback (even if positive).

These are all cases where sensitivity with a work involves attending to circumstantial features of our engagement with a work. In particular, sensitivity leads me to ask, What is my role relative to the work? This kind of sensitivity is more naturally connected to the moral attitude of care and thoughtfulness. Apart from such instances, are there any cases where criticism is insensitive *to* artworks? We may be inclined to suppose

that insensitivity to a work leads to *bad* art criticism. Earlier, Gaut suggested that the methodologies and ideological framework of some art-critical practices are not conducive to sensitivity to art. He lists deconstruction as one such practice. He does not elaborate on this, though the implication is that the critical ideology of deconstruction is unable to respond to a work's prescriptions adequately (or at all). If my responses to a work ought to be guided (but not tyrannically ruled) by its prescriptions, then a critical practice that is unable to sufficiently acknowledge a work's prescriptions is unwarranted. This does not offer us a rule for how criticism fails to be sensitive to a work. It does however tease a practical reality about critical practices: they tend to emerge in relationship to particular bodies of works. That is, what counts as an apt form of critical engagement is a moving target. The critical ethos of Walter Benjamin does not match that of *The Hollywood Reporter*, though both respond to film and both have (or have had) their place. It is not then criticism in its distilled, rationally ideal form that hinders sensitivity to a work, but the reality of live critical practices that are suited to some works and not others. Some critical practices may hinder sensitivity more powerfully than others (i.e., as the critical practice fails to shift with the work or its context), though it remains a possibility that a work or its context may simply discourage the primacy of an evaluative attitude toward whatever end or in whatever shape it may take. These observations suggest a sequence of engagement where we are constrained first by our sensitivity with a work of art, which guides us in our sensitivity to it, and finally, within these parameters, we may find that

other modes of engagement may be suitably infused—critical, interpretive, appreciative, or otherwise.

Some Objections to the Ethical Significance of Sensitivity

I want to close with consideration for objections. The most difficult problem I expect an *ethics* of engaging with art to face has to do with the question, Is it *morally* necessary to engage with art in some particular way? One objection is grounded in the following response: we ought to demonstrate sensitivity with art, but my failure to demonstrate sensitivity does not entail moral condemnation, nor does my successful demonstration of sensitivity entail moral praise. For example, we wouldn't *morally* condemn the novice reader for lacking the skills required to understand a challenging novel. Furthermore, isn't it possible to demonstrate great care and thoughtfulness while engaging with a novel but still lack the skills to demonstrate an expert, "readerly" sensitivity to it? At best then, sensitivity is an *artistic* ideal and not a moral requirement. A second objection is grounded in this response: morality simply has no direct bearing on art because only interactions among moral agents have moral significance. Let me respond to each of these in order, though I think they ultimately collapse.

In response to the first objection, I have claimed in this chapter that sensitivity *with* an artwork and sensitivity *to* it are mutually reinforcing. Are those who lack interpretive and appreciative skills in engaging with art are morally blameworthy then? Can I chide someone for failing to be a good reader of *Moby Dick*? The problem cannot

just be that sensitivity requires cultivation of a skill. I doubt an objector would insist that “ordinary” moral obligations ought not require skill, such that an artistic skill could never be morally required. I cannot escape moral judgment simply by saying I lack the “skills” of generosity or kindness. Maybe this is easier to accept if we’re Aristotelians, but it seems clear that the cultivation of a capacity is consistent with much that we expect in terms of moral behavior. This adequately responds to the case where someone says, “Hey, I really do care and I put a lot of thought into it, but I’m just a *bad* reader.” I would suppose that beginning with the expectation that one ought to handle a work with care and thoughtfulness, we likely bolster our ability to be sensitive to a work, including recognizing features that we may lack the ability to respond to with depth or nuance. In assessing whether or not someone has demonstrated sensitivity adequately, we can also adapt our expectations to the situation and the persons involved. The novice art-patron need not meet an absolute threshold of artistic competency to demonstrate care and thoughtfulness, in the same way that I do not expect everyone to express generosity by being charitable in just the same way.

Another potential problem with the claim (that sensitivity with a work requires sensitivity to it) is that it seems possible for the artistic expert to exercise sensitivity to a work without necessarily demonstrating sensitivity with it, insofar as sensitivity with a work involves an attitude and not just a set of actions. One way to soften the strength of this objection is to dissociate care and thoughtfulness from falling into an exclusively “feeling” category, such that the dispassionate expert may demonstrate care and

thoughtfulness so long as she is genuinely sensitive to the work. We may also be inclined to suppose that the neutral critic is the supreme ethical champion of engaging with art, showing no impassioned interest¹⁵ in a work yet dutifully and expertly engaging with it. However, I doubt it is possible to be especially sensitive to a work without being sensitive with it in the attitudinal sense, at least to some degree. It is difficult to imagine the dispassionate or (in the non-Kantian sense) disinterested critic perfectly exercising sensitivity to a work without upholding some minimal level of care and thoughtfulness. Imagine the critic who only writes about genres she despises. At some stage, one's active disinterest or even indifference seems likely to lead to poor sensitivity to a work. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine the novice, driven by a sense of care and thoughtfulness, wholly and consistently failing in demonstrating sensitivity to a work.

The second and deeper challenge to sensitivity as an ethical criterion is the charge that morality simply has no bearing on how we engage with art. We have two options in dealing with this issue of the scope of moral responsibility: either deny that morality only bears on interactions among people, or find a way for our interactions with artworks to

15. The Kantian notion of “interest” and “disinterest” is not the sense of the terms we carry now, *per se*. Kantian “interest” has to do with having a purpose or desire for a work, for its utility other than the enjoyment of aesthetic properties. This is with regard to aesthetic judgments in general, and more about our appreciation of nature, than artworks. Kant does not deny that we can have these purposes or uses for works (or natural things) that we enjoy aesthetically, only that they are irrelevant to aesthetic enjoyment. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); in particular, see pages xiv-xv for useful introductory remarks on this issue by Nicholas Walker.

persistently and relevantly connect to another person. The latter seems to be the more conventional approach, or at least the less troublesome.

Marcia Muelder Eaton offers a defense of what she calls “aesthetic obligations,” which are of a kind with moral obligations.¹⁶ She does this without insisting that they are always one and the same and without requiring any direct interaction with other persons. For example, Eaton describes “the obligation to tell good stories about others.”¹⁷ My position is a companion to this: the obligation to be a sensitive listener in the presence of good stories about others. Mirroring some of the problems I deal with here, Eaton considers whether these aesthetic obligations are merely “veiled moral obligations.”¹⁸

She states:

The obligation I have in mind ... does, admittedly, stem from the moral obligation we have to give due respect to other persons. But fulfilling this obligation takes us quickly, I think, into aesthetic territory. Respecting others involves treating them as individuals, and this is tantamount to treating them as having their own stories.¹⁹

To tell a story well involves aesthetic considerations and artistic choices, of course. By extension, to appreciate a good story we must employ corresponding sensitivities to it.

Eaton also draws on Ted Cohen’s account of a story about a story in support of her argument. On Cohen’s prompting, she recalls from 2 Samuel, “God sends Nathan to

16. Marcia Muelder Eaton, “Aesthetic Obligations,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 66.1 (Winter 2008): 1-9.

17. *Ibid.*, 5.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

David to explain to David what his sin amounts to and Nathan carries out his assignment by telling David a story.”²⁰ In Nathan’s telling of a story about a poor man and a rich man, David finds the rich man culpable, to which Nathan replies, “Thou art the man.”²¹ Nathan has an obligation to tell the story well, considering the context and aim of its telling, but for David to arrive at the aimed-at result—a realization of his own culpability—he must attend to the story and respond with relevantly connected emotion (and action). David demonstrates his sensitivity first through his anger, then his prayer and fasting, and finally through his repentance and worship.²² This is a useful example of both the importance of engaging with art well and a case where criticism is not the primary aim of our engagement. David certainly demonstrates a reasoned response to the story, but his response is not limited to a value judgment of its worth. David’s sensitivity with and to the story corresponds with contextually sensitive interpretive understanding and a suitable affective response (e.g., anger, remorse, repentance, etc.). We see also, Eaton claims, that our moral responsibilities here are inseparable from our artistic obligations.

You may still insist that the social context for a work of art is the primary arena of ethical concern, or at least a necessary backdrop for moral problems in art. The kind of engagement I “owe” a work of art is at best indirect. For example, if you ask me to take

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. Quoted in *ibid.*

22. 2 Samuel 11-12.

care of your plants while you are out of town, I owe your plants a certain amount of care and attention. However, if you meet a tragic death while away, I cease to owe your plants such care and attention (unless you were very deeply devoted to your plants, and I agreed, as plant godfather, to take care of them in the event of your death). Thus, the moral link between a person and an object only persists as long as another person is involved: my commitment is not to the plants, it's to you! Or with David and Nathan, David's commitments are to Nathan and God, not the story (the story is incidental or purely functional).

My response to this particular objection is fairly modest, I believe. I claim that artworks are sufficiently wrapped up with human life to qualify as falling under the banner of ethical treatment.²³ I am not making claims about the universality, absoluteness, or moral weight of such principles, only that in common cases, sensitivity is a plausible, ethical constraint on our engagement with art. How then are artworks wrapped up with human affairs, such that ethics comes to bear on our engagement with them? It seems clear that artworks are paradigmatically the products of human activity and continue to be wrapped up with human life after their creation. In some cases, the artist may be the person through whom our moral obligations to a work first arise. David bears the responsibility to demonstrate artistic skill in listening to Nathan's story because Nathan is a trusted advisor and friend. Such commitments will vary widely depending on

23. I should note, *not* in the sense that ethicism is concerned with morality and art, where we focus on the moral content of a work.

the work in question and the historical and cultural context.²⁴ An artist presents us with her work, and in her presence, I am inclined to treat what belongs to the artist in a responsible way (e.g., with sensitivity). However, this is clearly too limited a framework to establish a standard for ethical engagement in general. More often than not, we engage with the work of absentee or dead artists, to whom we are unlikely to have made any commitments.

Apart from the artist, we may invoke the moral community made up of the owner or caretaker of a work, others present before it, or future audiences.²⁵ A stronger claim, one I am sympathetic to, is that the way you treat an artwork will always have moral significance because it will always have some bearing on at least one moral agent—*you*. For example, if you are in the habit of spitting and urinating on books out of your hatred for authors—even if nobody sees you do it and all the writers whose books you deface are dead—it’s likely that this both reflects and reinforces poor moral character.²⁶ You

24. I want to be careful of presupposing a certain narrative about art, a modern Western one that prizes the artist as solitary and supreme executor of a work. That narrative is a useful and relevant one in many circumstances, but there are traditions, even within (e.g.) the history of Western painting, where the artist is secondary to, say, the patron. There is also a thread in criticism that insists we suspend consideration for the artist for the sake of the work. T.S. Eliot states: “To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad.” See Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 18.

25. Part of the mission of museums, for example, is the preservation of works for future generations. This goal helps shape the conditions for the display and treatment of works of art, including the rules for our engagement with them.

26. The Kantian moral tradition is sympathetic towards self-regarding duties, though there are competing arguments. Bernard Williams and Berys Gaut have made the opposing case: that what is clearly outside morality are those cases where our actions,

owe a book sensitivity for the sake of your own character and well-being. Even if you are not persuaded by this argument, the common and paradigmatic cases of artistic engagement undoubtedly involve invested parties who have a justifiable stake in your treatment of a work of art, such that engagement with art occurs within a moral setting in the majority of cases.

Finally, we can also make the positive case that proper sensitivity with and to a work is morally required for the same reasons we should hold to other moral rules.

feelings, and motives have no bearing on another and are purely self-regarding. Gaut states, “It seems, then, that the category of the moral is applied only to actions, feelings, and motives directed towards others.” His argument strikes me as slippery and overly reliant on idiosyncratic impressions. First, he states, “As anyone who has taught these doctrines to modern students will know, Kant’s view about there being self-regarding duties is not now widely shared” (46). Is this true? He offers no verifiable evidence. If it is true, it has no strong philosophical implications. Second, Gaut defines actions such as suicide and anorexia as paradigmatically amoral because they are not “other-regarding,” though actions, feelings, and motives that are other-regarding are sources of moral merit. This is a puzzling asymmetry, where self-regard is not morally implicated but concern for others is morally praiseworthy. Gaut says that self-regarding actions are only immoral insofar as they affect others, but this appears (on my own impression) more common than Gaut suggests, if not a contradiction in terms. A self-regarding action that impacts others ceases to be just about me, or, insofar as I see it as an action that only concerns me—it seems decidedly Western and modern to say that my actions can ever be all about me—I am mistaken. As anyone who has taught these doctrines will know, one student’s laziness can easily and negatively impact an entire class. It can also shame a family or waste their money (when the student fails and must retake the course). The student’s laziness reflects the student’s self-regard at the expense of others. Gaut, in rebuttal, accepts that cases of self-regarding harm deserve treatment and attention, but the act of self-harm isn’t a *moral* failing (so long as it’s genuinely and only *self*-harm). Taken on a broad view, it seems more plausible that the personal character failings of an individual tend more often than not to have other-directed impacts, for which the self-regarder ought to bear some moral responsibility. Furthermore, as I suggested, in the narrowness of our focus on self-regard, we may also neglect our moral responsibility to be other-regarding.

Namely, demonstrating sensitivity in our engagement with art contributes to human flourishing: it shows respect for the labor of others, encourages personal reflection, expands one's moral imagination, deepens or enriches appreciation for the world, and so forth. These are speculative gestures, and I imagine some of the values I describe will be more operative or realizable than others depending on the work. Yet, even the most poor work of art seems to deserve our sensitivity at some stage. How else, after all, will we know that a work is bad unless we've given it a good faith effort, attending to it with care and thoughtfulness, and employing our capacities to respond to it in relevantly connected ways? Perhaps this is too much to expect, forcing us to treat all the world and the many objects within it with sensitivity because they *might* contribute to flourishing, as if ethics is everywhere. (Well, yes!) But, as a final concession, I grant that sensitivity does not rule out the possibility that we may, at times, be called to cast a work into the oblivion. To do so would require very careful consideration for the work and the context, which is exactly what sensitivity helps us to determine. Following Auden, we may find that silence is the gravest sentence a work may face.

CHAPTER 4
A CONVERSATIONAL PRIMER

To be subversive, the critic does not have to judge, it is enough that he talks of language instead of using it.

—Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*

In these final two chapters, we turn to conversation as a way of engaging with art, one that responds to the limits of criticism and the need for sensitivity. As this gets off the ground, I want to acknowledge that, while the idea of conversation presents, in a familiar, straightforward way, a compelling conceptual challenge, especially as it relates to my experience with art—how does one converse *with* art?—it is also a challenge exemplified in the act of philosophical accounting and writing itself. I find myself asking, Where should such a discussion begin? How can it begin? What is the relationship between the way in which I write or speak and the subject of a conversation? For you and I to converse, presumably we must share some linguistic territory, but where does this ground come from, and how do we acknowledge or consider it without taking it for granted?

Hans-Georg Gadamer states: “Every conversation obviously presupposes that the two speakers speak the same language.”¹ He then states, “Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding.”² Here we arrive at one of the main problems and the condition I expect will pose the most problems for a model of conversational engagement with art. Even supposing we share a language, how does exchange occur? That is, supposing a painting has something to say, and I am able say something back, can the painting then respond to my utterance (and so on)? In his effort to understand how understanding happens, Gadamer states, “Only when two people can make themselves understood through language by talking together can the problem of understanding and agreement even be raised.”³ Put another way, in order to have a conversation about the problems (or successes or joys) of conversation, we have to share a language and have already succeeded in understanding one another in conversation.

Setting aside this puzzle for a moment, I propose three conditions for conversation: there are at least two participants, the participants share a language, and there is genuine exchange between participants. This chapter will serve as a primer for a conversational model of engaging with art by looking at conversation and these three criteria as both a subject of philosophical attention and as a problem exemplified in philosophical writing. The fifth and final chapter will weave together existing

1. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

conversations with and about specific works of art as a further extension of the discussion.

To begin by addressing conversation through philosophical writing may seem like a tortuous way to address the idea of conversational engagement *with art*. Why start there? Consider it a play on the possibilities and problems that conversation presents, one that is sensitive to the relationship between my own philosophical position and the works with which I engage. However, I will bridge the gap between this starting point and the narrower focus of the following chapter by revisiting claims about language and style in philosophy, film, and criticism, primarily through the work of Stanley Cavell, Robert Sinnerbrink, and Andrew Clayton. They each make the case for a kind of reciprocity or mutual transformation between philosophy (or criticism) and film in terms of the way each engages with the other. The affinity between certain works and writers further resembles a somewhat lost idea—of our *friendship* with an artwork—which enriches the model of conversation and brings it into closer contact with ethics. This serves as the basis for the next chapter, which puts flesh on the bones of this chapter's conversational skeleton by looking at exemplary interchanges between writers and works.

Philosophical Beginnings

Standard practice dictates that the opening paragraph of a philosophical text introduce its topic and its thesis unencumbered. Every word counts, and every word should contribute towards the argument. This sometimes denies philosophy the creativity permitted in other

kinds of writing or speech. Philosophy sometimes, or maybe often, favors the direct, literal, and explicit. For those learning to read and write philosophy, this is a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing to focus on clarity over expressiveness; it is a curse to read and write prose that is clear but dull or trivial. Along those lines, it is rare to find a first-person pronoun alongside a predicate expressing an author's personal commitment to or interest in an argument. Often a philosopher will reveal what she plans to argue in contrast to what others have argued, as in, "Regarding topic *z*, *P* argues *y*, while I argue *x*." Implicitly, we might assume that the act of writing about *z* declares one's valuing of *z*. Why write about a subject that holds no personal interest or importance to you? We may further say that a philosopher prefers, above all else, arguments that are valid and sound, and this is a philosopher's fundamental commitment or investment. Is a bad argument ever worth reading? Finally, the aversion to self-reference may also be a gesture of modesty and discipline: the issue is the issue.

However strong an argument a philosopher may construct, it may not always be clear why it was worth making, especially beyond the boundaries of professional commitments. The discrete sections of a published book in philosophy—acknowledgements, preface or prologue, introduction, text, postscript or epilogue—permit varying degrees of subjective pronouncement and stylistic variation, which may be clues to an author's attitude or motivations over and above the "argument." Dedications and acknowledgments are likely to be the most personal elements of a book but with the most distance between author and argument (though this is more or less true

from one work to another and from one genre to another⁴). *The Chicago Manual of Style* states that a preface ought to contain an “author’s own statement about a work,” including “reasons for undertaking the work” and “method of research (if this has some bearing on readers’ understanding of the text).”⁵ (Is the assumption that not all methods of research have some bearing on a reader’s understanding, or that the method of research will or ought to be sufficiently clear from the text itself?) Prefaces and introductions can, as in some of the books I discuss here, stand up independently from the text, as valuable in their own right, insofar as they make claims of their own or offer substantive insights, however dependent they may be on the main text to buttress or explicate them.

Stephen Mulhall opens his book, *The Conversation of Humanity* (based on his Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia), with the question of what it means for him to meet the terms of the invitation to give the lectures (and to convert them into a book—one of the terms of the invitation). He calls his opening gesture an “acknowledgment” of those terms and proceeds to assess them by unfolding the

4. Dedications to friends and family are common, especially in terms of their contributions to the life of the author and, commonly and more specifically, their contributions during the process of a book’s coming to life. This may take a simple, unexplained form: Wittgenstein dedicates his *Tractatus* “to the memory of my friend, David Pinsent.” In another simple but sophisticated gesture, Tobias Wolff offers the following dedication in his childhood memoir, *This Boy’s Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), a book that largely revolves around life with his mother and first stepfather: “My first stepfather used to say that what I didn’t know would fill a book. Well, here it is.”

5. Russell D. Harper, *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Ed.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 23.

ambiguity of the term “terms.”⁶ Mulhall considers this to be a typical philosophical response. His way of accepting the invitation is to question it: “No doubt this is just the response one would expect from a philosopher to a generous and straightforward invitation. What representative of any other of the arts and sciences would feel the need to tarry over its terms rather than simply act upon them—doing what the invitation asks?”⁷ This move, and Mulhall’s specific way of “tarrying,” enacts the problem the book carries over. What are the conditions for human conversation? How do we discuss those conditions? How does philosophy begin? To ask how philosophy begins means coming to terms with the conditions of his own response. Meeting that challenge parallels a long-standing philosophical puzzle: how does one legitimate a method of inquiry without presupposing the validity of one? Regarding the nature of philosophy, Dallas Willard states, “the very thought by which it operates is a large part of its own subject matter.”⁸ This is what invites the question on which Mulhall’s introduction improvises. How does philosophy validate or authenticate itself, especially insofar as its method is conversational? How do we begin to speak except with another?

6. Stephen Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 1-3.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

8. Dallas Willard, “Who Needs Brentano? The Wasteland of Philosophy Without its Past,” from a conference, “The Brentano Puzzle,” (Bolzano, Italy: 1996).

Whatever the conditions for speech, there is a further question of the value of one's speech, or the significance of speech just as speech. Mulhall points to the following observation "in [Stanley] Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein,"

that what can comprehensibly be said is what is found to be worth saying. And ... to remind us of the grammar of our words just is to remind us that, and how, we appraise the world—it is to recall us to our vocation as appreciators of reality and of our fellow appreciators of reality.⁹

Note that to "appreciate" does not always mean one approves. It may mean that one merely understands without much or any evaluative baggage. Yet, on this view, all speech reflects some measure of positive appreciation, or what Mulhall calls "praise," just in light of the act of acknowledgement. This is in contrast to silence, for which we do not need anyone else (and, to state the obvious, is more easily achieved in the absence of another). Note, however, that silence has a different significance in a world with language than in one without it. In that spirit, W.H. Auden quips, "Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered."¹⁰ That is, even the worst books must bear some value if they elicit our acknowledgment of them (or better, our continued acknowledgement). Books that are unwaveringly bad are simply not worth talking about at all, or we are unable to speak of them at all (because, say, we cannot speak with them;

9. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 102.

10. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 8.

they are unacknowledgeable¹¹). To be an author or artist of any kind that nobody writes about—to be beyond conversation—is to be in literary or artistic hell.

There is a conception of sin that Mulhall invokes at the close of his book, where the capacity for conversation is closely linked to conversion. To live in sin or a state of fallenness is to fall away from meaningful conversation (with God), our speech being the basic substance of divine communion and praise. To be made in the image of God is to speak. Mulhall states that

praise has and needs no measure other than the realization of one's desire to say what one means and to mean what one says to other speakers about the topic of our conversation, whatever that might be. It means overcoming amentia, eschewing idle talk, denying the sophist, in every word we say—as philosophers, and as speakers.¹²

It is not necessarily any particular topic of conversation that makes our speech divine or holy, but proper speech as such, where our words meet the world or where there is unity between word and world. In the Christian theological picture, we are reconciled to God just insofar as we live in Christ, who is the “living Word.”¹³ Through his reading of Augustine, Mulhall also points to the accounts in Genesis and the Gospel of John where

11. There is a debt to Wittgenstein in this idea, especially in Mulhall's relationship between acknowledgement and speech. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities Press, 1961). Wittgenstein famously posits as his seventh proposition, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”

12. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 110.

13. *Ibid.*, 108-110.

“the act of creation is effected in and through speech”¹⁴: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”¹⁵ With whom does God converse in this moment before creation, or in the act of creation? While not an exact answer to this question, Mulhall proposes the following: “For speech to be the mode of divine creation, it must be an expression of the divine nature—the primordial form in which the Godhead lives and moves and has its being. In short, God does not speak; he is Speech.”¹⁶ Here we have the link to the first lines of John’s Gospel, where the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God, and “all things were made by him.” The nature of the diving being is thus conversational and relational (theologically speaking, Trinitarian), and we at least implicitly acknowledge this in speech.

A conversation requires live responses or “fresh” contributions—one of the declared terms of the lectures.¹⁷ This corresponds with my third condition of live, responsive exchange, primarily in terms of the liveness of *my* contribution (i.e., this doesn’t necessarily address how my interlocutor is able to meet the same condition). We cannot merely go through the motions of speech, making word-sounds or repeating what

14. Ibid., 105.

15. Quoted in *ibid.*, 105.

16. Ibid., 105.

17. Ibid., 1.

another says blindly. In one sense, there is a tension between this requirement for fresh contributions and the indebtedness of our words to another. However much a conversation involves an authentic, live response, our grammar and vocabulary are also given or inherited—we must have them before we can reflect on them. As a way of emphasizing this debt, Mulhall looks to the speakers that preceded him as lecturers—“Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, Leo Strauss, Northrop Frye, T.S. Eliot”—as well as to Plato’s “decisive mark” on the matter of conversation and discourse from “[philosophy’s] outset.”¹⁸ How can he (Mulhall) make a fresh contribution in light of the daunting precedents set by these figures? To what degree must he acknowledge their contributions? In the absence of a fresh and original contribution, he fails the terms of the engagement while also denying his God-imagined humanity (viz. his capacity for conversation). Mulhall suggests that his contribution to the subject is called for in part because of the nature of conversation, which “stands constantly in need of refreshment or recovery.”¹⁹ The meaning of words is only as settled as “the form of life” that they are wrapped up in, which itself never sits still and cannot be lived for us.²⁰

Mulhall surveys some of the familiar philosophical strategies for navigating the gap between the inherited or the given and the novel or the fresh. On one extreme lies “metaphysical foundationalism” and on the other lies Richard Rorty’s brand of

18. Ibid., 1.

19. Ibid., 2.

20. Ibid., 32-3.

pragmatism. Both are guilty of a kind of absolutizing gesture, though in opposing directions. According to Mulhall, Rortian pragmatism divorces language from *all* contact with reality on the basis that that *some* speech is idle (or rhetorically manipulative to the point of disinterest or detachment from the real).²¹ Mulhall argues, “But to talk of some kinds of conversation as floating pleasurably or dully free of any concern with reality is to presuppose that other kinds of conversations are capable of making contact with what is real; such free-floating conversations are what they are only in the context of a life with language that is inherently open to the world.”²² This is essentially a way of divorcing conversation from contact with the world, closing in on itself. By contrast, Mulhall points to Cavell, whose work “insists upon the fact that its origins lie outside itself.”²³ This is a claim that is deliberately ambiguous in the sense that the origins lie not just in the philosophical work of forebears, in their speech, but also in the world.

In another strategy aimed at prodding the problem of conversational beginnings, Joseph Margolis opens the prologue to his book, *Pragmatism Without Foundations*, stating:

Prologues are a form of magic, mixing bias with fact. How to begin what is already finished? How to answer what has not yet been asked?

21. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

22. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 65.

23. *Ibid.*, 67.

A Homeric voice would surely elude the trap of silence: 'I sing the reconciliation of realism and relativism!' But the song is a rather complicated one, possibly not even apt for singing. It must soon descend to prosy puzzles.²⁴

Magic, in one sense, happens when we produce an effect without any familiar, rational cause. Out of nothing comes something: a rabbit from an empty hat, a bird from an empty cage. In a prologue we must speak before we speak. Out of silence, speech. Margolis thus dramatizes the problem he is about to set forth: What legitimacy can we grant to first principles, and what honest study can we conduct of them without presupposing some? Do we have any reason to privilege some starting place over another without begging the question? Admitting to the absence of any ultimate first principle, can we reconcile ourselves to a less-than-absolute, acceptably imperfect, or practically perfect relationship between our inquiries and reality? Is there any other choice?

Echoing this paradox, as well as the problems of inheritance Mulhall acknowledges, Cavell asks, how do we express our "dissatisfaction with everyday language" when "there are no *other* words to say than the words everyone is saying"?²⁵ When our words fail to meet up with reality, or when we fail in our attempts at understanding, can we talk our way around it without running into an infinite regress of trying to understand our failure at understanding? Cavell says that to get clear about what we mean may encourage us to try to eliminate or restrict the vagueness and ambiguity of

24. Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism Without Foundations* (New York: Continuum, 2007), xiii.

25. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 8.

ordinary speech (in favor of, e.g., logic), or it could mean reclaiming the slipperiness of natural language as acceptably slippery. There is perhaps a Cartesian-like satisfaction or confirmation-in-denial in our wrestling with language: if we are struggling with words (usefully or well), we are at least struggling with words.

In the philosophical works briefly addressed so far, there is an attempt to account for the conditions of expression, understanding, and exchange. This task is wrapped up with those specific subjects and works of philosophy that the authors take up and with whom they are in dialogue. To come back to Gadamer, reflection on the possibility of conversation requires it. I cannot *will* a conversation into being on my own. But then, where do these words come from? Where did they begin? This is, as Mulhall describes it, the difference between a human who “has words” and the God of Genesis and the Gospel of John who “*is* the Word”—who creates the universe through Speech.²⁶ A conversation begins with the words that already exist, that are given—there are no others. But then, as each of these writers attests to in their philosophical questioning, how do I “bear the responsibilities” of such an inheritance, to give fresh life to my words with another?²⁷

26. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 105. The Gospel of John links to the Genesis account, where God creates the world through speech, not in the sense of “using” words but in the sense that the world is an expression of the divine nature.

27. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28.

From Philosophy to Film

I am focusing on modes of writing and entry points to a philosophical discussion, primarily through the lens of the conventions of the published book or essay. Some of the works I discuss vary as a matter of philosophical style. Each author address the same or similar subjects but in distinctive or characteristic ways. Insofar as these works are not just about speech but actually invite our conversation with them, their dense, self-reflexive, and idiosyncratic styles may hinder the responsiveness conversation requires. They risk insularity. This has been a flashpoint in the scholarship on Cavell, in particular. In a volume dedicated to his work, Richard Eldridge describes the essays as being “largely oriented toward the issue of Cavell’s difficulty or, more exactly, of his peculiar style as a writer.”²⁸

It may be the case that style is less significant to our understanding of a work relative to larger categorical boxes, such as medium, genre, or discipline. Whatever their differences, one book of philosophy is likely more similar to another than either is to, say, a film (or so that argument would go). Is Cavell’s philosophical style any more or less important than those subjects he takes up? We do not typically talk about philosophical style in terms of its philosophical significance. The ideal response to a philosophical text focuses on the argument and its strength (i.e., are the premises plausible, do they logically

28. Richard Eldridge, “Review: Contending with Stanley Cavell,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (August 2005), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24835-contending-with-stanley-cavell/>.

lead to the conclusion?). Some philosophers receive praise for their style because of the pleasure it affords, and certainly philosophers receive condemnation for the impenetrability of their writing. However, these are normally either hindrances obscuring an argument or icing on a cake. Style on this view is a means to an end.

“Does style matter in philosophy?”²⁹ Robert Sinnerbrink claims that “the language of philosophy is itself expressive of what is to be communicated; philosophy is a performative, rather than simply representational, kind of writing.”³⁰ Sinnerbrink claims that for the analytically-inclined rationalist, “proper philosophy is handmaiden to science rather than companion to art.”³¹ One emphasizes clarity and objectivity (or neutrality); that is, one aligns oneself with the language of science, if not its methods. (This is a crude way of putting things, I admit, as there is no unified “language” of science. This is an abstraction or an ideal.) For those philosophers beholden to the lessons of romanticism, Sinnerbrink argues that “style makes, rather than masks, the thought.”³² In an effort to reconcile the romanticist conception of writing with the analytic (and the artistic with the scientific), he suggests that philosophy “transform itself through its encounter with film.”³³

29. Robert Sinnerbrink, “Questioning style,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, eds. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (New York: Routledge, 2011), 38.

30. Ibid., 39

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 40.

What is the language of film and philosophy, such that each might be transformed by the other? Or, as Sinnerbrink poses it, “How can philosophy think (with) film?” Note, the issue is not strictly a question of content, as if characters in films might talk about, say, epistemology or ethics in some uniquely informative way that is philosophical and from which we can extract a theory of knowledge or morality. Rather, film embodies and deals with the questions and problems that philosophy does but in its own characteristic ways. To engage with it is to consider its modes of thought rather than to simply impose one on it.

Sinnerbrink claims that “Cavell has addressed such questions as much in his manner of writing as in the claims that his prose makes.”³⁴ Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan comment: “Often criticism is the meeting point of a film’s style with an individual temperament, and the writing reflects both. The film and the critic find each other, discover something in each other; they confront, reveal, and affect one another. Sometimes they seem made for each other.”³⁵ In the midst of this observation, Clayton and Klevan allude to the specific debt, or inclination, film has toward romance, toward neatly packaged, happy endings, where couples are “made for each other.”³⁶ Sinnerbrink’s account of Cavell points to such a happy coupling—such terminology itself alludes to and risks the sentimentality of the subjects at hand—between Cavell and his

34. Sinnerbrink, “Questioning style,” 40.

35. Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 18.

36. *Ibid.*

genre projects on the Hollywood “comedy of remarriage” and the melodrama of the unknown woman: “They were films that served ‘to alter the iconography of intellectual conversation,’ not least the possibility that film might be an apt and equal partner to philosophy, or that some kind of marriage between the two might be possible.”³⁷ To respond to the films and to participate in their conversation with “conviction”—think of “conviction” as an analogue to the “freshness” required by Mulhall—“the prose one writes ... assumes or evokes the tasks of reflecting and acknowledging, persuading and questioning, which are essential to philosophical conversation.”³⁸

In Cavell’s long-standing engagement with certain films, his “writing adopts a *questioning style* sharing elective affinities with what film enables us to experience as well as what philosophical romanticism attempts to express.”³⁹ What film enables us to experience, according to Cavell, is *wonder*, not just in response to the extraordinary (one of film’s early tendencies, to which it has returned and continues to exploit⁴⁰), but also in response to the ordinary and the everyday. Film projects the ordinary into a space where

37. Sinnerbrink, “Questioning style,” 40.

38. *Ibid.*, 42.

39. *Ibid.*, 40.

40. I am thinking here of the spectacle of early film successes like Georges Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene 1920) and then the dominance of fantasy/action-adventure films over the last twenty-five-plus years. Twenty of the top grossing films globally each year since 1990 have been fantasy/action-adventure movies (I include James Cameron’s *Titanic*, a “romantic drama,” which garnered as much attention for its then record-setting budget and visual effects as it did for its “romantic drama”). Four out of the five remaining box office leaders are animated films. See Box Office Mojo, www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly.

it is “tantalizing present and yet always escaping,”⁴¹ captured but in perpetual motion, enlarged or blown up but alienated, distanced, or removed. The wonder film engenders is closely allied with questioning insofar as

film can disclose the everyday in ways that bring to our attention the unfamiliarity of the familiar, the difficulty of acknowledging others, the problem of our sense of reality, the meaning of being human, the question of skepticism or nihilism, the possibility of love—all things that philosophy has traditionally asked about, and that film has now rediscovered, questioned, and reanimated in its own distinctive ways.⁴²

To wonder is, in one important sense then, closely linked to questioning, as when we say, “I wonder ... (why, how, if ...).” Such questioning invites response and is one basis for the exchange that happens in conversation and its dialectical unfolding (something we will return to in the next chapter through Gadamer).

Cavell’s attention is often drawn toward films that are comic or “light” (so-called “screwball comedies”), dealing with ordinary domestic issues and skirting whatever “headline moral issues” circumscribe their plots: capital punishment, attempted murder, blackmail, divorce, political corruption, financial crises. Many of the films are not ones philosophy has taken seriously: *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940), *Adam’s Rib* (Cukor 1949), *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940), *The Awful Truth* (McCarey 1937), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Capra 1936). There is a risk in taking the films and one’s interest in them seriously (that is, philosophically), and it poses a particular challenge to Cavell’s

41. Raymond Bellour, quoted in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 71.

42. *Ibid.*, 41.

conversation with them. Some films have “philosophical content” that comes into view like a grizzled cowboy bursting through saloon doors, unsettling the room and drawing everyone’s attention. *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), for example, offers readymade illustrations of existing philosophical puzzles about reality and skepticism, depicting (without ambiguity) a world where humans are brains-in-a-vat and copies of Baudrillard are in relatively plain view. This reductive, binary approach to film and philosophy *in* the film invites philosophical-critical responses of a kind.⁴³ But where *The Matrix* is strictly *about* questioning, the “screwball” comedies Cavell engages *are* questioning. This is only apparent in light of their style and aesthetic choices. The films invite self-reflective responses about style and the mode of presentation and thinking.

Sinnerbrink claims, “Aesthetically effective writing not only illuminates new aspects, it sensitizes us to new ways of seeing, educating us as to how we might see film better.”⁴⁴ What Sinnerbrink calls “romantic film-philosophy” concerns itself with the conditions of our verbal responses to film and, more specifically, to our responses in writing. Andrew Klevan opens his essay on description and film with this problem in mind, asking, “How do we quote from a film?”⁴⁵ This has to do with the special

43. See *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). Most of the essays use the film as a springboard for familiar philosophical discussions about (e.g.) Descartes, Marxism, Buddhism, mostly ignoring the film’s aesthetic, performative choices as mere wrapping.

44. Sinnerbrink, “Questioning Style,” 44.

45. *Ibid.*

challenge of writing about film in light of what and how films express and ask their questions. Though, the same kind of challenge can be posed for any medium of art and discourse. Two specific issues emerge in understanding writing about film, though. First, there is the challenge of taking an experience that is visual and aural (as well as verbal) and expressing it in words. Even a literary art, Klevan contends, faces the problem of presenting the object of interpretation before those with whom we are inviting into our conversation, but film is especially “slippery” (for the reasons described earlier: its constant motion, its slipping in and out of attention ...).⁴⁶ This means that what primarily occupies our attention is interpretively shaped just in virtue of our conversation, as we move between the medium of experience to the medium of expression (about the experience). Description under these conditions possesses all of the features of “criticism” that Carroll distinguishes in his philosophy of criticism—judgment, analysis, appreciation, and so forth. This brings us to the second issue.

The methodological difference, in terms of philosophical writing, resides in what Sinnerbrink and Cavell call “film *and* philosophy” (or film-philosophy) rather than “philosophy *of* film.”⁴⁷ This means that in one’s writing, one cannot take it for granted that the way in which one philosophizes about a subject will automatically bear fruit in another (or that the philosophical conventions of one genre or subject, either of philosophy or film, will suit another). Conventional philosophical engagement with film

46. Andrew Klevan, “Description,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 71.

47. *Ibid.*, 41.

“tends to reduce particular films or individual scenes to readymade examples of assumed theoretical problems, concepts, or arguments.”⁴⁸ The films become merely illustrative of preexisting philosophical concerns and questions, as in the essays on *The Matrix*. In opposition to this, Sinnerbrink claims that our philosophy should be wed to the films, allowing them to speak for themselves and *with* philosophy. He pushes for a kind of friendship between art (film in particular) and philosophy that has not always been the case. This way of thinking about and by film keeps both philosophy and film accountable. It is part of their transformation or, recalling Mulhall’s terminology, their conversion.

Philosophical Interlocutors

The small thesis that I am slowly working towards is that both the mode of writing and the subject a philosopher takes up will color her argument and her conclusions, not by rule or in a predictable way, but in some way that matters, and this is itself emblematic of the conditions for conversation: to reflect on conversation we must already share a language, which casts a fog over how a conversation is able to begin, except to say that our terms are inherited—we begin with what is given. At the same time, to contribute to conversation, to bear the responsibility of that inheritance, our speech must be simultaneously refreshed and open to an other, where our words are our own and not our

48. Ibid., 43.

own. As philosophy engages with works of art, these same challenges are magnified and exemplified. I want to close with considerations for the ways in which a friendship relates to conversation, such that, one basis for understanding our conversational engagement with a work is in terms of our befriending a work.

The idea that you can befriend a work has found its strongest foothold in the literary world. Berys Gaut gives a brief account of its history, pointing to Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep* as the most prominent, recent account. In fact, Booth even describes our encounters with fiction over time as conversational.⁴⁹ In different versions of the friendship metaphor, we befriend works (or an implied author) as if we were choosing friends in the normal course of life. Gaut observes that the idea is at least as old as Hume, who says, "We choose our favorite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humor and disposition."⁵⁰ This metaphor of friendship generates numerous puzzles, not the least of which is, are bad works like bad friends? This brings us back in touch with the relationship between morality and art: the bad friend fails us, and this is morally significant, but is the bad artwork also a moral failure? How do discussions, philosophical or fictional, permit our friendship with them? The thread that I wish to follow here is that friendship depends upon conversation, though friendship also enables and enriches conversation.

49. Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

50. Quoted in Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 109.

Aristotle ends the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “Let us begin now the discussion we first began,” spiraling past his starting point and reminding us of our involvement in his written discussion. Do written discussions always possess a dialogical character, either within themselves or with reference to past or future works? The term “discussion” may refer to two people talking, or it may refer to a written work, such as Aristotle’s. The convention of referring to a philosophical text as a “discussion” corresponds well with its root meaning, “to investigate” or “examine by argument.”⁵¹ To say that a philosophical discussion is an investigation or examination (by way of argument) does not explicitly point toward any special conversational character it may have. This is one place where philosophical convention rubs against (some) common usage, at least in terms of the difference between an argument and a discussion. We might say during a heated debate, “We’re not arguing; we’re discussing.” We say this to highlight the civility of discussion in contrast to the incivility of arguing. Arguing here has a negative connotation in colloquial speech that it does not (usually) carry in philosophical discourse. However, among the origins of the term ‘discussion,’ there is some suggestion of violence as well, where we find the phrases “to shake apart” or “dash to pieces.” The latter is a phrase that recalls, for instance, Isaiah 13: “Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes.” The “shaking apart” or “dashing to pieces” that happens in philosophical

51. *Merriam-Webster*, “discussion,”
www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discussion.

discussions is of course a verbal and conceptual activity. The subject of discussion is what comes apart, not (ideally) its participants.

In *Cities of Words*, Cavell explores an interpretive question regarding Book X of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle appears to shift course in his rebuttal to Plato regarding the good life and friendship: "if the best life is one of self-sufficiency ... why does it *require* friends?"⁵² Having upheld friendship in the preceding books, Aristotle seems to revert to the Platonic privileging of the self-sustaining life of reason right at the close. J.O. Urmson describes these final sections as an "editorial edition," however "genuine" they may be.⁵³ Cavell's solution, contrary to what he identifies as the usual interpretive options, is to see the books as unified in a distinctive way. This is how:

My suggestion is that, in particular, the origin and goal of the study that constitutes the highest activity of friendship is precisely the study that takes friendship, this friendship in particular, as its object. It is to achieve perception of your life, new speculation about it, but one whose condition is the friendship itself. Only in the state of friendship is it possible to "study" it, to perceive it—there is nothing of the kind otherwise to perceive.⁵⁴

Cavell extends this notion by claiming that his examination of "what constitutes conversation" is a way of "studying friendship further."⁵⁵

52. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 364.

53. J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 109-110.

54. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 367.

55. *Ibid.*

With regard to art, conversation is a more general framework that better responds to what Cavell calls the authority of the work set against the authority of my experience. The link between the terms authority and authorship (and authenticity) is not incidental and is important for the prospects of friendship. Acknowledging and responding to the authority of the work means allowing the work the “teach you how to consider it.”⁵⁶ A good teacher, Cavell says, is able to “prompt his or her students to find their way to that authority,” “that authority” being, “the right to take an interest in your own experience.”⁵⁷ Part of the reason I think conversation more naturally addresses the span of practices of engaging with art (over criticism) is located in that insight. However much a critic might supersede me in her understanding and the depth of her experience of a work, it remains *her* understanding and experience. I cannot outsource experience or leave it to the critic (though I see the utility of it in the right settings, as a shortcut to what is worth pursuing), in the same way that I cannot outsource an education or friendship (or speech).

