Noël Carroll's *On Criticism*

Chapter Two

Chapter overview

- If art criticism is essentially evaluative, what is it that is evaluated in it?
- Carroll's view is that the critic evaluates the **creative process** through which the artwork has been created. If this creative process achieves its goal, the artwork will possess **success value**.
- Carroll's account differs from an alternative option, according to which artworks are to be evaluated on the basis of their capacity to **produce a valuable experience** in the audience. This is the **reception value** of artworks.
- Carroll's account of artistic value as success value requires the appeal to an artist's **intentions** in making the artwork.
- The role of authorial intention in the interpretation and evaluation of art has been subject to extended criticism in 20th century philosophy of art. Carroll defends his appeal to intentions from some common objection.

Objects of evaluation

- As should be clear by now, Carrol thinks that **evaluation** is the distinctive characteristic of art criticism. But what exactly is evaluated in art criticism?
- Carroll observes that objects of evaluation are normally human-made products, rather than natural objects (natural objects may also be evaluated, when they become somehow entangled in the network of human interests).
- Thus, the evaluation of artworks that is essential to art criticism will consist in the evaluation of the actions of people who are somehow related to artworks. Two groups come to mind: the creators of artworks (artists), and their appreciators (the audience).
- Carroll defends the view that art criticism requires an evaluation of the artist's **creative process**. He opposes **reception theory**, the view according to which an artwork's meaning and value are partly determined by the audience's response.

Against reception theory

- Carroll proposes two objections against a view of criticism that situates the interpretation and evaluation of artwork's in the audience's response.

(1) Reception theory holds that the object of evaluation is an audience's response. However, to know whether a response is appropriate or inappropriate, we already need an interpretation and evaluation of the artwork. Thus, interpretation and evaluation of the artwork (more precisely, of the process of its creation) is presupposed by reception criticism.

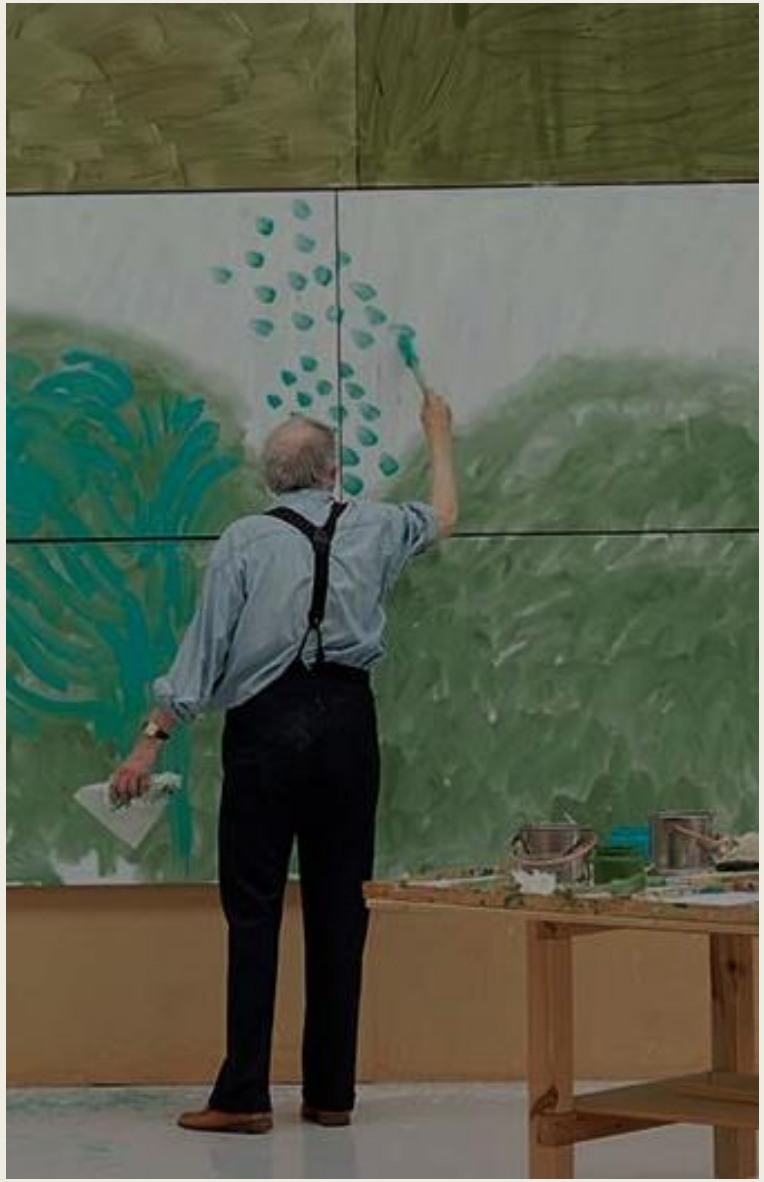
(2) If reception theory were true, then the proper object of evaluation would be the audience's response to an artwork, rather than the artist's creative process. But this doesn't fit well with our intuitive understanding of criticism: when an artwork is disappointing, we think it's the artist's fault, rather than the audience's.

