

# The case for beauty in art criticism: meaning, purpose and function

MATILDE CARRASCO BARRANCO(\*)

## 1. Introduction: Carroll amending Danto's case for beauty in art criticism

In a recent essay, Noël Carroll praises Arthur Danto for being «the critic who has most directly faced the question» of how art criticism «is to incorporate the evaluation of beauty in works of art where and when it occurs» (Carroll 2019: 176). Indeed, the role of beauty in art criticism has long been unclear once beauty is no more considered an essential component of art, and so, art, and good art, no longer needed to be beautiful or produce perceptual aesthetic pleasure in the viewers. Furthermore, Danto's own philosophy of art, as developed at least since the seminal *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), had fought the idea that artistic status could be determined by the perceptible properties of the work and claimed art fundamentally as a conceptual enterprise. Thereby, Danto took part in the mainstream that through the art of the 1960's and 70's rejected an aesthetic conception of art and particularly despised beauty. However, with the publication in 2003 of *The Abuse of Beauty. Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, as well as some other shorter essays around that time, Danto took a renewed interest in beauty.

When wondering why that was, Carroll suggests some possible answers. Among them is that since the early nineties the artworld had been witnessing a sort of return to beauty<sup>(1)</sup> and this new respectability

---

(\*) Departamento de Filosofía, Universidade de Murcia.

(1) For global and critical reviews of the revival of beauty see Beech (2009).

of beauty reminded philosophers that, given the old and prolonged relationships between art and beauty, any philosophy of art could not be complete without having something to say about it (Carroll 2013: 29; 2019: 176). But the thing is that, even when Danto reflected much on Hickey's announcement that beauty would be the defining problem of the nineties<sup>(2)</sup>, with the publication of the book in 2003, and as its subtitle indicates, Danto reconsidered the role of beauty as well as the rest of aesthetic properties in art.

Danto noticed that aesthetics had become narrowly identified with beauty obscuring the almost endless range of aesthetic possibilities. Among these, we can include not just ugliness but also others that are the opposite of what once was taken as aesthetic excellence. This will be the case, for instance, of the aesthetic of disorder, the aesthetic of grunge and mess exemplified by Rauschenberg's *Bed* (Danto 2004: 29). The grungy but also obscenity, outrageousness or repulsiveness are probably rather characteristic of contemporary art yet aesthetic qualities even so. Thereby, Danto admitted that purging the concept of art from beauty was not the same as purging the concept of art from aesthetic qualities. On the contrary, the «anti-aesthetic» movement actually made room for the pluralism of aesthetic modalities that matches the pluralistic artworld in the era of «the end of art» in which everything is possible as art; and «if everything is possible as art, everything is possible as aesthetics as well» (2004: 27). Danto thought that there were many aesthetic possibilities for art and there was no reason to think of it as though it had only a single privileged one. In any case, this «new appreciation of aesthetic possibilities» provided Danto with «a fresh way of thinking about beauty itself»<sup>(3)</sup> and found the exclusion of beauty as an option as unacceptable as the former exclusion of contrary values or qualities. Then, retaining the gap between beauty and art, beauty could nonetheless be rescued and make a relevant contribution to art criticism when, paraphrasing Carroll, it comes to «the evaluation of beauty in works of art where and when it occurs».

---

<sup>(2)</sup> Dave Hickey (1993) is usually taken as the manifesto of the return of beauty.

<sup>(3)</sup> Danto (2003: 59).

In this vein, Carroll, as many others (and Danto himself admitted), has pointed out that the main philosophical contribution of *The abuse of beauty* was the introduction of the concept of «internal beauty». By that, Danto meant beauty that is part of the work's meaning, while «external beauty» means that it is irrelevant to it, as meaningless as natural beauty. Carroll draws attention to how the notion of internal beauty is consonant with Danto's definition of artworks as embodied meanings; a definition that too gave Danto, as an art critic, an agenda for his practice. Given that, for Danto, something is a work of art if, first, it has a content, which, second, is embodied in a form that is appropriate to its meaning, insofar as it is internal, the beautiful form must have something to do the articulation of the meaning of the work (Carroll 2019: 177-178).

As a matter of fact, Danto understood the task of the critic as

to describe what the work is about – what it *means* – and how this meaning is embodied in the work... [recognizing]... that the being of a work of art *is* its meaning. (2001: x)

And for that he suggested that

one pick an aesthetic property out of a work of art, and ask what it means that the work has that property... Why, for example, is a work beautiful? Then it seems to me that one might get a deeper view of the work. (2006: 52-53)

In short, in Danto's account of art and criticism, beauty is an aesthetic quality among others; it does not have a privileged position, is not synonymous of artistic nor aesthetic excellence neither is it a mere expression of pleasure or subjective preference, but an aesthetic quality that might help with the interpretation of certain artworks. From this perspective, internal beauty «is certainly a boon to criticism» that avoids «falling into uninformative claims about the ineffable» (Carroll 2019: 178).

