

## THE ARTS vs ART WITH A CAPITAL 'A'. An Interview with Noël Carroll

Hans Maes

Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox* divides thinkers into two categories: Hedgehogs relate everything to a single, universal principle or idea, whereas foxes rely on multiple experiences and entertain a vast variety of ideas without seeking to fit them all into, or exclude them from, any one grand system. Peter Kivy refers to this essay when he describes the current state of aesthetics: '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 he adds: 'the big fox on the block ... looks to be Noël Carroll.' When I meet Noël Carroll in Canterbury on a sunny afternoon in April my first question is whether he agrees with that characterisation. Carroll is one of the most prolific philosophers of art today and has written about an extraordinary wide range of topics, but there doesn't seem to be one central idea that ties all of his work together.

NC: Yes, it does typify the way that I tend to work, which is to go from problem to problem. There may be something that holds most of my work together, though, but it is a reactive theme. A lot of what I do is a reaction against what one could call 'Enlightenment formalism.' As opposed to formalism, which brackets questions of history, politics, ethics, and intention, I argue for the reassertion of those kinds of considerations. I also take issue with the tendency to think about art as one monolithic category, Art with a capital 'A.' I tend to write about particular arts and issues that arise across different art forms, but don't pertain to all of them.

*HM: So, while there is not one archetypal idea guiding you throughout your thinking, you do have an arch enemy, so to speak. Is Enlightenment formalism the same thing as what you have elsewhere called 'the aesthetic theory of art'?*

NC: The aesthetic theory of art is one way in which Enlightenment formalism could be articulated. The Enlightenment part is the notion that the various arts all belong to one category. The formalist part is the aesthetic theory, which insists on the complete autonomy of art.

### **Aesthetic, sexual, and erotic experiences**

*HM: Unlike defenders of the aesthetic theory, you have resisted the idea that the purpose and nature of art can be fully defined in terms of aesthetic experience. But you have tried to develop a philosophical account of what aesthetic experience is. How would describe your approach?*

NC: Well, experiences have content. So, if one is going to characterize what an aesthetic experience is, one should specify what its content is. I've argued that it involves attentiveness to the formal, the expressive, and the aesthetic qualities of a work of art. When I first formulated this view, I often got the same criticism: why would precisely these and only these contents be the aesthetic ones? I've since tried to explain what holds those things together. They are all forms of embodiment. In other words, you have an aesthetic experience when you are attentive to the ways in which a work's point or purpose is embodied.

*HM: Why do you think that this content-oriented approach to aesthetic experience is superior to alternative approaches?*

NC: Those who defend an affect-oriented approach and want to define aesthetic experience as a particular affect at least owe us some characterization of that affect. You can't just say that there is one and leave it at that. Jesse Prinz has been bold in this regard and has argued that the affect is something like awe or elevation. But that can't possibly be right. Awe involves having an experience of taking in air, yet there are obviously aesthetic experiences, like laughter and horror, which involve expelling air. So, at the very least, that account can't be right. Likewise, the valuing views that claim that aesthetic experiences are intrinsically valuable can't be right because, among other things, they're not sufficient. For instance, you can have a fulfilling conversation with a friend and you might value that for its own sake, but it's hardly a work of art. So, being valuable for its own sake is not sufficient. Another disadvantage of the value-oriented approach is that it doesn't tell us anything about what one should do in order to have an aesthetic experience. It only says that one should try to value the experience for its own sake, which is about as unhelpful a piece of advice as one can imagine. A content-oriented approach, by contrast, can tell an aspiring aesthete what to do, namely attend to the formal, aesthetic, and expressive properties of artworks.

*HM: But why would an aspiring aesthete want to have aesthetic experiences in the first place, if they exhibit no positive value or desirable affect? In fact, it seems difficult to make sense of the very notion of an aesthete, someone who pursues aesthetic experiences, if one defends a purely content-oriented approach to aesthetic experience.*

NC: I'm not so sure about that. There are many values besides enjoyable experiences that can be obtained through an engagement with different sorts of art. Some of them involve improving your powers of interpreting other people, or enhancing your discriminatory powers, or developing your powers of pattern recognition. Moreover, art offers you the possibility of joining the conversation of culture. So you're not left with there being no sorts of reasons to encourage people to become aesthetes. That being said, I don't know whether one's account of aesthetic experience should also include in it a motive for pursuing aesthetic experiences. Yours is a distinctively philosophical way of framing the problem. Why be an aesthete? Why be moral? We enter these various discourses, whether they're about art or about morality, as a full fledged member of an evolving culture. After all, nobody wakes up and says: do I want to become an aspiring aesthete today? One's introduction to the arts is gradual and it's part of one's enculturation in any society. It's not the sort of thing that most people would self-consciously take on.

*HM: Let me raise a different issue then. Aesthetic experiences, you have argued, are similar to sexual experiences. If someone has sexual intercourse purely for some instrumental purpose, we wouldn't deny that that person has had a sexual experience, so, the argument goes, why should matters stand differently with respect to aesthetic experience?*

NC: The reason I introduced this particular comparison is because sexual experiences are ones that people are prone to say they value for their own sake, whereas I don't think that that is necessarily the case.

*HM: I think you are right. Sexual experiences can be good or bad or neither of the two, and there is no reason to consider all sexual experiences intrinsically valuable. But what about erotic experiences? Isn't it true that we will only call something an 'erotic experience' when it involves a positive sexual experience? And is an aesthetic experience, at least the way we use that phrase in everyday language, not more analogous to an erotic experience than a sexual experience? After all, if someone is simply attentive to the brushstrokes in a painting, without appreciating or valuing that experience, we wouldn't typically call this an aesthetic experience.*

NC: I don't know. I'm not as confident as you are that we have this distinction between the erotic and the sexual. When Gloria Steinem distinguishes erotica from pornography, she doesn't do this along the lines of intrinsic versus instrumental value. It has more to do with mutual affection and respect, or the absence thereof. But that's a stipulative definition. After all, exploitative adult materials shops say they sell erotica. Similarly, you could *make* the distinction and say that from now on you will mean by aesthetic experience only that sort of experience that has positive value and is valued for their own sake. But then you are no longer *arguing* for it. Also, this move would have catastrophic consequences if you are planning to use aesthetic experience as a building block in a broader theoretical framework. For instance, if you want to say that a work of art is something that has to carry an aesthetic experience then you won't be able to account for bad works of art. You could argue that the primary intention to bring about an aesthetic experience is sufficient for something to be art, but then there are all kinds of works ?? cathedrals, religious paintings, etc -- that don't have that as the primary intention. But, as I said, this is a problem if you try to deploy that concept of aesthetic experience in building a larger theory. You could of course refrain from doing that and be a fox and just stipulate that this will your account of aesthetic experience.