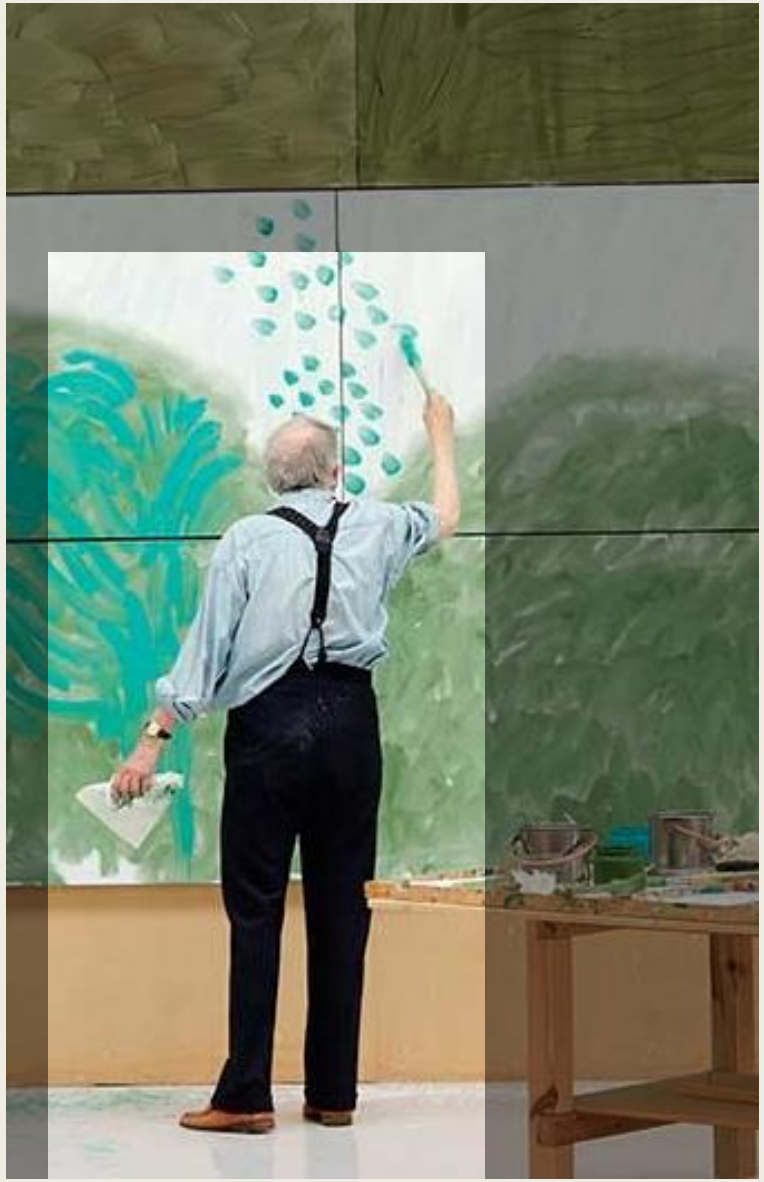
Objects of evaluation

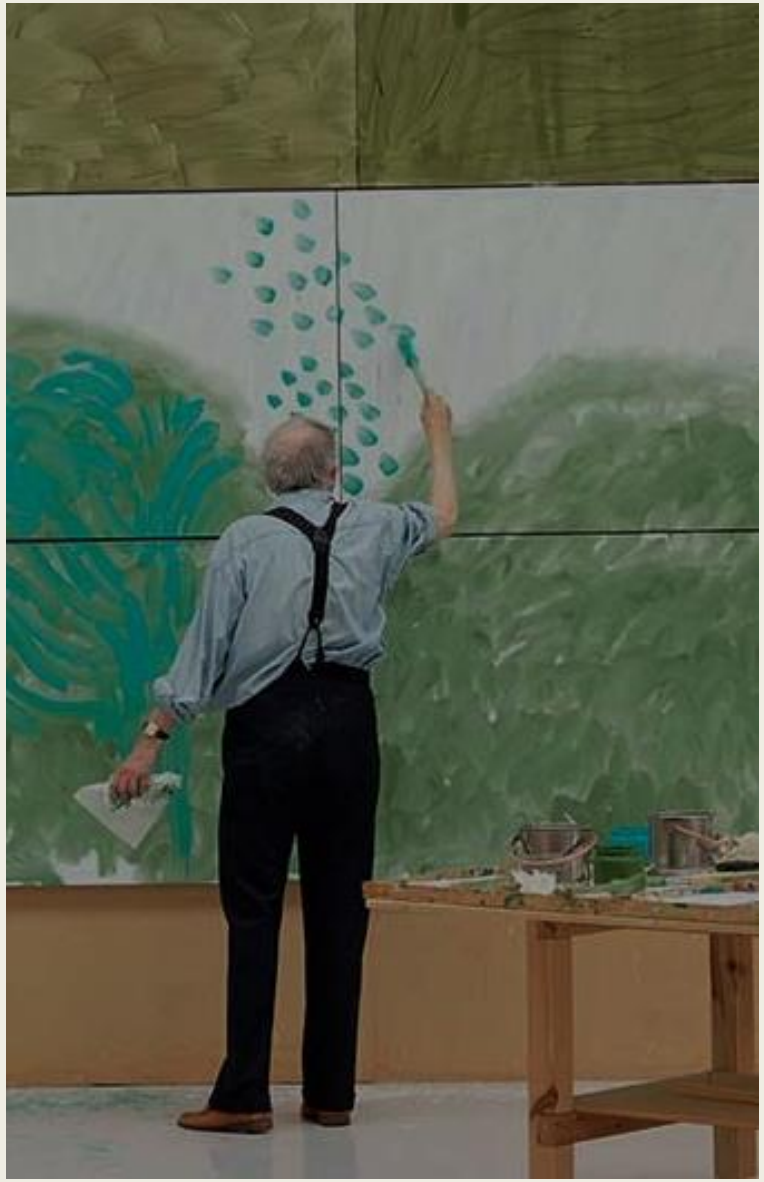
- If reception theory is false, then the object of evaluation is not the audience's response, but the goal-directed creative process that has generated the artwork.
- This means that the focus of art criticism is are the **intentional actions** performed by an artist in creating the artwork.

"What the artist does or has done in producing the artwork is the object of criticism. The object of criticism is a certain process of doings that result in the artwork." (p. 49)

- But to establish this conclusion, Carroll needs to face two more problems. First, an alternative account of artistic evaluation holds that it is neither's the artist's nor the audience's reaction that is evaluated, but rather the **artwork itself**, and its capacity to give rise to valuable experiences. Second, Carroll needs to defend his view against those who think that appealing to the **authorial intention** is unnecessary, or even impossible.







