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Noël Carroll's Theory of Mass Art

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Noël Carroll's article, "The Nature of Mass Art," performs a number of timely services.¹ Not the least of these is that it directs the attention of Anglo-American aesthetics away from the fine arts (which have captured the theoretical highground for most of this century) to those less rarefied art forms that are to be found on television, in the cinema, and magazines—and that are so much a part of our contemporary world. Carroll's aim is not just to explain the nature of mass art: it is also to convince us, rightly in my view, that both popular and mass art deserve the attention of contemporary aestheticians. There is much that is helpful in his approach. My aim in this paper, however, is to fixate (somewhat mean-spiritedly) on what is wrong with it, and in the end to furnish what I think of as a more adequate account of mass art.

1. *The Elimination Theory of Mass Art*

Carroll's article has both a negative and a positive component. In its negative aspect, it offers a critique both of what he calls the "Elimination Theory of Mass Art" and of John Fiske's rejection of the concept of mass art. The constructive component offers what I believe to be the first published theory of mass art to have emerged in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. Carroll does not agree. He believes that I was there before him; and, moreover, that the account of mass art that I have offered is wrong. Here, at least, we are in some sort of agreement, for I too believe that the account that he attributes to me is mistaken. He imputes to me an elimination theory of mass art according to which "there really is no such thing as popular or mass art, apart from the role certain objects play in reinforcing pre-existing social class distinctions and identities".²

Two comments seem to be in order. The first is that my argument in "Ways of Artmaking" was not intended as an elimination thesis regarding either mass art or popular art.³ On the contrary, I maintained throughout that there *really* is a type of art that is properly called "popular". On my view, though, the basis for the distinction between high and popular art is not internal to works of art. There are no intrinsic properties that distinguish works as popular or high art; nor is the distinction a product of our responses to these works.⁴ But for all that, I do not deny that there is a real distinction that may properly be drawn between high and popular art: my aim is to explain, not eliminate it.

Second, I do not argue in the paper or elsewhere that the basis for the

distinction is the function that certain works have in reinforcing pre-existing class distinctions. What I do argue is that

Since works of art are to a large extent socially produced, it seems reasonable to suppose that the distinction between the high and the popular arts must itself be socially produced; that it is a distinction which has its origins and rationale within a particular social context. (p.219)

The social context that I sketched explains the emergence of the distinction between high and popular art. While, as Carroll says, popular art may very well be an ahistorical phenomenon, the emergence of this concept in art criticism is not. I agree with him, both here and in my paper, that there were works in earlier centuries that now answer to the modern term "popular art".⁵ However, it was only in the late-nineteenth century that artists and critics thought it important to distinguish high from popular art and invented these concepts in order to do so. My aim was to explain why they thought it important, and I argued that the basis for their distinction had nothing to do with the intrinsic or affective properties of high or popular art. The distinction emerged only with the rise of the aesthetic movement and art for art's sake at the time of the industrial revolution.⁶ The refusal of the artists of this movement to pander to what the broad mass of people expected and wanted from art meant that their art was incomprehensible to, and lost the attention of, most people in European and eventually Western society.

My claim was that

the audience who turned away from this art did not enter an artistic void. Their interest was captured by a new band of arts that found their origin in the romanticism and the realism of the nineteenth century. These new art forms self-consciously addressed popular concerns. They strove to entertain, to educate, and, above all, to capture the popular imagination. Chief among these, of course, was the cinema, but magazines, journalism, advertising, the short story, popular romances, music hall, and eventually television, all addressed and nurtured the aspirations, the fears and the prejudices that found a ready audience. Traditional artists had been displaced, and it was, I would venture, in an effort to recover their waning authority that they came to describe their art as "high art"; the other as merely "popular". (pp.222-3)

The distinction is a social one, based on social considerations; more particularly, it was based on the desire of the members of the aesthetic movement to have their art taken seriously. But Carroll does not accept this argument. On his view, "if there were no formal differences between high art and popular art, it would, at least, be difficult to see how the distinction could serve the social role Novitz attributes to it. How would the elite be able to identify which objects were the right ones with which to affiliate or disaffiliate?"