Besides, although introduced in relation to beauty, the internal/external distinction applies too to the rest of aesthetic qualities and supplies the critic with a way to incorporate them into the overall

interpretation of the artworks. Nonetheless, Carroll thinks that beauty presents a philosophical danger to Danto's conception of art and speculates with this as the most serious motive for Danto needing to address beauty, «as a matter of theoretical damage control» (Carroll 2013: 29). According to Carroll, the threat appears when we consider artworks that are, so to say, beneath meaning but still beautiful. A vase decorated with an intricate floral design, certain abstract watercolors or music-without-words are among the examples that Carroll uses to show that there is art which tries to convey no meaning but clearly intends to delight by producing simple sheer beauty. Carroll warns that the concept of internal beauty will offer no guide to critically deal with this sort of art whose beauty is «mute» (2019: 178) because it leaves them outside the artistic realm and sees their beauty as non-artistic or external, as much as natural beauty. But if the problems for Danto's proposal come from his own definition of art, Carroll's solution is to amend it. Then, Carroll proposes dropping the meaning requirement and replacing it with the notion of «constitutive purposes». Thereby, the task of the critic becomes that of explaining how the works have been designed to achieve their own ends, being often plural and other than the making of any meaning; in fact, «giving up the conviction that the only relevant purpose of an artwork is the making or conveying of meaning» (Carroll 2019: 180). Assessing artworks as having one or various constitutive purposes that artists must articulate or embody in forms that are appropriate to the said purposes is a more useful model for art criticism. And here, Carroll concludes, beauty can play a role in art criticism retaining Danto's insights about internal beauty without leaving out artworks simply meant to produce sheer beauty<sup>(4)</sup>.

My own view is that Danto's interest in beauty relies certainly on its role in critical interpretation yet not because beauty meant any particular danger to his system, since Danto took interest in other aesthetic qualities as well, and introducing such asymmetry with

---

<sup>(4)</sup> To my knowledge, Carroll has developed this objection to Danto's views on beauty in contrast with his own proposal in Carroll 2013 and 2019, as well as in the more recent 2022, where Carroll has further explained the approach to critical evaluation based crucially on the idea of the constitutive purpose of the artwork. My analysis thus refers to these texts.

beauty seems unjustified<sup>(5)</sup>. In any case, Danto's internal beauty is useful for art criticism because, first of all, it tries to make a distinction between beauty that is artistic and beauty that is not. Without denying that Danto's definition of art is disputable and so has indeed received many objections, my arguments here seek to analyze the alternative offered by Carroll. My hypothesis is that, whereas Carroll objects to the fact that Danto's account of artistic beauty is too narrow, leaving some artworks out of the artistic realm because it demands that they always have meaning, Carroll's approach could be too wide, and not make enough distinction between artistic and non-artistic beauty. Many other non-artistic objects such as ordinary functional or useful things also aim at constitutive purposes. Therefore, I will try to show that Carroll's formula of simple sheer beauty as a possible constitutive purpose of an artwork looks too plain if we are to make some contrasts with the beauty of these other artifacts. Moreover, I will defend that, in spite of the weaknesses of Danto's definition of art, the idea of artistic beauty as completely meaningless or mute is actually quite controversial and, therefore, the core of Danto's notion of internal beauty, namely, that it is constitutive of the works' intended meaning, is yet better equipped to make such contrasts between the artistic and non-artistic and so to turn beauty into a term useful for art criticism.

---

<sup>(5)</sup> Nevertheless, there is a difference between beauty and the rest of aesthetic qualities that Danto not only admits but emphasizes: beauty is distinct from the rest of aesthetic qualities because it is the only one that has a claim to be a value, like truth and goodness. This is why humans have a natural appetite for beauty, or «*kalliphilia*» (2004: 25). The human interest in beauty should be added at the top of the list of possible motives that might have provoked Danto's interest in beauty. Captivated by the spontaneous appearance of beautiful shrines (full of candles, cards, flowers, ...) in Manhattan after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, Danto declared that beauty, although no longer essential to art definition, would always be «too humanly significant an attribute to vanish from life» (2003: 123). And so, he tried to explore the reasons for the abuse of beauty in contemporary art as the legacy of the moral and political commitments of earlier avant-gardism. I analyze Danto's politics of beauty in Carrasco-Barranco (2022).

## 2. Artistic Objects as Intentional Artifacts

Admittedly, lots of things, artifacts of different kind that are not artworks, have constitutive purposes. Thus, as Carroll notes, the purpose-driven approach is neither a theory of art nor, in contrast to Danto's case, is it attached to any particular view of the artistic or even to art criticism. But surely, we must think that at least the art critic should be aware of whether or not the object before is an artwork; whether the critic seeks for the interpretation of its meaning or for its constitutive purposes.

That aspect inspired Danto's famous thought experiments with indiscernibles. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, looking the same as the original boxes designed by James Harvey to sell scouring pads in the shops, was art while Harvey's were not. Danto's thesis was that the properties available to perception undetermined the artistic status and so, to draw the difference between art and non-art one had to rely on something that the eye cannot descry. For Danto, that something was meaning. It is by their meanings that artworks are different from mere things, even when they are perceptually indiscernible. The being of art is its meaning, delivered by interpretation in the context of an «artworld», understood by Danto as an atmosphere of artistic theory that includes knowledge of the history of art and, of course, also unavailable to visual inspection; this is what «transfigures» what otherwise would be considered a common object yet without the participation of aesthetic qualities. Nonetheless, as implied in his proposal for art criticism reported earlier, Danto did not exclude that insofar as they are embodied meanings, artworks exhibited aesthetic properties after all. In fact, many would do so because, without modifying the look of the common object, this transfiguration pragmatically affects the viewers, allowing them to appreciate certain qualities that are absent in the mere material object. He believed then that there is «a special aesthetics for works of art», which solely depends on interpretation<sup>(6)</sup>.