*HM: But would it really be just a matter of stipulation? At least where erotic experiences are concerned, I think there is a plausible, non-stipulative way of distinguishing them from non-erotic sexual experiences. An erotic experience will involve some form of sexual excitement or arousal, which seems to imply that it is, at least to a certain extent, enjoyable.*

NC: But I seem to remember having read about rape victims who find themselves enjoying the experience and then feel guilty about it afterwards. Does that then qualify as an erotic experience? More importantly, even if someone in such a situation feels arousal because there are certain physical mechanisms in operation, it would be really wrong to say that they value them for their own sake. The fact that someone feels some twinge of pleasure during the whole experience, doesn't in and of itself mean that it has intrinsic value. The same is true, I would say, for aesthetic experience.

**Buster Keaton and Merleau-Ponty**

*HM: I would like to ask you about your own aesthetic experiences. Can you mention a work of art that has had a profound impact on you?*

NC: The one that I immediately think of is Buster Keaton's film *The General*. That's a work of art I go back to again and again, and I always discover new things in it.

*HM: Would you say it's a profound work of art?*

NC: Philosophers of music have so pushed and poked the concept of profundity that I'm a bit hesitant to use that term. But it certainly is a work of art and it does offer some very profound insights into, say, the nature of human intelligence. It had a great impact on me, especially because it made me aware of a dimension of life that I, as an academic who has always been involved in the manipulation of information, I am not really familiar with. I mean the skill-dimension of human existence, the sort of life that is wedded to the manipulation of things. *The General* really makes you feel what is glorious about a life engaged with moving things, aiming things, weighing things, coupling things, uncoupling things, ... It's very exhilarating in that respect.

*HM: You recently published a book about Buster Keaton, entitled *Comedy Incarnate* (2009), which is a revised and updated version of your doctoral dissertation of 1976. Both the book and the dissertation show a strong influence of the French phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty. To some people, this may come as a surprise because in other publications you have been very critical of French philosophy.*

NC: That it was Merleau-Ponty that I was taken with shouldn't be that surprising. After all, he was very interested in the psychology of perception and behavior, what we would now think of as cognitive psychology. The people who I have tended to be more critical of are post-structuralists. Merleau-Ponty is a pre-structuralist. And, although I find post-structuralism, and particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis, deeply problematic, there are even certain aspects of post-structuralism that I can acknowledge have value as critical tools.

*HM: Such as?*

NC: The view that I think goes back to Lévi-Strauss, but is articulated by Pierre Macherey and, to a certain extent, is just assumed by Althusser, that what artworks do is reveal or exhibit contradictions in a society of a certain period. That can be a powerful heuristic and a viable critical approach to certain works of art. It's only when these ideas become super-generalizations, when it is axiomatic that any work will exhibit contradictions, that such a theory becomes problematic. Similarly, in structuralism, it's axiomatic that the fundamental structure will be binary and will involve two terms that are opposite. The work of the myth then, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, is to actually reconcile those oppositions. Now, if you replace the myth in Lévi-Strauss's theory with the work of art, it becomes clear why I think that the Macherey-Althusser line ultimately derives from Lévi-Strauss.

## **Philosophy of art and art practice**

*HM: In your widely used handbook, Philosophy of Art, you argue that philosophers, by studying the concepts of a particular practice, can make an important contribution to the life of that practice and even reveal its overall sense. If this is true, one would expect the philosophy of art to be extremely useful for people in the art world. Yet, one often gets the opposite impression. Many artists, curators, art critics would heartily agree with Barnett Newman's famous quip that aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds.*

NC: Well, if they really thought that, there would be no *ArtForum*, no *October*. Clement Greenberg wouldn't have had any influence. Harold Rosenberg wouldn't have had any influence. If you read articles by Donald Judd or Robert Morris, they're full of references to Wittgenstein, Hume, and other philosophers. Or, if you want examples from the contemporary art world, think of Documenta, think of influential critics like Danto, Buchlow, Krauss, Fried, think of the art journal *Aesthetica*.

*HM: But what about The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism and The British Journal of Aesthetics, arguably the two leading journals in our field? They are rarely read by people in the art world, unlike Aesthetica or October.*

NC: That's probably true. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* has the term 'criticism' in the title, but it rarely contains examples of what you would normally think of as criticism. When those other journals, certainly *October*, invoke theory or philosophy or psychoanalysis, they do it to interpret work. They apply it, in other words. Artists are attracted to that because they are shown how to access these theories creatively. They'll find it inspirational. Whereas, for various kinds of professional reasons, that's not how philosophy is conducted in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* or *The British Journal of Aesthetics*.

*HM: The level of generality that philosophy aspires to must have something to do with it. As you have pointed out elsewhere, a successful philosophical theory will try to accommodate all the pertinent data and because of that will tend to be pretty thin and not very useful.*

NC: Right. Some of the work I do is characterized by this kind of thinness. For instance, a good definition of the moving image should accommodate the good, the bad and the ugly; it should accommodate the modernist and the classical. Such a general definition, like the one I proposed, is not going to have much directive force. However, I also think that philosophical theories can be useful. Typically, I don't like to come at the problems of the philosophy of art so much from the reception side, as from the production side. In that respect, I try to imitate Aristotle. Aristotle cares about the reception side, but he is also very interested in the construction side: what sort of plot, what sort of characters do you need in order to get the catharsis of pity and fear? I think that some of my work could be useful on the construction side. I always had hoped that people would read my book on the philosophy of horror and would say "Ah, well this will be helpful when I'm constructing a plot or constructing a monster." Other aspects of my work are useful in a different way. Supposedly the Allies fought World War II to make the world safe for democracy. Well, sometimes I feel that what I do, in railing against the aesthetic theory of art and enlightenment formalism, is make the world safe for art the way it actually is: art that is engaged with politics, with society, with history, with spiritual values. That's another kind of service philosophy can perform.