The authority of one’s experience is itself provisional—it is a live relationship between myself and that which the experience is of (even as revisited in memory). Cavell states:

It is fundamental to [my] view of experience not to accept any given experience as final but to subject the experience and its object to the test of one another. . . . There are such things as inspired times of reading or listening as surely as there are such things as inspired times of writing or composition. Successive encounters of a work

56. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 11.

57. *Ibid.*, 7.

are not necessarily cumulative; a later one may overturn earlier ones or may be empty.⁵⁸

This parallels a problem from the philosophy of art: if works are reduced to what they communicate, are they then replaceable with that which they communicate or point toward? In the classroom, students often want to know what a work is about, or what a work means, which can enrich their experience. However, students just as often intend such guidance to replace the work, as they sufficiently and correctly report back what the work is about or what it means—full stop. These students operate on the artwork-as-message theory. This rejects conversation, or the exercising of one's will (embodied in linguistic expression), in favor of mere sounds (of their voices) and shapes (of their words). It over-determines the meaning of a work (if the mere repetition of sounds demonstrates any authentic expression at all, or what Cavell earlier called writing with conviction). Conversations may end at any time, but such endings require negotiation, participation, and responsiveness. A *good* conversation, at least, cannot be accomplished by rote, even if practice and study can improve one's ability to converse. For example, the same anecdote used over and over in a conversation can become tiresome and hollow.

The educational setting is a fitting place to look for lessons on engaging with art and what the call to friendship encourages and enables. Contemporary art and criticism is deeply entangled with education: its modes of inquiry as well as its formal presence in

58. Ibid., 13.

the art world, where artists, critics, historians, students, teachers, philosophers, and patrons of art are likely to have trained. However, the sense of education I draw on here has more to do with the relationship between student and teacher, or apprentice and master, and where it overlaps and conflicts with the role of the friend (as Cavell traces it in Aristotle and Emerson, for example). After their years of discipleship, Jesus—the *Rabbi*, master or teacher—declares that his twelve disciples are no longer slaves but “friends.” Part of this has to do with their finally understanding what his parables meant, what his speech amounted to. They something along the lines of, “Ah, now you are finally speaking plainly.” What does this transition into the world of friendship entail? Here education is a process in which one is “brought up” by a teacher. If friendship implies mutuality, as the Gospel stories suggest, education becomes a pre-condition of friendship: the friendship revolves around that which we share, though we come to share it through education.

What must we share to sufficiently consider our relationship a friendship? Sinnerbrink and Cavell’s film-philosophy supposes that film and philosophy share a “thinking” mode grounded in wonder and questioning. C.S. Lewis calls the friendship built around a shared object the ‘me too!’ moment, where we recognize ourselves in another.⁵⁹ Is the sharing of speech, a conversation, sufficient for friendship? Up to this stage, I have described the process of coming to understand one another in conversation

59. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 65.

an education. Where there is successful education then, there is friendship. In a straightforward sense, a friend makes conversation possible—to speak is to speak with someone. Of course, this is also true of the enemy or the mere acquaintance. Perhaps all enemies begin as friends if we've shared a word with them, in the same way that even the worst book, *pace* Auden, possesses some good if we've shared a word with it. A friend is one who helps us find the words that make it possible to discover what we might become, what we are capable of *wanting* to become, and by that I mean the friend makes authentic, “fresh” expression possible, the opposite of which is mere repetition, mere sound (the evaporation of meaning), or silence.

There are two extremes toward which students may incline in their orientation toward a teacher, both of which preclude conversation, and thus both education and friendship. One is towards the absolute authority of the teacher, which insures that a student remains forever a student. Call it false admiration. These students desire *the* answer to a question in order to robotically repeat it. In this they deny their own voice and agency. The speech is unilateral and literal. This parallels the conditions of marriage in the films on which Cavell focuses. The unilateral authority of one partner in a marriage denies the possibility of mutuality and thus a genuine marriage, where two become one; it is overly legalistic, operating by letter rather than spirit of the law (a condition explored in *Adam's Rib* [Cukor 1949] in particular). The other extreme is towards the absolute authority of the student, the absurdity of which should be immediately apparent. To be a student is to be in need of an education. The inmates don't run the asylum. Mulhall

observes that, in studying Cavell's book, we "see how the ideas of conversation and of (potentially radical) growth in understanding ... not only imply the idea of a certain pedagogical dimension to authentic human speech but also permit, even demand, expression in a pedagogical context."⁶⁰ This is a version of the story Aristotle tells, in that self-sufficiency is meaningless, and paradoxically unachievable, without friends, without those with whom we are able to share a word and through whom we come to an understanding. Without conversation there is no education.

Contravening the artwork-as-message view, Cavell states, "the end of caring cannot be expressed in a conclusion which you might *take away* from the text."⁶¹ I hear echoes of Kant's imperative that however you treat a person, you ought not treat them as a means to an end. To converse with a work, which one cares about, is not merely to report back or "take away" the right understanding and leave the work behind. Returning to Aristotle, we may see a similar temptation in that, we may think of self-sufficiency as the achievement of a successful education. We learn to be on our own. However, in Cavell's readings, both of the films and of Aristotle, we see that the success of an education with another is bond-forming. We are raised to a level of mutuality where before there was only master and slave, teacher and disciple. We befriend the works we care about and not merely as means to another end (or because we imagine their authors,

60. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 68.

61. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 13.

implied or real, could be friends of ours). It is instead the basis of a bond to which we remain open and subject to its transformations, i.e., able to be educated.

We converse with a work as we subject our understanding to its own forms of expression and thought. Cavell recasts the problem of taste—specifically, the authority of one’s taste—in terms of the education of one’s experience. Whatever our credentials, we cannot begin anywhere other than our own experience, but the articulation or education of that experience takes place within the framework of conversation, where we are called to bring our subjectivity to the table and to subject it to another. We uphold or achieve friendship with a work insofar as we are able to converse *with* it.

Before we close, I want to acknowledge more plainly some of the limits of the friendship metaphor. Supposing that the idea of befriending an artwork and conversing with it is a metaphoric invention, not to be taken too literally, we must consider its limits.

One objection insists that we not take the idea of friendship with a work (or its author or implied author or its “postulated implied author”⁶²) too seriously, lest we sound delusional. Gaut states: “It is a necessary condition for someone’s being a friend that she be someone with whom one has had some kind of relationship involving mutual awareness, normally meeting her. But the manifested author is a person whom one is likely never to have met. If someone said ‘Flaubert is a good friend of mine’ and one took him literally, one would have to suppose that he was suffering from a gross delusion.”⁶³

62. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 111.

63. *Ibid.*, 111.

By focusing on a work as the source of friendship, we can at least say that there is a much more tangible and familiar sense of acquaintance. I may not have met Flaubert, but my copy of *Madame Bovary* has seen plenty of love, starting with the time we met at 40th and Spruce Street. She was lying on a shelf with friends, and since then we've shared a number of evenings together, and even went on vacation. Yet, before I get carried away, in what way is the book (or painting or movie) *aware of me* and participating in the relationship?

There are two issues here. Supposing that people are aware of others while works of art are not, we can say, first, it's not always the case that the person before me seems to be especially aware of me, and certainly not always in any specially perceptive way that demonstrates understanding. Second, works of art often *do* seem to be speaking to me, often with greater particularity and depth than a person may. Compared to some friends, they are more insightful, psychologically penetrating, more comforting, or humorous (not always, but on occasion). Good works offer insights into the world I inhabit or into my own psychology, and not just as a confirmation of already familiar or known facts or ideas. Works can reveal things about myself or the world, which I otherwise pass over or miss. That these more elevated or robust achievements of a work appear only on occasion is no hindrance to the metaphor either; different friends offer different kinds of contributions to my life at different times. Not every work needs to offer profound insight and neither does every friend.

We may also object that with non-verbal works, such as paintings, there are no words for us to latch onto with which we can converse. I can hardly talk *about* some paintings, let alone *with* one. Furthermore, the profoundly visual significance of some paintings actively resists linguistic description or engagement. Here I appeal both to the need to be sensitive to and with particular works and their context, as well as to the challenge of responding verbally to *any* work. All artistic encounters expose a gap between the medium of the work, the medium of my experience, and the medium of articulating that experience. To engage with a work conversationally will always require developing a vocabulary and a way of speaking suited to the other, which is true of any conversation I may hope to have with a person with whom I may not, initially, share much in common. In fact, often such encounters expand and refresh my conversational habits. Furthermore, absent language, it is not clear what pure visual or auditory works could express, or what that expression would mean. There is always the risk of reducing an auditory or visual work to the linguistic responses we offer, but the same risk is present with verbal works. To reiterate once more, as with our everyday conversations, the shape of the dialogue will vary with the subjects and context with which we hope to engage. Meaningful silence is always a live option when the moment is right.

Finally, the upshot of the friendship metaphor, and the conversation that comprises that friendship, is that we must take our engagement with a work of art seriously, both in form and content. This will, as I will argue in the following chapter, better meet the condition of sensitivity than a conventional critical approach.

Conversation encourages and permits live, on-going responsiveness that varies flexibly according to the work or friend with whom I happen to be in dialogue. We turn now to some exemplary and fruitful friendships between works and writers, tracing their conversational exchanges and extending them further through our own participation and fresh contributions.

CHAPTER 5
CONVERSATIONAL PRAXIS

Understanding happens ... when something addresses us.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

I feel what's to happen, all happened before ...

“Oh it's you, hello!”

—Bert in *Mary Poppins* (1964)

A poet or novelist has to learn to be humble in the face of his subject matter which is life in general. But the subject matter of a critic, before which he has to learn to be humble, is made up of authors, that is to say, of human individuals, and this kind of humility is much more difficult to acquire.

—W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*

“Well that's no good; that's not even conversation.”

—C.K. Dexter Haven in *The Philadelphia Story*

“The time to make up your mind about people, is never.”

—Tracy Lord in *The Philadelphia Story*

Each of the chapters up to this point have been building room for the conversation that ensues here. It is the positive picture of engaging with art I would like to see take hold, though, I also think it is a fair representation of actual practice as well—a

sufficiently sensitive practice. My initial intuition at the outset of the project was that criticism played too large a role in theory and practice, and other ways of engaging with art had been left relatively untouched. I wanted a framework that made sense of the diversity and complexity of my experience with art and that responded to my intuition about the outsized role of criticism. Though the project title—an *ethics* of engaging with art—suggests a strict standard, a law etched in stone, my thinking began with what I intuitively took to be exceptionally good examples of engaging with art, or, more simply, what I enjoyed in my experience with art and others who were doing the same. What characterized these experiences? In curtailing criticism, I am eager to hold up and examine specific writers and works together as a testament to the complexity of artistic engagement and as models of sensitivity. That is the goal of this chapter.

Let's quickly review how we got to this point. We began by looking at the scope of philosophy of criticism, especially in the Anglophone philosophical world of the last seventy-five years. At the center of that tradition (if it can be called that) is a view of criticism as the reasoned, evaluative judgment of a work of art. We tested criticism against the criterion of sensitivity, considering cases where criticism fails in its sensitivity with and to a work of art. In particular, critical practice fails to demonstrate sensitivity in those moments where either the work or its context do not invite or warrant critical engagement. In making the case for conversation as a more sensitive practice, which we have not yet done, I began (in the last chapter) with a primer on what it means to converse. If we assume that artworks, on the whole, are not inclined to respond to our

verbal entreaties—at least not with live verbal responses of their own—then the problem of how to begin, and carry on, a conversation with an artwork is a serious one.

Philosophy's attempts to make sense of conversational beginnings offers us some clues as to how we might resolve this puzzle. At the very least, the problem of how we begin a conversation is not altogether different with art than it is in general. Still, the issue of how to construe conversational engagement *with art* has not yet taken center stage, which brings us to the present task.

We often talk *about* works of art, but is it possible to have a conversation *with* them? Do conversations demonstrate or require greater sensitivity than criticism, either to or with a work? In this chapter, I explicate what I call conversational engagement from two angles. The first involves the three criteria for conversation I introduced in the last chapter, and the second involves accounting for those criteria as they show up in the work of writers engaging with works of art. To reiterate, the three criteria for conversation are as follows: there must be (at least) two participants, the participants must share a language, and there must be responsive exchange. I explore these criteria piecemeal (primarily focusing on the third), first through Wendell Berry's discussion of Norman Maclean's story, "A River Runs Through It" (1976)—a story that exemplifies the tragedy of failed conversation. Next, I look at Stanley Cavell's engagement with *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940)—a film that deals with the comedic recovery and happy pursuit of conversation. Lastly, I bring each of these accounts into contact with the 1964

film adaptation of *Mary Poppins*, where we address the question (prompted by what I take the movie to be asking us), Should we take comedy seriously?

With each case, there is a double objective. I claim that each of the artworks in question invites our conversation with them, which we discover both through attending to the works and by attending to the work of each writer. The writers demonstrate an instance of a response to those invitations; that is, their writing embodies a conversational exchange between writer and work. They also write *as if* the works are capable of responding to what it is they have to say or have had to say (and may yet say). I resist calling this a “stylistic” feature of their writing for reasons contained in earlier chapters—and for reasons evident in Berry’s essay, to be discussed—where style functions as a dressing, or a way of expressing some uniform or stable idea that may be expressed in some other, comparable way. The double objective then is to look at the conversation that the writers enact in their attending to the works, as well as the facets of conversation each of the artworks discloses.

You may, at this point, be tempted to call conversation with art a metaphoric invention. Artworks don’t *really* respond to me, though I might imagine that they do at times. I do not mind the tag of metaphor, but I think it risks undervaluing the ease with artworks carry on a life of their own and expressively address me (and in different ways at different times). We may also come to see the ways in which we enact conversation as not just a fiction of the mind, but as a process of engaging with a work, as characteristic of our experience with it. In this sense, we also want to avoid over-literalizing the

conversational model I propose, even if the cases I focus on in this chapter take up manifestly verbal forms.

We must, of course, suppose that an artwork has something to say in some sense, and perhaps this is easier to suppose with works that are verbally charged than with pure visual or auditory works. Insofar as speech, and meaning, is always mediated, our task will be the same. Gadamer states: “writing and speech are in the same plight. Just as in speech there is an art of appearances and a corresponding art of true thought—sophistry and dialectic—so in writing there are two arts, one serving sophistic, the other dialectic.”¹ We look at how the works in question invite me to treat them as if they are capable of speaking for themselves and responding to renewed inquiry, while accepting that it is possible that a work may lack the capacity to respond to us, that it can harden into an object unable to speak on shared terms. As a positive example (not included in the ensuing discussion), we should be astonished that *Hamlet* continues to fruitfully respond to and participate in contemporary life,² and, as a specific instance of discovery and

1. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 393.