---

<sup>(6)</sup> Due to the interpretation of its meaning, Duchamp's *Fountain* is «daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever». These are *artistic* properties that mere urinals lack, although, as common objects, they might share other aesthetic properties like «a gleaming surface» or «a pleasing oval shape» (Danto 1981: 93-95).

In his account, artworks are not just about a content, the artist rhetorically imbues them with a point of view or an attitude towards what they are about, which consequently is meant to provoke certain emotional responses on behalf of the viewers; this expressive aspect of the embodiment is also part of what differentiates art from other merely symbolic representations and everyday artefacts. The distinction later introduced by Danto between internal and external beauty (or any other aesthetic quality) could be seen as a way to reinforce the separation he had made before between «the two components of the work W»: «the material object O and the meaning M» pointing out that «O has an indeterminate number of physical features, only a subset of which belong to W» and being a matter of interpretation which do and which do not<sup>(7)</sup>. Addressed as constitutive of the artworks' meaning, internal beauty finds its place in Danto's proposal for art criticism defined as *artistic* beauty, which consequently can help to get a deeper view of artworks.

Now, a purpose-driven approach is not by itself a method for art criticism, but it helps to evaluate other practices as well, in which people try to achieve certain goals. Carroll admits that his view «does not really discriminate between the evaluation of art and the evaluation of other things» (2022: 17). However, in this similarity he sees an advantage since it frees artistic evaluation from any air of mystery. More importantly, though not specific to it, a purpose-driven approach provides Carroll nonetheless with an itinerary for art criticism.

Carroll, who, like Danto, is not only a philosopher but also an art critic (and a film critic and screenwriter too), claims that each artwork has a specific purpose or set of purposes essential to its being the particular artwork it is, which he refers to as *constitutive* purposes.

In terms of the making or creation of the artwork, the constitutive purpose (or constitutive purposes, which are typically coordinated, often hierarchically) govern or control artistic choices [and] with respect to reception, enables us to understand the work (2022: 8).

---

<sup>(7)</sup> Danto (2005: 192).

That is, as in Danto's account, the critical judgment remains cognitive in nature, since the task of the critic is to explain the work as it is but, this time, by identifying the purpose or set of purposes that are realized or articulated in a form or an assembly of forms that could be more or less appropriate or adequate in securing those purposes, thus, a matter of critical evaluation (2022,8).

Another advantage of the purpose-driven approach is therefore that it is pluralistic and so accounts for the fact that a single artwork can have different constitutive purposes without the making of any meaning being necessarily, *contra* Danto, one of them. This view can thus accommodate the artistic status of a work aimed at offering just sheer beauty, for «there can be beautiful artworks that just dazzle us without inclining us to interpret them» (2013: 43 not. 5). In addition, the purpose-driven approach tracks the singularity of each artwork «inasmuch as given, among other things, contextual factors, virtually every artwork, including artworks in the same genre, will differ, if sometimes only very slightly» (2022: 26 not.55). Insofar as it is a critical judgement, the assessment of sheer beauty as the constitutive purpose of some works does not invoke the critic's actual feeling of pleasure (although of course, the possibility is not excluded) but it is, again, a matter of how to explain how the works have been designed to achieve their own ends and so the choices of the artists.

But why should we think that sheer beauty is the precise purpose of a given work? The identification of the purposes and artists' intentions and choices that allow us to understand the work as it is, in this case as intending mere sheer beauty, is still a matter of interpretation. Carroll even clarifies that

a purpose-driven view of criticism as involved with identifying the constitutive purpose or purposes of a work need not preclude the possibility that the work has more than one interpretation. The possibility of more than one interpretation is implicitly conceded by the acknowledgment that works may have multiple purposes (2022: 13).

Critics, of course, may disagree about those purposes.

On the other hand, different sorts of artifacts, artistic, for example, an abstract watercolor, and non-artistic, say, a certain wallpaper (let us



even imagine that they have the same design) may share a constitutive purpose; they are both intentional artifacts aiming to delight by offering meaningless sheer beauty. This constitutes a sort of experiment of indiscernibility in which the aesthetic quality would not help to differentiate artistic from non-artistic purposes.

### 3. Artistic and non-artistic constitutive purposes

A purpose driven account is not enough then to differentiate artistic from non-artistic beauty; a difference that is of undeniable interest for art criticism. The critical interpretation that allows sheer beauty to be seen as an *artistic* constitutive purpose rests in awareness that the object before us is indeed an artwork. However, as we are seeing, to define art is a highly controversial question that so far has produced some reasonable but different accounts and so remains yet unsettled. Carroll has given his own view on the matter.

