
Discussion

On Carroll's Enfranchisement of Mass Art as Art

It is eminently reasonable to believe that episodes of *I Love Lucy* are artworks. After all, they were original, brilliantly funny, and often insightful explorations of American culture circa mid-1950s, and their star Lucille Ball evolved into a physical comedy genius worthy of comparison with the likes of Keaton and Chaplin. If you do not share that assessment, then perhaps you would choose other comedies, for example, *Seinfeld* or *Taxi*, as examples of artworks on TV.¹ Given the theory of mass art that Noël Carroll develops in his groundbreaking *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, he would surely agree that all these comedy shows are artworks. On the other hand, it is not plausible to think that matches on *WWF Smackdown* are artworks. However, I suspect that Carroll is constrained to say that they are. Indeed, I believe that Dealin' Doug's Auto Emporium ads on Denver TV qualify as artworks for Carroll, because Dealin' Doug's ads probably² qualify as mass art, and if they are works of mass art, it follows by Carroll's definition of mass art that they are art. To evaluate this disagreement with Carroll, we will need to briefly examine his theory concerning the nature of mass art.³ On the basis of the conditions spelled out in his definition of mass art, I will argue that its global elevation of mass works to art status is problematic.⁴ Although his defense of works of entertainment and popular culture against commonly expressed criticisms is a welcome first step, I will argue that Carroll does not also succeed in giving a coherent account of what mass art is, and hence his enfranchisement of "mass art" misfires.

I

In *A Philosophy of Mass Art* Carroll lays out his theory of the nature of mass art, by which I mean

specifically his formal definition of it, after a thorough critique of several prominent twentieth-century critics of the popular arts. Carroll urges that the arguments of these thinkers—whether advanced against "amusement art," as in Collingwood, or the "culture industry," as in Adorno—apply principally to what he terms "mass art," not to popular art in general: "the debate between high art and low art, or serious and popular art—has really been concerned with mass art" (p. 198). My own view is that rather than taking Carroll's concept of mass art as their target, the more obvious *bête noire* of such critics (as they often said) was entertainment and the way that functioning as entertainment affected the nature of works so produced.⁵ In any case, although Carroll's theory of mass art is implicitly intended to capture mass entertainment forms, he neither claims nor implies that it amounts to an analysis of the concept of entertainment. Carroll's notion of mass art focuses on objects that are mass-produced and distributed in multiple quantities. In contrast to traditional popular art, he proposes that over the last two centuries a new sort of art characteristic of mass, industrial society has come into being.

As Carroll notes, many twentieth-century thinkers have argued against ascribing the status of art to the entertainment works of mass culture. When they take the view that all such works are by their nature non-art, I will call their position *elitist*. Carroll observes against elitists that there are many examples of mass works, for example, movies, such as *Citizen Kane*, or cartoons, such as Gary Larson's *The Far Side*, that do not exemplify the alleged common defects of mass/entertainment art; they are not more formulaic nor less aesthetically valuable than examples of high art. This shows that mass works (or entertainment works) do not *necessarily* have the disbaring qualities that critics have ascribed to the class of mass works.

However, this observation merely supports what I will call the *moderate* view: the view that *some* examples of popular or mass arts (or entertainment) can be genuine artworks. As we shall see, Carroll

appears to take a more liberal view than this concerning the relation of mass art to art per se.

II

Carroll's theory of "mass art" is spelled out in three conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something to be a mass artwork:

X is a mass artwork if and only if 1.) X is a multiple instance or type artwork, 2.) produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3.) which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences. (p. 196)

Before elucidating these conditions it is important to note two things. First, Carroll regards this definition as strictly classificatory; it is neutral with respect to any positive or negative value that works of mass art may have. It is intended to "provide an analysis of the concept of mass art" (p. 172), as he also says: "Mass art, on my understanding, has certain features—internal features—that lead us to classify it as mass art" (p. 185). Second, for Carroll what constitutes the intuitive class of items of mass art? He says:

my theory is particularly geared to mass art as it emerged in the industrial revolution and as it continues in the information age. Roughly stated, the extension of the items that I intend my theory to capture includes: popular commercial films, TV, commercial photography, pop music, broadcast radio, computer video games, comic strips, World Wide Web sites, and pulp literature. (p. 173)

As I read the overall account, I believe that Carroll means to claim that all items of these sorts of things have a common essence and that they are *all* artworks, that is, that the set of items of mass art is a (very large) subset of the class of artworks. I will call this the *liberal* view.

