

# Four

## I. INTRODUCTION

The view of criticism being advanced in this book is that it is essentially a matter of evaluation grounded in reasons. The support for the critical appraisal of an artwork is supplied by the description and/or classification and/or contextualization and/or elucidation and/or interpretation and/or analysis of the artwork.

For example, in her very positive review of Mark Morris's *Mozart Dances*, Joan Acocella classifies the piece as a work of modern-dance abstraction.<sup>1</sup> She notes that this kind of choreography can often leave viewers bewildered, but she emphasizes that, like much of Morris's other work, *Mozart Dances* is immensely pleasing. By placing the dance in the category she does, Acocella, at the same time, identifies its problematic—to make abstract movement accessible. Acocella maintains that Morris meets this challenge and she goes on to describe, interpret, and analyze how he succeeds in doing so.

She argues that Morris makes abstract movements that nevertheless insinuate or suggest a vague but discernible narrative. This hint of narrative is what gives the audience, if only subliminally, something to hold onto. Of course, for this conjecture to ring true, Acocella must help us see that

narrative. She does this then by describing and interpreting the movements that carry this gossamer story forward.

In the opening section—"Eleven," set to Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 11—Acocella pinpoints what she calls the "danger motif." She describes the repetitively sharp movements of the women dancers, which rhyme with the bold strokes of the painted backdrop, and the emergent and then repeated image of a woman on the floor jabbing her arms sideways. Acocella interprets these violent gestures as a premonition of trouble.

She then identifies the trouble as it evolves in the second dance, "Double," set to Mozart's Sonata in D Major for Two Pianos. There, a male soloist looks upward with his fisted hands against his chest, which Acocella interprets as a sign of desperation and abandonment ("Why me, God?"). Then the young man collapses and, stiff as a corpse, he is carried off by a group of men. And to etch the tragedy emotionally on the audience, it is reprised.

The final section, "Twenty-seven," ends with the sense of troubling ambiguity, in which some of the dancers hold their hands over their hearts while others hold out their arms in a questioning gesture; these clashing signals intimate that the group's story may not have reached closure, but rather a nagging, even unsettling, state of irresolution.

Throughout, woven into her description and interpretation of *Mozart Dances*, Acocella contextualizes her account by citing personal interviews with the choreographer and she even considers an alternative analysis of the ending in order to motivate the one that she finally endorses. By carefully selecting, describing, and interpreting movements in the dance, Acocella enables her readers to understand her grounds for maintaining that Morris has subtly articulated the

outline of a story. This, in turn, she maintains, gives the viewer a way into a dance of the sort that is often confusing to audiences, presupposing, as she does, that a narrative, typically, enhances accessibility. In this way, then, Morris succeeds in solving a problematic of much modern abstract choreography—which success grounds Acocella’s commendation of *Mozart Dances*.

The reader, of course, might disagree with either Acocella’s description or her interpretation of *Mozart Dances*. That would be to challenge the premises of her evaluation. But if one assents to her descriptions and interpretations of the movements and, furthermore, agrees that nothing significant has been omitted in a way that would point in another interpretive direction, then one would appear to have compelling grounds for agreeing with Acocella’s evaluation, since it appears to be based on sound observations and reasoning. That is, if things are as I’ve presented them, Acocella’s review seems to be an exemplary case of objective criticism.

And yet the very notion of objective criticism is often disparaged. Criticism, it may be asserted, is always, inescapably subjective, a matter of taste. Moreover, it must be this way because there are no laws of art—no generalizations about what makes an artwork successful—for the critic to invoke in the process of appraisal. These are some of the leading problems for the notion of objective evaluative criticism. In what follows I will attempt to make out the prospects for objective criticism in the face of these objections.

## II. BUT IT’S ALL SUBJECTIVE

It was the eighteenth century, and the philosophy of criticism got off to a bad start. David Hume is, I think, the main culprit here, although he was presaged by folks like his friend Francis

Hutcheson, and then Hume's missteps were compounded by Immanuel Kant, or, at least, by the way in which many people chose to read Kant.

The bad start had to do with Hume's use of *taste* (*la goût* in the French tradition) as the model for critical judgment.<sup>2</sup> Hume was not the first or the only person to propose this association, but he is surely one of the most influential. Hume seems to think that what critics specialize in is declaring artworks to be *beautiful* (or *ugly*). In tune with Hutcheson, another empiricist like himself, Hume believes that beauty is the name of a sensation, not a feature of the object that provokes the sensation. That is, just as the pain is in my hand and not in the piece of glass that cuts me, so beauty, strictly speaking, is a sensation of pleasure that I undergo when exposed to, for example, the opening of Beethoven's *Pastorale*. My approbation of the stimulating object is rooted in my experience of delight in, my attraction to, and my liking of the object.

This approval or liking is, of course, subjective. It is in the experiencing subject, even though we may have a tendency to project it into or onto the object under the rubric of *beauty*. Nevertheless, the pleasure isn't in the music; it's not out there in what we can call the objective world—the world of objects. How could it be, since the relevant objects, by definition, are not sentient? Rather, the feeling of pleasure is like the agreeable charge of sweetness that bursts upon my tongue when I taste ice cream. No one would say that the pleasure is in the ice cream. It is in me.

Beauty is the name of the pleasure we derive from artworks. When critics say that a work is beautiful, they are saying that it will yield this sort of pleasure, at least in normal percipients who are suitably prepared to receive the stimulus.

Critics have a taste for beauty that is analogous to the sensitivity for sweetness that certain of our taste buds possess. Like a quality-control taster at the dairy plant, who tastes this batch of ice cream to confirm that it is sweet, the critic affirms that she has experienced the pleasure we call beauty in her encounter with some artwork. Just as there is an outer sense of gustatory taste, there is an internal capacity for the experiencing of beauty. When certain artworks come under the critic's perusal, she undergoes sensations of pleasure with a built-in inclination toward attraction to the artwork which is the phenomenological correlate of approval.

Because critical taste is being analogized so closely to sensory taste, and beauty is being associated with sensations like sweetness, the use of the very model of taste for critical judgment brings with it not only the notion that critical approbation (or disapprobation) is subjective, in the literal sense of *being in the subject* (where, in fact, all experiences belong), but also the suggestion that critical judgments are subjective in the contemporary sense of being highly personal, individual, widely variant, and even idiosyncratic.

The latter surmise follows smoothly from the analogy between critical approval (Taste with a capital T) and taste (with a small t). For, we know that gustatory taste is extremely variable—highly personal and even idiosyncratic. So isn't it reasonable to suppose that Taste is likewise?

For example, many people like ice cream, but others have a decided preference for savory things. This variation is even more pronounced when we get down to more fine grained cases. Some people like vanilla ice cream but not chocolate and vice versa. Some have a taste for champagne but not beer, and even have a disliking of it. If critical Taste is like ordinary taste, it is not only something internal to the subject; it is

highly personal and, in that regard, subjective in the agent-relative sense, and not objective.

Kant's monumental work in aesthetics—*The Critique of Judgment*—at least agrees with Hume (and other empiricists like Hutcheson) that what is now called an aesthetic judgment—e.g., “This fantasia is beautiful”—is a feeling of pleasure, albeit a disinterested one, rooted in subjective experience.<sup>3</sup> Thence, philosophers and art theorists after Kant—perhaps forgetting that in the relevant passages Kant was discussing free beauty—began to treat beauty in art as a subjective experience of pleasure merely projected onto the stimulus.