Success value vs. reception value

- On Carroll's view, art criticism evaluates artworks as the result of an artist's creative process. Insofar as an artwork is valuable, it has value because it is the result of successful intentional actions. Carroll calls this the **success value** of an artwork.
- A competing view locates value in the artwork, not as the result of a successful creative process, but rather as an object with the capacity of producing a certain experience in its audience. This is an artwork's **reception value**.
- Carroll gives a brief historical overview of how the notion of reception value developed in Western philosophy of art. During the early modern period, the fine arts became more and more detached from the traditional functions that had been assigned to them. Artworks were ultimately defined as objects that are able to provide their appreciators with a particular sort of pleasurable experience, independent of the artwork's function (Kant's view is exemplary of this).

Reception value – a brief history

- Carroll gives a brief historical overview of how the notion of reception value developed in Western philosophy of art. During the early modern period, the fine arts became more and more detached from the traditional functions that had been assigned to them (for example, inspiring religious devotion, or respect for the monarchy).
- Over the course of the 18th century, artworks came to be considered as objects that are able to provide their appreciators with a particular sort of pleasurable experience, independent of the artwork's function (Kant's view is exemplary of this).

Giotto, *Crucifix*, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (1290-95)

Reception value – a brief history

- The formulation of reception value in terms of the pleasure that an artwork is able to produce in its audience was challenged by the emergence of art that, while unquestionably accomplished, gives rise to reactions of anxiety, unease, and even disgust.
- Reception theory was thus reformulated as to include a broader range of experiences than just pleasurable ones. Typically, theorists claimed that art gives rise to experiences that are **valued for their own sake** (为艺术而艺术).

Francisco de Goya, *Two Old Men Eating Soup* (1819-23)

Success value vs. reception value

- Carroll notes that a focus on reception value (as opposed to success value) results in a completely different view of the **critic's role**.
- If the goal of criticism is the evaluation of an artwork's value as the result of intentional actions, the critic's task with regard to the audience will be that of giving audience member a sense of the artist's achievements.
- By contrast, a critic focused on reception value will be primarily concerned with instructing the audience as to how to get the most pleasurable experience from the artwork.

