

# Attending to Works of Art for Their Own Sake in Art Evaluation and Analysis: Carroll and Stecker on Aesthetic Experience

Víctor Durà-Vilà

*Noël Carroll denies and Robert Stecker affirms that it is a necessary condition of aesthetic experience that it should be valued for its own sake. I make use of their controversy to argue for the psychological impossibility of discharging very common practices of art evaluation and analysis without undergoing an aesthetic experience valued for its own sake. By way of supporting my thesis and also making progress in Stecker and Carroll's dispute about aesthetic experience, I analyse their methodological assumptions and develop further our understanding of negative, indifferent and unexpected aesthetic experiences. The article provides a defence of Stecker's position based on my contention regarding art evaluation and analysis.*

## 1. Introduction

Noël Carroll and Robert Stecker are at a deadlock. They disagree about whether or not it is a necessary condition of aesthetic experience that it should be valued for its own sake. Stecker sides with the yeas, Carroll with the nays. Their argument is vividly illustrated through a number of related thought experiments, where two people engage with a work of art in exactly the same fashion except for one stipulated difference: one experiences the work of art for its own sake, while the other does not. According to Carroll, both people undergo an aesthetic experience, since they fulfil his conditions for aesthetic experience. Stecker, of course, disagrees.

My primary motivation in this paper is to show that out of the controversy between Stecker and Carroll there are some interesting lessons to be learnt concerning the *psychological impossibility* of engaging in certain *evaluative* and *analytical* art practices without valuing the experience of the works of art *for their own sake*. My secondary motivation is to help make progress in the dispute between Carroll and Stecker.

The controversy between Stecker and Carroll on this aspect of their respective views of aesthetic experience has involved a number of exchanges over the years, with the positive result of a refinement of their positions.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, I will focus on what I consider

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1 For Noël Carroll's publications relevant to this exchange, see 'Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic', *BJA* 40 (2000), 191–208; 'Enjoyment, Indifference, and Aesthetic Experience: Comments for Robert Stecker', *BJA* 41 (2001), 81–83; 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', *BJA* 42 (2002), 145–168; and 'Ethics and Aesthetics: Replies to Dickie, Stecker, and Livingston', *BJA* 46 (2006), 82–95. For Robert Stecker's side of the argument, see 'Only

the best versions of the relevant points of their theories of aesthetic experience; however, when it is advantageous to the explanatory aims of the present paper, I will go back to earlier stages of the dispute (Section 4).

In what follows, I will characterize the relevant aspects of Carroll's and Stecker's positions (Section 2), produce an analysis of their methodological assumptions (Section 3), refine our understanding of negative, indifferent and unexpected aesthetic experiences (Section 4) and, finally, establish my key contentions regarding the psychological impossibility of engaging in certain very common art practices of evaluation and analysis that involve an aesthetic experience without valuing said experience for its own sake, thus lending further support to Stecker's position (Section 5).

## 2. Carroll and Stecker's Disagreement on Aesthetic Experience

Stecker's favoured theory of aesthetic experience, the minimal view, says that

aesthetic experience is the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience. Such experiences can be positively or negatively valued. In so far as they are valued aesthetic experiences, they are valued for their own sake. They may also be valued for other reasons but that would be irrelevant to their being aesthetic experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Two brief but important points of clarification are in order regarding Stecker's understanding of the idea of valuing an experience for its own sake. First of all, as is apparent from the quotation above, for Stecker, valuing something for its own sake does not exclude valuing it for other reasons, including instrumental reasons. I value reading *Les Fleurs du Mal* in its original French for its own sake, but I also consider it worthwhile because it improves my French. However, and crucially, my interest in improving my French is entirely irrelevant to my valuing the aesthetic experience afforded by Baudelaire's poetry, which I value for its own sake.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, Stecker is at pains to disentangle his proposed view from any notion of disinterestedness, particularly those notions that trace their ancestry back to Kant.<sup>4</sup>