To be fair, although their treatment of beauty as something experienced in the subject opens the door to the notion that judgments of beauty are highly personal—subjective in the sense of being wildly variable inter-subjectively—it is a door that both Hume and Kant, and for that matter Hutcheson before them, struggle heroically to keep shut. All three advert to the idea that there are certain regularities, innate to normal percipients, which govern our (small t) taste-reactions. Most, unless our sensory apparatuses are defective, for example, find sugar sweet, not bitter.

Likewise, with reference to what Hume thinks of as the uniformity of the human frame and what Kant calls our common sense—our shared psychological systems of perception and cognition (notably our imagination and our understanding)—both hope to establish that judgments of beauty can be grounded inter-subjectively. That is: that the same stimulus should be presumed to cause the same pleasant reactions in all human beings so similarly constituted.

However, to the extent that moderns have become skeptical of the idea of a common human nature and, instead, embrace

a really thorough-going relativism, currently the analogy of critical judgment with sensations of pleasure naturally invites the supposition that critical approbation, liking, and preference are personal, relative to the person or agent who issues them.

I do not initially wish to challenge the notion of human nature upon which Hume and Kant rely, especially if we are speaking of beauty, very narrowly construed—i.e., as connected to the pleasures of sight and audition. I have other bones to pick with these philosophical giants, though most explicitly with Hume.\* Specifically, I think that Hume's tendency to relegate all critical judgments to judgments of beauty is a grave error. And, furthermore, suggesting that the detection of value (a.k.a. beauty) with reference to artworks operates on the model of taste compounds the misunderstanding of criticism by encouraging the allegation that it is subjective (in the sense of merely being a highly variable, personal preference).†

Quite clearly, determining whether or not artworks are beautiful, although it may be a part of criticism, cannot be the

\* Kant is not directly guilty of the same errors as Hume, since he is not writing with specific reference to the criticism of artworks in the sections on pure aesthetic judgments. But, I would claim that historically what he says there has reinforced certain views of criticism as a result of people misreading this section of the third *Critique* and extrapolating, and perhaps over-generalizing, its application to the case of the criticism of artworks.

† Again, let me emphasize that I am not claiming that this is Hume's official view, but instead is the view which many favor when they find Hume's official view unsatisfactory. Moreover, I contend they are moved in this way precisely because of the analogy of critical Taste with sensory taste.

whole of it. One obvious reason for this is that there are many artworks that critics hold in high repute that are not beautiful in any ordinary acceptance of the word. Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children* and the countless representations of the crucifixion in the Christian tradition provide ample evidence here, as does Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*. When commending an artwork to us, critics employ a broader repertoire of praise than simply calling our attention to beauty or the lack thereof.

If we conceive of beauty narrowly—as related to the pleasures of vision and hearing—then it should be obvious that beauty is too limited a concept to supply us with the critical vocabulary we need to estimate the value of artworks—not only because there are valuable artworks in virtue of features other than beauty (as cited in the preceding paragraph), but also because there are artforms like literature that, apart from certain elements of prosody, have qualities important to critics that are unrelated to beauty, strictly conceived, as well as genres, like comedy (e.g., slapstick comedy), where beauty is extraneous to the value of the gag. Therefore, criticism needs a more varied arsenal than *beauty* in the narrow sense.

Perhaps when it comes to beauty in this narrow sense, the proposals of Hume and Kant to the effect that beauty touches something common in the human frame—something bred in the bone—may be more reasonable than many contemporaries allow. For, beauty as related to the pleasures of seeing and listening—or *some* of the pleasures of seeing and listening—might very well be connected to, as they say, our perceptual hard-wiring. Some cross-cultural studies in facial preferences may support this idea. I do not say that it is true, but it is plausible, or, at least, it is not an outlandish conjecture.



However, if this is persuasive, that is yet another reason for rejecting the notion that beauty is the be-all-and-end-all of criticism, since criticism is concerned with so many valuable attributes of artworks that are not conceivably reducible to triggering our perceptual flesh-ware.

For much of the value critics discover in artworks has to do with the kind of intellectual achievements in the work that are hardly comprehensible on the model of our basic operating perceptual system. Critical admiration of the intricacy of Dante's allegory in his *Divine Comedy*, or of the cleverness of the portmanteau word-constructions in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, certainly requires much more than exposing one's innate perceptual system to the works in question.

Hume, of course, would concede this. On his view, criticism requires good sense, which capacity includes the ability to understand the works in question. Yet, according to Hume, good sense is not part of critical Taste; it merely sets up Taste so that the automatic operation of the human frame can swing into action, once it is properly oriented, cognitively speaking, to the stimulus. Then the prepared subject will suffer the pleasure Hume calls beauty. However, I wonder how one can non-arbitrarily separate the wit of Joyce's puns from their cognitive elements and our appreciation thereof. In any event, even if we regard "beauty" as the name of a sensation, isn't beauty different from humor?

It is extremely important to remember that there is a great deal to criticism beyond finding beauty. Indeed, I suspect that by far the major portion of the criticism of the arts is unconcerned with beauty. When one commends Shakespeare for his psychological perspicuity, we are certainly not talking about beauty. But, if we reject the comprehensiveness of

beauty to the critical task, then we simultaneously undermine the picture of the critic as essentially a broker of Taste. For appreciating the observations of social life made by a realist novelist can hardly be modeled on savoring the acidity of a ripe lemon as it presses against the tongue.

The conception of beauty as a subjective experience of pleasure segued nicely with the portrait of the critic as a person of Taste. For it did not seem unreasonable to analogize sensations of pleasure associated with artworks to those pleasant feelings that issued from the “outer” senses. However, once we concede that the detection of beauty cannot encompass the whole of criticism, then it must be granted that there is much more to the critic than Taste.

Perhaps some part of criticism involves Taste as Hume conceives of it. But since not all of criticism is a matter of tracking beauty, criticism is not reducible, without remainder, to Taste. Furthermore, since it is the equation of criticism with Taste that encourages the belief that all criticism is subjective, it would follow that the refutation of that picture of criticism allows that there may be some criticism that is not subjective, since it is not a matter of Taste.

That is, one argument leading to the conclusion that all criticism is subjective goes like this. All criticism is an exercise in Taste (since it is a matter of being sensitive to beauty understood as a sensation of pleasure). All Taste is subjective. Therefore, all criticism is subjective.

However, there is a counterargument present to hand. Not all criticism is an exercise in Taste (since not all, and perhaps even not most, criticism is concerned with locating beauty, narrowly construed). Thus, by challenging the first premise above, the argument that all criticism is subjective is stopped dead in its tracks and the conceptual space for the

possibility that some criticism might be objective has been carved out.\*

Nevertheless, before exploring that space more intensively, another argument against the possibility of objective criticism needs to be addressed.

### III. ON THE PURPORTED ABSENCE OF CRITICAL PRINCIPLES

The association of criticism with the exercise of Taste is one source of the conviction that all criticism is subjective. But another source involves the argument that, in the absence of critical laws, the only other possible origin of critical pronouncements must be the subjective preferences of the critic. That is, either critical appraisals are based on objective critical principles or they are based on the subjective preferences of the critic. Since there are no critical principles of the relevant sort, critical appraisals must be the result of the subjective preferences of the critic.