The liberal view is implied by condition (1) in Carroll's definition of mass artworks. This condition actually contains two claims about mass works. First, by using the term "artworks" Carroll literally means to define mass works as art, just as much as string quartets and sculptures are art. Second, the artifacts in question have to be capable of having multiple tokens, for example, copies of a novel, screenings of a movie, downloadings of a Web site. Since string quartets, cast sculpture, and novels are also capable of multiple instances, however, it is the second and third conditions that specify the

distinctive characteristics of the subclass *mass* art. Accordingly, although I will primarily question the first claim, I will first briefly examine the second and third conditions.

The second condition—call it the technology condition—requires that the work be mass-produced *and* mass-distributed. This is intended to eliminate multiple-instance traditional art such as cast sculpture and string quartets. It also rules out traditional popular art, such as folk songs or puppet shows: "Mass art is... distinguished by its reliance upon mass delivery systems capable of reaching non-overlapping reception sites simultaneously" (p. 199). Thus pop recordings qualify as mass art, but an arena rock concert, although seemingly a paradigm of hi-tech popular art, is not *mass* art for Carroll because even though it is produced by electronic technology, a rock concert is not delivered to multiple sites simultaneously.

The third condition—call it the accessibility condition—reflects what Carroll takes to be the essential influence of popular taste on mass art. The problem that this condition addresses is that some avant-garde films, novels, and photographs, although intuitively the opposite of mass art, satisfy the first two conditions. What eliminates them as mass art is the third condition, which makes a virtue out of what was previously thought to be a flaw. Carroll notes that to make a work broadly accessible, it must be constructed to avoid the challenges characteristic of avant-garde art as well as the need to have extensive background knowledge. In contrast to the aspirations of avant-garde art, mass art must incorporate forms and content that have broad appeal. As Carroll puts it, "Avant-garde art is esoteric; mass art is exoteric" (p. 192). This condition has the desired effect, for Carroll, of ruling out Rushdie novels and Stan Brakhage movies, while keeping in *I Love Lucy*.

A problem remains. For some genres, the most important and artistically successful mass artists do not appear to satisfy this condition. And if *they* do not, then most of the examples of mass art *good as art* (as opposed to *good as commercial product*, such as Kenny-G and Britney Spears) will drop out of the category; and it seems counterintuitive to define a vast category of artworks most of which are by necessity merely competent.⁶ I have in mind popular musicians such as Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix who regularly challenged their fans and the musical forms they worked with. Carroll might reply that rock music is a problematic genre that does not appropriately fit his concept of mass art, given that most examples of important rock music do not satisfy his third condition. But if rock music is not mass art, perhaps we ought to go back to the drawing board.

III

I turn now to the first condition, which I find the most problematic. I have said that this condition asserts that *all* mass artworks are art, and it claims that this follows as an analysis of the concept of mass art. This will surely be dumbfounding to elitists who doubt that works of mass art are genuine art. Is mine a misreading? Perhaps the expression “multiple instance artwork” should be taken more neutrally as merely: “multiple instance *artifact*.” But no, Carroll plainly intends to make being an artwork one of the essential properties of mass artworks.

This is implied by the fact that he gives three different reasons for such a claim. He argues (1) “that inasmuch as mass art-forms are descended from traditional art-forms, they have a prima facie claim to art status” (p. 197), (2) that “the creators of mass art are typically engaged in the sorts of activities that artists in traditional artistic practices engage in—not only drawing, writing, and acting, but, more abstractly, representing, expressing, and discovering suitable forms in which to convey content” (p. 197), and (3) “that there is no question that mass art would count as art in terms of the leading *classificatory* approaches to identifying art” (p. 197). Here he mentions, among others, institutional, historical, open-concept, and aesthetic theories.

