

“The role of reception value in the reasoned critical evaluation of artworks”¹

Abstract:

In the context of current discussion about the present function of art criticism, Noël Carroll proposes an account that establishes a social role for the critic to enable the audience to find what is valuable in an artwork. Being the main task of criticism, artistic evaluation is intended as a reasoned process supported by evidence. Carroll then wants to offer a picture of criticism that focuses on the artist's intentional actions and his or her achievement (success value) excluding the value the audience derives from experiencing the artwork (reception value), unless this is connected to what is intended by the artist. In this paper, my arguments object to this constraint on what will be considered valuable in an artwork and the reception the critic and the public should care about. I will also try to show that, in the practice of art, value doesn't locate on the artist's side, neither on the audience's, but it is inter-subjective and social.

Introduction

Nowadays, there is more art available than in any other period in history, and that's why many see art criticism more necessary than ever before; however the present role of art criticism is not clear.² To assent to or to reject works of criticism, we would need a conception of its nature and function. In a recent book, Noël Carroll attempts such an exercise in the philosophy of art criticism, or meta-criticism, that tries to illuminate both the aims and the practices of art criticism.³

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² See, for example, the discussions in Elkins, J., (2003) and Rubinstein, R. (ed.) (2006).

³ Carroll, N., (2009) *On Criticism*, New York: Routledge. Most of Carroll's quotations from this book will be from now on in the main text.

According to Carroll, the art critic should guide art consumers in the selection of art and assist them in comprehending and appreciating it. Therefore, he establishes artistic evaluation as the main task of the critic. This view contrasts with those more frequent that point out related functions, such as description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, analysis or, particularly, interpretation. For Carroll, these other activities are components of criticism but they are hierarchically subservient to the purposes of evaluation, articulating the reasons upon which sound criticism is based. Certainly, in Carroll's view, critical evaluation is intended as a rigorous, reasoned process in which every credible artistic judgment must be supported by evidence. Through a discussion of Carroll's account, this paper reflects on those reasons we can appeal to in order to support our decision on what makes a work of art valuable.

Some current debates about art criticism

Carroll locates his arguments in the level of evaluation that concerns individual works as whole rather than specific details in a work. Now, value judgments about whole works, currently associated with the formation of canons, are also more likely to be dismissed as "matter of taste" or at any rate culturally conditioned.⁴ Carroll would like to avoid these two objections, particularly the first one.⁵ In spite of value's current association with taste, or aesthetic experience, Carroll identifies the artwork itself as the central focus of criticism and maintains that there are in fact inter-subjectively verifiable generalizations sufficient to ground the evaluations of critics and avoid subjectivity. Carroll is

⁴ Cf. Lamarque, P., (2001), p. 458. Nonetheless, Carroll doubts that criticism is centrally concerned with ranking artists or artworks, which sometimes become an exercise that he sees as downright silly.

⁵ About the second objection, here I will say only that Carroll declares his notion of criticism contrary to current ideologically or politically based critical theory currently based upon political or ideological, not properly artistic, interpretations. For Carroll, even if political or ideological evaluations are sometimes appropriate dimensions of criticism, he maintains that the artistic evaluation is always apposite when criticizing an artwork when many of the dominant theories of criticism do not. See (2009), p.5.

willing to settle for modest generalizations that work within a defined category of art to support critical judgments pertaining to art belonging to the particular category. In other words, objectivity in art criticism does not require principles or rules that hold across the entire scope of art.⁶ So, it seems that Carroll looks for a way out of the dilemma that would affect current art criticism according to which art critics must either rely on their "eye" or taste to pronounce value judgments or draw upon some theory of art to provide more analytical accounts of art's meaning and function.⁷ The former option renders critical opinions purely subjective, but the latter option founders, allegedly, because there are now no workable all-encompassing theories of art.

On the other hand, it is also certain that another sort of crisis of art criticism is claimed based on the absence of a more committed criticism, of ambitious value judgements that look for artistic excellence.⁸ Perhaps this crisis is symptomatic of the larger mess that is the contemporary artworld, where curators and gallery owners hijack the latest art school whizzes and hype their work at fairs, bypassing critics who subsequently bemoan the dominance of crass market forces.⁹ According to this, the critic would have lost protagonism and surrenders to the market being no more the mediator between the artist and the public, who would be treated as mere consumers.¹⁰

In his book, Carroll doesn't explicitly address this other problem, but we could hypothesize an answer that would advocate both for the priority of evaluation and, again, for a pluralistic criticism (employing plural categories) according to the pluralism and fragmentation of artistic scenario. It is probably true that the artworld has become so multiple and changing that it is difficult for critics to

⁶ Carroll adapts and applies Kendall Walton's notion of categories of art, to develop ideas of genre-based criticism. See Walton, K., (1979).