Carroll does not offer a definition that establishes the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as art. As a matter of fact, this metaphysical issue worries him less than finding an efficient way that permits the identification of something, like especially challenging new forms, as art. Thus, he has developed a historical narrative approach to art, which basically suggests that art is identified by historical narratives that link the art of a time to the art of earlier times (Carroll 1994). If accurate, a historical narrative will be able to explain the way in which an object «came to be produced as an intelligible response to an antecedently acknowledged art-historical situation»; in other words, such a story will show «the way its past and present are integrated» (Maes 2012).

Briefly, the idea is that something is a work of art because of some relation it bears to earlier artworks. Therefore, a historical narrative approach draws heavily on the established feature of past artworks and, therefore, takes for granted both some art-status and some value to those earlier artworks (McFee 2011: 4). However, unless we deal with the so-called «first art», which cannot be solved historically, the historical narrative approach to art might still assist Carroll's purpose driven account guiding art criticism in most cases to distinguish artistic

from non-artistic purposes. Historical knowledge and context help to identify which were the central artforms at a given time and how those artforms typically tried to comply with certain functions. Tragedy, for example, is a recurrent example of art which exhibits instrumental goals. Aristotle famously established that the aim of tragedy was to arouse pity and fear in order to achieve the purification or catharsis from such feelings. Carroll sees in Aristotle's analysis a predecessor of the idea of constitutive purposes (2020: 24 not 34). Likewise, Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson have used tragedy to argue in favor of the existence of functional categories in art forms, which are defined by some effect that works in the category, at least typically, produce. For them, this makes it plausible to claim that certain artworks have proper functions causally responsible for the production and dissemination of the works in question; especially given the general features of the systems of artistic production characteristic of much of pre-modern Europe. Thus, Parsons and Carlson think that «a selected effects theory of proper function» furnishes «the resources for discriminating proper function from function *simpliciter*, and for identifying cases where proper functions are not present» even when they admit that the particular causal history of any given work is an empirical matter (2008: 222). However, others who, like Jonathan Gilmore, speak of «constitutive functions» reject, though, «a selected effects theory» for being a retrospective attribution of functions to original or once-idiosyncratic artifacts that cannot cover for any novel function an artifact may have (Gilmore 2011). Instead, Gilmore proposes an account of artifactual functions that would identify them in the intention with which an artifact is created. Gilmore's proposal is parallel to Carroll's, as Carroll acknowledges. But Carroll prefers to avoid the term «function» and «to employ the notion of constitutive purposes in order to emphasize the connection with the artist's intentions/cognitive stock, thereby affording the possibility of greater determinateness in evaluation» (2022: 24 not.34). Like many others, Carroll has much followed the core idea of Kendall Walton's influential «Categories of Art» which reveals the importance for art appreciation of putting a work in the correct artistic category. But again, without dismissing the relevance of artistic categories and contexts, Carroll's current view emphasizes the notion of «constitutive purpose» in order to signify the singularity

of each artwork and avoid the risks of generalization among members of the same artistic form (2022: 24 not. 37). In a nutshell, given that art evolves historically, when it goes to practice in art criticism, the identification of the intended constitutive purpose or purposes of the work will require attention to contextual and art-historical factors that help inform about art forms at a given time but also to authorial intentions. As I have noted above, in addition to the fact that works may have multiple purposes (or functions in the sense of Gilmore), the specific realization or embodiment of those purposes in the particular form of the artwork in question makes interpretation a key aspect of art criticism and reinforces the defense of intentionalism. In Carroll's view, «what fixes the constitutive purposes of the work are the intentions of the creator or creators of the work» (2022: 15). By «intention» though he means «not merely the artist's intention» but the term covers «for the totality of her cognitive/emotive stock, including, for example, her presiding cultural presuppositions» (2022: 25 not. 53).

Thus, artworks have historically fulfilled a great variety of functions: cognitive, moral, political, religious, economic, etc., without any of them being essential to art, nor even to artforms and much less to individual pieces resulting from the artists' choices. Arguably, the functional variety of artworks is so great that the question may still be raised of how critical interpretation could differentiate functions that are more genuinely artistic from more accidental ones. Robert Stecker, who also offers a historical functionalist approach to art without dispensing the reference to the artists' intentions<sup>(8)</sup>, gives the example of Picasso's *Guernika* (Stecker 2019: 62). One of the functions of this famous painting is to represent the horrific bombing suffered by the Basque town during the Spanish civil war and by extension the horrors of war and the despair of its victims. However, these certainly are, Stecker notes, the functions of this particular painting not attributable to all paintings. It could be objected that such functions have nothing to do with *Guernika's* artistic value but, in order to answer that objection, we need to offer an interpretation that shows how Picasso intended such aims through the painting's particular form. In other words, without such interpretation we could not understand

---

<sup>(8)</sup> For a brief presentation of his proposal see Stecker (2010: 114-116).

the work correctly, that is what makes the condemnation of war one of its constitutive purposes. Thus, Stecker condenses the idea in a test for artistic value according to which:

A property of an artwork is artistically valuable if knowing or recognizing that the work has the valuable property requires grasping the work's meaning (usually by interpretation). (Stecker 2019, 52)

Applying this test, adventitious purposes such as using *Guernika* to cover a hole in the wall or even its financial value would not be considered artistic functions because even the explanation given in order to justify the calculation of its possible price in the market will fall well short of «the understanding that full-fledged interpretation provides» (2019: 53). Stecker has in mind then a sort of «appreciative understanding» of artworks for which «one has to learn what sort of exploration of its subject matter [the work] provides, what attitudes towards this topic it manifests, what it requires its audience to imagine and to feel» (2019: 52).

