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CAVE PAINTINGS, NEUROAESTHETICS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN: AN INTERVIEW WITH NOËL CARROLL

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I. AESTHETICS AND NEUROAESTHETICS

KATHERINE TULLMANN & NADA GATALO: We're going to start very broad here, which seems fitting with your wide interests in aesthetics. One of the interesting things about the study of aesthetics is its relation to other fields of philosophy, like the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. Could you say a little about your view on the place of aesthetics within philosophy in general? Do you think some approaches to the subjects of art and beauty are more promising than others?

NOËL CARROLL: A lot of philosophy is the philosophy of something: you have the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of mathematics, or of law. I think of my work in that way – as the philosophy of art. I don't use the notion aesthetics to describe what I do. I talk about philosophy of art. This is the idea of philosophy as an inquiry about various practices, including various practices of inquiry. This is a view of philosophy as a meta or second order inquiry. In contrast, you might think of metaphysics as first philosophy, though of course metaphysics is an element of all of the "philosophies of." I think of the philosophy of art as the philosophy of the practices of art, including the concepts and modes of reasoning that make the practice

of the creation and reception of art possible. So in terms of a larger view of philosophy, I think of philosophy of art as being one of the second order philosophies. I think of philosophy of art as a second order inquiry about the concepts, the modes of thinking, the modes of imagining that make the creation and reception of art possible.

Philosophy of art intersects other areas of philosophy. Philosophy of mind is a prominent example, where the inquiries coincide in terms of the creative side, in terms of questions about the nature of imagination. Of course, the philosophy of mind is also relevant in terms of the ways in which art is apprehended. There have been breakthroughs in the philosophy of mind in recent decades that look extremely promising for the exploration of art. One area would be the discussion of the emotions by philosophers of mind, though there are also other areas, such as the study of the imagination, not only in terms of artistic creativity, but also in terms of the different kinds of imaginative activities that viewers of paintings and readers of fiction engage.

I think that the philosophy of art should always be on the lookout for hints and insights from other areas of philosophy in order to enrich the study of art, including enterprises like the turn towards evolutionary psychology.

KT&NG: You've always been an empirically informed philosopher, utilizing psychological and other scientific research to support your theories of art. Within the past five years or so we've noticed an interesting trend towards "neuroaesthetics"—a blend between traditional psychological and neuroscientific research specifically applied to art. We'd like to hear your take on this trend.

NC: Some neuroaesthetics has been overambitious and over-reaching. For example, Ramachandran's hypotheses about the peak shift principle are implausibly reductive; John Hyman calls his approach "The Pamela Anderson Theory of Art,"[1] with its claims about wide hips and big breasts being especially suited to the mind. Obviously it's interesting that Ramachandran is Indian and the best examples of this kind of art are Hindu statues.

A number of philosophers have argued against the relevance of neuroscience to aesthetics on the grounds that it doesn't have very much to do with appreciation. That

[1] John Hyman. "Art and Neuroscience," in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention,* eds. Roman Frigg and Matthew Hunter (*Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 262*: Springer, 2010), 245-262. p. 250

is, it really doesn't tell us very much about how we can appreciate art since we don't have access to our own neuroprocessing. But I think it's too narrow to think that philosophers of art are only interested in questions of appreciation and assessment. To a certain extent, I would say that I hold a kind of Aristotelian or Sellarsian view that philosophy is about "the big picture," and that picture includes the science of art**.**

It seems to me that we have a lot of questions about art and about the practices of art that might not be something that can be explored at the intentional level but might involve the exploration of subintentional processes.

For example, pictorial perception might involve psychological and physiological processes below the level of consciousness. So even though I see the philosophy of art as an inquiry into the concepts and modes of reasoning of our artistic practices, I also think of it in terms of explaining those practices in the deepest way possible. And this sometimes may, of course, involve sub-intentional processes, of which neural processes would be a primary example.

KT&NG: At the New Museum there is an exhibition by Carsten Höller which Jerry Saltz, the art critic for *New York Magazine*, described as "arty junk food," basically the artistic equivalent of a series of carnival rides.[2] Could there be a similar sentiment underlying this criticism and the objection to neuroaesthetics? Something like the view that art should offer something more than a succession of sensory events.