⁷ As it is summarized by Freeland, C.A., (2009).

⁸ Rainer Rochlitz (1994) affirms a "resignation" of the criticism.

⁹ See again Freeland (2009)

¹⁰ See Morgan, R. C. (1998).

discern meaningful patterns. Carroll would encourage them to make the effort though, because criticism essentially involves evaluation. On this line, Carroll does meet the objection of some critics, especially academics, to his notion of criticism because they are uncomfortable with evaluation willing a science like value-free criticism. For Carroll, a value-neutral approach is not a matter of reforming criticism, but abandoning it (p. 42). He thinks evaluation is the leading component of criticism, and shows his thesis is consistent with the long historical view of the concept and a widely held commonsense view of the public. I agree with him.

So, clearly, Carroll sees the critic occupying a social role in recommending and guiding our selection against the vast amount of artworks we can deal with, by finding the value that the critic believes that the work possesses. Criticism must render “its evaluation intelligible to audiences in such way that they are guided to the discovery of value on their own” (p. 45) The recognized expertise of the critics should be supported by their skills arguing their case, so the evidence and good reasons grounding their evaluations can be used by readers “to structure their own encounter with the artwork under scrutiny” (Ibid.).

Success Value versus Reception Value

The role of the critic is to say what is valuable in art. As it has already been remarked, one reading of this claim might suggest an uncomfortable paternalism with respect to the relation of critics and readers.¹¹ Even if Carroll only means for the critic to assist the reader, and not to actually determine what is in fact valuable. Indeed, he leaves the actual determination of artistic value in the hands, not of the critic, but in the artist's. Now, while the artist's achievement establishes value in the work, the task of criticism is to

¹¹ See Carter, C.L., (2009).

establish the *appropriate* range of audience responses in discovering this value.

Arguing that what is valuable in art is mostly the achievement of the artist as displayed in the work is part of Carroll's effort to sustain objective criticism. For Carroll, objective reasons in art criticism are based on the artist's intentions, classification of the work into its proper category, and examination of the particular features of the work. The purposes with which an artist intentionally produces a work provide a standpoint from which to determine whether or not the work has succeeded or failed on its own terms. He says:

"The critic identifies what is valuable in the artwork by limning what the artist has achieved –by explaining how, thanks to what the artist has done, the work works relative to its underlying purposes. And explaining this, in turn, enables the audience to grasp something about what is valuable in the work, or, at least, it is to be hoped, to comprehend with still greater clarity the achievement they may have already detected" (p. 52).

This species of value is what he calls "success value" and – Carroll argues– constitutes the main focus of criticism. Apart from defending himself from the recurrent arguments against the resort to artistic intentions both in appraising and interpreting artworks, Carroll wants to make clear how his view contrasts sharply with the opinion that the value of an artwork is a direct function of whatever positive experiences the artwork affords the audiences, that is, "reception value". According to Carroll, this other account establishes that the role of the critic will be to instruct the audience in the ways in which to derive the fullest positive experience of the work. Yet one of the problems with reception value view of criticism is that, *without qualification*, it seems to grant to the critic a specious methodological license to provide arbitrary frameworks of analyzing and interpreting the works validated just by our (no matter of what kind) enjoyment (p.60). Again, I think that these relativistic consequences are one of

the things Carroll is most afraid of. This means that the range of plausible analysis, interpretations and evaluations should be restricted and the critic should attach to what the artists aimed to do, and so will the public in order to enjoy the work of art in an appropriate way. Carroll prescribes that the critic should support plausible interpretations and/or analysis, and/or by placing the work in the correct category or categories as well as typically contextualizing its historical (including contemporary) origins adequately. From this perspective, the relevant experiences of concern to the critic should be the informed experiences of prepared audience members. Nonetheless, in Carroll's opinion, reception value can be considered relevant for the value of artwork, but only as an element of the artist's achievement. Carroll defends that the success value approach to what is valuable in an artwork can then incorporate whatever we should want to say about the reception value of the artwork insofar as, in the pertinent cases, the capacity of a work of art to afford positive experiences to the target audiences is part of what the artist intends to achieve. For Carroll, "here, the relevant person is the artist"(p.64), and so locates the value of the artwork "on the artist's side of the transaction between the artist and the audience" (p.53); that value subsists on its own as does the value of a baseball game held as a private match with no civilian spectators.¹²