Jerome: A Reply to Noël Carroll', *BJA* 41 (2001), 76–80; *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010 [2005]), 39–64; 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), 1–10; and 'Carroll's Bones', *BJA* 46 (2006), 282–286. We must also pay attention to Noël Carroll, 'Recent Approaches to Aesthetic Experience', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 165–177. While in this article Carroll does not follow up the dispute with Stecker, similar points are made against the theory of aesthetic experience endorsed by Gary Iseminger ('The Aesthetic State of Mind', in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 98–110; 'Experiential Theories of Aesthetic Value', in Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin (eds), *Aesthetic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2008), 45–57). Carroll's latest contribution to the aesthetic experience literature, one of little consequence for my focus here, can be found in 'Defending the Content Approach to Aesthetic Experience', *Metaphilosophy* 46 (2015), 171–188.

2 Stecker, 'Carroll's Bones', 283–284. Stecker also discusses his minimal view in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 51–61; and 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', 4–5.

3 Stecker, 'Only Jerome', 77.

4 *Ibid.*

In contrast to Stecker, Carroll maintains that ‘valuing an experience for its own sake is not a necessary condition for classifying an experience as aesthetic’.<sup>5</sup> His positive proposal is the content-oriented approach to the characterization of aesthetic experience. Carroll argues that

a specimen of experience is aesthetic if it involves the apprehension/comprehension by an informed subject in the ways mandated (by the tradition, the object, and/or the artist) of the formal structures, aesthetic and/or expressive properties of the object, and/or the emergence of those features from the base properties of the work and/or of the manner in which those features interact with each other and/or address the cognitive, perceptual, emotive, and/or imaginative powers of the subject.<sup>6</sup>

The disagreement between Carroll and Stecker can be captured quite saliently by a series of thought experiments which, in turn, play a key role in substantiating their divergent positions, since each of them interprets these thought experiments as backing his own view. Jerome and Charles have indistinguishable experiences of a work of art but for one stipulated difference: Jerome values experiencing the work of art for its own sake, whereas Charles does not. Charles values the experience of the work of art because, say, it enhances his perceptual capacities or allows him to write an essay that he needs to submit soon.<sup>7</sup>

For Carroll, as long as Charles’s engagement with the work of art involves the required understanding of (or attending to) the relevant properties (as per the disjunctive list offered in the quotation above), he is undergoing an aesthetic experience. And so is Jerome. For Stecker, of course, Charles is not having an aesthetic experience, since the necessary condition of valuing said experience for its own sake is missing.

At this point it seems that we have reached an impasse. There are two different notions of aesthetic experience, with Carroll’s being the more inclusive option.<sup>8</sup> I think that we can make inroads into overcoming this dialectical cul-de-sac. Most importantly, I believe that reflecting on the present controversy and the thought experiments that so well capture the divergence between Stecker and Carroll can help us focus on very interesting aspects of our own psychology in relation to some of our practices of art evaluation and

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5 Carroll, ‘Ethics and Aesthetics’, 88.

6 Noël Carroll, ‘Aesthetic Experience: A Question of Content’, in Kieran, *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 69–97, at 89; reprinted in his *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 77–108. I will, as Carroll does here, use ‘object’ to refer to any item that can sustain an aesthetic experience, not just objects in the conventional sense, but also performances and texts.

7 The original thought experiment inspiring the ones being discussed here is to be found in George Dickie, ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964), 56–65, at 58.

8 There are more precise ways to characterize the impasse and explain their disagreement, and I will examine them when needed in Section 5. Moreover, irrelevant though this is regarding the force of the contending arguments, it would be misleading if my presentation here gave the impression that support in the literature for both positions is somewhat similar: Stecker’s view is one that has much wider support and far more extensive and illustrious ancestry (‘Carroll’s Bones’, 284).

analysis, practices which, as I will argue, are inescapably underpinned by aesthetic experiences.<sup>9</sup> But first, some methodological clarification will be to our advantage.