2. Two points worth noting here. First, you may argue that *Hamlet* survives an impossibly enormous amount of attention because of the nature of being a work intended for performance, and each new performance provides us with fresh material. Second (and all the same), there is a staggering amount of material devoted to it. For example, there is an annual journal devoted to *Hamlet* studies, *Hamlet Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also Michael Dobson, Stanley Wells, Erin Sullivan, and Will Sharpe, eds., “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare, Rev., Expanded Ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 252-6. The authors state: “It would be impossible, even in a book-length study, to do full justice to any more than the bare outlines of this play’s impact, not just in literary criticism and on the stage, but on Western culture at large: its characters have entered the realm of myth, and its motifs

exchange that Cavell facilitates, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* turns out to have something to say to John Rawls (and vice versa).³

Berry opens his essay with a bald affirmation of conversation with art and its place in our lives:

Works of art participate in our lives; we are not just distant observers of their lives. They are in conversation among themselves and with us. This is a part of the description of human life; we do the way we do partly because of things that have been said to us by works of art, and because of things that we have said in reply.⁴

He then particularizes the conversation: “For a long time, I have been in conversation with Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River.’” What he means by this, I take it, is that in his attempt to understand the story, he turns to the work as if it is capable of responding to his inquires, though the limits of his conversation with it are the limits of the story’s terms. He says, “Hemingway’s art, in ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ seems to me an art determined by its style. This style, like a victorious general, imposes its terms on its subject.”⁵ Style that is about itself echoes the risks of the sophist outlined before, or the emptiness of a private language. Style must be a partner to the world. The essay functions to open the closure that the style presses upon us by extending it both to the reader (of his

have been endlessly reworked, in fiction (Gothic and otherwise), painting, opera, and film no less than in subsequent drama (from Middleton’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* through 19th-century burlesque to Chekhov and Stoppard and beyond)” (255).

3. See chapters 9 and 10 in Cavell, *Cities of Words*.

4. Wendell Berry, “Style and Grace,” in *What Are People For?* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 75.

5. Berry, “Style and Grace” (2010), 70.

essay) and to another story. I say ‘extension’ and not ‘recording’ of conversation because it would betray the openness and agency Berry attributes to works in that opening line I quote.

To be clear, not every conversational gambit is successful or needs to be. But then this is just the sort of thing we discover through our sensitivity with and to a work. What sort of conversation can we have with it? In a similar approach, Cavell embodies and enables conversation as a mode of thought in his writing by returning to familiar works over again (e.g., over the course of multiple books and essays) and by placing one work next to another in novel ways (e.g., linking chapters on Emerson with *The Philadelphia Story*). Each written work is thus a testimony to conversational possibility and exchange. Consider, for instance, the opening to his book, *Cities of Words*, where he pairs a film and a philosopher together over the course of several chapters, or letters, as he calls them:

The book of letters you have before you follows the course of a course of lectures ... which I gave a number of times over the last decade and a half. The book differs from the lectures most notably in the circumstance that the secrets of its ending and the mysteries of its beginning are here fixed, for you and for me.⁶

He goes on to stipulate that “unlike the students and friends in the classroom, [you] are free to walk away from any sentence or paragraph of it without embarrassment to either of us.”⁷ These remarks capture an important difference between the words we share in a

6. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, ix.

7. *Ibid.*

letter and the words we share in the classroom⁸, where we may suppose that conversation has a more natural home; that is, the words in a letter are “fixed.” However, one way to read the fixity of the “secrets” and “mysteries” of the book’s ending and beginning (listed in reverse order, we should note⁹) is that they are made public. The mysteries and secrets are not fixed in the sense of being reduced to known and determinable meanings. One of Berry’s criticisms of Hemingway’s story is that “it deals with what it does not understand by leaving it out.”¹⁰ By comparison then, the secrets and mysteries of Cavell’s letters are available and subject to the words of another, rather than being hidden from view (i.e., they are fixed “*for you and me*” to consider, and in a literal sense, they no longer belong to the classrooms of two private universities, which further corresponds with the switch from lectures to letters, a medium that emphasizes both distance and intimacy and where one is explicitly *addressed*, which further mirrors a tension in the films on which the book dwells—e.g., the closeness of a *star* on screen¹¹). A letter, furthermore, is commonly a form that permits response.

8. Cavell titles the introduction, “In the Place of the Classroom” (ibid., 1).

9. I take this to be an acknowledgment that in conversation, we often begin where another ended, in the sense that we seem to begin with the terms that are given to us (e.g., see Cavell’s extended, wide-ranging epigraphs), such that the beginning shows a debt to an end, and our ends point to future beginnings.

10. Berry, “Style and Grace” (2010), 66.

11. For a thorough account of this particular aspect of Cavell’s work, see Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 76-98.

Berry and Cavell are thus exploring the specific terms of an artwork's conversational possibilities as represented in those works, and each case reveals something about conversation. Let me offer a further overview of what each case aims to show regarding conversation before commencing fully.

Berry's discussion speaks to the limits of conversation in terms of the limits of understanding, and the limits of understanding are contained in the limits of conversation. As I pursue understanding through conversation with another, we sometimes find that understanding eludes us, our words are not fully shared. In the stories with which Berry converses, which either allude to or epitomize tragedy, our conversation is threatened by silence (or death, a kind of silence). There is a literal risk with a work of art that our words will be met with silence. Can we expect a work to offer fresh contributions to whatever discussion I wish to start with it, thus meeting the condition of responsive exchange? Supposing that a work may be silent, how can we overcome the limitations to understanding silence engenders? This is especially troubling when we are unable to return to some provisional or incomplete understanding with that which (or those whom) we love. In short, most conversations do not last forever, and, to understate the matter, our lives surely do not either. While the close of conversation is not always (or even often) lamentable—I am grateful many conversations do not last more than a few minutes, let alone go on forever!—the loss of conversation is a tragedy when the incompleteness of understanding overwhelms our ability to love another. How do we acknowledge that which escapes our pursuit? These problems manifest themselves in two

ways, so named in the title of Berry's essay, *style* and *grace*. Grace is the overcoming of the limits of understanding through the continual pursuit of it in words—a quality Maclean's story embodies through its openness to the unknowable—while style, when it is made primary, closes conversation by failing to enter the territory where the incompleteness of understanding is acknowledged—the hermeticism of Hemingway's story.

If silence is one threat to conversation, over-familiarity is another, inverse threat, at least as it breeds presumptiveness, or snobbery—its specific manifestation in *The Philadelphia Story* which Cavell identifies. *I already know what a work says, and it's the same thing over and over—it never changes*. On Cavell's prompting, I suggested before that there is no place to begin other than with the words of another, which he also calls, channeling Emerson, “the fatedness to quotation.”¹² On the other hand, Cavell quotes from Emerson the following observation, “The highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact.”¹³ In *The Philadelphia Story*, Cavell identifies the pursuit of conversation as the basis for a comedic and happy recovery of relationship, where we are able both to “want the world and want it to change.”¹⁴ The movie is filled to the brim with double, quadruple, centuple, and manifold

12. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 29.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

14. *Ibid.*, 18.

expressions. Its wooden characters draw attention to this by being unable to fathom a second meaning for a word, let alone a hundredth. The recovery of conversation, and the recovery of relationship, occurs through the unfolding of meaning and the need to refresh the terms of our engagement.

Cavell includes the film as a participant in reflections on “moral perfectionism,” where happiness is a kind of perfection, or a way the world may yet be for us. We inch closer to that perfection only through the perpetual renewal of the terms of our engagement. D.N. Rodowick describes it this way: “As a perfectionist ethical practice, conversation aims for an acknowledgment of self and of others that must not only be affirmed but continually reaffirmed”—thus the comedies of *remarriage*, in the sense that a marriage, even to the same individual, is only as secure as our ability to reaffirm our commitment. Cavell is not interested in an absolute perfection, one which we achieve once and for all (say, during the vows), but in an achievable but always unachieved perfection¹⁵—a *practical* perfection, in my own terms.

Drawing on Emerson, Cavell further emphasizes the importance of the words of another in helping us to articulate what it is possible for us to become, which he further associates with the role of the friend. The familiar and the private is on view or made public, as a point of tension, in the medium of film and in the film. We can describe this through so many contrasting elements: on the one hand, repetition, reason, permanence,

15. Ibid., 4-5.

the past or passing, and the ordinary, and on the other, discovery, unpredictability, the romantic, and the extraordinary (and perhaps also of the still image against the moving¹⁶, of divinity against flesh and blood¹⁷). Channeling Wittgenstein, a form of life together and the reinvigoration of the pursuit of happiness is ultimately signaled by the sharing of a familiar word made new again—within the film, the word is *yare*.

Mary Poppins also explores the familiar and its threat to our conversations, and it also relies on a word—a long, silly, invented word I won't repeat here (just yet)—to reinvigorate a form of family life, which is to say, conversation is recovered through play. The film flirts with the edges of absurdity that excessive play, or silliness, poses. As a piece of comedy, the movie risks not being taken seriously. Is it worthy of our conversation or is it mere amusement? Can we take its words seriously? Will it reward my conversation? Even if we say that it does, you may say, this is not really proof of conversation *with* the work. What I want to offer is that, insofar as the movie is preoccupied with overcoming the static, closed-off distancing that can happen in relation to the familiar—here the issue is not one of snobbery so much as one of authority, or mastery over another, as in a father's relationship to his children, or in our relationship to a children's story, a piece of popular entertainment seen many times over—it encourages play, with words specifically, as a way to acknowledge the presence of the other, as a

16. See Cavell's discussion of the film's closing "still" image in *Cities of Words*, 41.

17. I'm thinking here of the recurring label given to Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story*, that of a Goddess, against which she desires instead, as she discovers, to be "flesh and blood."

route to sharing life. Conversation with art, while not strictly a metaphor, involves this sense of play. In the end, you may *still* say, play is better rewarded with one's children or one's spouse than it is with an artwork. Fair enough. There are limits to play, just as there are limits to Mary's perfection, and within the movie, some suggest the line at which play ceases to be rewarded is animated dancing penguins. What we can we say?

Tragedy and the Limits of Conversation

Consistent with the three criteria for conversation, let's suppose that the principal threats to conversation are the following two possibilities: either one, the other, or both participants in an encounter does not understand the other, and thus responsive exchange is out of reach, or one, the other, or both of us *does* understand the other, but we refrain or are otherwise unable to respond. In both cases, there is no responsive exchange. The idea of "responsive exchange" is vague, though. What are its conditions?

Consider the following scenario. My parents sometimes sat me down to have what they would call a "conversation," one which did not obviously involve exchange. In fact, you might say that exchange was neither required nor desired. Instead our "conversation" involved, first, the delivery of a well-rehearsed speech on some well-documented area of adolescent incompetency (e.g., dish washing, social skills, personal hygiene, bed making, garage-door closing, front-door locking, pet care). Following this, the "conversation" required my acknowledgment that I understood what I was told. That second step, my acknowledgment, was usually prompted through a strategy I expect

many are familiar with, with which many conversations between parent and child have closed—a question: *do you understand?* I want to say that in my encounters with my parents, and others like it, the conditions for a conversation are met, even if minimally. We shared words in the sense that my parents spoke and I understood their speech, and I acknowledged their speech. To return to the original point, in order to have responsive exchange, conversational partners must come to understand one another. This is following Gadamer’s claim, “Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding.”¹⁸ He goes on, “What is to be grasped [in conversation] is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject.”¹⁹ I can think of no more apt description for what my parents desired, that we be “at one with each other on the subject.” In our conversation, the relevant response was fairly well prescribed and simple but also clearly necessary (they insisted), as evidenced by the question, *do you understand?*

There is a gap between knowing and understanding, however. John Gibson has described acknowledgment as the fulfillment of knowledge.²⁰ Starting from an idea in Cavell, Gibson suggests a difference between the mere knower, who is able to accurately recite or cognitively represent propositional facts about the world, and those who

18. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385.

19. *Ibid.*, 387.

20. John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 111.

understand those facts through acknowledgment (of, say, the claims those facts make on them). He states: “It [acknowledgment] is a form of understanding that concerns not a grasp of the ‘truth of the matter’, knowledge of the nature of the bit of reality before them. It consists in a mind’s awareness of what is better described as the *role* a piece of knowledge plays in a form of life.”²¹ With the conversations with my parents, understanding likely meant changes in behavior or calls to specific actions; in fact, it very clearly did *not* mean merely comprehending the propositional content of their speech. Part of the importance of understanding and acknowledgment is that even in the face of what may seem to be static or fixed—words that do not change—our understanding of those words, the claim they make on me, is context sensitive, in particular, sensitive to my own participation and the occasion for my encounter with them, and this requires not just any acknowledgment but *my* acknowledgment.

I hope you won’t quibble if I say that it is clearly possible to understand a work of art. But responsive exchange requires the reverse as well, and can we say that a work of art understands *me*? Can it acknowledge me? I think there is a plausible sense in which an artwork does understand and acknowledge me, and I explored this in part under the guise of befriending a work of art (in the last chapter). Great works of art, in particular, often seem to understand me in startling, subtle, and profound ways, revealing and shaping my understanding of myself and the world. Gibson describes this potential in

21. *Ibid.*, 107.

works of art as the act of “bringing our world into view.”²² All the same, we may deny that a work is *responding* to my inquiries. In keeping with that problem, I want to acknowledge where the limitations of understanding might arise, where we are met with silence or the absence of acknowledgment (i.e., where conversation is closed off).

In his essay, “Style and Grace,” Berry states, “For a long time, I have been in conversation with [Hemingway’s] ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ and with myself about ‘Big Two-Hearted River.’”²³ He identifies here and in the course of the essay three conversational partners. The first is between himself and a work. The second is between one work and another (in his case, as Hemingway’s story touches Maclean’s). The third is between two people about a work, which also includes the internal dialogue we might have about a work. I want to make the claim that Berry is prompted, first, by his attempt to understand something about Hemingway’s story, and this only happens insofar as Hemingway’s story is part of Berry’s own dialogue (specifically, about tragedy, mystery, and understanding)—which Hemingway’s story limits, for reasons I will explore shortly—and, second, that the process of coming to an understanding happens, as Gadamer states, *in conversation*. Berry’s conversation is expanded through the introduction of another interlocutor, one that enters the territory Hemingway’s story

22. *Ibid.*, 114.

23. Wendell Berry, “Style and Grace,” in *Norman Maclean: A Reader*, eds. Ronald McFarland and Hugh Nichols (Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1988), 213.

refuses to inhabit. What Berry's conversation shows is that the limits to our understanding are the limits of conversation.

