

Discussion on "Criticism and Interpretation"
by Noël Carroll

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The Relevance of Authorial Intentions

The question of the relevance of authorial intentions for interpretation has steadily established itself as one of the core debates of analytic philosophy of art. Noël Carroll has been among the main figures of this debate and has defended a position known as modest actual intentionalism, or modest actual mentalism as Carroll terms this view in "Criticism and Interpretation," in a series of articles against critiques from anti-intentionalist and hypothetical intentionalist takes on the interpretation of art. In "Criticism and Interpretation," Carroll expands on an idea which has been one of the cornerstones of his defense of modest actual intentionalism, namely, stressing the continuity between the interpretation of art and other forms of interpretation and communicative situations we encounter in our daily lives. Against the contrast between art interpretation and more mundane forms of interpretation the anti-intentionalists and hypothetical intentionalists invoke, Carroll argues that much art is underlain by communicative features similar to those our non-art encounters with other people involve. Moreover, we regularly explain the communicative actions of our interlocutors by referring to their actual intentions. We are also incredibly successful in tracing these intentions. Otherwise social life would become impossible or at least incredibly hard. Since similar communicative intents characterize the making of artworks, discovering the actual intentions of the artist becomes a legitimate target of art interpretation.

Now, I tend to be in a general agreement with the modest actual intentionalist position on interpretation and have defended it against hermeneutic and neopragmatist critiques in an earlier work of mine.¹ So, I have no need to embark on any kind of fundamental quarrel with the views Carroll presents in "Criticism and Interpretation." Here my interest will lie mainly in the analogy

¹ K. Puolakka, *Reconsidering Relativism and Intentionalism in Interpretation. Davidson, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD 2011.

between art interpretation and communication he draws in the paper and at the end of my commentary I will have a look at the debate between modest actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism from a slightly different angle from the one Carroll approaches it in his paper.

First, it seems that there are at least some differences between art interpretation and ordinary, non-art cases of communication. While the flow of ordinary communication is dependent on our ability to interpret the intentions of our conspecifics with a miraculous accuracy and pace, the beginning points of interpretation in the case of art seem to be precisely those in which the flow of life is interrupted. That is, something in the artwork catches our eyes or ears and leaves us in a state of bewilderment. That interpretation frequently arises from these sorts of events is seen from the examples Carroll uses to illuminate his position. Why does the Joe Wright movie adaptation of *Anna Karenina* use theatrical stage sets? What is the purpose of the draining of bright colors in von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*? Why does Wagner begin *Das Rheingold* with a chord of one hundred and thirty six measures? Or, to use an example of my own, why does Paul Auster use footnotes in his novel *Oracle Night*?

In all of these examples, interpretation is focused on questions regarding authorial choices. Hence, interpretation seems to become a form of problem solving, that is, interpretation seeks to find an answer to the questions artworks pose to their viewers and offers an explanation of the features they contain causing our bewilderment. By finding an explanation to the peculiar authorial choices present in the work and the communicative intents behind them, interpretation relieves the interpreter from her state of puzzlement.

To see interpretation as essentially concerned with these sorts of features of artworks raises some questions for the analogy Carroll draws between art interpretation and more mundane forms of communication. For our ordinary communicative situations do not seem to be that heavily permeated by similar bewildering causing features. Their more frequent presence could perhaps make our lives more exciting, but precisely at the cost of the flow which normally characterizes our everyday life and the communicative situations it includes. The lack of these question-posing aspects does not merely concern our everyday lives, for many artworks do not seem to involve the kinds of interpretation demanding peculiar authorial choices the examples Carroll uses do. All artworks do not leave us in a state of bewilderment and do not, hence, call for interpretation in the kind of explanatory sense present in Carroll's examples. It is, however, hard to deny that artworks, which lack these sorts of aspects, could not possess themes, theses, and expressive properties, which Carroll finds the primary objects of interpretation. But in cases where the communicative intentions of the author are in no way connected to peculiar or standout authorial choices, should the attempt to grasp the content of these sorts of works and to discover the communicative intents of their authors be called interpretation. Or is our understanding in these sorts of cases perhaps based on some other sense-making activity than interpretation?

The slight discontinuity between art interpretation and ordinary communication I have here pointed at does not undermine the view that the two activities

could not lie on a continuum, which is at the heart of Carroll's modest actual intentionalism. However, it seems to raise some questions about the aims and scope of interpretation. If the notion of interpretation is primarily reserved for the sorts of cases of problem solving present in the examples mentioned above, does grasping the communicative intentions of our everyday interlocutors truly rest on interpretation. How about understanding the contents of artworks which do not contain inventive eye-catching authorial choices?