Think of this on an analogy with Arthur Danto. On the one hand, Arthur Danto's theory of art doesn't privilege any kind of art because it is very general and is meant to apply to all works of art. On the other hand, his 'end of art' thesis is really meant to liberate art from the narrow

constraints of modernism as conceptualized by someone like Greenberg. Now that the task of defining art has been turned over to the philosopher, Danto says, artists are free to pursue a thousand different pursuits; they are free to celebrate the morning, sing of love, condemn oppression, etc.

*HM: Now that we are discussing the relation between the philosophy of art and art practice it might be interesting to talk about your own experience in this regard. You have been a screenwriter, an art critic, and a film critic. Did your philosophical views and training have an impact on your development as a practitioner, and vice versa?*

NC: I took film production classes and made student films that were more art films than the documentaries I wrote. As an undergraduate, I also wrote a lot of poetry. I think it's extremely useful to have that kind of knowledge and experience. Just look at the philosophy of music. One of the reasons why this is such a rich and sophisticated area of research is that almost all of the people working in that field have a musical education.

*HM: What about the other way around? What about philosophy informing art practice?*

NC: Well, philosophy was always very helpful to me, in a way that it's also been helpful to Danto, I think. Philosophy enables you to place something in a framework that orients you to a problem. So, for example, knowing about the structures of comedy helped me when I was a critic for the *SoHo Weekly News* at the time when performance art emerged, which is a kind of intersection between stand-up comedy and the art world. Having access to a philosophical understanding of comedy certainly helped me to understand this new art form. There's another, more trivial example that comes to mind. Steven Schneider, who was writing a PhD in Film at NYU with Annette Michelson, while at the same time writing a PhD in philosophy at Harvard with Richard Moran, edited at least two books on horror and later went to Hollywood to become a producer of cheap horror films. He was the producer who picked up "Paranormal Activity," a film that cost 10,000 dollars and made 32 million dollars. He made even more money on the sequel, "Paranormal Activity 2." In *Variety* he was interviewed about his influences. He said: Scorsese, Coppola, Tarantino, Stephen King, and Noël Carroll's "The Philosophy of Horror." [laughs] Now there's a story about a practitioner whose productivity was influenced by his study of philosophy.

## **On criticism**

*HM: Given your experience as a critic you were well placed to write the philosophical study On Criticism. In that book you defend the view that criticism is essentially evaluation grounded in reasons – reasons that are provided by means of description, contextualization, classification, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis. Now, as far as literary criticism and film criticism is concerned, that view seems plausible and accurate enough. But in contemporary art criticism, the evaluation part, which you consider essential to criticism, is often missing. I suspect that you won't see that as a problem for your theory, but rather as a problematic aspect of contemporary art criticism?*

NC: Yes. In the book I also try to explain why critics have been drawn to a view of criticism as being non-evaluative. Very often philosophical errors are involved. Sometimes it goes back to a kind of positivist notion of knowledge. I remember that, at the time when I was working for the *Drama Review*, Michael Kirby felt that interpretation was no part of criticism. He had what I call a Sergeant Friday approach. You probably don't remember that television program, *Dragnet*, but Sergeant Friday, played by Jack Webb, would say to the people he was

interviewing: "Just the facts, ma'am." If someone tried to offer an interpretation of what happened, he would simply repeat: "Just the facts, ma'am." I think a lot of critics were influenced by that kind of positivism. There was also pressure from phenomenology to just offer descriptions. You see that to a certain extent in Susan Sontag. To be fair, though, I should mention that a lot of art in those days itself aspired to a kind of cool factuality.

*HM: In his book What Happened to Art Criticism? James Elkins also draws attention the ebb of evaluative judgement. He thinks that the crisis in art criticism is partly due to the lack of a disciplinary home for art criticism. If it were a proper discipline, there would be some common ground and there would at least be a centre against which to push. What do you think about that explanation?*

NC: To a certain extent, I don't think he's right. A lot of the major art critical voices that you hear nowadays tend to be art historians. Benjamin Buchloh teaches at Harvard, Rosalind Krauss teaches at Columbia, Hal Foster teaches at Princeton. They have lots of students who write criticism. So, they do have a disciplinary home and it shapes the kind of criticism they write, which is precisely the kind of criticism that I have a certain opposition toward. Of course, it's hard to generalize about art critics. You also have a long tradition of art critics who are poets. John Ashbery is one example. I guess you could say they don't have that kind of disciplinary home, but that's not what accounts for the way they write. It's the fact that they're poets that accounts for the way they write.

*HM: Another reason to be sceptical about Elkins's explanation is that film criticism lacks a disciplinary home just as much (or as little) as art criticism, but doesn't seem to be in a crisis. Most film critics certainly don't shy away from evaluative judgments.*

NC: Film criticism is different in part because film criticism still has a pretty continuous life in newspapers and popular publications, on the Internet and on television. So it has a much less specialized audience than art criticism. In fact, what Elkins says about criticism not having a disciplinary home, is probably more true of film criticism than of art criticism. Maybe that's precisely why there's *no* crisis in film criticism. Maybe you need to be an academic to have an identity crisis...[smiles].