### 3. Methodological Considerations

#### *Current Methodology*

What are the philosophical background assumptions, commitments and motivations of Carroll's and Stecker's inquiries on aesthetic experience? Although throughout their exchanges certain wordings may naturally vary a little and dialectical emphasis may understandably shift here and there, one can answer this question with reasonable certainty and accuracy. Crucially, Stecker and Carroll do share common methodological ground and, therefore, a unified reconstruction of the methodology underpinning their exchange can be developed.

In what follows, the order of the theses does not correspond to their importance, but is driven by the clarity of exposition. To begin with, it is assumed that (1) there is a *plurality of views* regarding the notion of aesthetic experience and, importantly, that there is no single best view or privileged conception.<sup>10</sup>

Consistently, (2) the *extensional adequacy* of a given theory of aesthetic experience is a key measure of its success; often, it seems to be the pre-eminent consideration.<sup>11</sup> The notion of extensional adequacy can be understood in two different ways which can be seen constructively and charitably to coexist and, indeed, to have a common motivation: (2a) in relation to *people's usage* (or, at least, covering as many instances of usage as possible)<sup>12</sup> or (2b) as compliance with and preservation of *tradition*.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with these stated aims, (2c) finding a unified, 'common thread or necessary condition' for as many plausible conceptions of aesthetic experience as possible should be a desirable target.<sup>14</sup> But here, Carroll and Stecker part company, since Stecker thinks that such a common thread can be found, whereas Carroll does not, as is obvious from the disjunctive formulation of his content-oriented approach. Critically for the purposes of this paper, Stecker's candidate

9 Paradigmatic instances of art evaluation and analysis would include art criticism and scholarly academic work, but there are many other examples, such as our own personal reflections on works of art, and conversations and correspondence with friends and acquaintances with common art-related interests.

10 Stecker, 'Only Jerome', 76; *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 59. Regarding the footnotes in this section, it must be understood that, in each case, I will provide a few clear instances that back up my contention, rather than an exhaustive list of all the occurrences of every single view. Moreover, there are cases where I take it as obvious that there is meaningful convergence around a view, even if I cannot pinpoint a precise quotation for one of the authors, as is the case here with respect to Carroll, given the disjunctive nature of his content-oriented approach.

11 Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 45, 51, 60–61.

12 *Ibid.*, 45, 60–61.

13 Carroll, 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', 164; Stecker, 'Only Jerome', 76. Carroll explicitly acknowledges both (2a) and (2b) in 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', in his *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41–62, at 60.

14 Stecker, 'Only Jerome', 76; see also *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 51; and 'Carroll's Bones', 284.

for the unifying condition across the range of aesthetic experiences is that they should be valued for their own sake.

Unproblematically, there is consensus in developing (3) an account or explanation of aesthetic experience that is as *intelligible* and *informative* as possible.<sup>15</sup>

Given (2), it comes as no surprise that (4) any *revisionary* aspect of an account of aesthetic experience is seen not only as a serious weakness, but even as a reason, all things being equal, to favour one notion of aesthetic experience over another.<sup>16</sup>

It follows from (2) and (3) that Stecker and Carroll aim at developing *explanatory* and *clarificatory* inquiries. They attempt to systematically and coherently describe recognizable and well-established phenomena, but such a description requires a great deal of philosophical work to be rendered meaningful and intelligible, not least because of the diversity and variation among the phenomena to be explained.

### *Alternative and Complimentary Approaches*

Clearly, Carroll and Stecker are *not* proposing *normative* theories of aesthetic experience. There are no principles to be established so that people can undergo aesthetic experiences correctly. Stecker does not think that Charles is experiencing something aesthetically but wrongly, he instead maintains that Charles is not having an aesthetic experience at all: Charles is confused if he thinks that he is.<sup>17</sup>

It is also equally obvious that Stecker's and Carroll's methodological approaches have not employed *systematic empirical methods*. Nevertheless, one might wonder whether or not their respective projects leave any room for empirical work. Strong commitments in the direction of producing a theory of aesthetic experience that privileges people's usage would seem to open the door to work in empirical psychology along the lines of what has now become commonplace in experimental philosophy.<sup>18</sup> This would be particularly true if the premium regarding extensional adequacy were to be placed on contemporary usage, rather than on tradition; emphasis on tradition, conversely, would render historical scholarly work potentially illuminating.