This argument, of course, must be supplemented by a further argument that establishes that there are no critical principles. An important argument to the effect that there are no general critical principles was popularized by Arnold Isenberg and later refined by Mary Mothersill.<sup>4</sup>

\* It should be noted that the second premise in the argument in the preceding paragraph is also open to debate. For example, if we are talking about beauty, understood narrowly as certain perceptual pleasures, then it may not be the case, despite its being located in the subjects, that it is subjective in the contemporary sense of being peculiarly personal and wildly, even idiosyncratically, variable in non-converging and conflicting ways. For beauty conceived of as the pleasure of vision and/or audition may trigger some feature of our common perceptual apparatus in a way that is constant across normal human specimens whose judgments are not clouded by personal interests and negative associations.

Their argument goes like this: a critic attempts to ground her evaluation of the work by describing, or interpreting, or analyzing some feature of the work. Joan Acocella, in the example that opens this chapter, commends Mark Morris's *Mozart Dances* because of its possession of a vaguely suggested or submerged narrative. So it looks like what she is doing logically is inferring from the presence of a suggested or submerged narrative to a positive evaluation of Morris's choreography, or

- 1a) *Mozart Dances* possesses a suggested narrative.
- 2) Therefore, *Mozart Dances* is good.

But, there seems to be something missing here, namely, the general premise:

- 1b) Artworks that possess a suggested narrative are good.

However, there is a problem with the soundness of this argument, if this is what the critic is arguing, since premise 1b) appears to be false. Surely, in some artworks, a suggested narrative, as opposed to a clear and concretely developed one, would be a bad-making feature. For example, a suggested or submerged narrative in a Hollywood action film would be typically lamentable.

Next, the Isenberg–Mothersill line of attack proposes to generalize this observation, claiming that there is no feature *F* of artworks such that it always contributes positively to the value of artworks. Pratfalls are excellent in Harold Lloyd comedies, but their presence would have marred Bergman's film *Shame*. And so on, putatively, for any feature you can name.

That is, the general structure that a critical argument supposedly takes is:

- 1a) This artwork has property F.
- 1b) Artworks that possess property F are good artworks.
- 2) Therefore, this artwork is a good artwork.\*

Yet, premise 1b) is always allegedly false, since there is no property F that guarantees the goodness of any and every artwork in which F appears. Even properties as general as unity are not such that they always contribute to the goodness of a work, just because works can be unified in such a fashion that they become overly monotonous. Similarly, variety is no assurance of merit either, because too much of it may result in chaos.

However, if there are no general critical principles of the sort that would make an honest (or, at least, a logically compelling) argument out of critical reasoning, then the conclusions the critic reaches must be subjective. From where else but their own personal preferences could their verdicts hail? That seems the best inference to explain the critic's behavior that is available to us, given the ostensible absence of critical principles.

Of course, critics may do what looks like describing and analyzing artworks. But they are not really grounding their evaluations in a logically acceptable manner. Rather, they are using language to express their partiality to the artwork in question, and perhaps they are also attempting to persuade us readers to adopt their predilections.

\* It is interesting to note that the structure of the critical argument as sketched by Isenberg is extremely reminiscent of the hypothetico-deductive model of scientific explanation developed by Carl Hempel, Isenberg's one-time colleague at Queens College in New York.

When they point at the work and freight their gestures with all kinds of accolades, they are trying emotively to work us into the same favorably disposed state that they bring to the artwork. The critic is not making a logical argument based upon objectively established premises.

Rather, he uses beguiling language to get you to love what he loves, or to see it the way he sees it. He has not grounded his evaluation but rather has attempted to seduce his readers into concurring with him. He strives rhetorically to make his own subjective preferences yours. Or, at least, this seems to be a fair supposition of what he is up to in the absence of general critical principles of the order of: "Artworks that possess property F are good artworks."

Nevertheless, there is something troublesome about the way in which the notion of general critical principles is being dispatched by people like Isenberg. To see the difficulty, notice how extremely general Isenberg and his followers demand that the relevant critical principles be. Said principles must apply to absolutely every artwork. But aren't principles this general far more than critics need to make their case with reference to the works that concern them?

It is true that whereas pratfalls are good-making features in Harold Lloyd comedies, they would be defects in Bergman's *Shame*. However, it also seems to be the case that pratfalls are good-making features in the kind of film, namely, slapstick comedy, of which Harold Lloyd films are examples. That is, given the point or purpose of this kind of comedy—its function, if you will—pratfalls contribute to the goodness of a slapstick comedy and the lack of them, all things being equal, would be detrimental, unless that absence was compensated for by means of some other type of gag.

In order to see my point, notice that there doesn't seem to be any problem with this particular critical communication.

- 1a) Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* contains (let us agree) many successful pratfalls.
- 1b) *Safety Last* is a slapstick comedy.
- 1c) Given the purpose or function of slapstick comedy, slapstick comedies that contain many successful pratfalls, all other things being equal, are good (*pro tanto*\*).
- 2) Therefore, *Safety Last* is good (*pro tanto*).

The fact that Bergman's *Shame* and a massive number of other artworks are not improved by the presence of pratfalls—and might even be compromised by them—does nothing to challenge the preceding argument, since *Shame* and the other putatively persuasive counterexamples simply are not slapstick comedies, nor do they have the function of films in that category.<sup>5</sup>

The preceding general premise, derived from the purpose of things in the category of slapstick comedy, that I have deployed above (i.e., 1c) is general *enough* logically to ground the critic's conclusion. 1c) is not as general as the principles at which the Isenbergians aim their counterexamples. Yet it seems to me that those principles are supposed to be so general that their unavailability is a straw consideration. It may be just too extravagant to expect to find general good-making features of artworks that are so encompassing that they augment the goodness of any artwork, irrespective of the kind of artwork it is. And, in any case, critics, especially by advertent to categories of art and their purposes, have access to general principles about what counts as success

\* We will discuss the significance of this qualification in the next section.

in the pertinent artforms, genres, and so forth—which principles, in turn, are sufficient to ground their evaluations.

The Isenbergian may grumble about my Harold Lloyd example, suggesting that it can be the case that under some strange conditions a particular pratfall might not contribute to the goodness of a slapstick comedy. But that is why the *ceteris paribus* clause has been added to our formulation. Moreover, if the Isenbergian objects to that, it seems reasonable for us to demand to know why such clauses are acceptable in scientific generalizations, but not in critical ones.<sup>6</sup> Permitting scientists but not critics to use such devices seems downright arbitrary.

Once we establish the objective of slapstick comedies—say, the provocation of laughter through physical business, often of an apparently accidental sort—we can ground the principle that pratfalls, *ceteris paribus*, are good-making features in slapstick comedies. The function of slapstick comedy indicates to us why the possession of pratfalls is good for the genre, just as the function of steak knives grounds sharpness as a virtue of this sort of cutlery, since there is a teleological relation between the purpose of a kind and what counts as an excellence of that kind.\*

When Joan Acocella commends Mark Morris's *Mozart Dances* in virtue of its suggested narrative, she is not supposing that a suggested narrative is a good-making feature of every artwork. Rather, she is restricting her claim to works of

\* My strategy for blocking subjectivism as it is based on the alleged lack of critical principles is not the only maneuver available for challenging subjectivism. One might also attempt to formulate a version of aesthetic particularism, modeled on ethical particularism, as a way of thwarting subjectivism.



modern abstract choreography and saying that, all things being equal, it is a good-making feature in such works. This grants that in some cases things might not be equal. In some work of modern abstract choreography, a suggested narrative may not be a positive feature of the work (and in such an instance the critic should be able to say why, things being unequal, the suggested narrative has aborted). Likewise, a work of modern abstract choreography may lack a suggested narrative but succeed nevertheless in virtue of some other feature that solves the problematic or acquits the function that otherwise a suggested narrative would.