*HM: You have also argued forcefully against the idea that criticism is inescapably subjective. In your view, objective criticism is possible and it is what critics should aim for. But how far exactly would you take this? Are you saying that, if critics do their job properly and make no mistakes on the level of description, contextualization, classification, etc., they will inevitably arrive at the same evaluative judgment of the work of art? Or are there legitimate grounds for disagreement?*

NC: It doesn't seem to me that objectivity, or at least the kind of intersubjectivity that I am thinking of as objectivity, requires that everybody, at the end of the day, arrives at the same conclusion. We can expect consensus on the positive and the negative. For instance, music critics will all concede that Mozart is good. People will still have debates about whether or not Beethoven was better than Mozart, but I don't think that's a big threat to objectivity. It reminds me of what Hume says at the end of "Of the Standard of Taste". He thinks that the supposedly ideal critics will all agree that Ovid and Tacitus are both good writers. But for various reasons, they may rank the two differently. A young ideal critic, because of her age, may prefer Ovid over Tacitus. Or some people will be phlegmatic, while others are sanguine, and because of their different 'humours', they will make different rankings. But fundamentally, they're not going to disagree. Furthermore, there are procedures that can help us to reach a consensus.

Suppose you don't like a particular film by Hitchcock and I point out that you do like this other film by Clouzot and that it has a number of similarities to the Hitchcock film. The burden of proof is now thrust upon you to say what it is about Hitchcock that's different from Clouzot that defends your judgment. So, we have all sorts of practices of reason giving; and we have all sorts of resources to reach to. That's why I argue about the importance of categorization. Whether or not something belongs to this category or that category, very often is actually a matter of fact, not a matter of decision. I can't decide to place Hamlet in the category of farce if I'm interpreting Shakespeare. Of course, there is what Jerrold Levinson calls a 'performative interpretation.' That is, you could perform Hamlet as, say, a farce. But that wouldn't be a critical interpretation. A critical interpretation of Hamlet would require that we place it in the category of tragedy. And that's a matter of fact.

### **Categorizing works of art**

*HM: Since Kendall Walton published 'Categories of Art,' I think that very few philosophers of art will dispute the importance of categorization. But how do we find out what the correct category for a given work is?*

NC: I largely follow Walton in this. The intention of the artist, the fact whether a category is well-established at the time when the work was made, the amount of standard features that a work of art shares with other members of a certain category – these are the things that help to determine to which category a work of art correctly belongs. Walton also mentions a fourth standard of correctness, but that's one I disagree with. I also disagree with Jerrold Levinson in this respect. They think that it counts for a particular categorization if it makes the work better. I think that is not acceptable. When it comes to art, we care about what actually has been achieved and not how we could make it better. I think that this is a residue of the tendency that a lot of aestheticians have to view things from the reception side of the art transaction.

*HM: Is this the only difference between your and Walton's views on the categorization of works of art? Would you also subscribe to his view that categories should be perceptually distinguishable?*

NC: I'm actually not sure what to make of that requirement because if that requirement is understood in a narrow sense then there wouldn't be categories of literature. A novel is not perceptually distinguishable from an epic, at least not when you, say, transpose the dactylic hexameter of the Aeneid into prose English. Yet, it makes a big difference whether something belongs to the category of the epic versus the novel. So, while Walton seems to be talking about art in general, it may turn out that he's actually talking about visual art. Arthur Danto does that, too. Clive Bell is another example. I took it that Walton argues that we can't resist seeing works of art as belonging to certain categories and that this has a profound impact on perception. For instance, we see a work as belonging to the category of paintings in the style of Van Gogh. The next question is then whether this is the correct category for that particular work. And that's where his four standards of correctness come into play.

*HM: But suppose that we find out that the work was not painted by Van Gogh, but by an unknown painter in the 18th century. That would mean that 'paintings in the style of Van Gogh' would not be the correct category for this particular work.*

NC: Right.

*HM: But it would still belong to that category. Because, for Walton, membership in a category is determined by perceptual features alone, and this work really looks like a painting in the style of Van Gogh. So, 'belonging to a certain category' and 'being the correct category for*



*appreciation' seem to be two different things.*

NC: Yes, I can see that. Of course, if Nelson Goodman were right, then being a Van Gogh painting would always be perceptibly different from being a painting in the style of a Van Gogh. So, you could dig a trench there. But I'm sceptical about Goodman's claim. In any case, I need to read Walton's essay more carefully. I had always just assumed that everything he said in that article also applied to literature. When I talk about the importance of categorization, I certainly mean it to apply to literature, as well.

*HM: Putting a work of art in the correct category is one aspect of criticism. Interpreting a work of art is another important aspect. As a moderate actual intentionalist, you have argued that when a work is open to several interpretations, the correct interpretation is the one that takes the artist's actual intentions into consideration in so far as these are compatible with the actual features of the work. But how would you approach an artist who intends her work to be open to several interpretations, perhaps even incompatible ones? Suppose such an artist makes a work with a specific meaning in mind, but when asked about it, simply says that she's happy to leave it to the audience to determine what it is about.*

NC: Well, intentionalism isn't committed to taking pronouncements of artists as decisive.

*HM: But what if she's being fully sincere? There are many artists out there who genuinely don't care whether the audience is able to reconstruct the meaning they had in mind, and actively invite the audience to come up with their own interpretations.*

NC: But do you think that such artists have two intentions about the meaning of the work? I don't think so. The way you describe the thought experiment, the artist has one intention about the meaning of the work and another that she says is the meaning. Often artists actually dissimilate, especially contemporary artists, because they don't want critics to pigeonhole them. They are coy about the intentions behind a work because they are afraid that with each new work this will come up again and again. It's a defensive strategy that avant-gardists use to protect themselves from critics.

On the other hand, I wouldn't want to deny that artists can intend their works to be open structures. But not all artists fall into this category. Cage does, but Milton doesn't.

## **What is art?**

*HM: You mention avant-gardists. Their creations often give rise to that stickiest of questions: 'What is art?' As you have repeatedly pointed out, this question can be interpreted in at least two different ways: 'How do we identify something as a work of art?', which is an epistemic issue, or 'What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as a work of art?' which makes it a metaphysical issue. Many philosophers of art in the 20th century have tried to answer the latter question – without much success, so you argue. We don't have a satisfying theory, and in your view we also don't need one because the question of art's definition is only of marginal philosophical interest. People in the art world don't care about definitions. What they care about is the epistemic question: how do we know whether some new creation of an avant-garde artist is indeed a work of art? What is your answer to that question?*

NC: I have developed what one could call a historical narrative approach to art. If we can tell an accurate historical narrative about the way in which such a strange object came to be

produced as an intelligible response to an antecedently acknowledged art-historical situation, then we can be assured that we're dealing with a work of art.