15 Carroll, 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', 60; Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 60–61.

16 Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 61.

17 It would be interesting to explore whether Carroll's and Stecker's theories of aesthetic experience allow for undergoing aesthetic experiences *wrongly*, which is not to be confused with having a negative or indifferent aesthetic experience (as will be discussed in the next section). Given the stipulations in their respective theories designed to avoid including experiences that are not aesthetic (for Stecker, the subject must attend the object in a 'discriminating manner'; for Carroll, the 'informed subject' must attend the object in the 'ways mandated' by tradition, etc.), instances of aesthetic experiences where the person in question is doing something wrong could be excluded at the expense of extensional adequacy. I take it that someone who relevantly engages with the formal and expressive qualities of a painting, but who is also prone to, say, naive biographism, is still undergoing an aesthetic experience, yet at the same time getting things quite wrong. I think that one can be optimistic that both theories have the resources to modulate their demands regarding discrimination, so that such cases can still be included; however, this is a topic for another paper.

18 See, for instance, Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (eds), *Experimental Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

As things stand, I think that we should be wary of undue pessimism regarding our non-systematic views about the extensional adequacy of the notion of aesthetic experience, given our familiarity with so many instances of the usage and deployment of such a notion in so many fashions and contexts. Nevertheless, I also believe that we must be receptive to the potential benefits of empirical research in these matters. Even if the empirical results were to yield the kind of ecumenical picture that Carroll and Stecker assume, such results could still be interesting as long as they were philosophically rigorous in the demarcation of positions and understanding of assumptions. Naturally, given the theoretical complexities, without a great deal of philosophical subtlety in the experimental design, there would be a considerable risk of such empirical work either being meaningless or not as fertile as it could be.

Focusing solely on the aspect of the debate between Stecker and Carroll relevant for this article, an entirely different type of empirical work might go in the direction of studying whether or not the scenarios set up by the thought experiments discussed are *psychologically possible*, in addition to being conceivable. My central thesis here specifically denies that they are: I am going to argue for the psychological impossibility of a key contention by Carroll. I will do so purely through theoretical elucidation. The discussion of an empirical set-up that would make progress regarding my arguments here is beyond the scope of this article. However, any hope to motivate such an inquiry and for it to be meaningful will depend on there being a sound philosophical understanding of the problem to be addressed in the first place.

### *Thought Experiments and the Impasse*

One final and critical methodological point is in order. At the centre of the dispute between Carroll and Stecker, we find a series of related thought experiments, which I plan to systematically develop in Section 5 and which will be a crucial aspect of my strategy. We know already that reflection on these thought experiments has not contributed to solving the disagreement that has motivated the present article. Hence, it is fair to wonder on what methodological grounds I expect to advance the debate. First of all, although ultimately my argument here will support Stecker's position, my disagreement with Carroll is of a different sort: where Stecker thinks that Charles is not undergoing an aesthetic experience, I contend that Carroll is positing a psychologically impossible scenario. Secondly, while my thought experiments are recognizably related to those discussed by Stecker and Carroll, they are different and, importantly, have been developed into a systematic series. Where does this leave us? In exactly the same place that any other thought experiment would: I will succeed only if readers can meaningfully engage with the thought experiments in a way that elicits responses that persuade them of the soundness of my argument, or at least provide them with the basis of making progress in that direction.

## 4. The Expectation of Aesthetic Satisfaction

### *Negative and Indifferent Aesthetic Experiences*

At the beginning of the exchange under scrutiny here, Stecker developed the idea of valuing an aesthetic experience for its own sake by reference to *enjoying* the experience

in and of itself, independently of any further value.<sup>19</sup> This prompted Carroll's justified objection that there are plenty of rightful aesthetic experiences which are not enjoyable because they cause either displeasure or indifference.<sup>20</sup> To avoid the charge that he 'seems committed to thinking that enjoyment is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience',<sup>21</sup> Stecker refined his minimal view by explicitly allowing both negative<sup>22</sup> and indifferent<sup>23</sup> aesthetic experiences which are still valued for their own sake, in addition to the positive ones.