Considering the case of Joan Acocella's review of *Mozart Dances*, we see there is no reason to suspect that there is something logically amiss about it. One might attempt to challenge Acocella's first premise by arguing the work does not contain a submerged narrative, perhaps by questioning the descriptions and interpretations that advance the attribution of a narrative to the work. But that would not show that the logic of Acocella's case is weak, which is what the Isenbergian complaint is all about.

In sum, there may be generalizations that are sufficient to ground the evaluations of critics, but which are not as grandiose as those demanded by the Isenbergians. If this is the case, then we can derail the inference from the alleged lack of critical generalizations to the claim that criticism must be subjective.\* For, there may be some principles that are *general enough* to support the critic's evaluations.

\* It should also be noted that even if there were no critical principles, it may not be the case that that logically forces the concession that critical appraisals are subjective. Moral particularists, for example, argue that ethical judgments lack general rules, but are objective. One could imagine comparable aesthetic particularists. Perhaps on one reading, Kant is one.

One place where we may frequently expect to derive the requisite, critical inference-tickets is in the purposes and expectations that are connected to the multifarious categories to which artworks may belong. For, the category or categories that an artwork inhabits come(s) replete with certain purposes and expectations whose satisfaction is linked to the features of the relevant kind of art which we deem to be value-makers.\*

Therefore, if the critic can objectively—that is to say, in a way that is inter-subjectively verifiable—establish that an artwork belongs to a certain category and, furthermore, that that category or those categories have certain purposes that are best served by the possession of certain features, the critic will have the logical and conceptual wherewithal to issue objective verdicts.<sup>7</sup>

However, in order to substantiate the possibility of objective evaluation, we will need to explain how the determination of the category of an artwork and the purpose or purposes of artworks in that category can be objective rather than subjective.

#### IV. CLASSIFICATION (ONCE AGAIN)

It will not take long for anyone who is convinced of the thoroughgoing subjectivity of critical evaluation to regroup when confronted by the argument in the preceding section. For, even if they are forced to concede that it may be the case

\* When we critically evaluate a work relative to a category, it should be clear that we are not praising or chiding the work because it satisfies the criteria for being a member of that category, but, rather, because it discharges (or fails to discharge) the function or functions that are expected from works that fall into the pertinent category.

that critical verdicts can have a certain kind of objectivity relative to categories, they will go on to charge that the way in which a critic *chooses* to classify an artwork is itself a subjective process. The subjectivist agrees that whether you classify Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jalousy* as a work of psychological verisimilitude or a modernist exercise in reflexivity makes a world of difference in terms of the direction of the content of your description, interpretation, and evaluation of the work, as well as in terms of your account of the specific relations that those operations will bear to each other as you build your case. However, the subjectivist adds, which category the critic opts for is subjective, not only in this case but always. Criticism is voluntaristic through and through. Thus, the debate has escalated from the allegation that critical verdicts are subjective to the charge that the classifications upon which critics depend for their verdicts are subjective.

But this suggestion—especially in its most general form—surely sounds deeply counterintuitive. Isn't it obvious to everyone that DaVinci's *The Last Supper* is a religious painting and not a still life, and that the critic who opts to treat it as a still life would be objectively way off target?

The subjectivist may concur that this is how we conventionally classify the *The Last Supper*, but then add that just because that is what is customarily done fails to show that there is a fact of the matter about correct genre membership here. To claim otherwise, the subjectivist adds, is merely so much arm waving on the part of the objectivist.

For, the subjectivist maintains that there are no objective reasons behind the classification of DaVinci's *The Last Supper* as a religious painting rather than a still life. It is simply a habit, albeit a widely shared one. It may be what a lot of people say, but that choice is no more objective than the choice a lot of

men make to wear tuxedos at their weddings rather than Bermuda shorts.

At this stage in the argument, the subjectivist is attempting to shift the burden of proof to those of us who would defend the objectivity of critical evaluation. The subjectivist will not accept—sans further argumentation—our example of *The Last Supper* as objectively belonging to the category of religious painting rather than of still life. To blandly assert this, the subjectivist contends, begs the question. Moreover, he contends that he can dismissively explain away the apparent objectivity of the classification as nothing more than fashionable.

In effect, the subjectivist challenge is this: if there are supposedly objective reasons underpinning the classifications that support critical evaluations, then let's see them. Stop merely asserting that there are objective classifications; rather show how this can be done. Needless to say, the subjectivist does not think that this is possible. So, let me attempt to demonstrate the error of his ways.

There are at least three kinds of reasons—objective reasons—that can be marshaled in support of the types of classifications that are relevant to critical evaluation.<sup>8</sup> These include structural reasons, historico-contextual reasons, and intentional reasons. It will be useful for us to review these at this juncture in order to meet the subjectivist's challenge.

The first type of reason for classifying an artwork as belonging to one category or conjunction of categories may be called structural. That is, where a work has an abundant number of features that are typical of the artworks already adjudged to belong to a certain category, then that provides the critic with a strong reason to place it in

the pertinent category. That reason, moreover, becomes stronger as the features in question mount in number and/or salience.

Conversely, the fewer features a work possesses in common with works in the category at issue or the greater the number of dissimilarities between the candidate and other members of the category, the more dubious becomes the membership of the artwork in question in that category. For example, DaVinci's *The Last Supper* shares more features with religious paintings than still lifes, even though it possesses a supper table. Moreover, it contains a very salient and recurring feature that still lifes do not, viz., people.

The similarities between *The Last Supper* and other religious paintings (such as the representation of Jesus Christ) and the dissimilarities between *The Last Supper* and still lifes proper—such as the presence of people—provide us with a reason, an objective reason, to classify the painting as a religious painting rather than a still life. Given these considerations, that is, it is far more reasonable to classify *The Last Supper* as a religious painting than it is to say it is a still life.\* Moreover, this particular classification is not arbitrary in any way that invites accusations of subjectivity (in the contemporary sense of ultimately a matter of personal—and, therefore, highly variable—choice).

Admittedly, the number and/or salience of the relevant structural similarities and dissimilarities pertinent to classification may not always afford the critic with conclusive reasons in favor of one categorization rather than another, but

\* This is not to deny that one can go on to place *The Last Supper* in some more fine-grained category of religious art. But that too can be objective, if it follows the procedures sketched above.

statistics of this sort typically supply evidence in the direction of one classification instead of another. Furthermore, these reasons are clearly objective insofar as they are inter-subjectively both debatable and verifiable.

Whether or not *The Last Supper* contains salient images characteristic of religious paintings—such as the figure of Christ and the apostles—is not a matter of subjective choice. It is there for every prepared viewer to see and to confirm. Nor is the notion that such images are typical of religious paintings, but not of still lifes, up for subjective determination. These are historical facts that can be confirmed by study of the pertinent genres. They are not my subjective fancies. Indeed, if anyone wanted to dispute them, they would have to point to other historical facts about the genres in question.

A second kind of consideration that we bring to bear when attempting objectively to place a candidate artwork in its correct category (or categories) is to situate it in its art-historical context—whether institutional or more broadly cultural. If a certain art-making practice is alive and abroad in the art-historical context from which the work emerges, then, all other things being equal, that gives us a certain degree of rational warrant for classifying a candidate as an instance of that practice, especially where alternative classifications invoke practices not in evidence in the context of the work's production.