Berry begins with Hemingway but later states, "My conversation with 'Big Two-Hearted River' has been joined and a good deal clarified by Norman Maclean's long story, 'A River Runs Through It.'" ²⁴ One potential problem with Berry's notion that he's in conversation *with* these works is that the specific texts Berry converses with may be incidental to his mode of engagement—maybe he's just itching for someone to talk to. In his desperation for interlocutors, we may be inclined to reject the claim that the works invite or permit conversation (and that he demonstrates sensitivity with and to them). Is Berry just a madman talking to shadows?

However, the mode of engagement seems to be closely wrapped up with both the medium and its subject rather intimately. The possibilities of conversation, with and about the works, are the possibilities that the stories invite and permit. This communicative or expressive quality is arguably evident in all art to some degree: works of art communicate meaning because humans create them and communicate through them. Works always have something to "say." We have then Berry's description of his returning to a work with the expectation that there is more it has to say, which manifests itself in the form of what he has not fully understood, or, as the case may be, that the story itself has not fully understood. On the other hand, we have a third party that

24. Ibid., 215.

illuminates, encourages, and clarifies that exchange. It is not merely the depth of meaning that a single work contains that sustains the dialogue; in fact, Berry seems to be running up against its limitations. The style of Hemingway's story closes off dialogue, or a specific realm of conversation. To paraphrase Berry, it does not know what it will say when it gets to that place.²⁵ But, just as a third party can refresh and revive an otherwise stalling conversation among friends, another work revises and reframes his conversation with Hemingway's story. Maclean's long story partakes in Berry's dialogue with and about "Big Two-Hearted River." In what way does it do this?

The pebble in Berry's shoe is the end of "Big Two-Hearted River," where Nick, a fisherman, approaches but never crosses the edge of a wooded swamp because "the fishing would be tragic."²⁶ The story never enters the wooded swamp at the expense of what Berry calls Hemingway's "literary purity": "[the story] does not go into dark swamps because it does not know how it will act when it gets there. The problem with style of this kind is that it is severely reductive of both humanity and nature: the fisherman is divided from history and bewilderment, the river from its darkness."²⁷ In comparison, "Fishing, in Mr. Maclean's story, is not a rite of solitary purification, a

25. Ibid., 214.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

leaving of everything behind, but a rite of companionship ... [and] an art, and as such it is emblematic of all that makes us companion with one another.”²⁸

The art that the Maclean family shares is fly-fishing; dry fly-fishing being the most revered form. Berry recounts: “fly-fishing is seen ... as a way of recovering God’s rhythms and attaining grace—no easy task for ‘if you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess.’”²⁹ The biggest mess and mystery is Paul, Maclean’s brother, who is most at home under the discipline of the river and least at home away from it. Maclean’s story is a genuine tragedy because it inhabits the “dark swamp” Hemingway’s story only approaches, where understanding is imperfect or incomplete. Berry remarks, “it is a tragedy that confirms the completeness, and indeed the immortality, of love,”³⁰ for there can be no need for grace where failure and mystery are left untouched.

The elder Maclean is a Presbyterian minister who brings his Greek New Testament fishing. The Reverend remarks: “In the part I was reading, it says the Word was in the beginning, and that’s right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water.”³¹ The most serious obstacle to the happy reception of those obscured words is Paul’s untimely and

28. Ibid., 215.

29. Ibid., 216.

30. Ibid., 215.

31. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 95.

unresolved death. He is beaten by the butt of a revolver and found in an alley. Harold P.

Simonson observes:

Close as narrator Maclean appears to be to his brother Paul, both reverencing the river whose secrets only the best dry-fly fisherman can hope to touch, a vast gulf nevertheless separates them. If they both find the river an oceanic enigma where answers lie hidden in watery shadows, the narrator finds his brother an enigma as well.³²

What is clear with Paul is that he was not just a skilled fly fisherman but a masterful one.

To speak in broad terms about Paul apart from these facts would betray the care and difficulty with which Maclean articulates his imperfect knowledge and understanding of him. The conversational impasses he and Paul run into surface in a way that feels as if Maclean is still working out, through the story, how best to be his brother's keeper—that ancient, ill-fated task.

Maclean explains that “A River Runs Through It” is the *story* of his family, a fiction, and not strictly a biography or memoir. I think this has something to do with the imaginative space required in bridging, for the sake of love, what we know with what we do not know. Chasing that kind of knowledge is an unending, daunting task even among the living; what the Reverend Maclean would call the fishing of men. What threatens our success in that art is how well we can love when understanding fails us, which it will. In the language of Berry's essay and Maclean's story, we say that perfection comes by

32. Harold P. Simonson, “Norman Maclean's Two-Hearted River,” in *Norman Maclean: A Reader*, eds. Ronald McFarland and Hugh Nichols (Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1988), 164.

grace, and grace, Maclean observes, comes by art, “and art does not come easy.”³³ The final lines of Maclean’s story elliptically draw us into the uneasiness between understanding and grace, and the words that remain forever in view but always just out of reach, and that we pursue without end: “The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.”³⁴

What does this show us about conversation with art? The limits of conversation with art are the limits of the understanding we may come to with it. So far as our understanding of a work is incomplete, which Berry and Maclean suggest is forever our condition, we may continue to pursue understanding. There is a tremendous risk in this. Our intended conversational partners, either in their lives or in their words, may lie out of reach, silent, marked by death or buried beneath the world’s great river. Our desire to understand through conversation is premised on a desire to know and love—to acknowledge—that which may not acknowledge us. As we pursue understanding, we have to come to terms with the terms of our conversational partners. Maclean’s story is a rumination on the limits of our ability to understand words as the river runs over them. We can continue to fish for them, but we are only as successful in that art as we are guided by discipline and grace, which do not come easy (or in solitude). Regarding

33. Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, 3.

34. *Ibid.*, 161.

conversation with art, grace means accepting the limits of understanding—a work may not always have something to say to me, and it may not respond to every question I ask of it—but I continue to pursue it so long as I care.

The Recovery of Conversation

If Maclean's story deals with the loss or failure of conversation, *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940) deals with the comedic and happy recovery of conversation. Cavell states, "[with] a work one cares about," we haven't simply read, watched, or seen it, we are a reader, watcher, or seer of it—"connection with it goes on."³⁵ This claim is supported both in his writing and as a preoccupation of the works contained in his writing. *The Philadelphia Story* is a long time interlocutor for Cavell and a principal member of his genre project on the "Hollywood comedies of remarriage," historically and conventionally referred to as "screwball" comedies.³⁶ We already spent some time looking at the film and Cavell's discussion of it in the first chapter, but I want to focus on a different facet of the film and Cavell's writing here. To get there, I return briefly to the threats to conversation that my earlier example—between my parents and I—was meant to evoke.

In any attempt at conversation, there is the risk of talking past or over or at one another, which is also a failure of acknowledgment. Gadamer describes this as the task of

35. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 13.

36. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 189, 382.

“ensuring that the other person is with us.”³⁷ In keeping with some of the lessons of the previous chapter, we may call the exchange between me and my parents educational, or at least aspiring towards it. They were *lecturing* me. One well-worn contrast lies in the difference between education in the form of a lecture versus education through discussion. A lecture is a form that may seem, on the surface, to cut against the grain of the openness of conversation, which makes exchange possible. This is what makes my parent’s question—do you understand?—somewhat crucial. A question, so far as it is genuinely a question, is an opening, addressing another and desiring response. If an answer is over-determined, we have reason to doubt the genuineness of the question as a question. We risk, that is, a programmatic exchange that is *not* responsive. Gadamer states, “We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner.”³⁸ Furthermore, the most basic form of conversation lies in the shape of question and answer: “To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer.”³⁹ This may involve questions in a familiar kind of form, but it may also mean a form of speaking that is itself questioning, which is to say, a kind of testing that allows another to “provoke” our prejudices.⁴⁰ When a text addresses

37. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 367.

38. *Ibid.*, 383.

39. *Ibid.*, 367.

40. *Ibid.*, 299.

us, we, in turn, are required to suspend our prejudices in order to consider the possibilities and the claims that it makes.⁴¹ Gadamer insists that this does not further require our agreement or assent to its truth, but in order to judge the claims of another we must first make sense of them.

The Philadelphia Story dramatizes the question of prejudice and the form a suitable provocation may take. Conversation, it turns out, is the basis for a suitable, ongoing provocation—otherwise known as a spouse (or in more friendly terms, a “helpmeet”). In one of the movie’s many sparkling moments of dialogue, Tracy (played by Katharine Hepburn) says to Mike (played by Jimmy Stewart), “The time to make up your mind about people, is never.” Let me build back up to this line to show how it fits with the openness of conversation, and how Cavell enacts in his writing the forms of provocation, questioning, and suspension of prejudice that occur in the movie.

Tracy Lord comes from old money and is about to remarry after a violent breakup with fellow blue-blood, C.K. Dexter Haven (Grant), a designer and builder of “class boats.” Macaulay Connor (Stewart), or “Mike” to his friends, has a passion for writing short stories, but, for the sake of employment, he’s complicit in a blackmail scheme, along with Dexter, to expose Tracy’s impending second marriage in the pages of a tabloid called *Spy Magazine*. With Dexter’s help, Mike works his way into the wedding party under false pretenses, where he has an easy time dispensing judgment on just about

41. Ibid.

everyone, including himself, for partaking in the spectacle of “watching the privileged class enjoying its privileges.”

In the midst of this unfolding blackmail scheme, Mike and Tracy find themselves surprised by their growing and mutual affection. “With the rich and mighty, always a little patience,” Mike says, referring to a Spanish peasant’s proverb that’s the basis for one of his short stories. Tracy’s prejudice against Mike lies with his intellectual snobbery. Under the influence of a bottle of champagne, *Miss Pomeroy 1926*, their prejudices start to fade: they dance closely and gently along the lip of a fountain, misted with a late night fog and music and sentiment. Just at the moment when Mike’s love for Tracy might take flight, while she wheels him around in a chair, a little sobriety kicks in. He settles back onto level ground and into the safety of his disdain for the upper class. He’s convinced Tracy can’t go through with the wedding, though he hasn’t fully unburdened himself of his commitment to despising the well-to-do either. It’s in Mike’s moment of retreat, into the comfort of his certainty and judgments—“thirty’s about time to make up your mind!” he screams—that Tracy offers her proverbial declaration: “The time to make up your mind about people, is never.”

Whatever this line signals about Tracy’s transformation and the softening of her self-righteousness, this is a moment that invites us to approach the film itself provisionally, in the way that Cavell insists on the provisional nature of his experience and reading of the film. To make up one’s mind, to make settled judgments on the basis of class (or genre or casting ...), is to treat the work the way George Kittredge (John

Howard), Tracy's fiancé, thinks of Tracy: either she's a radiant goddess, perfect and unchanging, or she's flawed and something to tolerate in her weakness. In one inauspicious moment, George gazes up at Tracy in admiration and declares his intention to build her an ivory tower. This is the beginning of Tracy's suspicions that she may be headed toward a more debilitating fate than she anticipated in marrying George.

To not make up one's mind could mean we're indecisive, like a child at the ice cream shop, slowly deliberating and waffling in the selection of a flavor. In Tracy's declaration (not to make up your mind about people), I don't take her to be suggesting that we suspend judgment altogether, to remain indefinitely indecisive or uncommitted—this is a film about the conditions for marriage, which *just is* commitment in some sense. Rather, the suggestion is that we hold our judgments loosely, especially as they belong to a class of judgments or, say, judgments of class. We should be prepared to revise them, to jettison them, or to forget them altogether.

The issue of settled judgments is embodied and expressed perhaps even more so in the film's preoccupation with language. There are several scenes where ordinary, passing phrases are repeated or mirrored to unfold their possibilities, or perhaps to emphasize their fluidity. In a rather innocuous moment Cavell points to, Tracy, after her exchange with Mike and barely awake, drunk on the baptismal waters of *Miss Pomeroy 1926* and a late-night swim, declares herself "not wounded, Sire, but dead." She's responding to Dexter, who, alongside George, is trying to piece together the state of

affairs after a tumultuous evening. Tracy's line, Cavell notes, is from "Robert Browning's 'Incident at the French Camp'":

"You're wounded." "Nay, the soldier's pride
Touched to the quick, he said:
"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside
Smiling the boy fell dead."⁴²

How are we to read Tracy's allusion? It is not a strict quotation. It arouses questions of what it means to express something for oneself, to be accountable for one's words, or *to be oneself*—a constant problem for Tracy. It befits the "fatedness to quotation" that Cavell finds in Emerson. She announces her death in quotation, where her words are not her own. This is also a line that, in its brevity and obscurity, easily slips past attention.

Further speculating about the Browning line, Cavell states in a single, ponderous passage:

I note that, having re-found her playfulness in response to Dexter's concern, a quality in her he has told her he relished (I am remembering her having described Dexter, to George, as "my lord and master"), and, leaving aside the question of who is the chief who is present "beside" her (it could be George, but the idea that her pride in battle is touched rather suggests that it is Mike), I note further that what has died is specified in Tracy's allusion to herself, via Browning's poem, as a boy, hence she is in effect acknowledging that the "garconne" quality associated with Katharine Hepburn (fully recognized on film in her playing a boy in *Sylvia Scarlett*, directed by George Cukor in the mid-1930s) is part of why she requires resurrection as a grown woman.

Or is this worth noting?⁴³

42. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 44.

43. *Ibid.*

Should we doubt that a moment memorialized in an eleven-line sentence is worth “noting”? In effect, Cavell exemplifies the problem the allusion to Browning poses for us and some of the problems a “screwball” comedy may generate: Are the provocations of the film ones that test us, which is to say, that we are called to or capable of responding to? How much effort should we expend in attending to something that passes us by, as films do? How much sympathy do we owe high society? Did Tracy intend to quote Browning? Did the filmmakers intend us to recognize the reference?

The problems these questions are meant to evoke, and which Cavell’s response exemplifies, lies in the necessity of questioning, of questions, for the sake of coming to answers we can live with, but without closing off the possibility of rejoinder (i.e., by asking, “Is this worth noting?”). Cavell’s “note” is a pursuit of a line of interest that is particular to him—“*I note ...*” and “*I am remembering ...*”—which points to the responsibility the individual bears in responding to such questions. It cannot be done for us. Cavell states, “To deflect the question of intention you have to say something to yourself about how, for example, just this poem by just this poet is alluded to just here in this work. So if you tell yourself it is an accident, then take that idea seriously.”⁴⁴ Here we are asked not only to see what is possible for others to mean, but also to check what it

44. Ibid.

is we mean, to take our own words seriously, to check them through conversation with ourselves and the film.

