

REVIEWS

Noël Carroll. *On Criticism*. London: Routledge, 2009, 210 pp. ISBN 9780415396219.

Noël Carroll is a philosopher of art. His background is in film studies as well as analytic philosophy and cognitivism. His most important books combine critical views of traditional film studies and philosophy. He has also written on specific genres, such as horror and comedy. His publications include books and collections of essays on standard themes of aesthetics and the philosophy of art more narrowly construed, but not avoiding somewhat controversial topics like mass art, its analysis and defence, as, for example, in *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (1998), which is generally considered one of the most important contemporary philosophical reflections on the subject. What is characteristic of all Carroll's writings is the clarity of argument and a commonsensical, down-to-earth approach, free from any pomp, false mystery, or snobbishly sublime attitude towards art as a cultural practice. Carroll's imperative is to be understood and this is more than one can say about most art-theory texts. This strategy has its disadvantages, however, a point to which I shall briefly return later. Some of Carroll's books are openly designed to popularize the philosophy of art or aspects of it, and the one under review is definitely of this kind.

The modestly entitled *On Criticism* is published in the series 'Thinking in Action', which is intended to provide introductory accounts of different philosophical problems in a way that, as its publishers advertise, 'takes philosophy to its public'. This kind of purpose requires a special style. And since one of the fundamental critical criteria proposed by Carroll himself is success value, that is, the evaluation of a work in terms of the achievement (or non-achievement) of its intended purpose, I shall also take this into account in my review. On the other hand the topic of Carroll's contribution makes the task tricky, because my account of his book would be a fourth-order account: there is a cultural practice (the first order), art, which is a subject of an evaluation (the second order), art criticism, which is in turn an object of a theory (the third order), the theory of art criticism, about which I have now written in this review.

Towards the end of the book Carroll labels his concept of art criticism 'plural-category criticism' and 'category-relative evaluation', which basically means that each work should be evaluated in terms of the category that it belongs to. How does he reach this conclusion? He begins his book with several reflections on why criticism is important today and is becoming more and more popular. The most important reflection seems to be the fact that there is 'more art

available now than in any other period of history' (2). The normative dimension of criticism is emphasized throughout the book, evaluation being the culmination of all the critical procedures or operations on artworks. He observes that today's theories of criticism are in fact mostly theories of interpretation; these theories are not theories of criticism in the proper sense of the term, because they avoid evaluation. He also distances himself from those theories that place the interpretative and evaluative focus on the political and ideological aspect of the artwork, since he believes that the focus should be 'on the artwork as the intentional production of the artist as an individual creator of value' (6). The critic is defined by Carroll as 'a person who engages in the reasoned evaluation of artworks' (7). What are art critics for? The critic's social role is to enable the audience to discover the value of work by using a series of pieces of evidence and relevant procedures to reason for, or against, the work's values. Criticism is usually an activity whose results are intended to be presented to others. Carroll's conception is commendable for its emphasis on the basic responsibility of the critic to show the positive value of a work.¹ Since his emphasis is on a *reasoned* evaluation, it cannot simply be an expression of likes and dislikes; instead, it has to be grounded in a set of preceding activities. Carroll insists on the idea that the primary aim of criticism is evaluation: a negative or positive pronouncement of value. This, according to him, is the only criterion that distinguishes art criticism from other discourses that have art as their subject.

Evaluation is, however, a controversial matter in any discourse that has art as its subject, as well as in many other academic disciplines. The focus on evaluation as a distinctive feature and ultimate aim of art criticism therefore needs further argumentation. Some scholars maintain that evaluation should in fact precede other activities rather than follow them, because the very selection of a work for criticism is already a suggestion of its value as something worthy of our attention. Since the same applies to other discourses on art, art criticism is no different from them. Yet, passing over the obvious fact that the critic does not always choose the object of his or her criticism, even if such pre-evaluation actually does take place, it is not evaluation proper since it is not grounded in other activities that would provide a reasoned foundation for judgement. Carroll therefore responds that this argument rests on equivocation. Some critics (such as Arthur Danto) also believe that evaluation is the responsibility of

¹ A literary critic once told me that he never wrote negative reviews. If he read a book that was without value, he simply did not bother to write a review, because he felt that was a waste of his and his reader's time. I suppose that comports with Carroll's thinking.

others (for example, curators or other people working for art institutions) and that the critic should only explain those people's choices. But again, selection is not tantamount to evaluation, and the presentation of work is not a grounded evaluation.

It is argued, mostly by artists, that art is the act of creating, a free activity, not bound by rules, aiming to produce unique works. As long as there are no rules, there can be no evaluation. The 'no rules' argument is misguided, Carroll asserts, because the work is evaluated by the critic in terms of effect, on the reception side, for which the existence or non-existence of rules is not of key interest. In the same vein the uniqueness argument can be refuted, because even if there are no common rules or criteria for artworks of different fields, styles, times, and so forth, there are still connections between artworks in terms of genres, classes, and so forth. Consequently, Carroll concludes, 'although most artworks are numerically particular, they are not so incommensurable that they cannot be appraised in terms of the way in which they implement the purposes of the category or categories to which they belong' (28).