This rejoinder seems to be based on a misunderstanding. My claim is only that there are no formal features which distinguish popular art *as a type of art*: that all and only popular works of art enjoy. This is clear from the fact that what was once thought of as popular art (say, the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec or the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley) may later come to be regarded as high art. Of course individual works of popular art will have formal features that help distinguish them and in terms of which we may classify them as art of a certain period, or as art that suits the taste of a certain audience, but my claim is that these features are not definitive of the type of art that we call popular art. This, of course, does not entail that there is nothing that distinguishes this type of art; still less that there really is no such thing as popular art. On my view, certain social considerations, rich with history and theory, both determine and distinguish this type of art, and so help us ascertain whether or not the individual work is "popular" or "high".

On the argument that I advanced, it was purely fortuitous that the art of the esthetic movement found favour with the newly emergent middle classes. The primary or initial reason for the distinction had to do with the politics of the art world. It had nothing at all to do with class antagonisms or "with the role certain objects play in reinforcing pre-existing social class distinctions and identities".⁷

According to my argument, it

would be wrong to think that the high arts were deliberately favoured because they left middle-class interests untouched. In my view, there was nothing conscious about this. It was just that the middle classes felt comfortable with the formalism of the art for art's sake movement in a way that they did not always feel comfortable with the romanticism and realism of Honoré Daumier, Camille Corot, or Gustave Courbet. (pp.223-4)

This, of course, does not suggest that the distinction between high and popular art was born of the desire to reinforce pre-existing class distinctions. Certainly it is true that some members of the middle classes exploited the distinction later on, but their exploitation of it was not the source of the distinction.

If, however, the distinction between popular and high art can be explained only in terms of social considerations and not in terms of the properties intrinsic to these works or their effects, doesn't this amount to the elimination of the distinction? In what sense can the distinction be a *real* one if it is bred only of the desire on the part of a particular movement to achieve hegemony within the art world? The answer, in my view, is that social facts are as *real* as physical ones, and that there *are* social facts.⁸ There are married and unmarried men; honest and dishonest people; aristocrats and peasants; commoners and royals. These are real distinctions between people, but they are not based on the intrinsic properties of people; nor are they based on the causal effects that these people have on others. Rather, they are grounded on social considerations of one sort or another. To say this, of course, is to concede that as societies alter, the way in which these distinctions are drawn may also alter. This, I argued in my article, is true of the way in which we distinguish popular from high art.⁹ The extension of "popular art", like the extension of "peasant", is not fixed. As society and its accompanying attitudes, theories, and beliefs change, the extensions of these words change as well.¹⁰

So even if it is true (which, I shall argue, it is not) that I have inadvertently offered a theory of mass art, it is false that it is an elimination theory. Nor is it true that the distinction is grounded in the role that certain artworks play in reinforcing class distinctions or identities.

What of Carroll's claim that my theory of popular art is in effect a theory of mass art? He concedes straight away that I do not use the term "mass art" and that I speak everywhere of popular art, but even so, it seems to Carroll that I must really be talking about mass art because "he [Novitz] dates the emergence of what he calls popular art in the nineteenth century" (a point to which I shall return presently), and because the paradigmatic examples given of popular art include "many (although not all) films, popular romances, television programmes and the advertisements that fund them, as well as comic strips, magazines, erotica, rock music...."¹¹ Thus, Carroll concludes, "if Novitz thinks that there are no distinguishing marks of popular art of this sort— he must be committed to the view that there are no distinguishing marks of what I call mass art".¹²

But this conclusion does not follow. There need not, to take an analogous example, be an intrinsic property that distinguishes certain men as criminals. But it does not follow from this that there are no intrinsic properties that distinguish them as men. In the same way, while there are no intrinsic properties that distinguish certain mass arts *as popular arts*, there may very well be (and I shall argue that there are) certain intrinsic properties that distinguish them *as mass arts*.

There is a further reason why I do not believe myself to have offered a theory of mass art. When I wrote my article, I certainly did not, and still do not, believe that mass art is always popular, or that popular art is invariably mass. The schoolboy limerick is a popular art form that is not on any

account a mass art; so, too, perhaps, the erotic drawings of the said schoolboy. Eighteenth-century naive art, musical hall, and, of course, dances like the cancan and the fox-trot, were all popular art forms, but none of them were what either I or Carroll think of as mass arts.