*HM: Could there be a scenario where some objects did not come to be produced as intelligible responses to previous art historical situations, but where those objects are nonetheless considered to be artworks by people in the art world because they falsely believe that an accurate historical narrative can be told connecting them to previous art making practices? In other words, is it possible that we have identified as works of art, things that are in fact not works of art?*

NC: Yes, that's possible. I can think of different scenarios. One is rather far-fetched, but it's worth mentioning since it has a place in logical space. Think of those Von Däniken stories about space travellers coming to earth before the dawn of humanity. Suppose they left a painting here that looks exactly like a Dutch landscape painting and that if tested with radiocarbon we would date someplace in the 17th century. Perhaps it is just a kind of child doodle of one of these super-intelligent, super-skilful space aliens, done many millennia ago. We think that it fits into a particular narrative, but it doesn't. So, we would misidentify it. However, that's not a problem for my theory since it has the requirement that narratives be accurate. Other examples of false narratives that come to mind are those related to African ceremonial masks or similar items of tribal art. All too often we have incorrect narratives linking these objects to art as we know it in the West. But we don't need that kind of narrative to be able to identify these objects as art. These masks don't spring from nowhere. They originate from a practice in which there is a tradition of apprenticeship, etc., and this will allow you to tell a relevant and accurate narrative that will establish these objects as art.

*HM: What do you think about the following scenario: Suppose an artist believes that his latest work offers an intelligible response to the art-historical situation of his day, and that it has some relevance to what has gone before, but he happens to be wrong about that. If the art world is uncritical and doesn't challenge the artist's beliefs, the work may end up museums and anthologies, even though it is not art.*

NC: Let's take a case. Henri Rousseau, also known as Le Douanier, thought he was working in a tradition of Delacroix and people found his paintings charming, but not because they had the kind of depth or the quality of realism that you would find in a Delacroix painting like the *Rape of the Sabine Woman* or the *Arab Horseman Attacked by a Lion*. So, the art world dismissed his interpretation and art historians have ever since. The qualities that they pointed to in the paintings have to do with their terrifically flattened and schematic and repetitive character. They are not life-like, they are picture-like. As such, they are going to be grouped with the work that began to acknowledge the flatness of the painting in the late 19th century. So, Rousseau was wrong about working in the tradition of Delacroix. But he wasn't wrong about working in a tradition of representational painting. That view was reasonable. And for the purpose of identifying the work as art, that's enough.

*HM: So, even though the narrative that Rousseau himself subscribed to was mistaken, his work does have a place in art history and museums, you suggest, because we can tell a different and nonetheless accurate narrative connecting it to antecedent art making practices.*

NC: Correct.

*HM: But isn't there another reason why it would be ill-advised to deny art status to Rousseau's paintings, namely the fact that they have inspired and influenced so many artists afterwards? That's the sort of consideration that seems to have no place in your historical narrative account – the idea that, to identify something as art, we have to look, not just at what came*

*before, but also at what came after the creation of the work. Especially in the case of Rousseau, there seems to be only a thin thread connecting the work to previous art, but a very strong thread connecting it to later avant-garde art.*

NC: I certainly am sympathetic to what you are saying and I do invoke those kinds of considerations when philosophers in the debate on art's definition try to exclude things from the realm of art. For instance, there are still those who will say that Duchamp's *Fountain* isn't a work of art. In response to that, I tend to point out that *Fountain* has been counted as art for almost 100 years now; it's been heavily influential not only on art making but on art theory; some people think it's the most important work of art of the 20th century. So, I certainly invoke those things when people so to speak want to remove some things from the chessboard. But I am a little hesitant to use it as an identificatory procedure. Why? Well, think of visionary works that for some reason didn't get executed. LeDoux, for example, was a 19th century artist who made lots of plans for buildings that were never executed, but have had great influence on the history of architecture. I don't think we could call these works of art. If we were to take up your suggestion, we would need a way to exclude them.

*HM: Why not include them?*

NC: Okay, but I guess that's why I'm a little nervous about that suggestion: to take a plan and to call that a work of art, especially a work of architecture...

*HM: Obviously, it wouldn't be a work of architecture. But one could consider it an artistic drawing.*

NC: Maybe it is a work of art as a drawing, but then the connection to the future drops out. You would call it a drawing because of its connection to its past not because of its connection to its future. It hasn't influenced many drawings afterwards. I think you'll be able to come up with examples like this for every art form. Or even think of ideas expressed in manifestoes. They could be very influential, but you wouldn't want to call the manifesto itself a work of art.

*HM: I want to pursue this a bit further. In your book *Beyond Aesthetics* you compare art's identity to a nation's identity. Why do you think that's a helpful comparison?*

NC: Just like art, a nation is a historically evolving entity. So, it wouldn't make much sense to characterize a nation's identity by means of sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, you try to tell a historical narrative, one that shows the way its past and present are integrated.

*HM: But what if we want to know whether an emergent feature is or will be part of a nation's identity? It certainly seems relevant to consider the future impact and influence of that particular feature on the nation. But that would mean – and I'm keeping the parallel case of art in mind here – that we need to be forward-looking and not just backward-looking.*

NC: These sorts of considerations are relevant to certain questions in the philosophy of art, but are they relevant to the identification issue? One reason to think that that's not the case is that you've got to allow for the fact of failure of uptake. You want it to be the case that something can count as a work of art even when, as Hume said of his *Treatise*, it drops still born from the printer's wheel.