Although Stecker tries to fend off Carroll's criticism concerning aesthetic experiences that prompt negative or indifferent evaluations, he himself seems to remain agnostic as to whether or not such experiences are properly aesthetic; his contention is that it is a semantic matter:

Everyone should agree that some things are aesthetically good, others are bad, and still others are indifferent. We have experiences of the bad and the indifferent just as we have experiences of the aesthetically good. So the *only issue* seems to be *whether we call* the experiences of the bad and of the indifferent, through which we judge these items bad or indifferent, aesthetic experiences.<sup>24</sup>

My own view is that it is not merely a semantic issue. I agree with the idea motivating Carroll's complaint, namely that the minimal view would face a fatal problem of extensional adequacy if it did not have the resources to accommodate negative and indifferent aesthetic experiences. Moreover, I think that a successful theory of aesthetic experience should be able to convincingly *explain* cases that yield negative or indifferent aesthetic experiences and, subsequently, assessments. However, I believe that Stecker is right when he argues that his minimal view is perfectly compatible with negative and indifferent aesthetic experiences.

Carroll, nonetheless, seems to remain unpersuaded: in a recent criticism of Gary Iseminger's views on aesthetic experience,<sup>25</sup> which parallels his early controversy with Stecker regarding the valuing of aesthetic experiences for their own sake, he objects that 'there are bad and indifferent aesthetic experiences, and it makes no sense to claim that the very having of these are valued for their own sake'.<sup>26</sup>

Let us dig a little deeper in order to elucidate this aspect of the debate, which will be central to my broader aims in this paper. Stecker clearly thinks that his minimal view can accommodate aesthetic experiences which leave us frustrated or untouched. But perhaps

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19 Stecker, 'Only Jerome', 77.

20 Carroll, 'Enjoyment, Indifference, and Aesthetic Experience', 82–83; 'Ethics and Aesthetics', 92.

21 Carroll, 'Enjoyment, Indifference, and Aesthetic Experience', 82.

22 Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 55.

23 Stecker, 'Carroll's Bones', 284.

24 Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 40, my emphasis. Stecker makes this point explicitly again: 'Is aesthetic experience always something positively valued? The answer is that this is a semantic matter, but we can certainly recognize negatively valued aesthetic experiences, consistent with the idea that such experiences are valued for themselves. All that is needed is that the negative evaluation is of the experience itself rather than further things it brings to us' (*ibid.*, 55; see also 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', 7).

25 Iseminger, 'The Aesthetic State of Mind'; 'Experiential Theories of Aesthetic Value'.

26 Carroll, 'Recent Approaches to Aesthetic Experience', 167.



because he does not think that this is a troubling matter for his position, he does not offer a detailed story concerning how those experiences are supposed to work, which might put paid to Carroll's misgivings.

In the context of discussing a rival position in the debate about aesthetic experience, the affect-oriented approach, Carroll develops the same criticism that he had levelled against Stecker, namely, that 'this proposal ... is too exclusive ... [since] many aesthetic experiences are not pleasurable'.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Carroll tries to explore whether or not the affect-oriented approach could be developed so that it would not be dependent on the aesthetic experience being a pleasurable one. He offers a possible, tentative solution:

One way of remedying this shortcoming of course is to stipulate that aesthetic experiences are those that are *expected* or *intended* to deliver pleasure or enjoyment. Unpleasant aesthetic experiences then are still aesthetic experiences, albeit defective ones, since, though they are undertaken with the expectation of experiencing pleasure and/or they are intended to engender pleasure, said experiences fail to deliver the expected goods.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, Carroll does not find his own proposed solution satisfying because 'not all aesthetic experiences are expected or intended to promote pleasure in any non-stipulative sense of the notion of pleasure'.<sup>29</sup> His chosen example is the works of Damien Hirst, works designed to unnerve or disgust their viewers rather than to produce pleasure in any obvious or traditional sense. But this does not trouble me, nor should it pose a problem for those supporting views such as Stecker's and Iseminger's. In short, there is a wealth of literature discussing and explaining the role of negative emotions in art (some of this work is directed precisely at works such as those of Damien Hirst), with the upshot being that we are able to articulate a perfectly good notion of aesthetic satisfaction or enjoyment that is not narrowly connected to pleasure.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, we can take the positive suggestion from Carroll regarding the *expectation of enjoyment*, without paying the price of reducing such enjoyment to pleasure. Is it pleasure that first comes to mind when thinking of our experiences of Goya's *Black Paintings* or Berg's *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*? I very much doubt it, but there is no question that we derive a great deal of aesthetic satisfaction from those works of art;<sup>31</sup> this aesthetic satisfaction or enjoyment is not reducible to pleasure, but rather is

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27 Carroll, 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', 148.

28 Ibid., my emphasis. Relevantly for our purposes here, Carroll makes the same point, albeit more briefly, later on in relation to the axiological approach (ibid., 155); this is not surprising given that, in Carroll's taxonomy, the axiological approach identifies aesthetic experience as an experience essentially valued for its own sake (ibid., 153). Iseminger posits the same idea: Carroll's 'expectation' is Iseminger's 'hope' ('The Aesthetic State of Mind', 106).

29 Carroll, 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', 149.

30 For the latest contribution to this literature, see Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotion in Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Iseminger articulates the idea explicitly: 'the notion of being *valuable in itself*, in some sense ... might include pleasure as an instance but [is not] limited to it' ('The Aesthetic State of Mind', 102, his emphasis).

31 Iseminger makes a very similar point, coincidentally using *Wozzeck* as his example ('The Aesthetic State of Mind', 101).



the result of experiences of works of art that create a great deal of psychological distress and come at an emotional cost.<sup>32</sup>

For my purposes here, I do not need to go any further into the discussion of aesthetic satisfaction, enjoyment or fulfilment in relation to works of art that elicit negative emotions.<sup>33</sup> It is enough to simply adopt Carroll's own suggestion, disentangled from the notion of pleasure as understood by him. Hence, one can endorse Stecker's minimal view and acknowledge that we expect or intend to value aesthetic experiences for their own sake, it being well understood that the expectation of aesthetic enjoyment or satisfaction (in my broader sense, i.e. not limited to pleasure) will not always be fulfilled.

### *Unexpected Aesthetic Experiences*

The next point will bring up a crucial aspect of my proposal, as will be clear when I fully develop it in the next section. Carroll objects that even if we avail ourselves of a notion of expectation regarding the valuing for their own sake of aesthetic experiences, we cannot make sense of aesthetic experiences that are *unexpected*. Carroll is undoubtedly right that some aesthetic experiences 'force themselves upon us, unexpectedly as they say, as when strolling across a foreign city, we are abruptly taken by a striking facade'.<sup>34</sup> And again, the minimal view would face a serious problem regarding its extensional adequacy if it could not account for this type of aesthetic experience. As it happens, I think that the minimal view can be supplemented in an interesting fashion in order to account for unexpected aesthetic experiences. This is my positive suggestion: we have a background (or dormant or latent) disposition to undergo aesthetic experiences, which in certain cases kicks in *unintentionally* and *unexpectedly*. By contrast to intentionally sought and expected aesthetic experiences, what I am proposing here in relation to unexpected aesthetic experiences is that there are objects, which exhibit some sort of aesthetic salience, that awaken our disposition to experience them aesthetically in the *absence* of any *prior intention* of undergoing such an experience. In these cases, in Carroll's pertinent expression, the aesthetic experience *forces* itself upon us. Critically, for the proponent of the minimal view, the unexpected aesthetic experience will naturally incorporate the valuing of said experience for its own sake, just as the intentional and expected one would.