Now, turning to my second point, in an earlier article Carroll defends modest actual intentionalism not just by emphasizing the communicative interests we have toward artworks, but by developing an analogy between art interpretation and conversation. There he claims that "when we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation."² Carroll acknowledges that one important aspect of conversations is missing in the case of art interpretation, namely "the spontaneous feedback" we get from our interlocutors in real-life conversations. In this respect, art interpretation has less of an interactive character than conversations at their best do. Nevertheless, he thinks there is a significant overlap between conversations and art interpretation. For example, a rewarding case of art interpretation, in Carroll's view, involves the same kind of "conviction of having grasped" the author's intentions that is also a key aspect of good conversations. That is, encounters with both artworks and other people that "left us with only our clever construals or educated guesses, no matter how aesthetically rich, would leave us with a sense that something was missing."³

Moreover, Carroll refers, in the defense of modest actual intentionalism he presents in this earlier article, to the sense of community one gains with one's interlocutors in the course of a good conversation and he in fact finds "the prospect of community" "a constitutive value" of what he terms "serious conversations." Carroll again stresses the similarities between conversations and the interpretation of art, for, in his view, "this prospect of community supplies a major impetus motivating our interest in engaging literary texts and artworks."⁴

Both of these overlaps between conversation and art interpretation Carroll draws attention to are intended to support the modest actual intentionalist take on the interpretation of art over anti-intentionalist and value-maximizing views. A reference to the actual intention of the author is needed to secure the conviction that our interpretations are not just educated guesses, but that they truly correspond to actual communicative intentions, and the emergence of the sense of community Carroll considers a constitutive value of art interpretation requires that one has achieved a genuine understanding of the author's conversational aims.

From this conversational take on the interpretation of art, Carroll, again in the earlier article, criticizes value-maximizing views of art interpretation for involving a highly "consumerist" attitude toward artworks. In his view, they

2 N. Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in: *Beyond Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2001/1992, p. 174.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 *Ibidem*.

do not approach artworks as artifacts that result from human actions and that embody communicative intents of our fellows, but as things that exist primarily for meeting our hedonistic desires. These conversational aspects art involves thus limit “the range of aesthetically enhancing interpretations we can countenance.”⁵ Continuing on this line of thought, in “Criticism and Interpretation” Carroll builds an even stronger ethical undertone to his defense of modest actual intentionalism. There he insists that communication rests on a moral ground in that “it is not only morally wrong to willfully misinterpret another’s communication or to ignore another’s intention, but it is self-degrading to do so as well.”⁶ And given that art interpretation is a form of communication, ignoring or deliberately misinterpreting the author’s intentions should be considered equally objectionable.

However, there is also a slight difference in the line of defense Carroll presents in these two articles, for in the more recent text Carroll no longer refers to an analogy between art interpretation and conversation, but approaches interpretation in terms of communication in a more general sense. Not all cases of communication count as conversations. Communication can mean a highly simple form of conveying ideas and information and does not necessarily have to involve the kinds of features Carroll attributes to conversations in the earlier article. For example, a night table in a hotel room I recently stayed at had a piece of paper which said: “This card left on bed means ‘Please change bed sheets’.” This case of communication hardly constitutes a conversation and my ability to grasp the intents of the hotel cleaning department does not give rise in me to any kind of fulfilling sense of community with them.

This difference between the conceptions regarding the communicative aspects of art found in Carroll’s texts raises a question about the view of communication underlying his version of modest actual intentionalism. Has Carroll totally abandoned the idea that art interpretation is marked by qualities similar to those serious conversations are? Is it enough for a proponent of modest actual intentionalism to rely on a more modest view of communication, that is, on one that does not necessarily regard the kinds of features Carroll lists in his earlier defense of modest actual intentionalism as important parts of our communicative engagements with artworks?

The reason why I raise Carroll’s treatment of conversations from his earlier paper on modest actual intentionalism here is that it might provide a ground for an aesthetic defense of the view of interpretation he supports. For, in the earlier article, Carroll does not seem to emphasize the overlap between interpretation and conversation merely for the sake of highlighting the communicative aspects of art, but, with the help of that analogy, his goal also seems to be to draw attention to the fact that the conversational model of art interpretation he outlines in that article incorporates an important experiential level of art interpretation, which anti-intentionalist and value-maximizing views cannot embrace.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

⁶ N. Carroll, “Criticism and Interpretation”, in: *Sztuka i Filozofia: Art and Philosophy*, 42 (2013), pp. 7-20.

Some philosophers, like John Dewey, have argued that good conversations can, due to the “continuous interchange and blending”⁷ they involve, also possess aesthetic features. That is, conversations can be characterized by a cumulative and intensive developmental character that is also a central feature of aesthetic experience, at least according to a Deweyan understanding of that notion. No less important for the heightened experience good conversations engender is the sense of community one achieves with one’s interlocutors in the course of a good conversation.