Against the subjectivist, note that the question of the correct historical classification of an artwork is not a matter of personal inclination. It is, in the main, a question of fact, historical or social. Despite some of the tight black costumes in Feuillade's *Fantomas*, it would be a mistake—specifically an anachronism—objectively speaking, to classify that motion

picture as a ninja film. In virtue of the period in which it was produced—not to mention its place of production—there were no ninja films yet. And that is an historical fact, not a personal whim of mine.

Similarly, to classify the designs of tribal artists as proto-Modernists—as occurred in the Museum of Modern Art’s “‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art” show (as presaged and probably blessed by Clive Bell)—is to commit a historical category error.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the subjectivist may respond: “So, what? Who cares about the historically correct category?” But then, at the very least, the subjectivist has changed the subject, since, *prima facie*, the correct category—presently the topic of our investigation—is surely the *historically* or *contextually* correct category.

But again the subjectivist parries: “Why must the correct category be the historically correct one? Why not say that the correct category is the one that yields the greatest aesthetic pleasure to the percipient (something that may undoubtedly be a matter of subjective inclination)?” However, at this point, it seems we have strayed from any commitment to the idea of criticism as directed at what the artist achieved by way of her work. Rather we are in the realm of whatever classification jollies the reader, listener, and/or viewer.\*

Furthermore, it is not even clear that the experience yielded by a free-wheeling subjective election of categories is really aesthetic experience, since, on most accounts, aesthetic experience ensues from processing the artwork in terms of what it authentically is and relative to its correct

\* At this point, the reader may wish to re-visit our earlier discussion of success value versus reception value in Chapter Two.

historical category, rather than relative to some subjectively imposed one.

As in the case of the structural reasons on behalf of artistic classifications, historical and contextual grounds for categorization are not absolutely conclusive. Rather, they supply us with some rational motivation to elect one classification rather than another, especially in those cases where competing categorizations are historically or contextually inapposite or strained. Moreover, when contextual information is added to structural information, the objective purchase of our classifications rises proportionately.

The third type of objective reason germane to the issue of correct categorization has to do with the intention of the artist. In perhaps the largest number of cases historically, the way in which the artist or artists intended their work to be categorized is an inter-subjectively determinable matter of fact, and in a substantial number of the remaining cases, an extremely plausible conjecture about the intended classification of the artwork is readily available. What conceivable grounds do we have for doubting that David's *Oath of the Horatii*, Dürer's *Self-Portrait*, and Henri Fantin-Latour's *Still Life* were intended to be respectively: a historical painting, a portrait, and a still life?

Moreover, if it is claimed that we cannot glean the intentions of the dead, we should remember that few find it troublesome that archaeologists speculate upon the intentions of prehistoric peoples who are far more removed from us temporally than the likes of David, Dürer, or Fantin-Latour.

Even where we are told neither directly nor indirectly into which category the artist intends her artwork to fall, it is often easy enough to grasp the intention. When we see an ordinary, everyday object on a pedestal in a gallery, we know that the



artist intends it to be scrutinized and interpreted as a found object and that the critic (and the spectator) should mobilize the protocols appropriate to that genre in responding to it.

As we saw in the previous chapter, many critics, particularly in academic circles, are wary of invoking the intentions of artists in their intercourse with artworks. Often these worries are advanced on the basis of epistemological considerations—the critics in question are afraid that the aforementioned intentions are ultimately beyond our reach. But these anxieties are certainly excessive, especially when it comes to discussing the categorical intentions of artists (i.e., the intentions concerning which categories they mean their artworks to instantiate). There is no special difficulty in attributing to Robert Musil, with respect to *Young Torless*, the intention to create a psychological novel. This is no more an elusive piece of mind-reading on our part than our almost always correct inference that when a student raises her hand, she means to speak.

Nor should we distrust the artist when she claims that her work belongs to such and such a category because we fear she is radically low-balling her stated aspiration in the hopes of getting a “better grade” for her work. It is not a characteristic of the artistic ego to downgrade the level of her attempted achievement, nor to make something unworthy for the sake of faint praise.

Needless to say, the intention of the artist may not invariably afford sufficient grounds for a particular categorization. On occasion we might suspect that the artist is being less than honest or maybe just confused. And, of course, the evidence may be simply too indeterminate. However, in a truly staggering number of cases, our information is adequate

to support the presumption in favor of one categorization rather than another.

For example, with respect to his *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James informs us that it is a ghost story in his introduction. And, of course, the pertinent novels come labeled as mysteries. Likewise the titles of paintings often signal their category, as when a picture is called a “landscape” or a “still life with this or that.” Furthermore, perhaps it goes without saying that the content of a work of art is also generally an excellent indicator of the category in which the artist intends it to be placed.

Structural, contextual, and intentional considerations, then, supply us with objective reasons for classifying artworks in certain ways rather than others. When all three reasons are available, their combined force may frequently be conclusive or, at least, as conclusive as it is reasonable to expect.

Moreover, these reasons often work hand in glove in a number of ways. Contextual reasons may play a role in substantiating our attributions of the intentions of artists, insofar as knowledge of the historical context may fix the horizon of what the artist could or could not have meant her work to be.

Likewise, structural considerations reinforce our hypotheses concerning artistic intent, since, although there are some, very few artists, historically, who have had an interest in confusing their audiences about the intended category of their works, such confusion courts rejection. Thus, it is generally safe to presume that if a work bears sufficient and salient enough correlations with the works of an established category, it is intended to be taken as a member of that category.

Although I have just emphasized some of the ways in which structural, contextual, and intentional reasons working

in concert may ground a critical classification, a successful classification need not always depend upon backing from all of these sources. Sometimes a structural or a contextual or an intentional consideration alone will be enough to get the job done, especially in cases where there are no viable, alternative categorizations available.

By identifying the category to which an artwork belongs, the critic gains some sense of the point or purpose of the artwork. And knowing the purpose or range of purposes of the work, the critic can begin to assay whether or not the work has succeeded on its own terms. Furthermore, knowing the point or purpose of the kind of work in question alerts the critic to the features of the work that she needs to describe and/or analyze in order to ground her evaluation of the work. For, just as knowing the purpose of a steak knife is connected to the fact that sharpness is an excellence for that type of cutlery, knowing that the purpose of a religious painting is to instill awe enables the critic to describe and/or analyze as virtues of the work those features—for instance, features of scale and elevation—that contribute to taking the spectator's breath away.\*

This approach to evaluation and its solution in contradistinction to the Isenbergian demand for general principles of artistic evaluation is obviously category-relative. The principles it relies upon are those that pertain only to certain kinds

\* Some may worry that this account of evaluation is too cerebral and bloodless. But that is a mistake. Emotions will often be involved in identifying the pertinent category. In part, we know a suspense novel is such because it arouses suspense. And, as well, knowing the category of the work tells the critic about which emotion she should be on the lookout for. For example, thrillers should thrill.

of artworks rather than to all artworks. This contrasts strongly with the sort of principles that the Isenbergian was after, since those were supposed to pertain across all art kinds. However, that expectation seems to me extremely unrealistic. Why suppose that there are principles that apply equally to realist novels and Persian carpets?