In *The New York Times*' original review of the movie, critic Bosley Crowther focuses on the issue of wealth and class as an obstacle to enjoyment. In a surprising gesture that seems to take up exactly the kind of class judgments Mike initially holds to (and overcomes, or at least sets aside), Crowther concludes that you can have "great fun" so long as you have "a little patience for the lavishly rich."⁴⁵ Crowther writes almost as if operating out of Mike's prejudices, mingling diegetic with extra-diegetic elements in his description of the film's Hollywood, "blue-chip" pedigree, Katharine Hepburn's (box-office) appeal, and, in reference to a line I quoted earlier from Mike, the "pretty sight" of watching "the privileged class enjoying its privileges." Other elements of the film are, for Crowther, "amusing," "pleasant," and "charming"; its subject, "largely inconsequential." There is a superficial acknowledgement here of exactly the kinds of proclamations the film seems to be considering and, at different turns, mocking, acknowledging, overturning, and questioning.

Part of Cavell's project was to set aside the genre label of "screwball comedy" in favor of an original designation, "the Hollywood comedy of remarriage." This allows him to improvise and respond to *The Philadelphia Story* and the other films of the genre in a way that reflected his on-going experiences of the films, which the conventional genre

45. Bosley Crowther, "THE SCREEN; A Splendid Cast Adorns the Screen Version of 'The Philadelphia Story' at the Music Hall," *The New York Times* (December 27, 1940).

labels otherwise held in check. This spans the course of two books, one grounded in the genre project and the other focused on the subject of moral perfection.⁴⁶ This strategy also left behind some of the depression-era readings of screwball comedy that focused on the genre's escapist qualities, which Crowther's review exemplifies.

The introduction to Cavell's book on the Hollywood comedies of remarriage deals primarily with his theory of genre. Cavell suggests that we think of genre not in terms of a set of films sharing some common feature or features, but rather as a body of films that genetically relate to one another: there may be no single feature they all share, though each resembles another other organically. He further notes that this kind of assessment, about how to view the movie, how to categorize or class it, is a problem internal to *The Philadelphia Story* and others in the genre. It's a problem they encourage us to take up. I already pointed to some of the ways in which class-biases are provoked and subverted in *The Philadelphia Story*, or at least questioned.

Tracy's paraphrase of Browning, like other elements of *The Philadelphia Story*, appear openly, in plain view, but also indiscriminately, moving past us effortlessly. This is one of the tensions film and photography is capable of dramatizing: that which is familiar and before us, but out of reach all the same, or unacknowledged. I can watch a horse gallop with my naked eye, but I do not see its legs rising and gliding over the earth, suspended in air all together. The image holds up for our attention that which is

46. See Cavell, *Cities of Words*.

familiar—a gait, a face, an utterance—and exposes that which we may miss in our ordinary acquaintance with it and in the passing of time. Walter Benjamin called this “the optical unconscious,” which photography and film make conscious—we are able to speak of them.⁴⁷ In film, in *motion* pictures, that is, we are exposed to the fact itself: that we are able to see without seeing and hear without hearing. Yet we are also able to return to familiar moments again and watch them pass us by.

What does this show us about conversation with art? One challenge to conversation with art is that we already know what it says and that what it says is fixed. There is only so much to be gained from returning to it, even if we suppose it is *as if* the work may say something new on occasion. We can grant this, while also stipulating that the same may hold true of those with whom we aim to converse in life, even (or perhaps especially) with those we presume to know best, such as a spouse. However, insofar as we pursue what it is possible for us to become—or in that distinctively American phrasing, to pursue happiness—we need conversational partners who question and subvert prejudices, with whom we may renew the staid terms of our engagement (continually). Does the film hold up its end of the bargain? Can I question and provoke *it*? This is where I take it that Cavell’s on-going accounts are a testament to the film’s ability to address him, to sustain his interests in far more wide-ranging conversation than what, say, its early reviews and genre labels thought possible. The conversation is not

47. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” §13.

literally endless, but then that's never the case with conversation anyway. As long as our minds, our judgments, are never *fully* made, we are open to further exchange.

May I Have Another Word?

There is a criticism of serious movie awards that important awards only go to serious movies. There is a risk in taking seriously what is comedic, especially if we harbor a lot of affection for it. Sometimes we shelter our favorite movies by distinguishing them from those we call "best," or by referring to "our favorite movies" in contrast to "the best films." In her book, *Trash, Art, and the Movies*, Pauline Kael refers to "the enjoyable trashiness of American movies" in contrast to "the stuffy artiness of European films."⁴⁸

Part of the problem is that the way we enjoy a comedy is not altogether the same as the way we enjoy a drama or a tragedy, if we can be said to enjoy them at all. There is a longstanding paradox of tragedy, though there is no correlative paradox of comedy.⁴⁹ Comedic enjoyment seems to invite less justification, or self-justification at least. If I find my friend laughing at something I do not think is funny, I probably will not try to extract an explanation (unless I actually did not get the joke). I am mostly satisfied to let his

48. From Pauline Kael, *Trash, Art, and the Movies* (quoted in Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 125).

49. There are two instances I know of where this problem is raised. See Scott C. Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). Its thesis doesn't resemble the issue I raise here. See also Paul Woodruff, "The Paradox of Comedy," *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997): 319.

humor be *his* humor. To explain the joke is notoriously one way to ruin it. There are cases where our humor may be misplaced or unjustified, such as laughing at a moral atrocity, but we are less inclined to seek explanations for our laughter than we are our sadness, just as we are less inclined to explain our desire for happiness than the presence of misery or evil (and our willingness to subject ourselves to it in the arts). This isn't to suggest that philosophers haven't sought to understand the nature of comedy or the pleasure we take in it. It's only to suggest that enjoying comedy does not pose the same kinds of contradictions that enjoying a drama or tragedy generates.

Mary Poppins (Stevenson 1964) is certainly beloved and comedic. It's one of my favorite movies, and one that I have seen numerous times, though only recently in a movie theater. Few take the Disney treatment of it seriously. It received thirteen Academy Award nominations and won five, but it lost in the "serious" categories of writing, directing, and picture, albeit to another (literary and more serious) musical (also, like *The Philadelphia Story*, directed by George Cukor).⁵⁰ It receives little attention from film studies or philosophy in the way that, say, the French New Wave has, which is almost equally innocent of overt philosophical content. How seriously can we take *Mary Poppins*? Supposing, as we just did, that conversation involves a questioning mode, what

50. Julie Andrews won for Best Actress for her performance in the lead role of *Mary Poppins*. It did lose to another musical in the major categories, though one with a literary pedigree, *My Fair Lady*, directed by George Cukor and based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. For all of the nominations and winners from 1964, see Oscars.org (awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1441176609229).

can the airy, fleeting happiness of a children's comedy ask of me? Inversely, can we bear, here and now, to ask serious questions of it? This is my way of asking, does it permit conversation?

Mary Poppins rests at the threshold between the real and the fantastical, the childish and the adult, the comedic and the serious. It begins with its head in the clouds, breezily sweeping over London before descending to earth, to the border between a row of houses and a park on a street named for a tree and its blossoms (Cherry Tree Lane), marking the threshold between Eden and whatever is east of it—in this case, civilized British life, which is punctuated by the canon fire of a retired admiral of the British navy, who keeps time on the top of his rooftop-*cum*-naval vessel, his title reminding us that mastery over the world might consist in admiration as much as the command of great powers, such as time and the sea, which pass us by however well (or loudly, in his case) we might understand, predict, and acknowledge their passing. *Mary Poppins* is an adventure into the limits of language and escapability, and the degree to which play helps us—children and parents—grow up.

That *Mary Poppins* accomplishes its serious task comedically is a risk. The movie alternates between moralizing moments and proverbially punctuated songs—*A Spoonful of Sugar (Helps the Medicine Go Down)*, *Feed the Birds*—with those that are whimsical and almost unbearably playful—*I Love to Laugh*, *Step-in Time*, *Let's Go Fly a Kite*. Up to her death, the author of the book on which the Disney film is based, P.L. Travers, censured the addition of animated dancing penguins in the film, so much so, that in her

discussions about a theatrical production of the book, she stipulated that no dancing penguins should appear in the production.⁵¹ During a recent screening of the movie, I wondered, What does or does not warrant the appearance of dancing penguins, in this or any film? There is a silliness in asking. In a story where people magically enter into the world of a sidewalk chalk drawing and race merry-go-round horses across the countryside, it is not entirely clear why dancing penguins would be out of place.

Perhaps the more specific question the film is asking is, what *kind* of belief or imagination must we have in order to grow up, to be taken seriously? Not just any whim of imagination will do (i.e., no dancing penguins). George Kittredge's failure in *The Philadelphia Story* is not an absolute failure of imagination, just "of a certain kind," as Tracy says. This is, to draw the conversation further back, the sense of understanding that eludes Maclean in his effort to love his brother. What must he know about Paul, even in death, in order to keep him? In *Mary Poppins*, the narrow application of the question is, What sort of imagination must George Banks (David Tomlinson) have to retake his position as a father to his two young children, Jane (Karen Dotrice) and Michael (Matthew Garber)?

Mary (Julie Andrews), for all of her appeal, is, as we all know, "practically perfect in every way." There is no growing up for her. She descends from the heavens and returns to them just as soon as her job is done, popping in and out as her services are

51. See "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious: The Making of *Mary Poppins*," in *Mary Poppins: 40th Anniversary Edition*, DVD (2004).

required. With her, the children explore a world of magic and mastery, where she pulls just what she needs to furnish a room from a modestly-sized carpetbag: a floor lamp, a mirror. However, even within the domain of magic, conditions and limitations arise. Michael struggles to match Mary's ability to clean the nursery with a snap, a gesture of immediacy and ease, because he simply can't snap his fingers (at first anyway), and there are no magic words in this game.

Mr. Banks' growing up, or what we can call his return to fatherhood, coincides with his ability to utter the invented word you utter when you have nothing at all to say and which his children utter effortlessly and enthusiastically: *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. This is his moment of recovery, of growing up again, made possible by his re-entry into the lingual world through a silly, inventive play with words. The children's coming of age is part and parcel with their father's reversal, from stuffy bank executive, fixated on the economy of pinching pennies and pounds, to the economy of his household, where he and his children all utter that long and crazy locution together, which he had rebuked and could not utter before, just as Michael could not snap his fingers.

The invitation to conversation is announced from the very beginning of *Mary Poppins* by a kind of streetwise guardian angel—the busking, chimney-sweeping, sidewalk artist, Bert, who tells us in song that “what’s about to happen, *all happened before*.” He then addresses us directly: “Oh, it’s you—hello!” That this “all happened before” is true just in light of my having seen the movie countless times, and it’s as if

Bert knows it. What makes us want to revisit something familiar over again? I take this to be an acknowledgment of film's capacity to revisit seemingly familiar events endlessly, in spite of their familiarity and (pre-)scripted nature. It's also an acknowledgment that a father's place in his family is not settled without his ongoing acknowledgement of his children and their words (you may recall Mr. Banks tearing up the children's ad for a new nanny and tossing it in the fireplace.)

Our conversation with the film is initiated when Bert addresses us and utters, "Hello," but the possibility, indeed the necessity, of conversation is more fully captured in the imaginative, playful acts parenthood requires. That is, just when we believe ourselves masters of language, we are reminded that our words are always contingent upon another, including our children. Mulhall comments that "genuine adulthood can and should maintain an openness to adolescence, on pain of losing its sense of what is foregone should adolescence ever be altogether forgone."⁵²

Did Mr. Banks, or Mary for that matter, have a childhood, we might wonder? The fact that Mary is untied romantically, that is, unmarried, is a sign of her total mastery, or her lordship—she does not belong to anyone. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy, last name Lord, is often confronted with the proposition of what it means for her to belong to another in the sense of being lorded over. The "Sire" she addresses via the Browning poem is Dexter, and there is a further discussion about whether or not Dexter was ever

52. Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, 77.

Tracy's "lord and master," a point Cavell raises in his long, ponderous note. *Mary Poppins'* conversational circle is marked by that ridiculous word, which originates with those over whom we may otherwise believe ourselves (linguistic) lord and master. Our conversation requires mastery but also a willingness to improvise and remain open, in both marriage and parenthood. You cannot have conversation where the only words "we share" are your own.

Our sense of play, our conversation with the movie, is *practically* indefinite, in the way that Mary is practically perfect, and in the way that Uncle Albert loves to laugh, and in the way that snapping tidies a room: Mary has her faults, Uncle Albert comes down to earth, and Michael needs stronger finger muscles. This is the sense of "practically" as in *almost*. This is an acknowledgment that conversations may go silent. We have no more words that we properly share. Yet, if we remain in silence we lose a form of life together. My conversation with the movie begins at its invitation, and when I have no words to say—when I find that our exchange has hit a point of exhaustion—it offers a comedic and absurd one. That is, it encourages play as a way to recover conversation and life together. In the face of the familiar, or the childish, we may believe ourselves to be masters, above play, but this denies the possibility of continued life together.

The Philadelphia Story shares many welcome affinities with *Mary Poppins*, not the least of which is the centrality of an unfamiliar word. In the case of *The Philadelphia Story*, the word is "yare." Tracy initially introduces the term as she wistfully recalls the

sailboat Dexter designed and “practically built” for their honeymoon, *The True Love*. Yare means “quick to the helm, easy to manage, everything a boat should be,” Tracy says. That she and Dexter once sailed the seas on “true love” is a testament to a kind of marital perfection they once shared; that they achieved it at sea portends the changeable, tenuous state of that perfection, which we see in the wordless, slapstick break up that opens the movie. What’s a perfection that does not last? How can a marriage begin again once silence reigns? Can it be recovered? Cavell describes this as part of the film’s interest in an achievable perfection, which we could also call, echoing Mary, a *practical* perfection, and in keeping with the grace of Maclean’s story, a kind of love we offer when we do not understand completely.

As I suggest above, practical can mean “almost,” which is certainly one way Tracy uses it. But it can also mean “realistic” or something in tune with the world, unidealized. During one of the final scenes of *The Philadelphia Story*, as Tracy weighs who she is to become, that is, who she is to marry among her companions—George, Mike, or Dexter—Dexter tells her he’s selling *The True Love* and designing a new boat “along more practical lines.” *The True Love* reminds us of our aspirations towards both perfect fidelity and romance in marriage, knowing that when true love fails (or is sold, as the case may be), our ideal goes with it. We are forced to be born again, just as Tracy is “not wounded, Sire, but dead.” Dexter jokes that he’ll call the new boat *The True Love II*. What are the prospects for romance reviving itself along more *practical* lines? This risk, or challenge, is similar to the one that *Mary Poppins* takes in its comedic absurdity. The

success of a marriage (in the case of *The Philadelphia Story*) and the success of a family (in *Mary Poppins*) both seem to be conditioned on the meeting point between imagination, where we continually see what is possible for others and ourselves to become, and language, where we find the words to help each other grow up into perfection—of the practical kind, questioning and open to response, like a conversation. Where conversation falters we have silence, tragedy, and settled, final judgment; where we succeed we have happiness, comedy, and practical perfection. Grace redeems the tragic, but happiness ends with dancing penguins.