It is perhaps easier to think of positive examples and this seems what Carroll has in mind when he writes about the striking facade: we cannot help but experience the facade aesthetically on account of its being so aesthetically accomplished. Of course, as with fully intentional cases, an early promise of aesthetic satisfaction might be disappointed as we have the aesthetic experience: the facade, which seemed so attractive at first sight,

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32 Of course, this is not an uncommon occurrence, since very many works of art and even entire genres (provided that the works in the given genre are at least somewhat successful) are similarly demanding on their audiences, readers and viewers.

33 From this point onwards, I will use as synonymous the phrases 'aesthetic enjoyment', 'aesthetic satisfaction' and 'aesthetic fulfilment'.

34 Carroll, 'Aesthetic Experience Revisited', 155.

might yield a negative aesthetic experience as further inspection shows shallow ornamental effects or lack of cohesiveness.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to realize that unexpected aesthetic experiences also pose a challenge for Carroll's content-oriented approach, a point that Carroll does not seem to acknowledge. The required apprehension or comprehension of the aesthetic object postulated by Carroll would appear to imply a *conscious* intention on the part of those undergoing the aesthetic experience; at first sight, this does not really square with the aesthetic experience imposing itself upon us unexpectedly. In short, Carroll owes us an explanation concerning how his content-oriented approach would account for unexpected aesthetic experiences, something that, to the best of my knowledge, he has not provided. Fortunately, the same solution that I am offering here for the minimal view, with the requisite changes, could be adopted for Carroll's content-oriented approach.

There is nothing mysterious about the background or latent disposition that I am postulating in this article.<sup>36</sup> In the literature resulting from approaches to the study of art from neuroscience, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, there are lots of examples of dispositions that only get activated in the presence of the right stimuli and certainly do not require any prior intention or expectation.<sup>37</sup> So, I may be immersed in my own thoughts or paying attention to a particular object or event, when, all of a sudden and unexpectedly, I cannot help but notice and subsequently focus on a rhythmic pattern of sound or movement. And the same would be true concerning a symmetric arrangement or pattern, among other visual stimuli that I cannot avoid picking up on and then concentrating on. Irrespective of one's own take on the broader aims and successes of those research programmes, the phenomena that I am referring to here seem uncontroversial.

I do not deny that the disposition that I am postulating in this paper seems more complex than the examples that I have just cited. What matters to me is the plausibility and indeed continuity emanating from those examples. Furthermore, it may be the case that unexpected aesthetic experiences get a hold on us through one or more of these sensorial cues prior to forcing themselves upon us fully: the powerful colours and high symmetric arrangement of the facade first grab our attention and only subsequently do we fall under the full aesthetic spell of said architectonic marvel.

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35 A fuller investigation of unexpected aesthetic experiences would have to account, as well, for those prompted by hideous objects, such as when one's heart sinks, unexpectedly and unwillingly, upon taking in the desperately dull design of a room in a budget chain hotel. Again, I think that there is little doubt that one is undergoing a negative aesthetic experience in such cases. I do not think that this would present a great difficulty (i.e. it is quite possible that not only positive, but also negative aesthetic salience prompts the awakening of our dormant disposition to undergo an aesthetic experience), but I do not need to develop this notion any further for the purposes of this essay.

36 Not much should be read into my employing interchangeably adjectives such as 'background', 'latent' or 'dormant' to qualify 'disposition' in the present context. I use these words simply to indicate the unintentional nature of the activation of such a disposition.

37 See, for example, Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (London: Vintage, 2001); Mark Turner (ed.), *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (Oxford: OUP, 2006); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); and Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

I hope to have shown that there is nothing unusual or mysterious about such unexpected aesthetic experiences and the psychological disposition that, in my view, explains their occurrence. This disposition, which we are not free to control and is paradigmatically exemplified by aesthetic experiences which are unexpected, will play a pivotal role in my exploration of our art evaluation and analysis practices in the next section.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. The Psychological Impossibility of Carrying out Certain Practices of Art Evaluation and Analysis without Valuing the Aesthetic Experience for Its Own Sake

### *Cases of Art Analysis and Evaluation*

I contend that the controversy under scrutiny here should lead us to think productively about our psychology in relation to some ubiquitous and very important practices related to art evaluation and analysis. At the centre of the exchange between Carroll and Stecker, we find a series of related thought experiments in which two people, Jerome and Charles, undergo the same experience of a work of art, with the only difference being that Jerome values the experience for its own sake, whereas Charles values it for some instrumental reason.