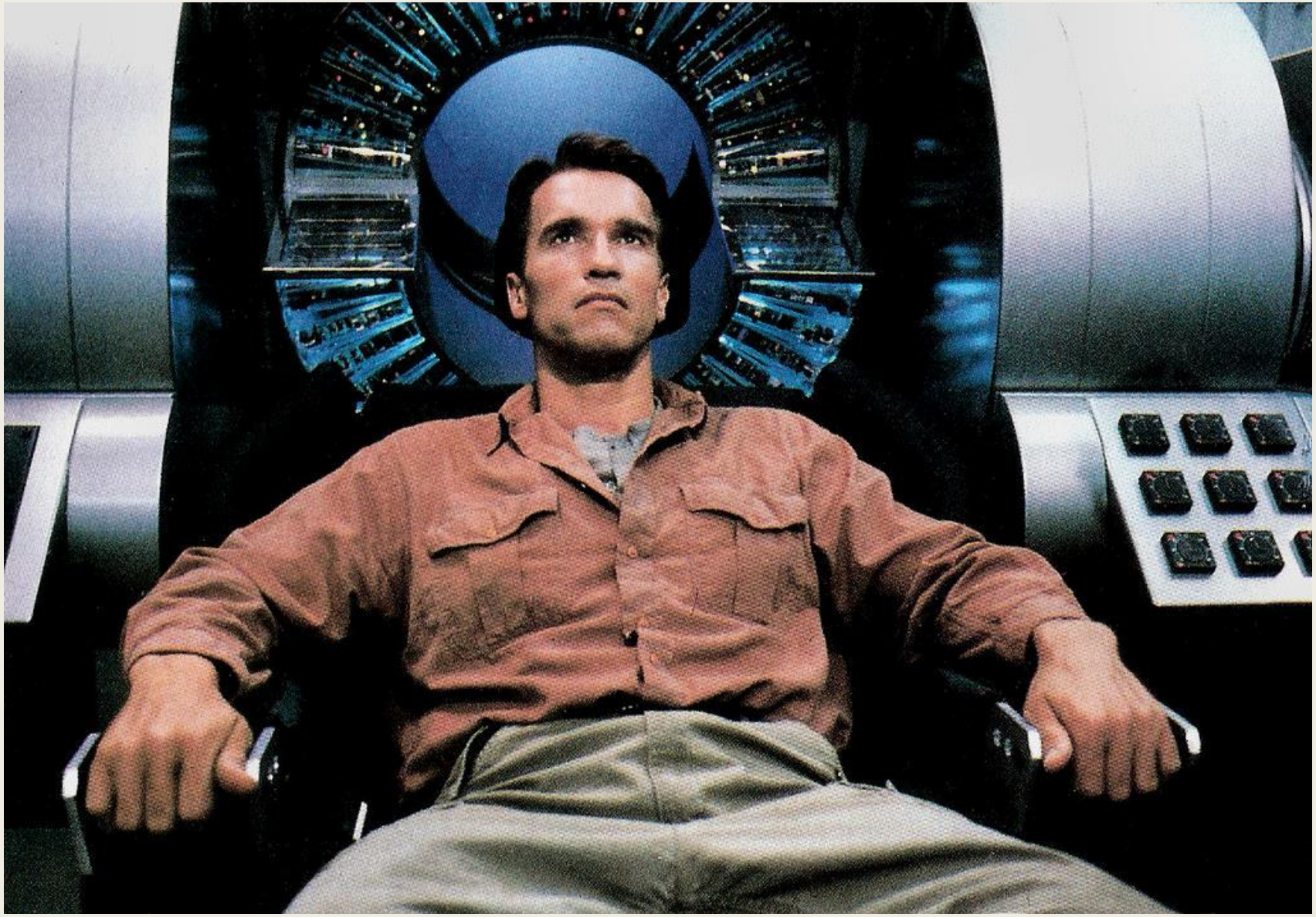
Reception value - objections

- Carroll suggests that reception value may also be the product of hedonism, the philosophical doctrine according to which **pleasure** is the only good.
- It is **experiences** that are more or less pleasurable (and thus more or less valuable). Objects are indirectly valuable insofar as they occasion pleasurable experiences.
- Even if we abandon the idea of pleasure as the only good, we may still hold on to the view that it is experiences that bear whatever value we find in our lives. In a world without experiencing subjects it would not make sense to speak of valuable objects.
- Against this, Carroll appeals to Robert Nozick's famous "experience machine" thought experiment – originally developed by Nozick (1974) as a rebuttal of hedonism.

The experience machine

- This thought experiment was proposed by Nozick in his influential book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974).

"Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? […] Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. […] Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?*"



Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall* (1990)

Reception value - objections

- Another problem for an account of criticism built on reception value is that it doesn't square with actual critical practice – it results in a **revisionary** account, as opposed to a **descriptive** one.
- Reception value results in in a revisionary view of artistic appreciation because it does not account for the value we attribute to **originality** and **historical influence**.
- A perfect copy of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) would afford the very same experience as the canvas painted by Picasso, yet it is only the latter that possesses originality, in the sense of being an innovative, ground-breaking work.
- A perfect copy of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* would also lack the property of being historically influential as the original painting.
- Thus, a perfect copy of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* would afford the same experience as the original, yet it would fail to possess (at least) two properties we value in the original (originality and historical influence).