NC: Well I haven't seen the show yet; I'm going tomorrow. So, we'll have to see Höller's show to discover if it all fits together. But in terms of the global characterization as just a series of experiences, you could say what you just said about going to a church. You have the stations of the cross; that is like one attraction; then there are the chapels that flank the pews; these too are attractions;, then there's the altar – another attraction; then you gaze up at the nave that's another experience which may accompanied by the sense of being enveloped in this space and of being engulfed by the silence. A church is an ensemble of effects, as much as Höller's show is.

Most architectural arrangements can be thought of as ensembles of effects that focus on one kind of effect when you come into the atrium and then direct you to

2 Jerry Saltz, "The Long Slide," *New York Magazine,* December 12, 2011, 80

other spaces that are going to induce other effects that shape your experiences in various ways. The dismissive notion that Höller's show is an ensemble of effects doesn't seem right. You could call the collections at the Metropolitan Museum collections of effects too. You do go from one painting to the next painting and so on. So you have to establish more than that something is a collection of effects in order to criticize it negatively. For example, you would have to show that it is incoherent or pointless.

KT&NG: So you would disagree with those who claim that aesthetic experience is inherently different from our experiences of everyday things? That seems to be the basis of the complaint against neuroaesthetics in general.

NC: It seems to me that, although our focus is on the practices of art, it would be strange to think that those practices, insofar as they involve things like narrative and pictorial representation, would be somehow utterly distinct from narrative and depiction and representation in other areas. So I don't actually understand the nature of the complaint. If you want to understand narratives and narrative comprehension in general, you'll be looking at things like newspaper articles on the one hand and novels on the other. You wouldn't expect that those phenomena to turn out to afford utterly different kinds of experiences. When you look at literature in terms of writing style, we don't think that artistic language is different in kind from normal English; if we're looking at Jane Austen's writing and style we don't think that Jane Austen speaks a different language than the Duke of Wellington was speaking at the same time. So, you would expect that studies in linguistics and psychology that shed light on how those things operate would be particularly relevant to the study of narrative art.

One way of thinking about the arts, although it's not the only way, is the way we think about sports. We're interested in sports because one thing that athletes do is to exemplify things that we all do, albeit in a magnified fashion. We all run and jump, we all walk; but athletes do it at levels that sometimes define the new limits of these human capacities.

In terms of artistic practice, we all talk, but poets raise language to its highest form of expression; you may sing in the shower, but divas show us what singing can be; we all jump and skip and maybe even do a bit of shaking of our bottoms, but ballet

dancers do it at a different level of achievement. We all make puns but Joyce does it at a truly dazzling level of accomplishment.

What artists do is different in degree not kind from what we all do. So it would be very bizarre to think that these arts were born in complete separation from other kinds of human practices. Rather art is on a continuum with the ordinary.

Art did not spring from nowhere The most plausible idea is that religion, social organization and the arts were all integrated in early tribal cultures and stayed that way for long swaths of history. It's only in the 18th century in the West that we begin to construct this very special category of *Art* with a capital 'A' which is something different from all the small 'a' *arts* that we had before. And for that reason, once again, I'm a strong believer in what you could call the "continuum hypothesis."

This is why w philosophers can learn things, not only from psychology and neuroscience, but also from sociology, economics and so on. We don't have to just look to philosophy for our theories; we should take advantage of everything on offer. Most philosophers pay lip services to the Quinean idea that the analytic and synthetic distinction can't be sustained. But that means that the philosophy and the science of art *also* lack fixed boundaries.

KT&NG: Nevertheless, it seems that neuroaesthetics can't handle the normative questions about art, or why some achievements, just as on the part of athletes for example, are held out as exemplary.

NC: Well, neuroaesthetics may tell you things like that there are certain preference patterns that lie in certain directions and certain stimulus activate certain pathways in the brain. I suppose that being informed of this the critic will say, "Well, that doesn't show it's good." If that's what you mean by the normative question, then that's right. But if you think about it for a minute the degree to which philosophy of art in the 20th has been concerned with the question of what's good versus all the other kinds of questions, you discover fixing the criteria of goodness is not really the only order of business. And psychology, neuroscience, and other disciplines, including history, may have a great deal to tell us about some of the other things that philosophers of art care about – such as art and emotional arousal.