To my mind, this is not far at all from Carroll's proposal. Identifying a purpose as essential (or constitutive) of the work is for Carroll what art criticism seeks in order to assay whether the choices the artist has made to advance said purposes are successful or not and help the viewers to understand and value the work. But Stecker offers the test in order to afford a route to make what he realizes is a necessary contrast between artistic and non-artistic functions or intended purposes in particular artworks, something that indeed historical narratives alone cannot provide. Albeit Stecker admits too that this procedure, which is not a definition, does not give us a very deep knowledge of the nature of art, at least presents artworks as objects of a particular sort of interpretation. The point is though that, according to Stecker's test, artistic interpretation that delivers constitutive functions presumes that works have meaning<sup>(9)</sup>.

---

<sup>(9)</sup> Among the possible counterexamples to his test that Stecker confronts, he mentions the possibility of one knowing or recognizing the aesthetic value of a work without interpreting it, much less interpreting it in a particular way. Thus, Stecker suggests modifying his test for assigning artistic value to an aesthetic

#### 4. Meaningless artworks?

Instead, Carroll contends that there are artworks that bear no meaning at all, for example those made with the sole intention of being beautiful. These artworks, so he argued, compromise Danto's theory of art, and consequently his conception of criticism, by making their beauty «external» and having to expel such works from the artistic realm.

Carroll charges what, he says, has been a frequent objection to Danto, which affects the necessity of «the content condition» or the aboutness of all art, in response to which, as Carroll reports, Danto challenged his critics to come up with an example of an artwork that is not about something (2013: 30, 31). However, Carroll warns about the confusion Danto would be creating between aboutness and meaning which, for Danto is «thematically or semantically construed» (Carroll 2013: 30). For Carroll, Danto is committed to seeing sheer beauty, «mere eye candy» destined to delight or afford visual or auditory pleasure, as a way to mark some other content, never as the very content of art (2019: 178, 181). So, despite him naming Danto's assignment of meaning to art «the *content* condition», Carroll admits that sheer

---

property by including the option of «either experience [the work] with understanding or to have the kind of understanding of [the work] that is derived from interpreting it». By adding «experiencing the work with understanding», he means to cover up for a sort of experience that is informed by the kind of background knowledge sometimes needed to grasp aesthetic properties. Although experiencing the work is usually required for understanding it and it is often not very different from interpretation, both things are still not the same *per se* and, Stecker suggests presenting the test with this modification that, in any case, «it is one completely in its spirit» (2019, 56). Nowhere is it suggested that the experience with understanding of an artwork's aesthetic value or properties removes the idea of the work as having meaning. As a matter of fact, Stecker's point reminds me of what Danto told us about the first time he saw one of Motherwell's *Elegies*. He reported that its beauty stopped him in his tracks, despite knowing nothing about the work and only later realizing how appropriate its beauty was to its meaning. Not all have found the beauty of these paintings quite so evident and so it is not unlikely that his training in abstract expressionism gave him the sort of background knowledge necessary to experience the work's beauty with understanding (Cfr. Nehamas 2008: 98).

beauty is what those alleged works are about; that is, sheer beauty is the content of some art yet without having to mean anything (2013: 43 not. 5, 31). And he further explains that, whereas Danto «might argue that the eye candy in question strikes reasonable people as worth exploring for possible interpretations», thereby meeting his condition, Carroll still maintains «that there can be beautiful artworks that just dazzle us without inclining us to interpret them (2013: 43 not. 5).

Carroll describes Danto's view of meaning or aboutness as «thought-content [...] like a theme, a thesis, or a pronounced expressive property» (Carroll 2019: 177). And he is surely right about not expecting all artworks to have a thesis, but expecting any art to have themes or subjects and especially pronounced expressive properties seems a matter of greater consensus. After all, as Stecker puts it, what Danto claims is not that art is a significant source of new knowledge but that, by offering some attitude or point of view for what it is about, art makes us «newly aware of or alive to ways of thinking, imagining and perceiving» (Stecker 2010: 237). Beyond presuming that artworks have meaning as a condition required by his test, Stecker includes himself and Carroll among those that think of art's cognitive benefits in such terms even when that does not commit any of these accounts to state that cognitive value, which goes beyond the experience of the work, is essential for something to be considered art. In fact, Stecker warns that even Danto «is not explicit about endorsing a particular theory of artistic value» (2010: 236) and so his view of what is to be a work of art may be perfectly considered «independent of reference to the essential possession of any particular artistic value or set of values» (Gilmore 2011: not. 23). Danto could not admit totally meaningless art, though. Before him, Nelson Goodman developed the view of arts as «ways of worldmaking» (1978) and his criticism of artistic formalism, using exemplification and most notably expression, in order to show how meaning can be attributed to «pure» abstract paintings or works of architecture remains very influential in recent philosophical accounts. For instance, James O. Young is among those that, going back to one of Carroll's examples, have objected to the appreciation of pure music as mere meaningless form defending its representational and expressive content (Young 2014: ix), all of which excludes that there

can be «music-without-words that pleasure the ear without having a meaning» (Carroll 2019: 179)<sup>(10)</sup>.