Conversely, and contrary to Carroll (who thinks that mass art is a subset of the "relevant popular art of our times"¹³), I think that mass art need not always be popular art. Much high art in this decade of the twentieth century is mass produced with the aim of reaching as large an audience as possible. The recorded performances of the music of Mozart, Bartok, and Stravinsky are all obvious examples. On the view that I shall defend, they may be regarded as mass, but not popular, arts. They are, and remain, high arts that have been distributed to a mass audience with the help of a mass technology. And the same is true of much literature. The novels of Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy were meant (both by them and by their publishers) to be perused by as many people as possible. Printing presses and, I shall argue, other "mass delivery technologies" were used to this end.¹⁴

These examples will not convince Carroll. He will no doubt contend that these works were not *produced* but only *reproduced* or *delivered* by means of a mass technology, and so cannot qualify as a mass art. Whether or not he is correct must depend on the adequacy of his theory of mass art. It is to this – the positive – component of his theory that I shall now proceed.

2. The Nature of Mass Art

According to Carroll,

- x is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is an artwork
- 2) produced and distributed by a mass delivery technology
 - 3) which is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g. its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect and, perhaps, even in its content) toward those choices which promise accessibility with minimum effort for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences.

A mass delivery technology is defined as

a technology with the capacity to deliver the same performance or the same object to more than one reception site simultaneously.

From the first of these definitions, we can see why Carroll thinks that I

am wrong to suppose that recorded Mozart or mass-distributed Tolstoy are mass arts. Neither were *produced* by means of a mass technology (even though they are often delivered and reproduced by means of one).

But Carroll's insistence on the use of a mass technology for the *production* of works of art is problematic. When Steven Spielberg, sitting in front of the fire on a winter's night, thinks out the plot and invents the details of his next movie, the process of producing the work has already begun. Indeed, it is arguably the central and most important part of the production of the work of art. But it is not true (at this stage, at any rate) that the work is being produced by means of a mass technology. Certainly cameras and film and the whole paraphernalia of the cinema must also be used to produce the movie, but a mass delivery technology need not be part and parcel of every stage of the production of the movie. There are, so far as I can see, no artworks whose entire production from conception onwards, depends on mass technology. The most that Carroll can plausibly argue is that a mass delivery technology must be *involved* in the production of the movie.

The trouble with this, of course, is that there are very few works of art whose production does not involve some mass delivery technology or other, so that it begins to seem that, if we follow Carroll's definitions, too many works may qualify as mass art. Part of the problem is that Carroll does not tell us where mass delivery technologies begin and end. It is clear from his second definition that he regards printing presses, television, radio, sound recording, photocopying, and photography as mass production and delivery technologies. All have the *capacity* to deliver the same performance or object "to more than one reception site simultaneously". But what of paper and pencil, inked quills and vellum, fountain pens and sketch books, typewriters and paper, personal computers, and mechanical (rather than electronic) amplifying systems? All (in appropriate combinations) have the *capacity* to deliver works to more than one reception site simultaneously. Why can't we regard these as mass delivery technologies? Like an electronic amplifier, the belly of a violin amplifies, as does the bell of a trumpet, and both can deliver works to different reception sites at the same time.¹⁵ It would seem, then, that mass delivery systems are involved in the production of all musical scores, musical performances, and literature. Indeed, the only works that fail to satisfy Carroll's second condition for mass works of art are autographic works of art like painting and sculpture. In most cases, allographic works of art will be mass arts.¹⁶

So there is no reason—even on Carroll's account as explored up until now—why high arts cannot be mass arts. But Carroll certainly does not want this to be the case. It is, I think, in order to obviate this possibility that he confines mass delivery technologies to the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ But this is a perfectly arbitrary move. In fact, of course, there were mass produced artifacts and works of art prior to these centuries. Europe and Asia had seen the mass production of prints and

books, as well as the manufacture of ornaments and trinkets as early as the seventeenth century.¹⁸ If Carroll's account really is the formal account that he believes it to be, it should apply equally to the mass art of earlier centuries.

However, it is only in *this* century, he tells us, that the critics of mass art have come to the fore, and have criticized it because of its failure to live up to the standards of avant-garde art.¹⁹ Here Carroll's argument hints that there are, after all, historical and social grounds for the distinction that he wishes to draw. Indeed, he seems to fall prey to the very moves of which he accuses me: that is, he appears to distinguish mass art, not in terms of features internal to it, but in terms of social or historical considerations of one sort or another. (There is a double irony here, because having artificially confined mass art to the late nineteenth century and beyond, he assumes that I too was really writing about mass, and not just popular, art—since I was, of course, writing of the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that appealed to popular concerns.) Even so, Carroll plainly does not believe that the social and historical considerations to which he appeals exhaust the distinction: there are, he believes, formal and intrinsic qualities in terms of which to distinguish mass art from the avant-garde.

