

Abstract

The Gangster on the Couch: Forms of Artistic Explanation, Gotthold Lessing, and *The Sopranos*

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In response to Noel Carroll's provocative suggestion that, in our art-critical and theoretic practices, we abandon medium in favor of other concepts like genre and style, I defend a critical use of artistic medium. Carroll claims use of artistic medium confuses art critics and theorists, encouraging pronouncements on the particular artistic capacity a given substance best realizes. Some, not all, uses of artistic medium lead to the confusions worrying Carroll. Rudolf Arnheim's critical account of film's artistic possibilities exemplifies a use of medium that depends on identifying the medium with the substance out of which the work is made independently of considering the ends to which the substance is put and, on that basis, prescribes artistic ends to which the substance should be put.

Gotthold Lessing does not have a substance/attribute use of artistic medium. In distinguishing between painting and poetry, Lessing articulates two modes of apprehending action. Lessing's and Cavell's critical work exemplify a capacity/practice use of artistic medium, in which the critic calls attention to receptive practices instanced in a given artistic work in order to account for coordination of the formal elements of that work of art. Such a use of artistic medium is necessary to make sense of works of art that seek to bring to the audience's attention the practices they instance.

Making *The Sopranos*, a television show inheriting the figure of the movie gangster, intelligible demands description equally in terms of genre, a form of description that articulates a particular action type an artistic instance presents, and in terms of medium, a form of description that articulates receptive practices exercised in the work. *The Sopranos* inherits the gangster by reimagining him as an aggressive figure, one who, by rationalizing ongoing therapeutic description of his actions, distances himself from his participation in ongoing violent activities and is thus better able to continue them. In so doing, *The Sopranos* calls attention to two forms of action apprehension: one, psychoanalytic, in which we listen to what is avoided in therapeutic description; the other, physiognomic, in which we recognize a body's movements as parts of an action.