Art as a social practice

Carroll says that the "artwork is an *artifact* and should be evaluated as such – that is, in terms of what it is *designed* to do" (p.64). Right, as an intentional human activity, artifactuality should be kept as part of the definition of a work of art. However, we have to point to a side of intentionality that rests in the production, and so in the appreciation of an artwork. We can say that for the artistic there is an intention of communication; the artwork has a symbolic dimension and has to be in some way significant. Carroll, again, links this

¹² I follow his own example. See Carroll, (2009), p.65.

matter to the artist's intentions. As in any other communicative relationship with another, the range of acceptable interpretations will be *morally* constrained by our best hypotheses about what the creator of the work intended (p.145, my emphasis).

I do not deny the relevance and certain priority of the success value; the intended achievement of the artist offers a proper focus for art criticism and it is certainly the starting point of evaluation by the critics and the public. But it won't exhaust the value of an artwork and, opposite to Carroll, I don't see as illegitimate the pursuit of aesthetic experiences –valued for its own sake¹³ through an intentionalistically independent play of interpretations by the critics and the public. In my opinion, Carroll's account subtracts a degree of autonomy from the artwork that carries out certain freedom of reception. Even if he doesn't exclude that there can be something valuable in the work that was not actually intended to be there by the artist, Carroll thinks that the fact that the artist ratified the presence of any feature in the finished product, warrants his (actual) intentionalism.¹⁴ However, I think that we can still make a distinction between the artist's intentional actions, the work itself and the audience's reception or experience of the work that allows us to see that there is still relevant reception value elicited by the work, but not captured by those intentions. For example, it is the case that we actually know that Tolstói wrote *Anna Karenina* thinking that it should be a negative portrait of the aristocracy of the time. The way in which he contrasted their hypocrisy, lack of values and spiritual emptiness with the happiness of simple life and true faith, is grounded in Tolstói's own biography. Anna and her adulterous behaviour is meant to

¹³ This definition of aesthetic experience that Carroll employs here belongs to what in an earlier article he called "an axiological account" of aesthetic experience, the most common one, although then he objected and offered his own "content based" account. See, Carroll, N. (2006).

¹⁴ Different to a "hypothetical" intentionalism. Although they converge very much in practice, the difference between actual and hypothetical intentionalism has to do with the kind of evidence they are ready to use in order to reconstruct the intentions of the author. See, Carroll, N. (2009), pp .147-149.

represent much of that, but the character herself and the whole portrait of that complex society allows different interpretations, and consequent evaluations, to that idealized and simple moral which the author intended to be the lesson of his novel.¹⁵

Many people have enjoyed reading the novel. Of course, we have to appraise the merit of the artist who wrote it, but many (in this case, most of them, I would say) of the readers' experiences would not have been intended by him and insofar their reception value is not the intended reception value that –according to Carroll- is the only one that should count as part of the (success) value of an artwork. Carroll likes to compare artistic production and current agency arguing that they should be evaluated in the same way. But should an agent be made unlimitedly responsible for the (right or wrong) consequences of his actions? However, should the critics not take heed of this accumulated reception value when trying to discover what is valuable in an artwork? For many, the richness of our experiences is what makes artworks be great artworks; they are proof of its value.¹⁶ It would be characteristic of works of art that they throw up questions, calling our attention again and again.¹⁷ Our experience of works of

¹⁵ Intentionalism has been argued to be a “monist” theory of interpretation that would defend that there is an single correct interpretation of an artwork, that is, the one related to the author's intentions. See Hirsch E. D. Jr., (1967).

¹⁶ Artworks would do this challenging us perceptively, cognitively and emotionally, raising a sort of experience that will be also properly called “aesthetic”. See Goldman, A., (1995), and more recently (2006). His account of the aesthetic keeps the idea that essentially ties it to the perceptual, but involves cognition and affection avoiding formalism. At the same time it argues for a critical evaluation of artworks on their own terms, not connected with extra-aesthetic commitments. Truths, moral and political lessons can contribute to the aesthetic value when truth or knowledge brought to or gained from an artwork is, and only then, “mobilized in the experience of the work”. (2006), p. 338.