Jerrold Levinson, another leading philosopher who has also developed an account of art that sustains a historical relation between previous works and the intentions of artists, in fact draws on Danto's emphasis on that «at a minimum, art has a content that must be grasped» (as being a basic intuition that contrasts art with nature) in order to argue that it is content so understood that grounds the particular phenomenology of our responses to *artistic* beauty, for it is distinct from the ground of our responses to other species of beauty such as physical or natural, but also to artifactual beauty, centered on desirability, function, or design. Levinson explains that, being artifacts, both artworks and functional objects exhibit dependent beauty, in Kantian terms. With Kant, that is beauty that depends upon the object being seen «under some concept» and not simply attending to its visual form (in what would be a sort of Kantian free beauty); «in this case, a concept of the object as an artwork something with a potential significance» (2011: 194). Levinson also resorts to the comparison between the formal beauty of an abstract painting with other non-artistic design objects and works of craft. All these objects have «an *identity*, often of a purposive or functional sort» (Levinson 2011: 194). The point is that, according to Levinson, the appreciation of their beauty depends on seeing them as objects of a certain kind, since our perception does not construe objects as abstract sensory presentations, and see them «*as for* something» that makes the objects display properties that they would otherwise lack (Íbid.). The formal beauty of the patterns and configurations as they occur in an abstract painting, Levinson says, «are not appreciated merely for their geometric or spatial properties, but also for what they may represent, symbolize, exemplify or express» (2011: 193). He so concludes that whereas the apprehension of the beauty of both artistic and non-artistic artifacts shares the presupposition of a conception of

---

<sup>(10)</sup> The quote continues «but thrill the body encouraging the impulse in us to dance or, at least, to tap our toes». Framed in Carroll's argument, it is plausible to believe that he might be thinking about such effects as among the constitutive purposes that do not exhibit any meaning, including any references to pronounced expressive properties of the music, which I see rather difficult to defend.

these objects as being things of a particular kind and the estimation of purposes or uses in relation to their form, artistic beauty exhibits something else that the other non-artistic beauty lacks: it involves «estimation of *meaning or content* in relation to form» (Levinson 2011: 205). For Levinson, artistic beauty in abstract painting has an import not found in the mere pattern it contains and that could be also found in an oriental rug, following Levinson's example (2011: 194), or in certain wallpaper, using the one I gave above. Artworks do not seem to aim at delight in the same way by offering, as Carroll contends, meaningless sheer beauty.

Furthermore, is not the situation that the meaning-condition is employed only to differentiate art from non-art by those who, it could be suggested, somehow seek to privilege the experience of art, beautiful art specifically, over ordinary things. Theorists of design also rely on it in order to make a case for a correct appreciation of design and vindicate its aesthetic importance. Jane Forsey pursues just that in her book *The Aesthetics of Design* (2013).

By design objects she means most objects that surround us in our daily lives and have a human functional purpose: all sorts of things that we find in our homes, workspaces and towns, coffee-pots, bicycles, computers, bridges...and etc., etc. These things have in common that they have been designed, manipulated, and manufactured in a way that differentiates them both from «art» and «craft». These are more traditional categories and so have received more attention than design in aesthetic theory in part, as Forsey observes, because «the emergence of design runs in tandem with developments in industry and the possibility of mass manufacture as well as the growth of market capitalism» (2013: 15, not. 8). As opposed to craft, design is mass-produced and not the result of the skilled production of an artisan that directly manipulates raw materials. But for Forsey, both design and craft are distinct from art in not having a content or either evincing a singularity of vision; a contrast that theories of expression and formalist accounts of art defend. The particularity that craft works can exhibit relies on the execution of a mental act of planning by a skilled artisan but without appealing to his expressive vision. Design objects are not always skilfully made and almost never hand-made but, like craft, they are functional and both despite having form, have



no content; they are so mute<sup>(11)</sup> and lack the profundity of artistic content. In short, they are «'mere real things', to use Arthur Danto's phrase» (Forsey 2013: 28).

Moreover, Forsey too holds an intentionalist account of functionality for all: art, craft and design. Thus, artists, artisans and, in particular, designers have a key role in Forsey's account since they intentionally make artifacts to serve specific human needs, rather than simply being found to be useful to us. She also points out that designers are often appraised in a way that is similar to that of artists, but she notes that with design, the strong link that exists between art and artist «breaks down in a number of interesting ways» (2013: 20). In particular, she allies with Danto's assessment that what comprises the uniqueness of individual works of art is in part the particularity of their originating activity, lying not so much «in its formal or apparent properties at all, but in the specificity of its meaning or content as determined by the expressive act that produced it» (2013: 50).

