

# Elisabeth Schellekens

---

## The End of Artistic Meaning?

---

Sztuka i Filozofia 44, 25-30

---

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Elisabeth Schellekens

### The End of Artistic Meaning?

Like all Noël Carroll's work on artistic interpretation, "Criticism and Interpretation" offers a remarkably clear and concise discussion of how to engage critically with art. The principal target is artistic meaning and the two questions that any attempt to unpack such meaning must tackle head-on. First, the "constitutive question" aims to establish exactly what (or who) determines artistic meaning. Second, the "epistemological question" sets out to explain how we come to know that meaning, that is to say, by what means we access a work's meaning.

Strictly speaking, and as Carroll rightly points out, not all artworks call for interpretation. And even when they do the "intended point" can be fairly one-dimensional (as in the example of a military building like the Pentagon aiming to project some idea of raw strength and indestructibility). Nonetheless, when there is such an element to take part of, working out what a particular meaning consists of must be part and parcel of our experience of the work. Carroll writes, "where the artwork is about something, isolating what it is about – that is, interpreting its meaning – is an unavoidable step in establishing whether the artist has done a good or a bad job articulating whatever the work is about".<sup>1</sup>

As we know from his *On Criticism* (Routledge, 2009), Carroll is a forceful advocate of the view that criticism fundamentally aims at the evaluation of art and it is only by grasping a work's full meaning that can we discern the features and qualities which contribute to its general worth. Interpretation thus has to be prior to evaluation and full-blown appreciation: "[i]n order to evaluate works... we must first interpret them before we go on to judge whether the artist has or has not found the appropriate way to articulate them – that is ways that successfully will support, reinforce, or enhance the meaning".<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this claim relies on the idea that art can have a complex cognitive dimension upon which its overall value depends. Perhaps more controversially, it stipulates that evaluation is always the consequence or end-result of interpretation. Whereas many artworks undoubtedly support this reading, we may want to remain open to the idea that others suit an alternative vision better, one based on a more inclusive process whereby appraisal and understanding progress in parallel to one another. With some visual art, for example, ascertaining or assessing the phenomenal or sensory impression the work gives rise to can itself be key to its most appropriate interpretation. In a case like Picasso's *Guernica*, say, the

1 N. Carroll, "Criticism and Interpretation," in: *Sztuka i Filozofia: Art and Philosophy*, 42 (2013), p. 7.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

evaluative dimension can not only provide a motivation to find the work's complete meaning, but can also contribute to its strength and intensity. In short, there may well be cases where artistic appreciation or estimation feeds into interpretation and vice-versa in a way that might not fit squarely with Carroll's account. That said, if – as Carroll well might – we take evaluation to refer only to the final assessment of a work as a whole, then that notion obviously refers to something rather like a verdict and can more confidently be placed at the tail-end of the artistic experience.

Thinking about artistic meaning and interpretation in this way may seem to project onto art an intentionality that individual pieces cannot possibly support, be they abstract or concrete, multiple or single. After all, one might ask, how could talk of meaning for particular works be anything other than metaphorical? To the extent that anyone interested in artistic interpretation has, by and large, had to operate alongside this kind of question – a question which threatens to derail the entire enterprise – Carroll's analysis certainly doesn't fare any worse than anyone else's. However, talk of artistic meaning as something which the work itself is imbued with – as something which is somehow "in" the piece, there to be discovered by its audience – does reveal some commitment to an interpretative model which strongly points to a highly work-focused constitutive view. This is relevant because if we cast our original problem as one fundamentally concerned with how to unpack something inherent to the artwork, then we may be alienating some aspects of the anti-intentionalist approach before we even formally begin to argue about them.

Crucially, Carroll advises us against committing what he calls the "linguistic fallacy" or the invalid transfer of insights afforded by the literary arts to all forms of art. Here, of course, Carroll is absolutely right to warn us against the dangers associated with assuming that what seems to be true of novels or poems must also be true of, say, sculptures, installations and films. Generally speaking, visual and musical art especially does not rest on anything like "the meaning conventions recorded in dictionaries"<sup>3</sup> even though there can be fairly targeted and firm symbolic representations (such as the representation of peaches in Renaissance paintings symbolizing virtue and honour or dogs symbolizing fidelity and loyalty), and so we are wrong to assume that all artworks offer at least one common and generally accessible mode of deciphering its semantic content. This is an important point, one which can, on reflection, be applied more broadly. For, as we shall see shortly, even works within the same artform can call for different modes of appreciation and interpretation.