Moreover, whereas the Isenbergian critical syllogism is framed in terms of features that lay claim to the overall goodness of the work, on my approach—which we may call the plural-category approach (since there are many, many categories of art)—the category-relative evaluation of an artwork is a *pro tanto* evaluation insofar as it commends the work for being good of its kind just insofar as it realizes the points or purposes of the type of artwork it is. And this result accords with the sentiment that I expressed earlier in this book to the effect that the primary role of criticism is to isolate that which is valuable in an artwork.

An initial objection to the plural-category approach to criticism is that it is inherently formalist. For by assessing the artwork in virtue of its categories—whether genres, movements, oeuvres, styles (period and otherwise)—it appears that we are only concerned with the way in which the work executes its purposes—i.e., with the way in which the form of the work embodies its category-relative points and purposes. One putative problem that this poses is that it would appear to insulate the work from other-than-formal evaluation in terms of, for example, its moral, political, and/or cognitive chops.

But this objection can be defeated by two considerations. First, many works of art are committed directly to various moral, political, and/or cognitive projects. Thus, a work committed to moral inspiration that fails to possess a

genuinely inspiring moral message, because its message is morally objectionable, will count as a failure on the plural-category approach. Likewise, a work of social protest that fails to raise an issue appropriate to political indignation can be criticized negatively on the plural-category approach. And, a realistic novel whose observations are inaccurate can be declared a cognitive failure relative to the expectations that are pertinent to the category of realism.

Furthermore, even where the artworks in question are not directly connected to the realization of some moral, political, cognitive, and/or otherwise “extra-aesthetic” commitment, considerations of such dimensions of the work are very frequently integral to the success of the work on its own terms. Often, narrative artworks aim at currying admiration for certain characters. But if such a work fails to do so because the artist has invested the character with a morally repulsive attribute, not only may the critic chide the artist’s decision because it failed to realize the aim of the work but she may also lambaste the artist for his ethical shortcomings in mistaking vice for virtue.

Another line of complaint against the plural-category approach might be that it is ontologically naïve. So far I have acted as though I presume that each artwork falls squarely into one and only one category without remainder. But that is not very plausible. All sorts of mixtures and hybrids are not only conceivable, but actual. The movie *The Black Book* has been referred to as a film-noir, costume film, while Norman Mailer’s *Executioner’s Song* is a nonfiction novel. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is both a *chanson de geste* and a satire. And there are prose poems.

Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* has been called a “dramedy,” a mixture of comedy and drama, while *The*

*Sopranos* is both a gangster fiction and a family melodrama. And Thoreau's *Walden* is in part a nature book, a do-it-yourself guide, social criticism, belles-lettres, and a spiritual exercise.

In the world of dance, there are: Jerome Robbins's *Fancy Free* (in which ballet crosses with Broadway); Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes* (which blends ballet and a halftime football show); Balanchine's *Union Jack* (which mixes ballet with Edinburgh tattoo and the English music hall); Mark Morris's *Striptease* (modern dance plus strip show); Morris's *Championship Wrestling* (modern dance plus TV wrestling); and so on.

In literature, there is the hybrid form of the novel-in-stories, including: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Cheever's *Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Joyce's *The Dubliners*, Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and David Shields's *Handbook for Drowning* (not to mention Jean Toomer's genre-crossing *Cane*).<sup>10</sup>

However, although, as these examples more than amply attest, it is true that artworks may inhabit more than one category, this does not refute the plural-category approach; it only reminds us that evaluation is sometimes more complicated than my examples thus far may have suggested. Where an artwork involves a fusion of two or more categories, the realization of the points and purposes of the different kinds should be calculated in terms of each category's proportionate influence on the overall outcome of the work.

For example, the movie *Beetlejuice* is an example of genre-splicing—the conjunction of horror and comedy. Though it is predominantly comic, it also aspires, at moments, to frighten. A critical evaluation of *Beetlejuice* should

estimate the capacity of this motion picture not only to deliver laughs, but also to change moods rapidly in order to elicit a sense of foreboding creepiness. (And, I am quite happy to report that *Beetlejuice* does superbly on both counts.)

Of course, since a single artwork may belong to more than one category, the possibility arises that a given work may serve, in a manner of speaking, one of its masters well and the others poorly. Many horror-comedies are less successful than *Beetlejuice*; very often the comedy is effective, but the horror is lame. In that case, the critical evaluation will have to record mixed results.

However, the fact that the plural-category approach may often lead to mixed evaluations does not constitute a problem of any sort, since mixed results should come as no surprise when it comes to the evaluation of artworks. It happens all the time.

Indeed, even when considering a work in a single category of art, there may be mixed results, if only because even a single category of art may have more than one point or purpose. All sorts of adventure stories involve both a romantic plot and a problem solving plot—for example, two secret agents must thwart the conspiracy led by an international terrorist at the same time their courtship is supposed to move apace, usually from initial hostility to mutual adoration. But there is nothing strange about the presentation of these two endeavors coming apart qualitatively—the problem-solving part being successfully suspenseful, but the love-making being forced and dull. In other words, there is nothing anomalous or embarrassing about a critical approach that makes mixed results possible or even likely.

In fact, when you come to think about it, probably most critical assessments of artworks are or should involve mixed

results. For, most artworks, save perhaps some of the most incomparable masterpieces, warrant mixed appraisals. And, even some of the masterpieces have their defects. For example, some of Dostoevsky's greatest novels trade off unity for intensity.

So, mixed results are really the norm. Consequently, the fact that the plural-category approach readily leads to mixed results is not a liability. It shows that this approach is in conformity with the facts on the ground. Moreover, that the plural-category approach is often able to clarify exactly why we are issuing a mixed result in the relevant cases should count additionally in its favor.

There is also the worry, broached in the previous chapter, that the plural-category approach is too conservative. The basis for this suspicion is the presumption that, in speaking of categories, we must have in mind a finite number of fixed categories, whereas, in truth, a sober consideration of art history reveals that there is an indefinitely large number of categories, many of which are in the process of continuous mutation.

However, the defender of the plural-category approach can and should acknowledge this. New categories are emerging all of the time and even many of our standing categories are undergoing constant evolution. But, these new categories and categorical developments do not pop into existence *ex nihilo*. They emerge through the operation of well-known processes of development, including: hybridization or category-splicing; the inter-animation of the arts (the movement of the concerns of one artform to the formation of a new category in another artform as in the case of the influence of minimalist painting on minimalist dance); amplification (the discovery of new solutions to earlier problems); repudiation



(the rejection of a dominant or reigning style in the name of some neglected but acknowledged value of art—as Duchamp rejected art that addressed the eye in favor of art that addressed the mind); and so forth. Therefore, insofar as the processes by which new categories of art arise and come to the fore and by which old categories evolve are understood, it is possible for the plural-category critic to keep track of them, their purposes, and their connected standards of value in *medias res*, so to speak.

This may appear to fly in the face of the phenomenon of the avant-garde. However, not only do the developments within the avant-garde and its proliferation of new categories follow the recurring patterns of artistic innovation that were alluded to above; the institution of the art world in which avant-garde art operates also swells with information about emerging categories of art, even as they exfoliate before our very eyes. There are interviews, manifestoes, artists' statements, curatorial statements, grant applications, and lectures/demonstrations, not to mention a constant circuit of conversations (a.k.a. incessant gossip) between artists and artists, artists and critics and curators, critics and critics, curators and curators, and all of the permutations thereof and more.