*HM: So, influence or impact is not a sine qua non for something to be identified as art. Let me ask you about something that you do consider to be a sine qua non. In your view, it's not enough that an artist's work has some connection to previous art making practices. Her work should also have some relevance to what has gone before and should not be of only*

*peripheral significance. But aren't you introducing a normative element here that is at odds with the purely classificatory approach that you seem to favour? Doesn't this exclude the possibility of there being bad art?*

NC: Here's a counterexample to intentional-historical definitions of art that will explain why I have that extra condition. Somebody's video tape of Christmas morning with their family might be intended to have the property of perceptual verisimilitude. That is, the regard that the maker invites or even mandates the viewer to have is that they see this as perceptually like what happened that Christmas morning. That way, it is connected to what was once an art regard. The Greeks, and many painters ever since, had the aim had of producing a likeness of appearances. So, according to the intentional-historical definition of art that video of Christmas morning should be considered art. I think it is not art, because even though it connects to something in the past, it connects in a way that is not relevant any longer to the purposes of advanced art. It doesn't mean that you can't make art that looks like what it's of. You can. But making something that looks like what it's of is no longer enough for something to be art. It doesn't make it bad. It's just not an aspect whose repetition in the present makes it count as a work of art. So, there's a case where relevance doesn't push you over into evaluation.

## **Progress**

*HM: You once observed that there has been progress in answering the question 'What is Art?' but only in the sense that more precise distinctions are being drawn and subtler conceptions of the project of definition are being proposed. Do you think that progress in aesthetics, if there is any, is always of this kind, i.e. incremental rather than monumental?*

NC: For my generation, the idea that the defining features of art might not be manifest properties of the work brought about a seismic change. I would say that that introduced a monumental shift in aesthetics. The idea found its origin in Maurice Mandelbaum's response to Morris Weitz and was later developed by Danto in one direction, by Dickie in another direction, and by Wollheim in yet another direction.

*HM: But developing an idea in a certain direction is not necessarily the same thing as making progress. In science, it seems appropriate to talk about progress because there you have a growing body of knowledge around which there exists a broad consensus. In aesthetics, however, there is very little consensus and all the big questions remain unanswered or, at least, have many competing answers.*

NC: Isn't there a consensus that what makes something a work of art cannot exclusively be an intrinsic property?

*HM: Yes, but that's a consensus on a negative conclusion. Philosophers will often agree on what is not the right answer to a certain question. But they are rarely, if ever, in agreement on what is the right answer. And as such, there seems to be no substantial body of knowledge that increases over the years.*

NC: It's true that most of the time philosophers don't have absolute knock-down arguments that will once and for all convince their opponents. But instead they can provide arguments that shift the burden of proof. I think we should accept that philosophy is very often just a matter of shifting the burden of proof.

HM: *But you have never found this lack of consensus frustrating?*

NC: No, it's because of that that I have a job...

### **Humour, suspense, and horror**

HM: *While tragedies are typically taken more seriously than comedies, you are one of the few philosophers of art who has written about the latter. In 'Two Comic Plots', for instance, you attempt to identify narrative structures that are either funny themselves or are naturally conducive to eliciting comic amusement. One such narrative structure is what you call the 'Wildly Improbable Plot'.*

NC: Yes, that's when the outcome of the story, given what is true in the fiction, is so absurdly unlikely that it upsets our expectations and presents us with a striking incongruity – which is precisely the business of humour. As such, I argue that the plot itself is a comic device.

HM: *But doesn't this offer only a very partial explanation of what is funny about these comedies? Take the example you describe in detail: Buster Keaton's College. We are only confronted with the incongruity at the end of the movie, when the extremely clumsy protagonist wins over the girl with an unlikely display of athletic skill. But it's certainly not the case that we are only laughing at the end of the movie. We're laughing throughout the movie...*

NC: You are right. But that model is only supposed to accommodate what is funny about the *plot*. It does not necessarily explain what is funny about the film on a moment-to-moment basis. That being said, even in terms of more local effects one can often point to improbable coincidences that are also part of the plot. For example, in *Bringing Up Baby*, the Cary Grant character and Katharine Hepburn character meet again and again, which is wildly improbable. Or think of the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* or W.C. Fields' *The Fatal Glass of Beer* where the improbabilities build almost from moment to moment. So, you can have those improbable effects embedded in the plot, or you can have it as an overarching structure. But, again, the model is only meant to explain what is comic about the plot as such, not what is comic about all the gags or jokes within the plot.

HM: *Another potential concern is that many narratives with wildly improbable outcomes or incidents don't turn out to be comedies. One example is suspense fiction where the hoped-for, triumphant outcome appears very unlikely, thus creating suspense on the part of the audience. What, then, is the difference between comedy and suspense?*

NC: In suspense the happy ending cannot be too improbable or else the audience would start laughing and all suspense would be gone. In a comedy, that's precisely the effect you want to achieve. As a consequence, the maker of a comedy will foreground the improbabilities in the plot, whereas a master of suspense will try to hide these.

HM: *But if this analysis is right, then comedy and suspense would seem to be mutually exclusive since one cannot both hide and foreground plot improbabilities. Yet, there are suspenseful comedies.*

NC: That's an interesting point. I think you'll notice two things when you look at suspenseful comedies. First, you will often find yourself shifting between the two modes. For example, in

Buster Keaton's *The General*, there are many funny moments, but there are also suspenseful moments that are not necessarily in any way funny. When the Union trains are chasing him there are all kinds of jokes and gags along the way, but fundamentally there is a kind of suspense that follows the classic structure. Second, there are instances of suspense where in the end the suspense gets topped off with an absurd and comic improbability. For example, in *Our Hospitality*, Buster Keaton's girlfriend is drifting towards the edge of a waterfall and he can't save her because he is tied to a log. Just as she hits the crest of the waterfall he suddenly realizes that he could actually use the log he is tied to as a kind of support to swing over and catch her, which he does in a spectacular backwards catch. It is absurdly improbable and couldn't possibly be done by this inept and clumsy character. So here you have suspense right up until the moment when the suspense is at its most intense point and then you have it broken with comedy.