As there is not space to examine these reasons thoroughly, I will only briefly note that the second reason—discovering suitable forms for content—is far too broad. If this is sufficient for art status, then all of our communicative actions are art. In regard to the third reason, if Carroll is right that a given theory of art would include such a broad set of items, that fact could plausibly be taken as an *objection* to that theory by elitists and moderates who doubt that, for instance, the TV talk show *Live! with Regis and Kelly* is art. In sum, I doubt that it is uncontroversial that *all* entertainment works have the status of art,⁷ much less that the wider class of artifacts that Carroll placed in the intended extension of the concept of mass art is art.

Is it then just begging the question to put the property of being art in the definition of mass art? Even Carroll worries that his opponents will object: “it is a contested issue as to whether or not what I call mass art is art properly so called . . . you can’t just stipulate that it is such” (p. 197). If the problem of defining “mass art” were parallel to the problem of defining “art,” Carroll could take the following line. If we do have a concept of “mass art,” and if it does follow from an *analysis* of that concept that the items falling under the concept have the property of being art, then they have that property whether or not that was obvious. We do not have to be explicitly aware of the analysis of a concept before that analysis is spelled out.

But Carroll’s conceptual situation is not parallel. In the case of “art” we have a term in common use that is widely used to categorize items (if sometimes subject to dispute). An assumption of analysis, whether of “art,” “knowledge,” or “cause,” is that there is a shared concept to be analyzed, and the evidence for this is a common term in use to label items. A definition is then proposed that specifies properties of things in the world that have led us to label them by that term. Although Carroll formulates his project in these terms, there is one crucial impediment: “mass art” is simply not a common term. And so, we cannot test his analysis by comparing it with items that we regularly label “mass art” since there is no such class of labeled items.

This suggests that we try an alternative construal of Carroll’s concept. “Mass art” may be better regarded as a theoretical term intended by him to name a distinctive class of artifacts he notices in the world. In other words, we can take the concept of mass art as intended to categorize a natural (social) kind.

But even taking “mass art” as a theoretical term, it is necessary that we be able to determine if an item is mass art by determining in a noncircular fashion that it has the defining properties. While the technology and accessibility conditions, as well as the multiple-artifact part of the first condition, are sufficiently descriptive to enable us to agree on the class of things embodying these properties, what are we to do with the extra property of being art? Carroll’s confident ascription of art status to mass arts, if not question-begging, at the least appears to assume that we can readily determine that members of the intuitive extension from TV to Web sites and computer games, are art proper. But this is in fact problematic. That leaves us in a quandary as far as determining which artifacts are to be counted mass artworks.

The problem obviously lies in the first condition. Suppose we explicitly bracket the question of whether the items in question are art proper and we reformulate the first condition simply as specifying those things that are:

1. * multiple instance artifacts that seem to make use of art strategies such as representing and expressing or that exhibit aesthetic qualities as a self-conscious part of their point;⁸ in short, these are multiple-instance artifacts that are intended to be aesthetically appreciable.

Call the class of things that meet this revised condition and the other two conditions of Carroll’s original definition the class of “mass aesthetic artifacts.” Having eliminated the controversial condition of being an artwork, there is no particular problem about determining the members of this class. The question at issue now becomes: are all mass aesthetic artifacts

plausibly regarded as artworks according to our current shared concept of art? This question is critical because although Carroll claims that being an artwork is one of the essential properties of mass artworks, he offers no further condition to differentiate mass artworks from mass aesthetic artifacts.

In fact, there are many multiple-instance artifacts that appear to be mass aesthetic artifacts but are not apparently examples of art: syndicated talk radio shows, Levis blue jeans, printed T-shirts, TV programs of many sorts, such as talk shows, televangelism, and quiz shows, ads on TV like Dealin' Doug's, designer table-settings, the original Brillo boxes, board games, automobiles, and so on. These seem to be counterexamples to the claim that all mass aesthetic artifacts are art. Further counterexamples occur in "commercial photography," which was included by Carroll in his original list of mass art. Although this inclusion indicates how broadly Carroll projects the class of mass art, it also illustrates why such a vision is not necessarily in sync with the enfranchisement claimed in his explicit analysis. For, surely not *all* commercial photographs ought to be regarded as art works (even bad ones!)—for example, those in advertising flyers for supermarkets, discount stores, and drug stores folded into Sunday newspapers, with their hundreds of thumbnail pictures of detergent bottles, breakfast cereal, houses for sale, turtle neck sweaters, and so on.⁹