As Carroll knows, few artforms or art movements challenge our classical repertoire of engagement as profoundly as has the avant-garde. Often, its very point is to "undermine customary protocols of communication"<sup>4</sup> by presenting its audience with something surprising or unexpected. Carroll writes that

[a]lthough it is true that we do not have to go to the avant-garde in order to support our claim that much interpretation cannot even be remotely conceived to be modeled on the understanding

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

of word in terms of their dictionary meanings, the practice of various avant-gardes, literary and otherwise, drives that point home very effectively. For, the genuine avant-garde proceeds by breaking with conventions.<sup>5</sup>

Here, the suggestion that contemporary art is a kind of process in which authorial intention is often important to interpretation in the terms proposed by the notion of conversational implicature<sup>6</sup> is helpful. Using *Brillo Box* as an example, Carroll discusses the way in which Warhol's placement of a mass-produced commodity in the space usually reserved for uniquely crafted works of art leads the viewer to construe a meaning which takes this clash of expectation into account – namely that art is itself a kind of commodity.

This is the way in which a very great deal of avant-garde art communicates. It adopts a strategy that subverts expectations, but in a way that intends to say something relevant to its art historical circumstances. The audience figures out what the work means by attempting to grock what an informed participant in the discourses of the artworld could intend to get across by upending our presumptions in telling directions, such as inserting the simulacrum of a commodity, a commercial packing carton, into the network of the artworld at just that point where one would anticipate finding something discernibly different, something that looked like the kind of thing we antecedently identified as an artwork.<sup>7</sup>

By highlighting the great extent to which art cannot simply be understood in terms of previously agreed and generally acceptable conventions, Carroll reaches the conclusion that contemporary art strongly supports intentionalism. Contemporary art, Carroll further argues, sets out to convey a message or “intended point” directly via its maker, and thereby “brings out very dramatically a condition of much artistic communication,” namely that it must be understood “in terms of authorial intentions.”<sup>8</sup>

The early conceptual works Carroll cites to support his position may well point in the direction of intentionalism. Nonetheless, more remains to be said about this issue in relation to more recent works in the same tradition. In what follows, I will suggest that much contemporary art shows that meaning is not always something which needs to be uncovered or discovered in the relation between work and artist and that the rejection of this possibility is largely built on the dismissal of what may be called a more “open” form of interpretation. Linked to this, is the way in which a work's meaning and its intended point can come apart sometimes, such as when at least some of the artistic meaning is determined by the cultural context in which the work is set. Regardless of whether an artist intends to shock and provoke us with his/her work, or not, the way in which we initially receive it can shape our future interpretation and understanding of it. Furthermore, the “intended point” may well lose its force over time and become displaced by another set of responses. As in the case of Warhol's *Brillo Box*, few who view this work today are genuinely shocked by it, with the result that no conclusions can be drawn by the viewer from the artistic

5 *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

7 *Ibidem*.

8 *Ibidem*.

experience about the overlap between artworks and commodities. Instead, the iconic nature of the work becomes the object of a more straightforward and perhaps even aesthetic form of fascination.

In order to make progress with this set of questions, let us begin by addressing the notion at the very heart of our inquiry, that of meaning itself. What do we mean by “meaning” in art? Here again, Carroll provides us with a very useful threefold distinction between forms of artistic meaning.

There are themes and theses. Roughly, the topic or topics of a work are its theme, as the wrath of Achilles is the theme of the *Iliad*. Where a work stakes out a perspective or position on its theme, we can say it has a thesis. The recent film *Lincoln* by Steven Spielberg is about the abolition of slavery; that is its theme. But it also advances a thesis or perspective about its theme; it is in favor of the abolition of slavery. In addition to their communication of themes and theses, artworks may also possess meaning in terms of exhibiting expressive properties like sadness, joy or gloom. The objects of interpretation then are at least themes, theses, and expressive properties.<sup>9</sup>

One of the main advantages of this categorization is that it carves out more space for the ways in which the non-literary arts can be about something. Lacking the means to develop a specific narrative might reduce the chances of transmitting a highly individualized message successfully, but this aspect in itself need not involve the end of all cognitive or semantic aspiration. Certainly, the sense of hope and optimism conveyed by the last movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* can be grasped through its expressive qualities alone without prior knowledge of any theme or particular perspective.