II. ARTISTIC AUTONOMY

KT&NG: Historically philosophers and theorists have held the position that, against what you've been arguing, art is somehow a separate enterprise from other practices. This position is characterized by the "art for art's sake" autonomist and formalist theses. Your view is that formalism is an implausible theory because art is obviously often concerned with things other than form, e.g. providing moral instruction, and that the implausibility of formalism also spells the end for autonomism. In "Art and Alienation" [3] you write "Philosophical formalism is the best hope for the thesis that art is autonomous, for it lights upon a feature of art that appears to be not only arguably generic but detachable from other realms of social value, namely, form for its own sake [...] [W]ithout formalism the strongest case for the philosophical endorsement of the autonomy thesis founders [...]"[4] Can you elaborate on how you understand the formalist and autonomist theses and your objection to each one?

NC: I think that you can have various kinds of autonomism. I think that the most powerful sort of autonomism is formalism, but you don't have to be a formalist to be an autonomist. Aesthetic theorists of art are often autonomists but they're not always formalists. In the 1981 preface to Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics*[5] he says he believe in the autonomy of art but that he's not a formalist.

KT&NG: What is the difference exactly?

NC: Here's a simple way of drawing the difference: anyone who is an autonomist thinks that art is a separate realm of values from other realm of value, like sport or religion. So as an autonomist, you could say: "Look, a work of art is something that's made with the intention to afford an aesthetic experience." Of course, then, the first thing you want to know: what is an aesthetic experience?

Here, the autonomist might offer: an aesthetic experience is an experience that is valued for its own sake, but not for any other reason -- not for moral instruction nor

3 Noël Carroll, "Art and Alienation," in *The Life and Death of Images*, eds. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 89-108
4 Carroll 2008, 107
5 Monroe Beardsley. *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indanapolis: Hackett, 1981)

for anything else. Art is separate then because aesthetic experience is separate from everything else. So, given that the role of art is precisely to afford aesthetic experience, it follows that art is separate from everything use.

But an experience valued for its own sake is not extremely informative idea. So, this is where the formalist is apt to step in. What I want to suggest is that the formalist attempts to give teeth to the notion of aesthetic experience by saying that the experience that is valued for its own sake, so-called aesthetic experience, derives [solely] from the form of the work. It is, in short, an experience of form. So someone like Clive Bell is a formalist because he says what makes something a work of art is that it has significant form, and significant form is valuable because it engenders "aesthetic emotion" - by which he means aesthetic experience. For the formalist theoretician, art is an experience of form.

However, to be an autonomist, you don't have to make that move. You could say that it's anything that is valued for its own sake.

Now there are certain people, nowadays, like Malcolm Budd and Alan Goldman, who in a sly way try to have their cake and eat it. They say that if you get knowledge from the artwork and you value that knowledge for its own sake then that is an aesthetic experience. But of course that way of parsing aesthetic experience removes it entirely from the debate between whether or not aesthetic experience and the value thereof is going to be connected to other forms of social values or not.

KT&NG: One might argue that the autonomism thesis seems at least to capture the insight that it is unreasonable to saddle artists with the responsibility of educating their public. And that people should be wary of getting bad information from artists.

NC: That's the argument in Plato's *Ion*; it's a very ancient argument. You could make it this way: just look at certain artforms like music; surely, there's no reason to think that because someone can compose symphonies that they would have anything particularly interesting to say about physics.

But, then, on the other hand, some arts are about observing human behavior. It's part of what those arts are: this is true of realistic novels, for example; it's not just a matter of putting sentences together in a way that sounds euphonious.

Aristotle says, what makes a poet isn't that the poet is someone who makes verses,

but rather the poet is someone who makes *plots*. What's important about plots, according to Aristotle, is that they track what's necessary or probable in people's behavior. That is, for Aristotle, the poet gives us information about human behaviour.