Although the appearance of an apparently new kind of art may dumbfound the bourgeoisie (as it is meant to, although perhaps with decreasing success), the informed critic, covering the experimental beat, usually has a general grasp of the contours of the emanent avant-garde forms and their subtending aspirations as those forms unfold before us. Perhaps needless to say, one of the major functions of such critics is to keep the interested audience apprised of the appearance of new artforms, genres, styles, and movements

and to explain their points and purposes in a way that assists the laity in understanding them.

It may seem questionable that critics can have a handle on the new as it explodes onto the scene. Some philosophers of art—of the epistemologically musclebound variety—may even suggest that such a feat of criticism is paradoxical or, at least, suspect.\* Yet it happens all the time, and the factors that make it possible are, as I have itemized: 1) that the processes, like repudiation, through which new artforms evolve from the tradition recur at a frequency such that the informed critic can use knowledge of the past to plot the direction of the emerging categories, and 2) there is ample information in the form of art world chatter for the informed critic to have a good sense upon its arrival of the points and purposes of the latest avant-garde breakthrough, even as it is occurring.

For example, in his infamous article “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried was able to track the category of Minimalist art—which he called literalist art—as it coalesced before his very eyes and to identify its aims with great accuracy (even though those were aims of which he ultimately disapproved).<sup>11</sup> And he was able to do this by paying close attention to the stated intentions of artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith, while also charting the structural convergences in their work.

A final objection to the plural-category approach may be that it makes evaluative comparisons between artworks in different categories impossible. This is surely an exaggerated anxiety. As we have seen, sometimes artworks belong to more than one category, and where the categories of two artworks overlap, they can be compared in virtue of those categories. In

\* Here I am thinking especially of anti-intentionalists.

a similar vein, many categories of art share points or purposes, such as narration. Clearly, works from different categories can be compared in terms of their converging points and purposes.

On the other hand, given my view of criticism as primarily an affair of discovering what is valuable in an artwork, I think that frequently too much is made of the role of the critic as a person whose business it is to pronounce upon which artworks are best, which better, and which are worse. Critics are not art world touts; their primary assignment is not to provide the rest of us with tips about which artworks will win, place, or show and in what order. Rather, we expect critics to assist us in seeing what there is of value in the work at hand. Thus, it is not a liability of the plural-category approach that it is not obsessed with comparison, especially evaluative comparisons that reach across categories.

In order to pinpoint that which is valuable in a work, the critic may compare artworks. But such comparison is generally undertaken in order to show how the choice of this strategy instead of that one enabled the artist to achieve her purposes more expeditiously than an alternative strategy, as exemplified in another artwork. This sort of comparison undoubtedly has a role to play in analyzing artworks. One artwork, in other words, is used to cast light on the structure of another artwork. Yet a piece of criticism does not strike me as incomplete if after it shows us what is valuable in a work (or, at least, some of what is valuable), it does not then go on to say whether or not the work is better or worse than other artworks, even artworks of the same kind.

Being shown what is excellent about *The Miser* or *The Bourgeois Gentleman* doesn't require some added comment about how the excellence of either of these compares to that of *Pygmalion*.

And even less does an account of the merits of *Gulliver's Travels* require a comparison with the achievement of Jasper Johns's target paintings or Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Criticism suffices that assists its readers in comprehending what is valuable in the work under discussion—period and full stop.

In short, on my view, there seems to be a misplaced emphasis on the critical comparison of artworks, especially for the purpose of ranking them—as if critics were essentially aesthetical accountants. In most cases, ranking the artworks in question seems beside the point. We want the critic to tell us what to be on the lookout for in a particular work, e.g., what of value can we find in this particular musical composition? It is not as if the focus of our attention is a wrestling competition between this work and a bunch of other works. Or, to shift metaphors, attending to an artwork is not like following a baseball game early in the season with an overriding interest in who will ultimately win the World Series.

Some intra-category, evaluative comparisons are possible, as we have seen, although I am not convinced that even this activity is of the utmost critical importance and urgency. Yet many other inter-category critical comparisons are incommensurable and are best left to one side (though we will discuss the grounds for certain sorts of cross-categorical comparison in the next section). And finally, many critical comparisons may be downright silly and/or distracting.

For example, the question of which is better, *As You Like It* or the Parthenon, or *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, seems almost impossible to get one's mind around. It strikes one as silly. And even if you could answer it, who cares? What would be the point? Especially when it comes to masterpieces, there seems to be little pressure to say which one is the winner. This

may be an enjoyable pastime for connoisseurs and fans, but not critics. What we want from the critic is guidance regarding the excellence to be found in each of these works. Arguing over which is superior, even if we could pull off a decision, has nothing to do with being put in a position to appreciate the particular value of each masterpiece in its own right.\*

So, once again, the fact that the plural-category approach to critical evaluation is not perfectly suited to making every imaginable sort of comparative evaluation may not be a flaw in the approach, but rather an indication that it is on the right track.

In sum, then, some criticism can be said to be objective in virtue of its mobilization of categories of art as a crucial element in the process of evaluation. Some critical disputes can be settled objectively, since some disagreements will rest on debates over the correct categorization of the works in question and many debates of this variety can be settled objectively.

Of course, not all critical disagreements about works of art are disagreements about categories. There may be disagreements about how to describe, contextualize, interpret, and/or analyze works, but these disputes may also be objectively tractable. If one claims that a painting is symmetrical, but it is

\* It might be charged that I am too hasty in my demotion of the importance of critical comparisons. It might be claimed that critics should rank, since there is so much art available that audiences need rankings for the purpose of deciding what to consume. But I think that this does not coincide with the facts. Most pieces of criticism do not end with the advice, see this rather than that, these rather than those. Nor does the ranking of masterpieces in this regard make much sense. We should see as many as we can.

not, that is not something that is subjectively up for grabs. Needless to say, it is not my contention that the invocation of categories will dispel every critical disagreement. But since I know of no area of inquiry where disagreement has been banished entirely—not even physics—I do not think this is either a unique or a deep problem for criticism.

One of the leading arguments against the prospect of objective criticism is that there are no general critical principles. For, it is presumed that if there are no general critical principles, then all critical evaluations can only be subjective. We have blocked this inference, however, by showing that, in some cases, the requisite generalities are available through a consideration of the category of art to which the work in question belongs and its subtending points and purposes.

Nor do I think that the word “some” here is niggling. For, I conjecture that a great many, if not most, of the evaluative judgments that critics issue with respect to works of art are category-relative, whether or not the critics realize it, if only because humans in general have a natural tendency, psychologically, to key their appraisals to categories. And, if this is correct, it suggests that a substantial number of critical evaluations are objective, despite the common sentiment that they all must be no more than subjective,\* just because a great many categorizations can be shown to be correct objectively.

\* Although this section has emphasized the possibility of objectively ascertaining the point or purpose of the work through a consideration of its correct categorization, it should also be clear that another way of grounding one’s evaluation of an artwork might be through contextualization. That is, even if there were a work that defied all categorization—something whose likelihood, I believe, must be close to nil—there are absolutely no grounds

## V. CRITICISM AND THE LIFE OF CULTURE

I have been arguing that most critical evaluation is category-relative and that it is very often ridiculous to engage in comparison for the sake of grading when it comes to works from disjoint categories. Attempting to rank a hard-boiled detective novel by Raymond Chandler vis-à-vis a Fabergé egg either just taxes sense or is downright silly. However, there do seem to be some cases where cross-categorical comparisons are advanced which are not absurd. Thus, if it is the aim of this book to account for our practices of criticism as they are, something needs to be said about the grounds for cross-categorical, critical evaluations where said evaluations appear to be legitimate, or, at least, unexceptionable.