These features have much to do with, and are explained in terms of, the supposed fact (given in condition (3) of Carroll's definition) that mass art always seeks mass consumption. Mass art, we were told "is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences."²⁰ These structural choices—choices which are intended to assure ease of comprehension to "untutored audiences"—furnish the formal features in terms of which mass art is to be distinguished. It is this feature of mass art, Carroll believes, that ensures that high (avant garde) art cannot also be mass art. Some mass art will itself tutor an audience through repetition (such audiences, he says, are relatively untutored), but all mass art is invariably designed to be understood by people without special training.

The claim that mass art is necessarily *designed* to be accessible (and contains structural features that promise to make it accessible) to "untutored audiences" seems to have consequences that Carroll must find unwelcome. It is certainly the case that Jane Austen designed her works to be accessible to her readers. So too did Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Mozart and Tchaikowsky. Each intentionally designed their works in ways that promised accessibility, but their works were not what Carroll would regard as mass art. This, he will most probably remind us, is because the structural features to which he is referring constitute only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for mass art. However, if it is true that such features are only necessary for mass art, then Carroll has not isolated (as he claims to do) intrinsic or formal qualities that *distinguish* mass art: that

all and only works of mass art share. There plainly are many works that have such features but are not members of the class of mass art.

Perhaps Carroll is of the opinion that *Sense and Sensibility* would have been a mass art if it had been produced and delivered by a "mass delivery technology". For according to his definition, it is only those objects that are produced and delivered by a mass technology and which gravitate in their "structural choices ... toward those choices which promise accessibility" that are mass arts.

If my earlier arguments are correct, this move is already closed to Carroll. Both he and I agree that *Sense and Sensibility* was distributed by a "mass delivery technology". And he can no longer plausibly deny that Austen's novels are mass art by insisting that they were not wholly produced by means of a such a technology. No mass art, we have already seen, is wholly produced by means of a mass technology; and Austen's novels were partly produced by means of such a technology. For I have already shown that if a mass delivery technology is defined as "a technology with the capacity to deliver the same performance or the same object to more than one reception site simultaneously," then several mass technologies were very much a part of the production of *Sense and Sensibility*. Quill, ink, and paper are not just the product of technology; together they form what is of course a rather primitive and cumbersome mass delivery technology, but a mass delivery technology nonetheless.

Am I not leaving something out of the equation? Carroll insists not merely that a mass art should tend towards structural choices that promise accessibility, but that promise "easy accessibility with minimum effort for the largest number of *untutored audiences*".²¹ And whatever else Jane Austen was doing, she, like Mozart and Beethoven, was not writing for "untutored audiences". On Carroll's view, it is only when the works produced and delivered by means of mass technologies are designed to be accessible to *untutored* audiences that they qualify as mass arts. He insists that works of mass art are designed to be easily understood by audiences that have not been taught how to understand them, and it is this, he argues, that rigidly determines the structural qualities of mass art: qualities that will, after all, distinguish mass art.

Part of the problem with this suggestion is that it is not clear in what respects the audience needs to be untutored. I must, for instance, have acquired a range of linguistic skills in order to understand any work of art in the English language, and these are skills that are acquired only through tutoring of one kind or another. Does this mean that there are no mass works of art in English (or any other language)? On this view, *L.A. Law*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Casualty* are not works of mass art—not just because they are in English, but also because one has to know, and have learned, something about the law, about mental illness, parody, human foibles, and hospitals, in order to understand them.

Or is it just that an audience counts as "untutored" if it does not need

to learn anything more than it already knows in order to comprehend the work—so that it is able to comprehend it easily? This option is even more problematic for Carroll. According to it, a work is easily accessible if comprehension and (negative or positive) appreciation can be secured with no (or very little) new learning; and this, he seems to think, is what is aimed at when one produces mass art. The trouble is that what some people find easily accessible without the benefit of additional learning, others might not—either because they inhabit different cultures, or because they have been schooled in different artistic traditions. It seems unlikely that someone schooled largely in Shakespeare and Mozart will find rap accessible even after a number of exposures to this art form. Such people find Mozart much more accessible than rap.

