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## BEYOND AESTHETICS

*Beyond Aesthetics* brings together philosophical essays addressing art and related issues by one of the foremost philosophers of art at work today. Countering conventional aesthetic theories – those maintaining that authorial intention, art history, morality, and emotional responses are irrelevant to the experience of art – Noël Carroll argues for a more pluralistic and commonsensical view in which all of these factors can play a legitimate role in our encounter with artworks. Throughout, the book combines philosophical theorizing with illustrative examples including works of high culture and the avant-garde, as well as works of popular culture, jokes, horror novels, and suspense films.

Noël Carroll is the Monroe C. Beardsley Professor of the Philosophy of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Former president of the American Society for Aesthetics, he is the author of seven books including *The Philosophy of Mass Art*, *The Philosophy of Art*, and *Theorizing the Moving Image*.

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*Philosophical Essays*



NOËL CARROLL  
*University of Wisconsin–Madison*



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Dedicated to my teacher  
George Dickie

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## FOREWORD

The second half of our century has witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in philosophical speculation centering on the fine arts. Not since the flowering of German Romanticism have so many philosophers of the first rank taken aesthetics and the philosophy of art as an area of special interest.

The publication of Arthur Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, in 1981, ushered in a period in the aesthetic revival of which I speak that, at least in Anglo-American circles, has been largely dominated by Danto's philosophical presence.

*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is philosophy of art in the "grand manner": in the universe of the arts, a "theory of everything." I myself think it will be the last such grand speculative venture in the field for a very long time: how long a time I cannot possibly guess. But we are, in any case, entering a new period in the ongoing philosophical exploration of the fine arts. If the age of Danto was the age of the hedgehog, who knows one big thing, we are entering, now, the age of the fox, who knows a lot of little things. And the big fox on the block, at least from where I sit, looks to be Noël Carroll. If the age to come in philosophy of art and aesthetics is the age of the fox, it may very well be the age of Carroll.

I should say a word, though, about foxes. The philosophy of art has had, over the past half-century, its *little foxes*. These have been people who have found one area of the discipline particularly amenable to their efforts and talents: one has worked only on literary interpretation, another only on music, a third specializes on problems of pictorial representation, and so on. The hedgehog knows one big thing, the little foxes one little thing. The little foxes are by no means to be despised. They also serve, and have, together, made an enormous contribution.

What makes the big fox *big* is that he knows not just one little thing but a lot of little things. And if they are important, central things, then, like the hedgehog, he is a master of the whole discipline. Noël Carroll is, by any standard, a very big fox.

The essays in your hands cover a wide range of topics in the philosophy of art and aesthetics; and their range, of course, is one of the collection's most impressive features. But one can, after all, range over trivial and peripheral topics, as well as over deep and central ones. It is the depth and centrality of the issues Carroll is willing to confront that makes these essays such a substantial contribution to the field, and their author one of its dominant figures. Issues that the faint of heart shy away from for fear of their difficulty Carroll takes on with a kind of confident common sense that makes us all wonder what there was to be afraid of, and why *we* didn't think of the answer ourselves.

A look at the organization of this volume, the topics covered, and some of the theses advanced will give the reader some small idea of what Carroll's contribution to the main issues in aesthetics and the philosophy of art has been, and why it has earned him, in my eyes and the eyes of many others, such distinction in the field.

In Part I of this collection, *Beyond Aesthetics*, Carroll broaches what I take to be one of the two most central questions in the philosophy of art since its founding in the first half of the eighteenth century. The other of these central questions is the definition of art, which Carroll takes up in Part II.

Although Kant did not use the word "aesthetic" in the ways we do, he nevertheless laid the groundwork for *one* of our two basic usages – namely, as a word to describe certain formal and sensual properties of works of art, as well as of Nature. The *other* way we tend to use it is simply as synonymous with "artistic," "pertains to art *qua* art." When the two are conflated, it has the result that the *only* properties of art *qua* art that there are – the only properties of art that are relevant to art *qua* art – are its "aesthetic," which is to say formal and sensual properties. This view of art, sometimes called "formalism," has had a profound and baleful influence on our thinking about art and the aesthetic. Carroll argues, convincingly, I think, that this conflation should *not* be allowed to take place: that "(1) the philosophy of art and aesthetics should be spoken of as two areas of inquiry since (2) failure to do so has been and continues to be a source of philosophical confusion" ("Beauty and the Genealogy of Art Theory"); and, further, he disputes "both the thesis that aesthetic responses are definitive of our responses to artworks and the thesis that art is to be characterized exclusively in terms of the promotion of aesthetic responses" ("Art and Interaction").

In his claims about art and the aesthetic, Carroll exhibits a healthy philosophical pluralism that runs through all his work. I shall return to this theme in my conclusion to these brief remarks.

Part II, *Art, History and Narrative*, as the title suggests, contains essays having to do with the nature both of artistic and historical narrative structure. But the three major essays have, rather, to do with the second of the two central issues of modern philosophy of the arts, which is to say, the nature of art itself, with narrative as the essential, defining idea.