He also refers to the alleged emotionality and subjectivity of criticism, claiming that the emotional aspect need not exclude reasoning, especially if we regard emotions not as irrational but as rooted in cognition and the recognition of patterns. Subjectivity, as Carroll notes, originally referred to the subject of work, so it did not mean (as it is usually understood today) the 'uniquely personal and even idiosyncratic' (33). The modern use of this expression is based on the presupposition that our judgements on art are inevitably divergent. Carroll points out, however, that there is at least as much diversity as there is convergence. Moreover, diversity often concerns secondary problems. For example, there is a general convergence of judgement as to whether Mozart and Beethoven were great composers; the diversity of opinion arises with regard to the question of which one was better. What immediately comes to mind is the question of whether convergence (as exemplified in our almost unanimous belief in the greatness of Mozart and Beethoven) is not simply a matter of cultural training. As an experienced analytic thinker, Carroll takes this qualification into account, dismissing all the work done by sociologists of art and sociologically oriented aestheticians (such as Bourdieu and feminist theorists of art) by labelling their analyses a 'conspiracy theory of convergence' (38). He also rejects the positivist account of value-free criticism, because he believes it to be a self-contradictory idea: 'the value-neutral approach is not a matter of reforming criticism but of abandoning it' (42).

In Chapter Two, Carroll addresses the question of what exactly the object of criticism is and he establishes that 'it must be what the artist does (or what

the artists do) with or by means of the work' (49). Criticism is therefore the evaluation of what the artist has done and it should be assessed in terms of the artist's achievement or failure. In fact, then, the object of criticism is the success value. Carroll reflects upon the view that the value of a work of art resides in its reception, in the experience it provides the audience (regardless of whether we take into account only pleasant experiences or any experiences valued for themselves). In that respect, the critic's job would be to show the audience what experience a given artwork can grant them. It would be a difficult task to deny that the reception value (that is, experiences enabled by the work of art) is an important aspect of criticism in many cases. Yet Carroll rejects the view that it is the only, or ultimate, value that the critic should take into account, because the work of art can be valuable from a point of view that is more or less irrelevant to its reception, such as originality (for example, in experience, a perfect forgery is equal in value to an original) or impact value (which is also absent from the actual experience of a Brillo box, for example). Carroll concludes: 'I do not deny that a work, if it is successful, may be an achievement precisely because it affords the basis for an informed and prepared experience' (63), but the critic should understand this reception value from the point of view of success value. 'The artwork is an *artifact* and should be evaluated as such – that is, in terms of what it is *designed* to do' (64). That leads Carroll to the controversial question of the relevance of the artist's intentions.

Intentions, he claims, are important for evaluating artworks in terms of success value (achievement or failure), just as in everyday life we take into account intentions of other people while evaluating their actions and achievements. In order to pursue this line of argument Carroll first needs to deal with everyone who believes in the existence of the 'intentional fallacy'. He classifies their arguments into three main groups: the inaccessibility argument, the circularity argument, and the irrelevance argument. Concerning inaccessibility, Carroll argues that there is no reason to suppose that the artist's intentions are more inaccessible than, for example, the intentions of the people with whom we interact in everyday life. True, we are sometimes wrong in our estimations, but that is not an argument for a claim that intentions as such are inaccessible. The fact is, as Carroll often remarks, artworks belong to categories, so if an artist chooses a category it is an indication for us to infer his or her intentions and the basis for evaluating whether he or she has achieved it or not. We also have many indirect sources, such as interviews, manifestos, and introductions, to infer the intentions from. It may be that the artist is deceiving us or deceiving himself or herself, consciously or unconsciously, but this is not the rule. Once we establish that, Carroll claims, we also have grounds for dismissing the circularity argument – first, because

we have more than just the work as evidence of the artist's intentions (that is, we have other direct and indirect sources); second, because the work itself *provides* evidence of the artist's intentions. It is the artist's achievement or failure that is the object of critical evaluation, but his or her intentions are relevant in that respect, 'inasmuch as the critic needs a take on what the artist intended in order to determine what, precisely, the artist has done' (81).

That established, Carroll turns to component operations on artworks that function (individually, two or more together, or all in combination) as grounds for evaluation: description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis. The description of an artwork can never be complete, nor should it be, but it can be adequate: 'That which needs to be described about the work are those features of the work that are important to draw to the audience's attention for the purposes of classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, and/or analysis, and, of course, evaluation' (89). Description is therefore selective and as such may be guided by some agenda on the part of the critic, but, again, it is not a rule, and, moreover, since criticism is a public venture it can be corrected and challenged. The categorization of an artwork (for example, in terms of art form, genre, and style) is important because it guides the expectations we have of a work. To the possible objection to the importance of classification (because art is allegedly a matter of breaking with traditions, transgressing styles, being unique, original) Carroll responds that 'the mandate that every artwork break with its tradition and re-invent its artform was actually never anything more than a wishful fantasy' (95). A critic possesses expert knowledge that is generally broader than the ordinary reader's, and consequently has greater facility in classifying the artworks at hand. Misclassifications happen, but are open to corrections; indeed, the correction of previous errors is one of the functions of criticism. These procedures are part of internal criticism, but there is also external criticism, which takes the form of contextualization: 'description of the circumstances – art-historical, institutional and/or more broadly socio-cultural – in which the artwork has been produced' (102). Contextualization helps to reconstruct the aims of the artist in order to describe and explain his or her choices in terms of the work's form and content, which, in turn, is a basis for the assessment of this work in terms of failure or achievement.