*HM: A further subgenre of comedy that seems predicated on a contradiction is the horror comedy. Horror and humour appear to be completely opposite emotional states and, yet, films like Gremlins, Arachnophobia, or Scream combine the two and have been huge box office hits. How would you explain their puzzling success?*

*NC: While the feeling of horror is very different from the feeling of comic amusement, the cognitive constituents of both these emotions are actually very similar. As mental states, they are both directed at the same sort of object, namely some kind of incongruity or anomaly – I'm thinking here especially of monsters in horror and clown figures in comedy. What is important is how the anomaly is treated: whether it is projected as threatening or non-threatening. For instance, developmental psychologists have found that a child will laugh at a funny face if it is made by a caregiver, but if the same face is made by a stranger, the child is likely to recoil and maybe even to scream or cry. In other words, add threat to the anomaly and you are going in the direction of horror, subtract the threat and you are going in the direction of comedy.*

*HM: This explains well how the switch from horror to humour in these films is possible. What it doesn't seem to explain is why the mixture of horror and humour has proven such a successful formula over the years. Stuart Gordon, the director of Re-Animator, once said that you will never find an audience that wants to laugh more than a horror audience. So, he is not just saying that horror and humour are compatible, but rather that there's a special readiness or openness to humour in horror audiences. Could it be that in order to explain that, we need to refer to the feeling constituent of these respective emotions, after all? For isn't it precisely the preceding tension and claustrophobia of horror that makes the relief and release of humour particularly welcome and enjoyable?*

*NC: So your view is that somehow the horror gets disarmed in a horror comedy?*

*HM: I wouldn't put it that way exactly. What I'm suggesting is that, in order to explain the special appeal of films that offer this curious blend of horror and humour, we may need to refer to the affective constituents as well as the cognitive constituents of both emotions. Suppose you are feeling really scared because you think there is a burglar in the house, but a few moments later you find out that it's just the cat making noise in the kitchen, and you start laughing with relief. In this type of situation, you have a combination and quick succession of intense fear and laughter, just like in horror comedies, but there is no monster or anomaly involved. To understand this switch from one emotion to the other, it seems that we need to understand the play of affects – tension and relief – and not just the shared cognitive constituents (if there are any). Couldn't something similar be at work in horror comedies as well?*

NC: I'll have to think about that. I am a little worried about the suggested account since it introduces the notion of 'release,' which is often linked to the problematic 'hydraulic' theory of emotions. I do think that there is a kind of release involved in humour in general – I call it 'levity'. But I think of it more in relationship to the cognition than the affect. With a joke, for example, when you are confronted with a punch line, at first it doesn't make any sense, but then you think of an interpretation that seems to make sense, after which you realize that that interpretation doesn't make sense either. So, there is a kind of cognitive tension here. You are challenged to make sense of the punch line, and you do, but then you realize that in the end your 'solution' doesn't make sense, after all. And then you relax, realizing that you are dealing with nonsense rather than a genuine puzzle. So, rather than use the word 'release,' I prefer to use the word 'relax', where you are taken with sense of 'levity' or 'lightness.' Returning to the horror comedy, I think there may be an element of that in the cognitive transition from dealing with the stimulus as a threat to then re-categorizing it as a non-threat. That is why I prefer to use the word 'disarm'. I do need to think about it more, but the way I see it, a lot more is happening along the cognitive dimension than along the affective dimension.

## **Dance**

*HM: Not many philosophers of art have engaged philosophically with the art form of dance, certainly not to the extent that you have. Why do you think that dance has received so much less attention than literature, music or painting?*

NC: Some will say that it has to do with philosophy's problematic relationship to the body. But I tend to think that there is a much more pedestrian answer. In modern society, people have no trouble getting access to literature, music or pictures. There are libraries in every city; middle class children are taught musical instruments; huge bodies of music are easily available since the development of recording devices; big cities have picture galleries, and paintings can be reproduced photographically. Access to dance is much more limited. Most cities, even large cities, don't have ballet companies. For a large part of the population there is almost no possibility to learn dance. And even if there are dance schools in small towns, you are not going to build a philosophy of dance by studying your niece's ballet recital. So, I think there is a more innocent explanation than the theory that philosophy denies the body.

*HM: Given that the philosophy of dance remains such an underexplored territory, there must be quite of a few dance related issues that could use more philosophical study.*

NC: Well, to name just one, there is still a great deal of perplexity about the identity condition. What makes something count as a performance of the same dance? That issue is extremely

unsettled. People try to solve it by making extrapolations from things like music and theatre as these are standardly practiced. But that is difficult because music, at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has a score, and theatre typically has a text. Dance doesn't have anything exactly like that. There are notes and notational systems, but most of the notation is not 'generative.' The choreographer doesn't sit down and generate the dance by making such notes. Laban notations are almost always records of a specific dance – comparable to having a tape recording of a particular piece of music and then having a notator make a notation of that. As you can readily imagine, that is not guaranteed to be the structure that generated the movement in the first place. It is a record of one particular performance. Typically, even if you have a notation of a dance, it will not exactly be like the kind of score that a composer writes since that serves as a recipe for the performance of a symphony. So, finding a way of developing the identity conditions here is a serious challenge because you just can't help yourself to models from the other performing arts.

*HM: You are married to one of the most prominent dance theorists of the past decades, Sally Banes. Is she the one who got you thinking about dance, or have you always been interested in dance and is this perhaps how the two of you met?*

NC: It is how we met. I was a dance and performance critic for *Art Forum* and she was the dance critic for the *Chicago Reader*. One evening, the dancer David Gordon was performing with the Grand Union in Chicago and since I had just written a catalogue article for a performance he was doing in Tokyo and she was writing a book on post-modern dance, we both went up to say hello to David after the show. He didn't want to talk to us, and suggested instead that the two of us should talk to each other...

*HM: You have co-authored several articles with your wife, but also with other philosophers. Such collaborations are still quite rare in aesthetics. Like in most other areas of philosophy, the single-authored paper is very much the norm. What made you depart from this norm?*

NC: I usually team up with someone when I want to bring together certain strengths. For instance, I have written a paper on songs with Philip Alperson because he has a much greater knowledge of the philosophy of music and of music itself. I, on the other hand, have generally been trying to defend the integration of art into society and to open up the philosophy of art to the appreciation of the social role and function it discharges. That's a project that Phil was not unsympathetic to. We are both similarly disposed to making the approach to art less hermetic and songs – anthems, work songs, marches – seemed the perfect way to do just that.

## **Architecture, Roman Catholicism, and human beauty**

*HM: Music, dance, film, literature ... In line with your idea that the philosophy of art should give way to philosophies of the arts, you have written about most individual art forms...*

NC: But not about architecture.