The three dominant theories of art in our time have been George Dickie's "institutional" theory, Arthur Danto's "aboutness" theory, and Morris Weitz's Wittgensteinian "no theory" theory. The options have been, then, the theory that something is a work of art if and only if it has been enfranchised by the "art-world"; the theory that something is a work of art if and only if it at least makes sense to ask what it is about (and that it fulfills certain other conditions on its "aboutness" too elaborate to go into here); and the theory (if you want to call it that) that "art" is an "open concept" and therefore cannot be defined at all.

To these three approaches to defining art we must now add Carroll's "narrative" definition, the first new approach since Danto became the dominant figure in the field. As Carroll sees the novelty of his suggestion, "the question 'What is art' changes its thrust. 'Art' in our query no longer refers primarily to the art



object; rather what we wish to know about when we ask ‘What is art?’ predominantly concerns the nature and structures of the practices of art – things, I shall argue, that are generally best approached by means of historical narration” (“Art, Practice, and Narrative”).

Carroll’s idea, then, is that something is a work of art if and only if it can be connected with other, bona fide cases of art by a convincing historical narrative. As he puts the view, “I propose that ... we identify works as artworks – where the question of whether or not they are art arises – by means of historical narratives which connect contested candidates to art history in a way that discloses that the mutations in question are part of the evolving species of art. I call these stories ‘identifying narratives’” (“Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art”).

On Carroll’s view, attempts to define art are driven, particularly in our century, by the avant-garde, which continually challenges the reigning definitions with “problem objects,” bizarre entities that it seems impossible to see as possessing anything in common with art “properly so-called.” With regard to such objects of the avant-garde, it is a virtue of Carroll’s account that we are looking not for some common property in the object, even in Danto’s liberating sense of “something the eye cannot descry,” but for something not belonging to the artwork at all – rather, an art-historical narrative in which the problem object can, as it were, play a believable role. It may also prove more effective than Danto’s approach with “problem objects” not of the avant-garde but ones that have been around to plague us since the very beginning of the art-defining project, which is to say, works of *absolute music*.

Absolute music in the eighteenth century, as now, was a plague and a nuisance to would-be art definers. Its at least apparent lack of representational or semantic content, and the absence of consensus over whether its “expressive” features can make up for that lack, are themselves “content,” have made it recalcitrant to any theory of art that posits “content” of any kind as a necessary condition, even Danto’s, with its subtle “aboutness” criterion, requiring merely that the “aboutness” question can relevantly be asked. Carroll’s theory sidesteps this problem, requiring but that absolute music be worked into an “identifying narrative,” connecting it with other, standard cases of “art” properly so-called. What its “inner” nature may be is not material for this narrative maneuver.

All prospective “definitions” of “art” must, in the event, steer between the Scylla of *exclusion* and the Charybdis of *inclusion*: they must, that is, be so framed as to not exclude from the precincts of art those problematic objects of the avant-garde driving the enterprise, and, on the other hand, they must not, in so doing, *include* objects no one recognizes intuitively as “art.” It is my suspicion that Charybdis is the danger to Carroll’s project. But the ultimate fate of that project is yet to be played out.

The publication of a little essay by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, called “Intention,” in 1942, the theme of which was later developed more fully in their “The Intentional Fallacy,” in 1954, had two important results: it made the topic of literary interpretation a central one for the philosophy of art, and made

the relevance of authorial intention the crucial question. Wimsatt and Beardsley argued with great persuasiveness, and, indeed, succeeded in persuading many, that the author's intentions are irrelevant to literary interpretation; that, in fact, to treat them as relevant is a "fallacy": the "intentional fallacy," as they called it.

Carroll takes on this long-debated issue in Part III, Interpretation and Intention. Characteristically, his position is commonsensical, and appeals to "everyday" experience. "In the normal course of affairs," Carroll writes, "when confronted with an utterance, our standard cognitive goal is to figure out what the speaker intends to say" ("Art, Intention, and Conversation"). If this is true in ordinary conversation, he asks, why should it be any less true in our encounters with literary (and other) works of art that, Carroll suggests, can usefully be thought of as, so to speak, "conversations" with their creators? As he puts the point: "When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation. Obviously, it is not as interactive as an ordinary conversation, for we are not receiving spontaneous feedback concerning our own responses. But just as an ordinary conversation gives us a stake in understanding our interlocutor, so does our interaction with an artwork" ("Art, Intention, and Conversation").

To many, this answer to the much debated question as to the relevance of authorial intention to artistic interpretation will seem too simple to be true. Simplicity of theory is much admired in the mathematical sciences, but not in philosophy, where bogus profundity thrives on unintelligible complexity. My own feeling is that Carroll's answer to the question of authorial intention is too simple *not* to be true.