To avoid these counterexamples, we need a further restriction on which mass-produced types of aesthetic artifact count as mass art. Carroll hints at such a principle when he says: "I argue that inasmuch as mass art-forms are descended from traditional art-forms, they have a prima-facie claim to art status" (p. 197). We can use this remark to construct a more complex position using two basic ideas. First, that work-forms or genres are the basis of the definition of mass art: mass art is to be delineated by a list of forms—movies, comics, and so on. Second, that mass artworks will be just the mass aesthetic artifact-forms that are descended from traditional art forms.¹⁰ Carroll's enfranchisement of mass art will then be preserved if and only if all "descended mass aesthetic artifacts" are plausibly regarded as art or as artworks. An advantage of this view is that it has the potential to be *moderate*¹¹ in that it does not necessarily count all entertainment forms as mass art and thus as art.¹²

The descended-from criterion fits some art forms well, such as movies, which may be regarded as descended from stage plays. Perhaps also photography can be regarded as partially descended from painting. But then any use of photography would still count as art, including any commercial photography on the supposition of transitivity: if *z* is descended from *y*, and *y* from *x*, then *z* is descended from *x*. Thus any photograph is descended from painting. It

appears, accordingly, that the suggested principle rules out very little. The wide range of counterexamples previously suggested to the claim that mass aesthetic artifacts are art might all be left in. For instance, nationally syndicated talk radio programs bear similarities to paradigm art forms: they are entertainments involving story telling, role playing, collaborative improvisation, and so on descended from dramatic presentation. Similarly, it is arguable that designer clothes, as well as designer kitchenware and table-settings, are descended from sculpture.¹³ Clearly, the class of descended mass aesthetic artifacts is still far too broad for all its members to be considered art.

Let me sum up the argument concerning the concept of mass art. The original definition appears to make "mass art" art by definition. This would be flawed for two reasons: (a) it would beg the question against moderates and elitists, and (b) it would leave the class of mass artworks basically undefined. Can we solve this conundrum by substituting a more neutral definition of mass art? By defining the classes of mass aesthetic artifacts and descended mass aesthetic artifacts we then asked: If mass art were equated to either of these, would it be plausible to regard it all as art? The answer, I argued, is no. This leaves open the possibilities that either a further condition can be proposed to isolate the members of mass aesthetics artifacts that are art or that the descended-from condition can be modified in such a way as to block the undesired descendants while including the many new potential art forms. Until that is done, the claim that we have discovered a new species of art, namely, mass art, must remain in limbo.¹⁴

JOHN ANDREW FISHER
Department of Philosophy
University of Colorado—Boulder
Boulder, Colorado 80309

INTERNET: jafisher@spot.colorado.edu

1. Or choose any number of other brilliant TV comedy shows, such as *The Honeymooners*, *Fawlty Towers*, *The Simpsons*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, or the *Ernie Kovacs* show. I choose examples that are both TV programs and comedies because either property alone tends to guarantee that a work is entertainment, and, in my view, it is entertainment that we intuitively resist classifying as art.

2. Dealin' Doug's ads are of the crude sort common to car dealerships, and thus I intend to urge that they are counterexamples to art status. But this is not meant to imply a blanket rejection of advertisements on TV as potential artworks.

3. Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Parenthetical page numbers are to this edition. The official definition of "mass art" is found in Chapter 3, "The Nature of Mass Art."

4. Clearly, I reject facile dismissals of the question of which things are art. They are often made by those who implicitly want to ascribe the appreciation-worthiness and status of art to entertainment products of popular culture, such as B-movies, motorcycles, or restaurant decor, without having to give any argument or spell out any theory of art to show why this is justified. Such a stance is tempting, however, only because as a culture we still operate with and care a great deal about what is art, even though what counts may be, as Gallie claimed, “essentially contested.” See W. B. Gallie, “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1956): 97–119. Hence, it is plainly *not* true that which things are art is no longer regarded as important. That is why new avant-garde works still elicit debate and vehement denials of their claim to be art. Carroll in particular does not dismiss the question in this book or in his account of identifying art. (See Noël Carroll, “Identifying Art,” in *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie’s Philosophy*, ed. Robert J. Yanal [Pennsylvania State Press, 1994], 3–38.)