¹⁷ This can sound as part of what Carroll calls the “achievement argument” against intentionalism: the argument that emphasizes that the critic should attend for the sake of evaluation to what has been achieved by the work, not to what attempted or intended by it. Carroll agrees with it because it correctly affirms that is not the artist's intentions what the critic is appraising but what the artist achieves. However, this fact doesn't preclude a concern with the intention of the artist for the critic's purview, since the critic –in order to identify what the artist has done and achieved- will need to grasp something of the artist's intentions. Even when what the artist performs has unexpected consequences the intentions will help precisely to identify them as such. See, Carroll (2009), pp. 77-80, 82-3. In any way, this reply doesn't modify

art should then remain open; there will be more to see, more to think of. Artworks would look for an unending interpretation, which certainly will be influenced by the changes in cultural, historical and aesthetic contexts of reception.

Also in the context of more contemporary artworks, even if the work is not reducible to the experience, the symbolic and communicative dimension of art establishes a pragmatic point of view that will give priority to the experience over the object.¹⁸ This doesn't mean that, on the opposite extreme of the intentionalism, the meaning of the artwork, and its value, are to be imputed only by the audience.¹⁹ This view is also wrong; an artwork is a symbol, therefore its meaning is public and intersubjective. Art is not just something which is produced by an artist, neither is it only just received by an audience; mainly it is a social practice, a regulated game in which they all take part.²⁰ The rules of the game though, not only involve the context in which art is produced but the reception context too, without which –in my opinion- the game makes no sense. This is why art and its value cannot be defined just looking at the artists' side, or only at the spectators' side. As a social practice, art is regulated by rules, more or less explicit and codified, and they allow artworks to exist, mean, and be evaluated.

Now, I think that Carroll's limits on reception value to what is intended by the artist of an artwork impoverish its feasible artistic value, and his reasons for setting those limits have to do with his scepticism about the rationality, objectivity, and communicative nature of those aesthetic experiences of the

Carroll's previous view concerning reception value, whose critical relevance depends on the actual intentions of the artist who elicits or supports some definite range of experiences.

¹⁸ See Vilar, G., (2005), pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ As Carroll points out, some variant of reception aesthetics, as those who declare the death of the author (Barthes), would make the distinction between the artwork and its critical interpretation disappear. See, Carroll, (2009), pp. 150-152.

²⁰ Cf. Michaud, Y., (1998) p.11. See also, Tilghmann (2006)

public. He remarks how the philosophy of criticism in the eighteenth century got off to a bad start with the model of taste for critical judgement. As Carroll argues, the equation of criticism with taste encourages the belief that all criticism is subjective. To avoid this conclusion, Carroll wants to offer a pattern for criticism based on objective reasons that leaves aside the (subjective) positive experiences of the public. In the following section, my arguments will try to show that the cultural roots of these experiences could calm the fears of Carroll.

Aesthetic evaluation, subjectivity and criticism

Analogized to sensory taste, critical taste is seen as something highly personal, even idiosyncratic, and extremely variable. Carroll points out that David Hume was particularly influential in both linking criticism with taste and with the detection of beauty, as the pleasure we derive from artworks. Hume believed that beauty is the name of a sensation, not a feature of the object that provokes the sensation, and explained the agreements in this matter by appealing to certain regularities in the normal reactions of a common human frame. Nonetheless, in spite of that the concept of taste emphasizes the subjectivity of aesthetic reactions, judgements of taste are also about objects; they refer to putative qualities of objects that can be noticed and enjoyed by others. As Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, the “problem of taste” has always harboured an uneasy tension between the necessity of critical standards for judging art works and the fact that those standards rely upon the subjective responses of the individuals appreciating art, which are notoriously variable”.²¹ So the “problem of taste”, that inspired most of the debate on early modern aesthetics, has always pointed to the difficulties for a subjective judgment to become a critical one. It’s is a question not located in the subject, but in the relation of the subject with the object, in the experience of it.

²¹ Korsmeyer, C., (2001), 193.

On other hand, in Hume's account, the capability for critical taste was meant to be perceptive, but also affective,²² and its origin wasn't only physical and psychological either, but cultural too. For Hume, knowledge and familiarity with art were also conditions to improve our aesthetic judgements. This means that for somebody to recognize the artistic qualities of an object, and even to assess it as art, they must connect them with familiar traditions and practices of art appreciation inside of which those qualities are also learnt. As practitioners, we can learn to identify and affectively react to, and so evaluate, certain qualities. The artists also learn their skill inside this very complex and dynamic process that demands practice, comparison, and attention to others' viewpoints.²³ The unavoidable circularity in the identification, interpretation and evaluation of art would lead to a sort of conventionalism that Carroll seems to support and that, according to the changes in art practices that have developed a pluralistic and fragmented artistic scenario, requires an equally diversified and plural exercise of criticism in the way that Carroll defends. For him, the existence of artistic conventions (related to styles, genres, types of work, artistic groups or movements, and so on) offers enough objective basis for that categorical classification that renders a reasoned critical evaluation. They will support the structural and contextual reasons that join the intentional reasons in order to meet the challenge that wants to show every evaluation as subjective. However, what the existence of conventions ruling art practice also shows is how a community of production is articulated with a community of evaluation. Being personal in a deep way, aesthetic experiences and judgments are also produced in context of common practice and expressed in shared language (more or less specialized) that allow discussion on interpersonal, and so