The three remaining procedures are slightly more complicated, since they overlap in some instances and are often treated as one, though Carroll insists on the distinction between elucidation, interpretation, and analysis. Elucidation consists in 'identifying the literal meaning narrowly construed, of the symbols in the artwork' (108), in a way similar to iconography. It concentrates on fixed associations and established conventions, and is generally concerned with 'what

has been given directly to us by the artist' (110). Interpretation, on the other hand, is concerned with the theme, concept, message, or idea of the work as a whole and it seeks that which is not literal, fixed, or established. The aim of analysis is to show how the artist achieved his or her purpose, which can be, but need not necessarily be, a theme or message (in which case analysis takes the form of interpretation), since the purpose can take the form of bringing about a certain state, projecting an expressive property, or pleasing the senses. Interpretation is thus one of the principal forms of analysis, but not the only one. To sum up, elucidation determines the symbols constituting the work's meaning in terms of semantics, iconography, but also pragmatic meaning-making factors, such as the background assumptions (112–13); interpretation entails discovering or disclosing 'more general or analogical implications than their straightforward description might portend' (116) and it therefore requires imagination, and cannot be mechanical or algorithmic as elucidation can, to some extent, be; analysis consists in identifying the point or purpose of the work in question (be it an emotional state, an expressive quality, the presentation of beauty, and so forth) and in the explanation of how the artist has achieved that.

The concept of art criticism as multiple-category criticism and as category-relative evaluation offers, Carroll argues, many advantages. It is not, as one might suspect, formalist, since it encompasses the evaluation of an artwork from ethical, political, and social points of view in terms of the work's purpose. It recognizes the possibility that many works of art belong to more than one category and in that case 'the realization of the points and purposes of the different kind should be calculated in terms of each category's proportionate influence on the overall outcome of the work' (182). We shall get mixed results, but this is usually the case, even with one artwork belonging to a single category, because 'mixed results are really the norm' (184). Even when new categories emerge (as they do all the time), they emerge in the realm of existing art forms and are usually somehow connected with them, by means, for example, of hybridization, inter-animation, amplification, and repudiation. This perspective on criticism does not preclude the possibility of comparisons where there is a need for them, although Carroll thinks that comparisons are not the primary job of the critic or the critic's primary aim; critics who engage in comparisons, especially in the form of various rankings, Carroll calls 'aesthetical accountants' (188). What we want from the critic is to show us what is to be appreciated in a particular work.

We can (and this is Carroll's final point) make comparisons, however, from different categories, taking their cultural significance as a criterion. Carroll claims that even the best detective novel or comic novel is worse than a work such as the Sistine Chapel, because its cultural significance, its importance for

the life of societies, is different; each one has, in other words, greater or lesser cultural substance. At this point the clever construction of the argumentation begins to creak: after having argued throughout the book that each category has its own set of success-value criteria,² Carroll suddenly realizes that there is a hierarchy of genres or art forms. The thought comes out of nowhere, and lacks any grounded argumentation. The most convincing account in support of the idea would be possible in terms of the economy of cultural capital and hegemonic taste, but Carroll cannot do that since he brushed off this line of argument as 'conspiracy theory' only a few chapters before. Carroll seems to try to find a way out of the predicament by distinguishing between art criticism in the narrow sense (grounded in procedures described in the previous chapters) as specialized knowledge, a learnt field of expertise, and cultural criticism, which 'demands that the critic function not simply as an expert but something more of the nature of a public intellectual' (194), but he is not following this consistently enough, recognizing that the boundary between the two activities is blurry, and concluding that a good art critic should indeed be a cultural critic.

The book follows the style of a work popularizing a certain kind of reflection. It is written in accessible language, not overloaded with specialized terminology or references. All in all, it discharges the task of taking philosophy to its public. But who is this 'public' anyway? Who are the targeted readers? Probably not academics specialized in the field – for them Carroll has much more to offer, as he has demonstrated in many books before. In other words, for art theorists and philosophers of art the book is too easy and sometimes too commonsensical. Who would the other possible readers be? Art lovers? Art critics? Maybe, but a typical art lover needs art and, sometimes, art criticism, not necessarily a book on art criticism. The same goes for critics. I hasten to add that my qualifications here are not directed at Carroll's practising of the genre, but to the genre itself. Nonetheless, books that summarize and systematically present practically all the important general matters and aspects of art criticism, especially in such a high-quality example, merit attention and anyone interested in expanding his or her general knowledge or looking for a starting point to investigate art criticism further will find Carroll's *On Criticism* rewarding.

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² Not to mention his rejection of 'grand theory' and his fiery defence of piecemeal theorizing in previous books.