The section of Carroll's collection called Art, Emotions, and Morality takes on two questions about art that have only recently regained an importance they once had. They are the questions of whether moral value is relevant to artistic value, and how ordinary, garden-variety emotions like anger, hope, fear, sorrow, and so forth, can be aroused in audiences to fictional works of art. The reason for their eclipse has been, I believe, the general acceptance, in recent philosophy, of what is sometimes called the "autonomy of art," or, more colloquially, "art for art's sake." Fueled, certainly, by formalism, the belief has gained currency among "sophisticated" lovers of art that its values, even where it seems to have reference to the world beyond its boundaries, must be found within *its* world alone. Both the ideas that we should evaluate fictional works even partly for their moral content, or that it can be part of their function to arouse in us the ordinary emotions of our everyday lives, ideas once accepted as a matter of course by experts and the laity alike, were, until recently, considered discredited vestiges of Romanticism, not worthy of philosophical notice.

Carroll is not alone in reconsidering these issues and, as a matter of fact, his account of how fiction arouses the garden-variety emotions is a developed version of a theory that others have propounded. The problem is that emotions are standardly aroused by beliefs about what are taken to be actual states of affairs. Thus, I am angry at my landlord for raising the rent. But why, so the skeptical argument goes,

should I get angry at a fictional landlord who raises the fictional rent of a fictional lady in distress, since there is no landlord, no lady in distress, no rent to be raised?

The answer that Carroll and others have come up with is that mere “thoughts” of things happening can arouse the garden-variety emotions. The mere thought of my landlord’s raising the rent, even though I do not presently believe the landlord is going to raise my rent, can make me angry, so this account has it. As Carroll puts his point, “it seems indisputable that emotions can be engendered in the process of holding propositions before the mind unasserted. While cutting vegetables, imagine putting the very sharp knife in your hand into your eye. One suddenly feels a shudder” (“Art, Narrative, and Emotion”). And applying this conclusion to fictional works of art, “Fictions, construed as propositions to be imagined, supply us with the relevant, unasserted propositional content, and in entertaining that content, we can be emotionally moved by fictions” (“Art, Narrative, and Emotion”).

Armed with this account of how fictional works of art can move us to the garden-variety emotions, Carroll goes on, in Part IV, to investigate, among other things, the role of these emotions in narrative in general, in horror, and in suspense. He argues against both the ancient Platonic theory that emotions in fiction are aroused in us by “identifying” with fictional personages, and its present-day reincarnation, called “simulation theory,” which has it that “By simulating the mental states of fictional characters, we come to experience what it would be like – that is, for example, what it would feel like – to be in situations such as those in which the characters find themselves” (“Simulation, Emotions, and Morality”).

With regard to the issue of moral value in art, Carroll advocates, characteristically, a view he calls “moderate moralism.” I say “characteristically” because here, as elsewhere, Carroll exhibits his innate common sense and commonsensical pluralism. *Of course*, the layperson, untainted with theory, wants to say that moral value is neither *all* there is to artistic value; but nor is it *nothing*: it is part of artistic value, in some kinds of artworks, some of the time. This, essentially, is the moderate claim.

Carroll’s argument is that narrative, at least as we know it, works, in part, by engaging our moral concepts, attitudes, feelings, sympathies. “Part of what is involved, then, in the process of filling in a narrative is the activation of the moral powers – the moral judgments and the moral emotions of audiences” (“Moderate Moralism”). And that being the case, “the moderate moralist also contends that moral evaluation may figure in our evaluations of some art. For inasmuch as narrative artworks engage our powers of moral understanding, they can be assessed in terms of whether they deepen or pervert the moral understanding” (“Moderate Moralism”). That sounds like common sense to me. I am not saying that common sense always makes philosophical sense – but it is an encouraging start.

I said that what characterizes these essays of Carroll’s, and makes them such a substantial contribution to aesthetics and the philosophy of art, is their wide-ranging coverage of the central, most difficult, and most contested issues. The final section, however, *Alternative Topics*, shows that there is yet another side to Carroll’s impressive range of philosophical interests: a lighter side, shall we say, as evidenced

by such essays as “On Jokes,” “The Paradox of Junk Fiction,” and “On Being Moved By Nature.” That Carroll can interest himself not only in the core issues of his field but in the peripheral ones as well makes him truly the “complete” philosopher of art. There is no one I know who can come even close to him in either breadth or depth.

The theme of Carroll’s work in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, I have maintained, is a healthy kind of commonsensical pluralism: the tendency to avoid those overarching theories that tell us art is *all* one thing, or *never* another, and to say, rather, perhaps it is more things than one. In its favoring of practice over theory it is Aristotelian rather than Spinozistic (to appropriate a distinction Stuart Hampshire once applied to moral philosophy). For those who think philosophy must be high and mighty, this philosophy is not for you. For those who think the truths of art and the aesthetic could be right in front of your nose, where you suspected all along that they were, Noël Carroll will give you the best arguments you are ever likely to get for your intuitions. In the postmodern age of outrageous paradoxes, you will find here an oasis of sanity.

Peter Kivy