Coming to a Close: Conversation and Sensitivity

I claimed before that an ethics of engaging with art requires sensitivity with and to an artwork. ‘Sensitivity with’ an artwork means we demonstrate care and thoughtfulness in our handling of it, while ‘sensitivity to’ describes our capacity to respond relevantly to the features of a work and its context. Our friendship with a work consists in our willingness to share a word with it, to come to an understanding through our acknowledgement of its expressive power and possibilities. Not all works are destined to be friends with all people, but the life without any friends is a life without words, and not worth having. The primary, substantive claim for conversation as the basis for an ethics of engaging with art is that conversation encourages a process of coming to an understanding with a work, where our prejudices and judgments are subject to the claims a work may make upon me at any given moment, but without ceding to either the finality

of judgment or the incompleteness of understanding provoked by over-familiarity, incessant talk, ‘talking at’ or ‘past,’ or silence. A work, too, may be transformed by the words we have to offer it; though, as it resists our inquiries, we may cease to have conversation with it.

This framework permits an extraordinary, generous range of conversational shapes, in tune with sensitivity’s open nature and the complex, ever-changing domain of artistic production. If a work can sustain a lively, polemical conversation, we are free to enter into such a dialogue. If a work merits a polite, thoughtful exchange, we can enter into such a conversation as well. In each of the cases above, work and writer share a sensitivity and a fit to one another that is modeled on mutual exchange and shared linguistic territory, though such territory is also in question, encouraging reply. Furthermore, the translation of an experience into words is always only settled in part. There is then a sense that those conversations may be picked up again—they may have more to say, or the work may have more to say, or perhaps we will.

Conversation does not preclude criticism, either in its positive appraisals or its condemnations, but it does contextualize those evaluations. Any number of aims and ends may be picked up or discarded as work and context permit or require. Berry and Cavell exemplify a commitment to letting the authority of the work continue to educate one’s experience over time, at least insofar as the works continue to reward our talk with them, or as others have something to say, too. They are live relationships that may be returned to, revoked, revised, or otherwise supplemented. Berry and Cavell each revisit their initial

encounters with a work or works, while also drawing them into dialogue with like-minded partners. I have tried to do the same through the introduction of *Mary Poppins*.

I suppose that artworks are expressive, that they say *something*, throughout the project, though I offer no developed argument in favor of this position. This may, as I have noted at times, pose special challenges with works that lack a verbal character. *The Philadelphia Story* says something at least in the sense that it *has words*, but what does a Mark Rothko painting “say”? My retort may not be especially satisfying, but my experience is that at least some paintings have generated far more dialogue than works that generically present themselves as verbally expressive. In the end, what it is we might learn to say through exchange with Rothko must be shaped just in light of my encounter with it, where I cultivate a visual vernacular through my sensitivity with and to it.

Berry and Cavell’s sensitivity with their favored works—their care and thoughtfulness with them—is evident in their striving to acknowledge them as participants in their respective discourses: philosophical discourse for Cavell, and literary (and humanistic?) discourse for Berry. Jeffrey Crouse writes:

Cavell’s readings of films are sensitive to what those films might be about. Taking for granted that film is important, he further asks precisely why a specific film is important as well as trying to understand what it has to offer. To this end, he seeks to dialogue with that film, or in his words, to open a conversation. Is it surprising, then, that his readings of films often turn out to be unusually perceptive?⁵³

53. Jeffrey Crouse, Editorial: Issue 22. *Film International*, 4(4) (2006), 4-5.

To assume the importance or authority of a work permits Berry and Cavell to be sensitive *to* what works have said and might have to say still. This is part of conversation's invitational and participatory character. Particular to the interests of both work and writer in these specific cases is the role of judgment, or the suspension or overcoming of it, which provides the shape of Berry and Cavell's conversational responses that are more than just critical.

Berry's and Cavell's achievements and the dialogue the works sustain may owe something to the degree to which the works are *about* the conditions for their own existence. That is, it may be the case that conversation is only possible with works that possess some meta-artistic content or self-reflexive character. On the one hand, the claims of this chapter are that these artworks possess just such content (though, I know of no other reading of *Mary Poppins* that treats it as such; that is, perhaps we too easily assume a work is only ever about what it is apparently about—the problem of over-familiarity). I do not believe any specific content is necessary to sustain conversation with art, though it must have some—not what I would call *content*, per se—but it must address me in some way.

However firm and certain our judgments may be at any one moment, they remain subject to response. To improvise on Tracy's line, the time to make up your mind about a work of art, is never. As she further suggests, this does not mean we never make commitments, or, in this case, that we never render judgments. *Tracy does get married* (again). Conversations come to a close and friendships end, necessarily and for good

reasons. Sensitivity with a work may call for letting a conversation die equally as it may require extending one, but if we are too deeply entrenched in our judgments, treating them as final, we lose the opportunity to pursue what it is we might become through the transformation of our words. Conversation provides us with a framework that flexibly acknowledges the need to renew, with “fresh” contributions, the current state of affairs, rather than acting solely on inherited or dictated or assumed terms. In befriending a work, we take on a personal responsibility to share a word with it. I come to think of both myself and the work as bearers of meaning: insofar as it has something to say, I listen (watch, read ...) and engage with it, offering words of acknowledgment, asking questions, and then I see what else it might have to say.

What else is there to say in favor of the shift from criticism to conversation? Our critical “conversations” often lack a participatory spirit and carry an air of finality. While not all judgments are final judgments (or even negative ones), there is a form of closure that they often carry. A conversation always leaves open the possibility of rejoinder that speaks to the grander possibilities of how an artwork may shape a human life, where we are open to what we may become. Recall Cavell’s notion that with a work we care about, we haven’t simply read it, we are a reader of it—relationship with it goes on. This is a key difference between criticism and conversation. Where criticism often aims at authoritative, reasoned judgments as the culmination and aim of an artistic experience, conversation prizes open-ended responsiveness. Rarely do we revisit the subjects of our critical judgments, even positive ones but especially negative ones. A conversation by

contrast is more flexible and discursive, leaving open the possibility of renewed interest and attention, knowing that even my positive appraisals need to be subject to the conditions of any given encounter. In this way, conversation also better captures the way meaning and interpretation evolve with a work, audience, and context over time. If meaning is provisional and shaped just in light of my engagement, then a work's meaning (and my own view of the work) will change through my conversation with it. A critical conversation may be justified at some moments, but it is far from the only kind of dialogue a work may invite or reward.

In the Introduction I discussed A.O. Scott's recent book in praise of the critical life. One of Scott's insights about the importance of mass critical engagement revolves around those moments where the professional critic gets it wrong, woefully wrong. He points to the early reviews of *Moby Dick* as an example. However, it's not clear that inviting the mob into the critical arena will function as a corrective for the erring professional critic. Everyone already *is* a critic, but the quality and use of that criticism is superficial and cursory and intellectually and politically impotent. If, as Benjamin envisioned, the mechanical and mass arts encourage a more engaged populace, conversational engagement seems to offer a more useful framework for responsible practice. The critical arena encourages individual, independent evaluative pronouncements that easily let us talk past the work and one another.

What do we stand to gain by shifting towards conversation then? We gain a clearer, more equitable understanding of what a work is doing. We curtail prejudice and

evaluative bias. We respond more sensitively to the context for our engagement. We ask more questions. Is this a setting where criticism is warranted or useful? Who are my interlocutors? What do they have to say? What do you have to say?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
- Barthes, Roland. *Criticism and Truth*. Translated and Edited by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman. London: The Athlone Press, 1987.
- Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003.
- Bermúdez, José L., and Sebastian Gardner, eds. *Art and Morality*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Berry, Wendell. "Style and Grace." In *Norman Maclean: A Reader*. Edited by Ronald McFarland and Hugh Nichols. Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1988.
- Berry, Wendell. "Style and Grace." In *What Are People For?*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010.
- Bonner, Stephen. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.
- Carroll, Noël. "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research." *Ethics* Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000): 350-387.
- . *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . *On Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- . *Must We Mean What We Say?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

- . *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- . *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Clayton, Alex, and Andrew Klevan, eds. *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Cohen, Ted. *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Coplans, John. *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*. New York: Soho Press, 2000.
- Crouse, Jeffrey. "Editorial: Issue 22." *Film International*, 4(4) (2006): 4-5.
- Crowther, Bosley. "THE SCREEN; A Splendid Cast Adorns the Screen Version of 'The Philadelphia Story' at the Music Hall." *The New York Times*, December 27, 1940.
- Danto, Arthur. "Deep Interpretation." In *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Devereaux, Mary. "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will." In *Aesthetics and Ethics*. Edited by Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.
- Dickie, George. *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Dobson, Michael, and Stanley Wells, Erin Sullivan, and Will Sharpe, eds. "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." In *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare, Rev., Expanded Ed.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Function of Criticism: From 'the Spectator' to Post-Structuralism*. London: Verso, 1984.
- Eaton, Marcia Muelder. "Aesthetic Obligations." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 66.1 (Winter 2008): 1-9.
- . *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- Ebert, Roger. "The Passion of the Christ Movie Review." *RogerEbert.com*, February 24, 2004. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ-2004>.
- Eldridge, Richard. "Review: Contending with Stanley Cavell." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (August 2005). <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24835-contending-with-stanley-cavell>.
- Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921.
- Elkins, James. "On the Absence of Judgment in Criticism." In *The State of Art Criticism*. Edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- . *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Feagin, Susan L. *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Fishman, Solomon. *The Interpretation of Art: Essays on the Art Criticism of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Herbert Read*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963.
- Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2015.
- Fry, Stephen. *The Ode Less Traveled*. London: Arrow Books, 2007.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method, Second Revised Edition*. Translated by Joel Winsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Gaut, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Gibson, John. *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In *Art in Theory: 1900-2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.

- Greene, Theodore Meyer (T.M.). *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*. New York: Gordian Press, 1973.
- Hagberg, Gary, ed. *Art and Ethical Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.
- Harper, Russell D. *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Irwin, William, ed. *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Chicago: Open Court, 2002.
- Isenberg, Arnold. *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism: Selected Essays of Arnold Isenberg*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Kermode, Mark. "Mark Kermode's DVD Round Up." *The Guardian*, January 28, 2012. www.theguardian.com/film/2012/jan/29/mark-kermode-dvd-round-up.
- Klevan, Andrew. *Film Performance: from Achievement to Appreciation*. London: Wallflower Press, 2005.
- Lewis, C.S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.
- . *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt, 1988.
- Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Margolis, Joseph. *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- . *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1965.
- . "The Logic of Interpretation." In *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*. Edited by Joseph Margolis. New York: Scribner, 1962.
- . "Moral Values in the Arts: A Manifesto of Sorts." *Aesthetic Pathways* 1.1 (2010): 30-57.
- . *Pragmatism Without Foundations*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

- . “Robust Relativism.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35.1 (1976): 37-46.
- Meyer, Richard. “The Jesse Helms Theory of Art.” *October* 104 (2003): 131-148.
- . *What Was Contemporary Art?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.
- Miller, J. Hillis. “The Ethics of Reading.” *Style* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 181-91.
- . *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Millington, Jeremy. “From Criticism to Conversation.” ‘Modernism/modernity’ Vol. 1.3, (John Hopkins University Press, November 1, 2016).
modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/criticism-conversation.
- Nussbaum, Martha. “The Professor of Parody: the Hip, Defeatist Feminism of Judith Butler.” *The New Republic* 220, no. 8 (February 22, 1999): 37-45.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Rodowick, David Norman. *Philosophy’s Artful Conversation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism.” *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 200-28.
- Scott, A.O. “Everybody’s A Critic. And That’s How It Should Be.” *The New York Times* (30 January, 2016). http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/sunday-review/everybodys-a-critic-and-thats-how-it-should-be.html?_r=0.
- . *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth*. New York: Penguin, 2016.
- Shershow, Scott C. *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

- Shusterman, Richard. *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Simonson, Harold P. "Norman Maclean's Two-Hearted River." In *Norman Maclean: A Reader*. Edited by Ronald McFarland and Hugh Nichols. Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1988.
- Sinnerbrink, Robert. "Questioning style." In *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*. Edited by Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Stallabrass, Julian. *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Urmson, J.O. *Aristotle's Ethics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998.
- Willard, Dallas. "Who Needs Brentano? The Wasteland of Philosophy Without its Past." From a conference proceeding, "The Brentano Puzzle." Bolzano, Italy (1996).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. New York: Humanities Press, 1961.
- Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.
- Wood, Robin. "Hitchcock and Fascism." *Hitchcock Annual* 13, (04, 2005): 25-63.
- Woodruff, Paul. "The Paradox of Comedy." *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997): 319.

FILMOGRAPHY

- The 11th Hour*. Directed by Leila Conners Peterson and Nadia Conners. Warner Independent Pictures, 2007.
- Adam's Rib*. Directed by George Cukor. 1949. Culver City, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000. DVD.
- The Awful Truth*. Directed by Leo McCarey. Columbia Pictures, 1937.
- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Directed by Robert Wiene. Decla-Bioscop, 1920.
- The Cove*. Directed by Louie Psihoyos. Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions, 2009.
- DamNation*. Directed by Ben Knight and Travis Rummel. Felt Soul Media and Stoecker Ecological, 2014.
- Food, Inc.*. Directed by Robert Kenner. Magnolia Pictures, 2009.
- His Girl Friday*. Directed by Howard Hawks. Columbia Pictures, 1940.
- Mary Poppins* (40th Anniversary Edition). Directed by Robert Stevenson. 1964. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.
- The Matrix*. Directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski. Warner Bros., 1999.
- Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Directed by Frank Capra. Columbia Pictures, 1936.
- My Fair Lady*. Directed by George Cukor. 1964. Culver City, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004. DVD.
- The Passion of the Christ*. Directed by Mel Gibson. Icon Productions and Newmarket Films, 2004.
- The Philadelphia Story*, two-disc special ed. Directed by George Cukor. 1940. Culver City, CA: Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner Home Video, 2005. DVD.
- Titanic*. Directed by James Cameron. 20th Century Fox and Paramount Pictures, 1997.
- A Trip to the Moon*. Directed by George Méliès. Star Film Company, 1902.