Reception value - objections

- A final objection to reception value is that, if an artwork's value depends on an audience's reaction to it, the interpretation of the work that produces the most rewarding experiences is going to be the best one, regardless of how implausible it may be.
- This is again in contrast with critical practice. Critics do not normally think that they can re-categorize and re-interpret an artwork as we see fit, provided that they increase an audience's perception of its value.

Ed Wood's *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959)

Class discussion

Elías García Martínez, *Ecce Homo* (1930), before and after Cecilia Giménez's restoration (2012), Sanctuary of Mercy Church, Borja, Spain.

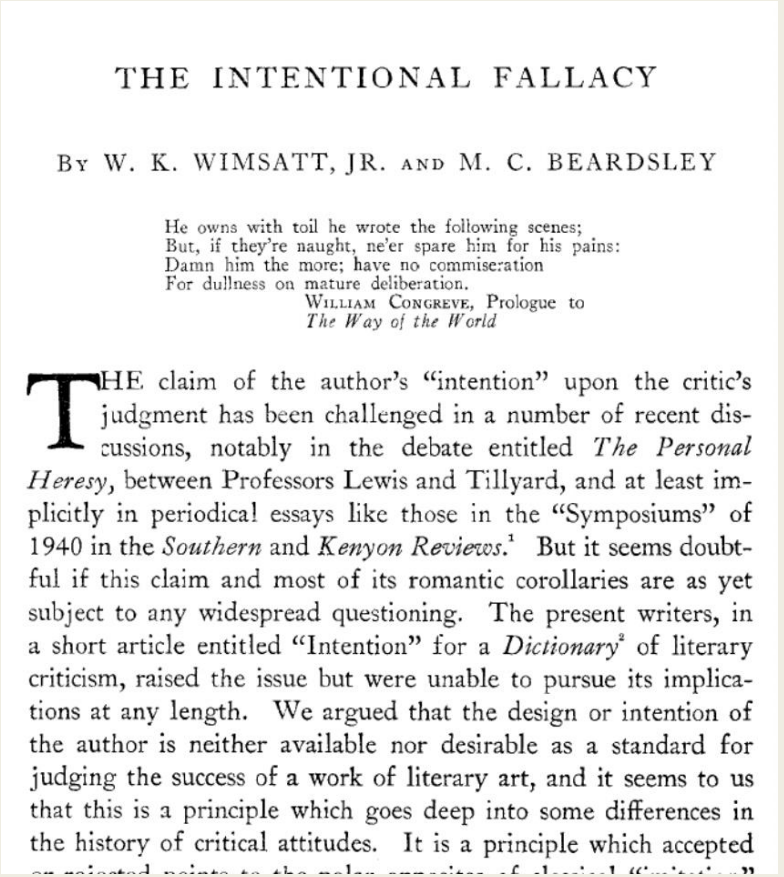
What is the role of reception value in the restoration of artworks?

The anti-intentionalist challenge

- Having rejected accounts that locate the object of critical evaluation in the audience's interpretation of an artwork, or in the artwork's capacity to induce a valuable experience, Carroll can reaffirm his positive view that critics evaluate an artist's creative process, consisting of **intentional actions**.
- This raises a serious problem for Carroll's view. There are powerful arguments against the appeal to authorial intentions in the **interpretation** of artworks. These arguments seem to apply equally well to the **evaluation** of artworks.
- The view according to which authorial intentions are unavailable or irrelevant to the interpretation and evaluation of art is normally called **anti-intentionalism**.
- In order to develop a plausible account of criticism as involving the evaluation of intentional actions, Carroll needs first to fend off the anti-intentionalist attack.

Anti-intentionalism –history

- Anti-intentionalism in English-speaking criticism and philosophy of art developed starting in the 1930s. It was partly a response to forms of criticism that excessively concerned with the author's biography or other information external to the artwork.
- The most famous early defense of anti-intentionalism is the essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley.
- Anti-intentionalists often appeal to the idea of the artwork as an **autonomous object**, which must be understood without appealing to external sources of information. In this sense, anti-intentionalism is related to **formalism**.



THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY

By W. K. WIMSATT, JR. and M. C. BEARDSLEY

He owns with toil he wrote the following scenes;
But, if they're naught, ne'er spare him for his pains:
Damn him the more; have no commiseration
For dullness on mature deliberation.
WILLIAM CONGREVE, Prologue to
The Way of the World

THE claim of the author's "intention" upon the critic's judgment has been challenged in a number of recent discussions, notably in the debate entitled *The Personal Heresy*, between Professors Lewis and Tillyard, and at least implicitly in periodical essays like those in the "Symposiums" of 1940 in the *Southern* and *Kenyon Reviews*.[1] But it seems doubtful if this claim and most of its romantic corollaries are as yet subject to any widespread questioning. The present writers, in a short article entitled "Intention" for a *Dictionary*[2] of literary criticism, raised the issue but were unable to pursue its implications at any length. We argued that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art, and it seems to us that this is a principle which goes deep into some differences in the history of critical attitudes. It is a principle which accepted

Anti-intentionalism – arguments

- Carroll considers three anti-intentionalist arguments, and rejects each of them.

(1) **The inaccessibility argument**. This is perhaps the most obvious argument in favor of anti-intentionalism (though arguably not the strongest). It claims that the interpretation and evaluation of artworks could not be based on the artist's intentions, because these are external to the work, and often impossible to retrieve. Intentions are inaccessible.

- Against the inaccessibility argument, Carroll notes that there is no reason to be skeptical about our ability to correctly guess authorial intentions. If we can reliably figure out other people's intentions in everyday life, we can do the same with artists. The **category** an artwork belongs to is often relevant in establishing the author's intentions with respect to that artwork.
- The inaccessibility argument seems stronger in the case of dead authors, especially authors from remote historical times. However, various disciplines make plausible hypotheses about the intention of people from the past – history, anthropology, etc. Art criticism is just one more such discipline.