5. Accordingly, I believe that the fundamental problematic in the relation of art to popular culture is the conflict between our notions of art and entertainment, a conflict that Carroll often illuminates but also sidesteps with his distinct concept of mass art.

6. As a matter of historical fact, classical music in England after Handel and before Elgar may have been largely mediocre, but it was not part of its very essence, part of what it was to be classical music in England 1750–1900, to be mediocre.

7. Gabler gives forceful arguments for the claim that the evening network news programs on TV are entertainments (Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* [New York: Random House, 2000]). Surely TV newsmagazines and quiz shows are entertainments. As it is difficult to see what would be meant by categorizing examples such as quiz shows as art, it is *prima facie* implausible that all entertainments are art. (See also note 11 below.)

8. To avoid misunderstanding, I hasten to note that every artifact (and every object) has aesthetic properties of some sort. These aesthetic qualities, positive or negative, are usually unintended. But mass aesthetic artifacts are specifically those made and expected to have attractive aesthetic and artistic qualities, and the aesthetic interest these artifacts are intended to have is understood as a central feature of the given type of entity. Clothing and entertainment, for example, require attractive aesthetic qualities for the successful performance of their function.

9. I am, of course, not saying that no advertising photographs are artworks, merely that it is obvious that not every photograph is art. (Carroll appears to agree—see note 11). Nor do I deny that any given commercial photograph could be “transfigured” into an artwork by a conceptual artist. Although there is no fully satisfactory account of our current concept of art, all competing theories logically presuppose that there are obvious cases of nonart as well as paradigm cases of art. That many advertising (as well as military, medical, engineering, and so on) photographs are not artworks, according to our current concept, is just as obvious as that city council resolutions are not artworks and just as clear as that paintings by Raphael or quartets by Beethoven *are* artworks. Nor, finally, have I denied that in

the future the concept of art could change so as to include all photographs used for advertising as art.

10. However, what do we do with potential artworks that have emerged within genuinely new mass artifact forms, for example, Web pages or computer games? The latter are descended from games, but are games a traditional *art form*?

11. It is quite possible that some type of moderate position ought to be Carroll’s considered view. To be sure, his first mention of mass art seems to be an open-ended list of entertainment forms, genres, and media—he even says “mass art, or if you prefer, mass entertainment” (p. 1)—in mass industrial society: “This is a book about mass art—about TV, movies, bestselling novels and other sorts of pulp fiction, popular music (both recorded and broadcast), comic books, cartoons, photography, and the like” (p. 1). This sounds like the liberal position. He follows this, however, with a telling footnote: “Including advertisements of the more creative variety—not ads that address the audience directly, but the ones that employ artistic means, such as montage, collage, juxtaposition, artful composition, and so on” (p. 1). Equally telling is his suggestion that some TV programs are not art: “Of course, this does not separate the works in question from certain non-artworks—like TV news programs . . . TV news programs and sitcoms share the same mode of existence, inasmuch as they are the same kind of types. Where they differ is in their respective claims to art status” (p. 218 ff.).

12. For example, TV quiz shows are descended from tests (not a traditional art form) and thus would not be mass art, at least with regard to that part of their origin.

13. To be sure, these items are *also* “descended from” other classes of artifacts, for example, utensils. That a given type of thing has multiple antecedents, including functional antecedents, is a given. But this will be true, I think, even in Carroll’s favored cases, such as photography.

14. An earlier version of this paper was given at the American Society for Aesthetics Pacific Division meetings in March 2002. I thank the participants and my commentator, Mitchell Avila, as well as an anonymous referee for *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, for their comments and suggestions. Thanks also to Jason Potter and Christopher Shields for comments on this paper.

Mass Art as Art: A Response to John Fisher

In “On Carroll’s Enfranchisement of Mass Art as Art,” John Fisher criticizes my theory of what it takes to count as a mass artwork. On my view, as set forth in my *Philosophy of Mass Art*,

X is a mass artwork if and only if 1.) X is a multiple instance or type artwork 2.) produced and distributed by a mass technology 3.) Which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the