*HM: That's right. Is there a special reason why you haven't written about architecture yet?*

NC: Not really. I'm actually trying to learn more about it now and also to take advantage when I take trips abroad. For instance, now that I'm here in Canterbury I'll make sure to spend a long time in the cathedral and before coming here I read several books about these magnificent architectural structures. Of course, because I was raised as a Catholic, I already had some understanding of cathedrals... When I think about it, the fact that I was Roman



Catholic in a society where art had a social function and was deeply embedded in social life probably predisposes me in the philosophical direction I take. By way of contrast, I am in a reading group with Paul Guyer who grew up in a secular Jewish family that appreciated the modernist arts. As a Kantian, he is now in many ways my philosophical antipode.

*HM: You have mentioned elsewhere that your Roman Catholic upbringing has given you a visceral dislike of all forms of dogmatism. But it seems that in yet another way it may have had a lasting impact on you.*

NC: *[laughs]* I guess so. The other biographical fact that is perhaps worth mentioning is that, unlike many of my colleagues, I was first involved in the interpretation and production of art before backing into the philosophy of art, so to speak. That might be why I tend to take up issues and problems, as opposed to philosophers like Wolterstorff or Levinson who came to aesthetics as metaphysicians and are very strong in that regard. They came to art as philosophers whereas I came to philosophy backwards.

In a sense, it's odd that I have taken so long to be interested in architecture because architecture seems exactly the kind of art that I should be interested in since it strongly connected to the life of a culture. So, I suppose I am not just interested in architecture now because it is something I haven't done yet. It seems to me that it is almost emblematic of the view I defend.

*HM: Perhaps it's precisely because of that fact that you haven't written about it before? As you say, you are interested in problems, but the social embeddedness of architecture has never been contested. It is just obvious. Whereas it is still cutting-edge, so to speak, to stress and investigate how other art forms are deeply embedded in social life.*

NC: That's a flattering way to put it. But what I said about dance might be true here as well. Of course architecture is available everywhere, but the *discourse* of architecture in analytic philosophy is not overwhelming. There are only a couple of books, such as Michael H. Mitias' anthology and Roger Scruton's monograph. So, rather than there being a grander reason, there wasn't quite as much stimulus to think about architecture.

*HM: Another issue that you haven't written about, and not many aestheticians have written about, is human beauty. If you Google 'aesthetics' most of the webpages you'll find will be about cosmetics and beauty treatments, etc. Yet, if you look at the leading aesthetics journals you will find many essays on natural beauty and beauty in art, but virtually no work on the beauty of human beings. Is this just an oversight that will be soon be remedied? Or are there good reasons why aestheticians have paid so little attention to this?*

NC: I don't know if there are any *good* reasons, but there are reasons. In his book on art, Clive Bell didn't want to use the word 'beauty' for significant form because he figured it might get confused with the beauty of persons which he thought elicits sexual desire rather than an aesthetic emotion. This is a view that goes back to Kant. Besides this philosophical reason, there is probably also a cultural reason for the neglect you mentioned. As Brecht says in his *Threepenny Opera*: art is high, beauty and sex are low. But that really is just a cultural prejudice. There are all kinds of things that you would expect to be a natural topic for aestheticians: body marking, tattooing, fashion. But although some philosophers are interested in that – I'm thinking for instance of Peg Brand's anthology on beauty – philosophy has largely been oblivious to those things probably because they are not considered to be serious enough. But I anticipate that this will soon change. For one thing, aestheticians are

getting more involved with evolutionary psychology and as such are becoming more interested in beauty. But also, aesthetics is becoming more and more democratic and is gradually, and I want to say *finally*, leaving behind the idea of art or the aesthetic as an entirely autonomous domain, cut off from any other human concerns.

## References and further reading

Noël Carroll has authored a great number of books. Of most relevance to the topics discussed in this interview are *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York, Routledge, 1990), *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York, Routledge, 1999), *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor and Bodily Coping* (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2007), *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2008), *On Criticism* (London, Routledge, 2009), *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).

The essay collection, *Theories of Art Today*, edited by Carroll (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), focuses on the problem of defining art. The observation that a successful philosophical theory will tend to be very thin and therefore not very useful to practitioners, can be found in the interview 'The Strange Case of Noël Carroll: A conversation with the controversial philosopher', *Senses of Cinema*, 13, 2001. It is in the same interview that Carroll talks about his Roman Catholic upbringing. 'Working and Dancing,' *Dance Research Journal*, 15:1, 1982, pp. 37-41 and 'Cunningham, Balanchine, and Postmodern Dance', *Dance Chronicle*, 2006, 29: 1, pp. 49-68 are two essays that he wrote with Sally Banes. He co-authored 'Music, Mind, and Morality: Arousing the Body Politic,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 42: 1, 2008 with Philip Alperson.

My remarks on Carroll's account of aesthetic experience were informed by Jerrold Levinson's 'Toward a Non-Minimalist Conception of Aesthetic Experience' (forthcoming in *Aesthetic Pursuits*, Oxford University Press, 2013) and Paisley Livingston's 'Utile et Dulce: A Response to Noël Carroll,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46, 2006. An essay by Brian Laetz, entitled 'Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art": A Critical Commentary,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50, 2010 inspired my questions regarding the categorisation of art works. Laetz argues convincingly that the notion of a correct category of appreciation, as understood by Walton, cannot be equated with the category a work belongs to, and that therefore the guidelines for discerning correct categories are different from the guidelines for determining category-membership.

Carroll refers to David Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* and also wrote an essay on it: 'Hume's Standard of Taste,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43: 2, 1984, pp. 181-19. Other articles and books mentioned or discussed in the course of the interview are: Gloria Steinem, 'Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference' (*Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. Ed. Laura Lederer. New York: William Morrow, 1980. 35-39); Jerrold Levinson, 'Performative vs Critical Interpretation' (in *The Interpretation of Music*, ed. Michael Krausz, Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Peg Zeglin Brand, *Beauty Matters* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, forthcoming). The Stuart Gordon quote can be found

in *Dark Visions*, ed. Stanley Wiator (New York: Avon, 1992), p. 84.

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