Throughout this text, emphasis has been placed on critical appraisals of artworks on their own terms, which are most frequently the terms of the category or categories of art to which they belong. But if there are evaluative judgments of artworks across disjunct categories, then these cannot be category-relative appraisals. How are such appraisals possible?

I think that there are two major kinds of occasions where cross-categorical assessments are made confidently. The first is relatively uncontroversial. If we are comparing a work of questionable value from one category to a masterpiece of

to suppose that we could not objectively establish the presiding points or purposes of the work through an account of its context—whether institutional, art historical, or more broadly social—which account, moreover, could divulge the standards of achievement appropriate to the work on its own terms. Artworks, like other artifacts, are made for reasons; we can discover those reasons by examining the context in which the work was created; and we can use those reasons to estimate the degree of success of the work on its own terms.

another category, there does not seem to be much strain in saying that the latter is superior to the former. No one blanches at the assertion that the *St. Matthew Passion* is greater than *The Three Stooges in Orbit*. For where one work is pretty close to the top of its game and the other is near the bottom of the league of its own, the comparative ranking seems well motivated. Where things very often get giddy, it appears, is when masterpieces from wildly different classes are measured against each other.

Nevertheless, even here, there are some cases where it seems that many of us are comfortable with cross-categorical comparisons. There is nothing so exquisite as a well-wrought Jeeves-and-Wooster story by P.G. Wodehouse. And yet I suspect that many, including Wodehouse lovers like myself, would agree that such a story is not the equal of Michelangelo's also undeniably spectacular accomplishment, the epic *Sistine Chapel*.

Here it is not the case that the lower ranked work is poor of its kind. Quite the contrary, it's superlative. So on what grounds do we rank the Wodehouse beneath the Michelangelo? I think the answer is unavoidable. We think that the kind of artwork that Michelangelo's work represents is regarded to be more important than the genre in which the Wodehouse story excels. "More important" relative to what? More important to the life of society. Michelangelo's achievement is virtually an encyclopedia of the culture of his age. Obviously the ambition—and achievement—of a Jeeves-and-Wooster story are of a different order of cultural significance. The point here is not that comedy per se is a lesser genre than epic. Rather, the kind of comedy in which Wodehouse excelled—frivolity for its own sake (which is rather a good thing)—is not of the same cultural heft as the



encyclopedic ambition on display in the *Sistine Chapel*. I suspect even Wodehouse would concur.

The Jeeves-and-Wooster story is excellent of its kind as is the *Sistine Chapel*, but the kinds and their related purposes are valued differently. The Michelangelo is the mythic expression of some of the deepest beliefs and feelings of the Catholic civilization into which Michelangelo was born. The Jeeves-and-Wooster story is an absolutely splendid comedy with little or no redeeming social value (and, undoubtedly, Bertie would have been proud of it). When confronted with masterpieces from genres with these very different claims upon the interest of the culture at large, I suspect that we do not think that it is silly or beside the point to concede that the masterpiece from the genre with greater cultural substance outweighs the masterpiece from the less socially significant genre.

Moreover, to return to the question of the objectivity of criticism, I do think that sometimes we can reach agreement rationally about the relative cultural importance of different categories of art. Novels that explore forgotten or unacknowledged dimensions of the human psyche—such as *Beware of Pity* by Stefan Zweig—are more culturally important than comic strips, like *Hagar the Horrible*, of slovenly, overweight, dysfunctional, and lazy middle-aged Vikings, as delightful and amusing as those cartoons may sometimes be. Indeed, I believe that we can grant that this is the case, even if in our hearts of hearts we prefer comic strips. And on some occasions the critic may think that it is not only important to comment on the success value of the work, but also on the significance of the purposes of that kind of art.

Of course, I would also admit that there are cases where there can be reasonable disagreement about the relative

importance of a category of art for the culture at large—cases where there is nothing that either side in the debate can appeal to for objective leverage. In those cases, it may be just silly or beside the point to contrive a cross-categorical ranking.

As I said, I do not think that the kind of cross-categorical ranking which requires a determination of the relative importance of the pertinent categories of art to the culture at large is the norm. In my guess-estimation, most criticism is conducted within the bounds of categories. Moreover, when the critic works within the categories in her chosen domain of expertise, her criticism is art criticism narrowly construed—that is, criticism based in her knowledge of the traditions, histories, theories, styles, genres, oeuvres, and categories of the artform or the artforms that comprise her field of expertise. This is the sort of specialized learning that one may acquire by attending art classes—historical, theoretical, critical, and practical—or by reading up on or exposing oneself widely to the kind of art in question.

However, the weighing of the cultural importance of different categories of art is not art criticism narrowly construed. Perhaps we should call it cultural criticism. It demands that the critic function not simply as an art expert but as something more of the nature of a public intellectual. In order to pull this off, the critic must be informed about and be a participant in the conversation of his or her culture. This requires general understanding in addition to a specialized background.

At this point, it may be objected that we have gone beyond the compass of art criticism and into the realm of social punditry. But I am not so sure. My ambition throughout this book has been to rationally reconstruct our critical practices.

In order to do so, especially in terms of certain of the cross-categorical rankings with which critics seem comfortable, it seems advisable to speculate that the sort of cultural criticism discussed above plays a role. To say it ought not—because it is not art criticism, properly so called—seems legislative, rather than descriptive. The boundary between art criticism narrowly construed and what might be called cultural criticism is porous, a fact that should be readily apparent to anyone who reads criticism regularly.

But the need for a critic to be an informed citizen of her culture at large not only becomes evident when the issue of cross-categorical comparisons erupts. It may also be important when comparing works in a single genre where both serve the genre well but one, in addition, contributes something of greater social significance than what is usually expected of the category in question.

For example, *The Bad and the Beautiful* and *Sunset Boulevard* both belong to the genre of the Hollywood exposé. But in addition to its caustic view of the movie industry, *Sunset Boulevard* offers something else—a popular philosophical exposition, if you will, on the very human tendency to deny aging and thereby to deny, as Heidegger might have it, our mortality.

Although ostensibly at the sunset of her life, Norma Desmond fails to grasp that she is no longer the young starlet she was when Max and Cecil B. De Mille were her directors. Her failure to acknowledge aging leads to her tragic end. Like *Oedipus Rex*, which reminds viewers to call no one happy until they are dead, *Sunset Boulevard* recalls our attention to a Heideggerian fact about human existence which we all know but deny in the way we conduct our lives—the fact that we are headed toward death.

That in addition to being a very well designed and polished Hollywood exposé, *Sunset Boulevard* also performs the function of popular philosophizing—of bringing to mind truths about the human condition that have been forgotten, neglected, or repressed—makes *Sunset Boulevard* more socially significant than *The Bad and the Beautiful*. And this is something that the accomplished movie critic should figure into her evaluation of *Sunset Boulevard* and assist the viewers in appreciating.

A good critic should be a master of the history and categories of the artform about which she has elected to specialize. She should be an art critic, narrowly construed. However, that is not enough. She should also be a cultural critic. For, the arts are not simply hermetically sealed enterprises. The arts are among the major conduits for the ideas, beliefs, and feelings that form the warp and woof of a living culture. This is as much a part of the function of the arts as is the solution of the problems that beset the individual practices of the arts. Consequently, even though most workaday criticism is art criticism, narrowly construed, the critic-in-full of art cannot altogether shirk the responsibilities and risks of cultural criticism.