Today, as well, part of the job of various sorts of story tellers, such as psychological realist novelists and dramatists, is that they're supposed to observe people in telling ways. And there's no reason to think that they're not as effective at observing people as anyone else. That's one reason that people read novels, and especially realist novels. As Matthew Arnold put it, we read literature in order to understand "the way we live now." Think about Jonathan Franzen's and Zadie Smith's writing.

We do not read them just for the stories but for what they reveal about certain character types such the emerging personality types of our contemporaries. You don't just prize an Anne Beattie or a Tom Wolff merely because they tell yarns. Rather they tell us about what kind of people – what kind of characters – inhabit our world. Recall Wolff's "Masters of the Universe" in his *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

KT&NG: But don't artists have aesthetic commitments? Is it possible that structural and aesthetic requirements of plot get in the way of the faithful depiction of character? This is an underlying theme in several of the articles in an issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* that you edited in 2009[6].

NC: This is a big worry now. Some argue that there's this aesthetic dimension to a plot working well—certain choices need to be made not because they are probable or because they make sense psychologically, but because they make the plot work. There is a piece by David Velleman in the *Philosophical Review*[7] where he also talks about how there's a certain kind of emotional cadence that a plot has to have: that's what makes narratives work. But these fictional models are not good models for human explanation, despite what the tradition—especially Aristotle—has said, since human behaviour has to be bent into an aesthetically pleasing shape in order to be an effective narrative.

This seems like a common worry now. Consider this: sometimes you read a novel

6 Noël Carroll, ed., *Special Issue: The Poetics, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Narrative, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009)

7 David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1-25

or see a movie and you think "Why did that character suddenly start behaving like this? Where did that come from? Why are they doing that?" It doesn't make any sense. Maybe he's locked in jail. He has been in a rocky relationship and he's betrayed his wife with another woman. But then suddenly his wife gives him the key to the jail, and then you think "Why did she do that?"

But think: if she hadn't done that there would have been no way to get him out of jail and then we wouldn't have had the rest of the story. Very often when you look at something that seems psychologically or socially implausible in a fiction and you think "Why did that happen?" the answer is that it is what you needed for the plot to go on.

KT&NG: Does this suggest that not all the arts, in particular not the narrative arts, are suited to the continuum approach? Perhaps depictive art forms like film or painting, or performance art forms like dance or drama, arts which have a strong perceptual element, would be better suited to this approach than, perhaps, literature where we have to take account of the function of the narrative and imagination and consider the role of literary and linguistic convention.

NC: Literature is a big field, and certainly a lot of it involves storytelling. Storytelling, obviously, fits with the notion of the continuum—there's a psychology of storytelling. To a large extent this is how people are inducted into their culture; they learn its norms, for example, to a large extent through stories. It's how you learn about other people -- how you learn about the human psychology that's in operation in the culture you live in. Thus, the psychology of narrative comprehension should be informative for anyone concerned with narrative literature, and, for that matter, narrative theatre, film, video, etc. And, of course, the psychology of narrative comprehension is the same for comprehending literature and journalism alike.

There's also a psychology of reading that may inform the philosophy of literature. Pspychologists have looked very closely in experiments at how subjects are able to answer spatial questions after reading bits of narrative in order to determine the degree to which there is actually some kind of spatial thinking going on. That is, if you're concerned with things like spatial comprehension in reading, it seems to me you would be interested in these kinds of tests which may employ artistic texts and

nonartistic ones alike. So once again, certain literary aptitudes are on a continuum with mundane reading abilities.

There are also tests that are relevant to determining the variables of suspense. These tests don't use stories of the most complex sort—they don't test Graham Greene or Ian Flemming novels, just a one paragraph story—but there's lots of information that's relevant to developing philosophical theories of suspense.

Other things that are relevant to the philosophy of literature are the psychology of interpersonal relationships (especially in terms of mind reading). This information is related to how readers "fill in" characters in the stories that they read. So the psychology of interpersonal relationships, the psychology of storytelling, the psychology of reading can inform aesthetic experience in an expanded sense.

Of course, I am not talking about the kind of narrow sense of aesthetic experience that we discussed earlier. It's much more informative to know how you engage specifically with the elements of suspense, how you engage with the elements of storytelling and the representation of space and so on than to be told that these are all examples of experiencing x for its own sake.