²² Carolyn Korsmeyer, who has studied deeply the origins of the "metaphor of taste" that modifies its original meaning from the gustatory appreciation of food or drink to value art, has pointed out an important reason for the successful use of the term "taste" during the XVI, XVII, and XVIII centuries. This is, the idea of knowledge and pleasure, the cognitive and the affective, being intimately connected when appreciating art. See, Korsmeyer, C. (1999).

²³ Cf. Michaud on Hume again, (1998). p.38

enough objective, basis.

In the search for intersubjective normativity, the aesthetic experience should be then informed.²⁴ Carroll is right in prescribing that the critic should support his evaluation on plausible interpretations and/or analysis, in certain conventions that are shared with the public. This way of grounding critical evaluations allows the audience to be able to replicate the critical process on their own and add to it on the basis of their own experiences. But doing so, the critic will be instructing them in the ways in which to derive a positive experience of the work. A sort of experience that could rightly be called “aesthetic”, because people, including the critic, would respond affectively to the interpretation they make, and consequently they will derive positive or negative evaluations. The point is that their evaluation is connected “conceptually” (not physically or psychologically) to that interpretation. They feel satisfaction *when* grasping, for example, the correct design, and vice versa.²⁵ “Satisfaction”, and not pleasure, would be a better term for describing the feeling we derive from the (aesthetic) appreciation of artworks even when they are not beautiful or pleasurable, in a narrow and hedonistic way, but assault our senses, shock us affectively, and challenge our intellects.²⁶ From this perspective, and as Carroll affirms, the critic will have to prepare the audience to have informed experiences, but -as argued above- they don’t have to be necessarily restricted to what the artist intended and, for that reason, suspect of arbitrariness.

Reception value and the practice of art

It seems to me, that this is the way our practices of artistic reception should work. They include modes of appreciation that would constitute the institution of

²⁴ Including our cognitive grasp of those external and historical relations that Carroll thinks a reception value approach fails to attend.

²⁵ See Tilghman (1984), pp. 204-205.

²⁶ See, Goldman, A. (2004), p.102.

art, and the value that we confer to it.²⁷ They will provide art also with vitality and subversive power. As pointed out before, Carroll's arguments in favour of restricting the critical relevance of reception often appeal to the analogy between art production and current agency, therefore artworks produced by an artist should be interpreted in the same way as words and actions of a person in daily life. But there are, again, some differences. In the game of art, the language is not used as currently, and that allows certain degree of freedom in its reception; its symbols and its meanings are not so firmly codified. Consequently, for an artwork to be understood and correctly appreciated, the response of the reader will be required, making this communicative relation possible even when it implies the rupture with previous conventions. Carroll mentions too the categorical developments in constant evolution that overturn old conventions. The critic should then help the interested audience to understand and appraise the new artforms, genres, styles, and movements (pp.184-6). But again, this means a process that should involve both sides of the art game, production and reception, in an active way so that whatever motivates and animates our aesthetic evaluations can crystallize in a new norm.²⁸ Critical criteria as mere norms without feelings, without enjoyment, are empty and they will be used for conformity. Supported and advised by a valiant criticism, the public should be allowed to discern, from authentic feelings and experience, and not just because it is what they have read or been told, what is truly creative in the art.²⁹

The social role of the critic, with new and old artforms, should try to make the artwork intelligible, but it should also avoid that the experience of art by the public finally succumbs to mere passive consumerism. In order to discern true artistic value in an artworld bigger and more diverse than ever before, reception

²⁷ Cf. Lamarque on the institution of literature, (2001).

²⁸ Cf. Michaud, Y. (1998), p.94.

²⁹ Cf. Vargas Llosa, M. (2008), when - he concludes- maybe then "art will emancipate itself from the snobs, the frivolous, and the speculators who confine it".

value should then not be ignored.

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