It follows, I think, that if ease of access (without the benefit of further tuition) is a condition of mass art, what counts as mass art will differ from society to society and from period to period within a society. However one looks at it, there is a range of cultural, historical, and social factors that help determine ease of accessibility to a work. Structural features are not the sole determinants of this.²²

What emerges, then, is that since ease of understanding differs from period to period, and has much to do with the quality and emphasis of the prevailing education system, there can be no structural features that will of themselves ensure ease of comprehension, and so help distinguish the category of mass art. Of course, if Carroll confines mass art to a particular historical period and social context, then he may very well be able to list structural features that facilitate comprehension, but it is important to see that these structural features do not themselves distinguish the mass art of that period. Historical and social considerations will also have been invoked.

3. Conclusion

It is no part of my purpose to advance an elimination theory of mass art. However, I believe that I have shown that Carroll has inadvertently advanced what he would consider to be an elimination thesis. He has not isolated formal (intrinsic or structural) features that distinguish mass art. At every turn he is forced to rely, sometimes tacitly sometimes explicitly, on the cultural, historical and social determinants of the type of art that he wishes to distinguish. Still worse, if my arguments are correct, Jane Austen's novels, like Mozart's music, satisfy Carroll's three conditions for mass art.

In addition, I have tried to show that Carroll is mistaken in thinking that mass art cannot also be high art. On my view, when the BBC produced Shakespeare's plays on television, it converted them into mass art by using a "mass delivery technology" to convey them to as many people as

possible who were interested in attending to them. Certainly not everyone could understand them and relatively few people were interested in them. Their mass distribution did not, for certain cultural and historical reasons, make them popular arts.

On the view that I favour, a mass work of art is (1) a work of art (2) whose production or delivery involves the use of mass technology (3) with the intention thereby of delivering the work to as many people as possible. In our culture, this often involves "structural choices" that, taken together with a good deal of background or shared learning, promote ease of understanding. However, not all mass art is easily understood. Sometimes very difficult and learned works of art rely on mass technology for their production and delivery, where the aim is only to place such works in reach of as many people as possible.

It will be apparent, I think, that the difference between Carroll's and my own theory of mass art, turns on the different ways in which we handle the deeply ambiguous word "mass" (as it occurs in the expression "mass art"). A product may be "mass" in two distinct and unrelated senses. It may be "mass" in the sense that it is *produced or reproduced or delivered by means of a technology capable of delivering the work simultaneously to two different sites*. Or it may be "mass" in the sense that it is *designed to be understood or appreciated by large numbers of untutored people*. Without giving an argument for doing so, Carroll runs the two senses together in his account of mass art. I do not. I emphasize the first sense, and I do so because this allows me to give the formal account of mass art that both Carroll and I seek. Inevitably, then, I have argued that while a mass delivery technology is necessarily involved in the production or delivery of works of mass art, it is not true that such works are *always* designed to be understood by large numbers of untrained viewers. In arguing thus, I am able, I think, to avoid the difficulties that inhere in Carroll's theory of mass art.

Notes

- ¹ Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Mass Art", *Philosophic Exchange*, 1992.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ David Novitz, "Ways of Artmaking: The High and the Popular in Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 29 (1989), pp. 213-229. Where appropriate, references to this article will be given in the text. My theory is further elaborated and defended in *The Boundaries of Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Ch. 2.
- ⁴ Novitz, "Ways of Artmaking", pp. 215-6.

- ⁵ Ibid., p. 219.
- ⁶ Ibid., pp. 218-223.
- ⁷ Carroll, "Mass Art".
- ⁸ For more on my treatment of the concept "real", see Novitz, *Boundaries of Art*, Ch. 3.
- ⁹ Novitz, "Ways of Artmaking", pp. 224-227.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 214-215.
- ¹¹ Novitz, "Ways of Artmaking", p. 213. This quotation is cited by Carroll.
- ¹² Carroll, "Nature of Mass Art".
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. I assume that the manufacture of paper and ink is a "mass delivery technology".
- ¹⁵ This must, of course, depend on how one individuates reception-sites. Carroll gives us no guidance.
- ¹⁶ I have uncritically adopted Goodman's distinction at this point. See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), Ch. 3.
- ¹⁷ Carroll, "Mass Art".
- ¹⁸ See Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1983), especially Chs. 2 & 5. In note 41 Carroll allows that there were mass arts in earlier centuries, but says that he is primarily concerned with mass art of a "modern vintage".
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 36.
- ²⁰ Carroll, "Mass Art".
- ²¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.
- ²² Carroll's appeal to picture perception as an example of untutored comprehension overlooks a considerable body of evidence that seems to establish that it is an acquired or a learned skill. See my *Pictures and Their Use in Communication: A Philosophical Essay*, (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1977), Ch. 2.