Now, Dewey seems to be pointing at the same kinds of qualities in conversations as Carroll in his earlier defense of modest actual intentionalism. Dewey’s account of conversations is part of his more general view of aesthetic experience he presents in *Art as Experience*. In some places, Dewey contrasts aesthetic experience to what he calls “inchoate experience,” which involves opposite qualities to those that, in his view, characterize aesthetic experience. Unlike in aesthetic experience, in this case things follow each other, but the different parts of the experience in no way build on earlier ones or develop them. Yet, “because of continuous merging” there are “no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers” in aesthetic experience.⁸

It seems that conversations, which fail to meet the criteria Carroll sets for what he calls serious conversations, are precisely marked by the kinds of qualities Dewey tries to capture with his notion of inchoate experience. Conversations during which we can only make educated guesses of the communicative intents of our interlocutors and which we leave with the conviction that something was missing are precisely among the experiences Dewey would call inchoate. In this case the close of the conversation is, to quote Dewey again, “a cessation” rather than “a consummation.”⁹

These Deweyan ideas deepens the view of the experiential aspects related to conversations Carroll provided in his earlier article and that he found important parts also of the interpretation of art. But would Carroll any longer be willing to pursue this line of defense of modest actual intentionalism? His slightly different approach to the communicative aspects of interpretation in “Criticism and Interpretation” at least throws some doubt on his willingness to develop a defense of modest actual intentionalism on the analogy between conversation and interpretation he hinted at in his earlier article. Now, I admit that the conversational model of interpretation I have here outlined on the basis of some ideas found in Carroll’s earlier essay and Dewey’s aesthetics is still very sketchy, but I think the experiential aspects involved in our encounters with artworks it brings to light implies that the modest actual intentionalist should perhaps not totally give up the analogy between art interpretation and conversation.

Now, to close I will take a look at the debate between modest actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism. In the paper, Carroll approaches it mainly as an epistemological issue about the kind of evidence that it is legitimate

7 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Perigee, New York 2005/1934, p. 38.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 37.

to rely on in forming and defending an interpretation. The hypothetical intentionalist insists on the public character of interpretation and rules out, for example, private authorial avowals and unpublished notes from the realm of valid evidence. I wholly agree with Carroll that there is likely to be no nonarbitrary way of making the distinction between private and public evidence and I think he puts this arbitrariness well when he writes that “what are today’s private letters, journals, manuscripts, and interviews are often published or made publicly available in library collections tomorrow”.¹⁰

But let me try to frame the debate between modest actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism slightly differently. For it seems to me that one of the central motivating factors of hypothetical intentionalism is a disbelief toward the idea that every interpretable aspect of an artwork could be directly connected to an author’s *actual* intentions. That is, it is arguable that artworks may possess features, which can be subjected to interpretation, but which bear no direct relationship to the author’s actual intentions. Referring to the Quine-Duhem thesis on the under-determination of hypotheses by the evidence, Carroll argues in the paper that there can be cases where the principles of hypothetical intentionalism will leave the meaning of a work ambiguous, since “the evidence allowed by hypothetical intentionalists will support different hypotheses from different ideal observers”.¹¹ Hence, the actual intention of the author is needed to disambiguate the work under interpretation.

However, it seems that hypothetical intentionalism is better equipped compared to modest actual intentionalism to disambiguate cases, where there does not seem to be a direct connection between the interpretable content of an artwork and the author’s actual intentions, that is, cases where we would like to attribute a certain content or expressive property to a work, even though there does not seem to be any actual intention behind that content or property. In cases like these, a proponent of hypothetical intentionalism would insist, the meaning is determined by the best hypothesis about authorial intention made by an ideally-equipped audience and it is irrelevant to the truth of this attribution whether the author actually had an intention that corresponds to the interpretation. Or as the main representative of hypothetical intentionalism, Jerrold Levinson notes, “cases where a contextually informed ideal reader can arrive at a best attributable intention, though no such clear authorial intention exists or existed, will be ambiguous on AI [actual intentionalism] but unambiguous on HI [hypothetical intentionalism].”¹²

So my question is that if the modest actual intentionalist acknowledges the possibility of interpretable content which is not connected to the actual intentions of the author, how the correctness of such attributions are determined in the modest actual intentionalism framework, as there is no actual intention to rely on. Or is the proponent of modest actual intentionalism content to leave parts of the work of this kind ambiguous?

10 N. Carroll, “Criticism and Interpretation,” *op. cit.*, p. 13.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 14.

12 J. Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1996, p. 194.