She is not suggesting that design is neither sincere and authentic nor without originality but that we cannot define it based on its originating activity alone (2013, 54). According to Forsey, the designer is not so intimately connected to the final product as the artist is. And not because of the complexities of the manufacturing process since, after all, there is much art that is produced in a collaborative way and through machinery (more recently using computers) but because in the end, in art, each member of the production team would be working to realize the vision of a single or several individuals; which is not the case of design. This relates also with art's supposed profundity as no other activity or object seems to share the exploration and expression of the complexities of human existence that artworks have often carried out and for which they stand out and are appraised. For Forsey, the differences in the purposes of design and art would make their aesthetic

---

<sup>(11)</sup> She clarifies that «this is not to suggest that designs cannot also be used in communicative practices: many designs become symbols of wealth, power, elegance, and so on.» Even she admits that «many of our consumer choices involve attempts at self-expression or self-definition through the objects that we purchase and use», however, for Forsey, design objects «do not themselves speak, or were not created as forms of (profound) communication» as, we are about to see, she thinks artworks are. Forsey (2013: 67 not. 90).

experience qualitatively different, as in one case we respond to the practical purpose of the object and, in the other, to the content of the work, affecting the appreciation of their respective dependent beauty.

Within the scope of this essay, I cannot further explain, nor discuss, Forsey's rich account but my point is to note that, first, in Forsey's view, the separation of the categories: art, craft and design, is important because our responses to each will differ, all of them being of aesthetic interest. Second, the fact that after reviewing expressionist as well as formalist theories of art, she sees it as the product of the artist's creative work which involve content and an expressive vision. In that, finally, Forsey goes along the same lines of others who, like Levinson, despite differences between them and with Danto's definition of art, keep its core idea that, against the position defended by Carroll, makes unlikely both the existence of meaningless art and declaring their «mute» beauty (Carroll 2019: 178) an *artistic* constitutive purpose.

## 5. Artistic Beauty

In this essay, I have analyzed the objection that Carroll directs at Danto's view of internal beauty and the amendment he proposes in order to keep its insights and contribution to art criticism. Basically, he recommends that critics seek to identify the works' constitutive purposes when trying to explain why they are the way they are and evaluate them accordingly. The notion of constitutive purposes is supposed to be able to drop Danto's condition of aboutness that necessarily ascribes meaning to artworks, because there can be completely meaningless artworks like those that are not about beauty but just are beautiful, meaning nothing else. However, my thesis here is that insofar as it is artistic, such beauty bears expressive meaning intended by the artists.

By making contrasts with other non-artistic objects such as ordinary functional or useful things (members of the categories «craft» or «design») that also aim at constitutive purposes, my arguments have tried to show that Carroll's solution of a purpose-driven account (in spite of its advantages signalling the plurality of artistic goals and values, and even attached to a historical narrative approach to art) will not make enough distinction between artistic and non-artistic beauty.

The singularity of every work demands critical interpretation in order to identify its intended purposes and that requires to relate them to the works' meaning. That artworks have meaning is not the view of a minority. By referring to a good deal of other non-essentialist and pluralist theories of art and design, I've tried to show that it is the fact that art is *always* about something in a particular intended way that helps to make the contrast with non-artistic yet purposive artifacts. From this perspective, artistic beauty is neither equivalent to *mere* beauty or «beauty as a such»<sup>(12)</sup>. Thus, I think that Danto's proposal of artistic beauty as beauty that is internal or constitutive of the works' intended meaning is yet a notion better equipped to turn beauty into a term useful for art criticism. Nonetheless, the weaknesses of Danto's definition of art might still ruin in part the contribution made by the notion of internal beauty.

As explained earlier, Danto's definition of art made room for an artistic-aesthetics whose appreciation is mediated by grasping the meaning of the artwork; namely, it presupposes a cognitive process absent in our response to mere things. Therefore, for its correct appreciation, it is important to see the object as art. The new distinction between internal and external beauty introduced in *The Abuse of Beauty* seems to have reinforced the idea that the physical medium in which the work is presented, or at least part of it, does not necessarily affect the meaning of the work, as if it were external to it, thus leaving still the possibility of artworks that may not exhibit any particular aesthetics at all. For Danto, that was actually the case of the outstanding visual qualities of the original boxes designed by James Harvey, which Warhol was not responsible for.

Some critics, though, have pointed out some tension in the exclusion of aesthetic qualities from Danto's own definition of art as embodied meaning. Diarmuid Costello charges that the possibility of artworks having no (artistic)aesthetic qualities (which afford expression and reflect the style of the artist) would eliminate their contrast with *mere* representations and everyday artefacts (Costello 2008). Costello noticed too that Danto even admitted how close his notion of embodied meaning was to the Kantian concept of aesthetical ideas, namely, ideas

---

<sup>(12)</sup> This is also the main theses in Monseré & Vandenabeele (2012).

that have been given sensory embodiment, where we grasp a meaning *through* the senses<sup>(13)</sup>. The point is that internal beauty as *constitutive* of the work's meaning matches the very idea of embodiment, which after all implies that the meanings of artworks are not paraphrasable (McFee 2011). Thereby, the *internal* role of aesthetic qualities blurs the border that excludes them from the semantics of artworks only to constitute their pragmatics. The notion of «internal beauty» could have been the beginning of Danto's «aesthetic turn» (Costello 2008), consequent with the idea of art as meaning yet *embodied* in an expressive form, without separating the execution and the apparent features of the work as only secondary elements to his theory of art.