How, then, does more recent contemporary art fit into these categories? Carroll sets to one side the idea that mere contemplation can, by itself, count as a form of proper artistic appreciation. Instead, he takes the view that “most contemporary art, whether esoteric or exoteric, is designed with primarily communicative intent”<sup>10</sup> and, as we have already seen, must therefore be interpreted in order for its value to be recognized. To the extent that anything put forward by one person for scrutiny and engagement by another (or others) inevitably possesses some kind of “communicative intent”, that may well be right. But this is not the same as to say that all contemporary art is produced with some interpretable meaning in mind, or at least not if we think of interpretation as the process of coming to know “*the*” or “*the determinate*”<sup>11</sup> meaning of the work. Can we really say that the art of today still requires or even allows for this kind of interpretation? Are traditional conceptions of artistic meaning defunct?

As we have already seen, Carroll’s argument is well tailored to much of the conceptualist art of the 1960s and 1970s, at least in so far as these works were originally conceived and understood. Aiming to make a specific point about a particular area of inquiry, it seems fair to say that much art of that period had both a theme and a perspective, and to that extent at least sits nicely with Carroll’s categories of artistic meaning.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

When we turn our attention to the art of the 1980s and 1990s, however, it can be argued that a rather different semantic dimension comes into play, one in which notions of a single, determinate meaning is much more problematic to apply. A good example here is the art of the so-called "YBAs", or "Young British Artists." With a piece like Damien Hirst's *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, we can certainly identify a broad theme, supplied by the title. Additionally, the work seems to expect us to supply some kind of thesis in so far as it urges us to think about something which affects us all directly. Importantly, however, the thesis is not something which the work – or its artist – will supply by itself. Rather, the work is democratic in relation to the plurality of any of the theses it may give rise to: none is especially to be valued over any other, provided they are genuine responses to the work. In contradistinction to traditional notions of determinate artistic meaning, the art of the YBAs seems brazenly to court this interpretative plurality. If anything, the more the merrier.

Nor does the rot stop there, so to speak. In much more recent work, this aspect of challenging the viewer to interpret can itself be said to be absent from the equation, and the artwork's value is construed simply in its occupying a communicative space. In other words, artists seem to be less concerned with giving rise to responses than with the simple presentation of things. Taking the nominees for the 2012 Turner Prize as examples, the criteria for the selection of the shortlist seems specifically to exclude traditional communicative elements. Instead, a work "explores" a theme (Elizabeth Price, winner) by using existing film footage and mixing it with text and music; another "creates an atmosphere" (Spartacus Chetwynd) by creating carnivalesque performances including costumes and sets; or "evokes an atmosphere" (Luke Fowler) by interweaving found film footage with own film clips. Similarly, the work of Martin Boyce, winner of the 2011 Turner Prize, "explores visual languages" by using pieces of furniture to create "peculiar landscapes."

If we appeal to the categories of artistic meaning we have been leaning on until now, none of these pieces can rightly be described as presenting a particular thesis such as the promotion of the abolition of slavery. Nor can we reliably find an interpretable theme analogous to Achilles' wrath. The works mentioned above just aren't *about* anything in this sense. And although one might think that at least some of these works manifest expressive properties, and so can be said to have interpretable meaning in virtue of that, any affective components these works might have are fluid and ambiguous, and best conceived as some kind of open-ended mood, disposition or frame of mind – even at the level of emotional register these works tend to be entirely unspecific.

If, as Carroll and many with him do, we want to hold on to the idea that artworks must be appreciated in their own terms and not savoured for whatever pleasurable associations they might happen to give rise to in their audience, this aspect of contemporary art clearly poses serious difficulties for intentionalist theory. How can one, after all, maintain intentionalism where the whole notion of artistic intention seems to have been left behind by artists and spectators alike? Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable to ask whether there can still be room for traditional concepts of interpretation and meaning here. In

cases such as these, where the artist might seek to isolate his own intentions as merely one of many possibly meanings, and where this open-endedness is reflected in the nature of the work itself, it may be that whatever meaning(s) the work may “possess” take a secondary role to a broader and overtly pluralistic process of appreciation and contemplation for its own sake. What may be more important here, in other words, is the experience of seeking an encounter rather than the uncovering of meaning as such. Certainly, if we consider the example of visual art of the last few decades, there are good reasons to believe that artists and their audiences have started to abandon the kind of traditional interpretative model upon which most intentionalist arguments rely. Whether they are right to have done so is, of course, another matter entirely.