Hand silhouettes from the Cave of Hands, Perito Moreno, Argentina

Anti-intentionalism – arguments

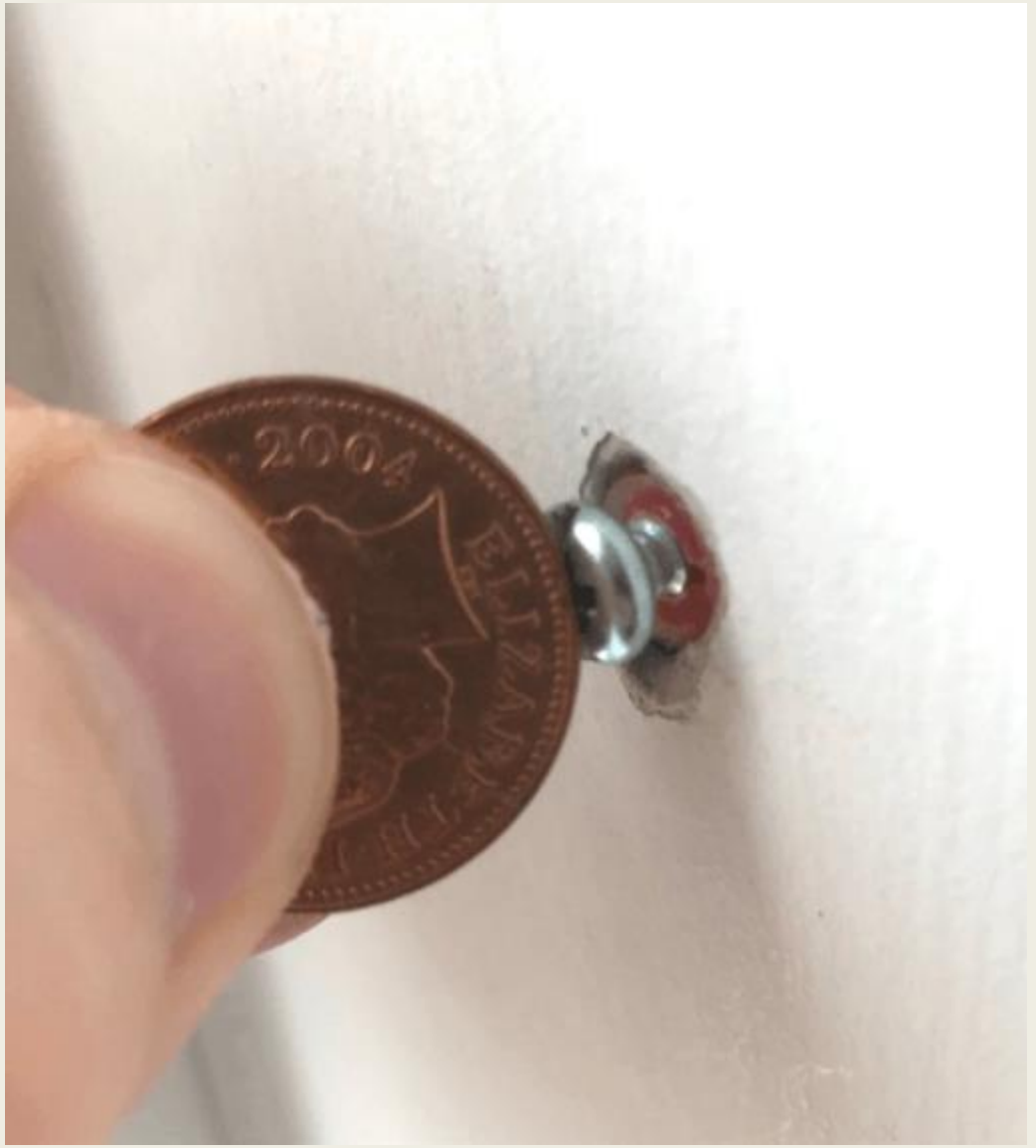
(2) **The circularity argument**. If intentions are not immediately available (they are external to the artwork), the critic will reconstruct intentions by examining the artwork's features. But then it looks like the intentionalist critic is engaging in a circular task. She claims that an artwork's features are determined by intentions, but in order to discover those intentions, she relies uniquely on the artwork's features.

A related worry is that, if intentions are reconstructed from the artwork's features, it would be impossible for the critic to identify a **mismatch** between the artist's intentions and the artwork's features, and thus claim that the artist has failed in her intent.

- The circularity argument is weakened once the inaccessibility argument is rejected. It is false that we need to rely on the artwork's features in order to make plausible hypotheses regarding the artist's intentions. A number of external indicators are also used, such as the artwork's classification.

- The proponent of the circularity argument is also wrong is holding that the artwork itself could not provide evidence of failed intentions.
- Carroll observes that in many everyday contexts we can see in an action both the intention behind it and the fact that the intention is failing or has failed.

"For example, I see a man applying a coin to the top of a Philips-head screw, and I see at once that he intends to turn the screw and fails to do so at the same time." (p. 76)



Anti-intentionalism – arguments

(2) **The achievement argument**. This argument starts from the rather plausible claim that art is evaluated on the basis of what artists have achieved, rather than on the basis of what they intended to achieve. But what artists have achieved is evident from the artwork itself (otherwise the intention would have failed). Thus, there is no need to appeal to authorial intentions in interpreting and evaluating art.

- Carroll's counterargument is that an artwork's achievements are often by no means evident on the basis of the artwork only. We need to know the author's intentions in order to assess the artwork's achievements.

"To return to our previous example, I submit that it could not have been part of Ed Wood's putative achievement that he transgressed the codes of Hollywood moviemaking with his *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. For, transgression, construed as an intentional act, was not an action that Wood could have performed, since it was outside of his ken. Thus, a discussion of Wood's probable or even possible intentions is pertinent in this case to refuting certain claims about Wood's achievement." (p. 78)