When Carroll charges the objection to Danto that denies the necessity of the content condition or the aboutness of all art (in order to contend that artworks made with the sole intention of being beautiful and bearing no meaning compromise his theory of art, and consequently his conception of criticism), Carroll is claiming that such a condition makes their beauty «external» and having to expel such beautiful works *simpliciter* from the artistic realm. But I think that, in these cases of supposed sheer beauty, Danto would have not declared such works as art *because* he would have seen their beauty as external. For beauty to be external to an artwork, there must be an artwork for a start. And, insofar as meaningless, Danto would not have seen those objects as art at all, whether they were beautiful or would have exhibited any other aesthetic quality. Therefore, leaving aside the question about whether the definition of artworks as embodied meanings should have led Danto to include pragmatic qualities as a necessary condition for art<sup>(14)</sup>, the embodiment at least seems to require said qualities to be always internal, inasmuch as they belong to the aesthetic character *of the work* intended by the artist different from the aesthetic character *of the material object*; thus, showing the idea of external beauty of artworks *qua artworks* as somehow incoherent (Gilmore 2005)<sup>(15)</sup>. External beauty is meaningless, but it is not artistic

---

<sup>(13)</sup> See Costello (2008) and Danto (2007).

<sup>(14)</sup> For a further development, see Carrasco-Barranco (2020).

<sup>(15)</sup> Danto even conceded that «of course, it can be a criticism of the work that the beauty of the object has nothing to do with the aesthetics of the work— but for the moment this is as far as I care to go with the matter here». Danto (2005: 194).

beauty in the first place. And in so far as mute, beauty could not be considered an artistic purpose.

## References

- BEECH, Dave (org.). *Beauty*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009.
- CARRASCO-BARRANCO, Matilde. «Beauty and Politics». *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto*, First Edition. Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goehr (org.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2022. 355–362.
- CARRASCO-BARRANCO, Matilde. «Beauty and Art Criticism: A Proposal from A.C. Danto». Martino Rossi Monti and Davor Pečnjak (org.) *What is Beauty? A Multidisciplinary Approach to Aesthetic Experience*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. 107–123.
- CARROLL, Noël. «Forget Taste». *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 56. 1, 2022. 1–27.
- CARROLL, Noël. «Art, Beauty and Criticism». *Beauty: New Essays in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, W. Huemer and I. Ventrell (org.). München: Philosophia Verlag, 2019. 171–184.
- CARROLL, Noël. «Arthur Danto and The Problem of Beauty». Peg Zeglin Brand (org.) *Beauty Unlimitorg*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013. 29–44.
- CARROLL, Noël. «Identifying Art». In Robert Yanal (org.) *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy*. University Park: Penn State Press, 1994. 3–38.
- COSTELLO, Diarmuid. «Kant and Danto, Together at Last?». In Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (org.), *New Waves in Aesthetics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 244–266.
- DANTO, Arthur C. *The Transfiguration of the Common Place: a Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- DANTO, Arthur C. *The Madonna of the Future*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- DANTO, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 2003.
- DANTO, Arthur C. «Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art» *Art Journal*. 63. 2, 2004. 24–35.
- DANTO, Arthur C. «Embodiment, Art History, Theodicy, and *The Abuse of Beauty*: A Response to My Critics». *Inquiry*. 48. 2, 2005. 189–200.

- DANTO, Arthur C. Intervention in *the Art Seminar. Art History Versus Aesthetics*. James Elkins (org.). New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 51–89.
- DANTO, Arthur C. «Embodied Meanings, Isotypes, and Aesthetical Ideas». *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 65. 1, 2007. 121–9.
- FORSEY, Jane. *The Aesthetics of Design*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- GILMORE, Jonathan. «A Functional View of Artistic Evaluation». *Philosophical Studies*. 155. 2, 2011. 289–305.
- GILMORE, Jonathan. «Internal Beauty». *Inquiry*. 48. 2, 2005. 145–54.
- GOODMAN, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.
- HICKEY, Dave. *The invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1993.
- LEVINSON, Jerrold. «Beauty Is Not One: The Irreducible Variety of Visual Beauty». Peter Goldie & Elisabeth Schellekens (org.). *The Aesthetic Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 190–207
- MAES, Hans (2012) «The arts vs art with a capital “A”. An Interview with Noël Carroll», *Esthetica*. Available at <https://estheticatijdschrift.wp.hu.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2014/09/Esthetica-THE-ARTS-vs-ART-WITH-A-CAPITAL----A---.An-Interview-with-Noël-Carroll-2012-12-28.pdf>
- MCFEE, Graham. *Artistic Judgement. A Framework for Philosophical Aesthetics*. London: Springer, 2011.
- MONSERÉ, A. & Vandenamee, B. «Beauty and Artistic Value». Gabrielle Simpson (org.) *Exploring the Critical Issues of Beauty*. Brill, 2012. 35–42.
- NEHAMAS, Alexander. *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- PARSONS, Glenn, and Carlson, Allen. *Functional Beauty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- STECKER, Robert. *Intersections of value: art, nature, and the everyday*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- STECKER, Robert. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction*. Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.
- YOUNG, James O. *Critique of Pure Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.