III. ART AND SOCIAL FUNCTION

T& G: It seems then that storytelling at least has an important social function. Many people—including yourself—have taken this to imply an evolutionary theory for the purpose of art. We'd like to tie this discussion to a relatively recent article of yours, "Art and Human Nature."[8] You note there, and it's your project elsewhere as well, that popular art is an especially important aspect of our society, due perhaps to the shared cognitive makeup of people in any given society. For example, you argue that art and feeling are particularly related, and artworks elicit converging feelings amongst audience members.[9] You suggest that art may be particularly useful insofar as it enhances sociability. Could you elaborate on this?

NC: One thing that's been emphasized in the recent research in the emotions is called emotional contagion. Emotional contagion is basically the surge of emotions that

[8] Noël Carroll, "Art and Human Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 95-107

[9] Carroll 2004, 100

moves through a group. It's pretty clear that a lot of art is about eliciting emotions, even if we don't go with the notion that art is *just or only* about eliciting emotion.

My own suggestion is that emotional contagion explains the role of art in adaptation. Emotional contagion at the very least engenders fellow feeling. If you think of people who are involved in various ritual practices, either singing, or dancing or listening to somebody sing or dance or telling a story, you frequently note that there is a shared feeling amongst the group. That's certainly promotes bonding and also, of course, that shared emotion becomes the conveyor for a whole set of social values—maybe about the virtues of the hero you're singing about. I think that is clearly an adaptive benefit, because emotional contagion is a way in which communities not based on blood can begin to assemble.

KT&NG: Of course, not all philosophers approve of evolutionary explanations of art—they're "just so" stories, supporting any theory without direct evidence.

NC: I think you can bolster "just so" stories. If there are two species A and B and one has a certain feature and the other doesn't, and A succeeds and B doesn't, that at least provides some inductive evidence that you've got something more than a "just so" story. And we do have that, kind of evidence with respect to art because the Neanderthals didn't have art and the Cro-Magnons did. Also, the Neanderthal groups were much smaller and the Cro-Magnon groups grew larger and larger And it seems that that advantage enabled the Cro-Magnons to win in the competition for survival.

It seems to me to be a reasonable hypothesis that the possession of art, which involves emotional contagion, facilitated the formation of larger and larger groups. There may be other advantages Cro-Magnons had—they were more intelligent and had better weapons. But *we're all* struck by the fact that they had art.

The caves of Chauvet and Lascaux might have been places where people gathered for storytelling and rituals; there's evidence that some of the stalactites had been beaten as if people were hitting them rhythmically, making a rhythm for some kind of ritual or chanting or storytelling about what happened on the hunt. In terms of emotional contagion we can begin to use some of the insights from psychology and philosophy of mind and apply it to the issue of whether or not art had some function that accounted for its universal appearance across cultures.

KT&NG: Music seems to definitely fill this role even today. People bond together based on their preference for certain genres.

NC: Absolutely! Even much classical music, especially the romantic – although maybe not Morton Feldman and certain other avant-garde composers.

KT&NG: Even in that case people bond with each other over shared musical preferences. Although, presumably people aren't jamming out together to avant-garde music.

NC: But watch people at the opera, or go to the ballet and watch *Sleeping Beauty.* There are people swaying and tapping their feet. But I mentioned Morton Feldman because I want to be clear that I am not saying that all art is about engaging the emotions or instilling emotional contagion. Yet I think that in terms of explanatory purposes, it us helpful to make the uncontroversial observation that an awful lot of art is.

KT&NG: And you take it that this emotional contagion continues to be one function of mass art today? That this is another way art shapes our social lives?

NC: You bet; just go to a movie theater!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Noël Caroll is the Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. His philosophical output spans well over 100 articles as well as over 15 authored books such as *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990), *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Routledge, 1999), *On Criticism* (Routledge, 2009), *Art in Three Dimensions* (OUP, 2010) and, most recently, *Living in an Artworld* (Evanston Publishing, 2011). Professor Carroll is also noted for his film criticism and he is the author of five documentaries.

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Katherine Tullmann received her MA in philosophy from University of Missouri-St. Louis and is currently working towards her PhD at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She works in philosophy of art, mind and cognitive science.

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