I propose now to systematically develop a variation of this type of thought experiment in a way that, first of all, will be illuminating for my own purposes here (i.e. those unrelated to the debate about aesthetic experience); secondly, will put in sharp relief some key aspects of the controversy between Stecker and Carroll; and, thirdly, will help us to make some progress regarding their disagreement.

Case 1a. In the course of doing a research project, a student of English literature needs to find out the number of occurrences of the word 'love' in Shakespeare's comedies. Confronted with such a daunting task, our student opens an electronic file with the text of *As You Like It* and uses the search function to locate the instances of the word 'love' without actually reading any of the text.

Case 1b. As in the previous case, with the only change being that the student does not use the search function to locate instances of the word 'love' in Shakespeare's comedies, but scans the text visually without actually focusing enough to read it.

Case 2a. Our student has to identify instances where the word 'love' is used ironically in Shakespeare's comedies. It seems sensible to assume that full engagement with the text is required in order to ascertain whether or not the use of a word is ironic, so she simply reads through the whole text of each comedy. Critically, the task at hand does not involve an evaluation of the quality of the irony: the

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38 It is important to underline the unintentional aspect of the disposition. It is not the case that certain circumstances *enable* or *inspire* one to have an aesthetic experience, but rather that the awakening of the dormant disposition *forces* one to undergo an aesthetic experience in relation to a given object or event. Moreover, for the purposes of this article, I do not need to explain how we come to possess this dormant disposition to undergo an aesthetic experience any more than I need to elucidate such matters for aesthetic experiences generally.

target is merely to identify instances of irony involving the word ‘love’, but not to determine whether they are aesthetically satisfying or successful instances of irony.

Case 2b. As in the previous case, with the only variation being that now the student has to judge whether or not the instances of irony are aesthetically good or bad.<sup>39</sup>

Case 3. A critic has absolutely no desire to attend a theatre performance, but he does so purely for financial and professional reasons. Every aspect of his decision-making and motivational framework consists of purely instrumental reasons: that he might enjoy the performance does not even register as part of his motivation for going to the theatre, however compatible this might be with his other instrumental aims.

Cases 1a and 1b are unproblematic; they provide a useful contrast to the other cases, but do not elicit controversy: nobody maintains that the student is undergoing an aesthetic experience in those cases. Not even in Case 1b does her interaction with Shakespeare’s text mean attending to it in a discriminating manner, with the right kind of understanding.

Cases 2a, 2b and 3 will be very important in developing my own argument regarding our practices of art evaluation and analysis. As for the controversy between Carroll and Stecker, Case 2a saliently captures the central point of their disagreement; furthermore, Cases 2b and 3 point to a potential, but by no means unavoidable, divergence between them concerning evaluative aesthetic experiences.

### *Art Evaluation*

I will start with the most influential normative theory of aesthetic judgement, which will allow us to set the stage for my own purposes here. Irrespective of how one decides to work out the details of Kant’s proposal, I take it to be uncontroversial that, according to him, our aesthetic judgement is grounded on the aesthetic satisfaction or dissatisfaction that we derive from the aesthetic experience of the object being judged.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the details just sketched, Kant’s proposal has a normative component, since, in his view, we can base our aesthetic judgement on the wrong type of aesthetic experience, namely, an interested rather than a disinterested one. But neither Stecker nor Carroll wants to go down this normative road. As discussed in Section 2, Stecker wants a clear separation between his notion of valuing an aesthetic experience for its own sake and

39 One could transform Cases 2a and 2b into the Jerome-Charles type of thought experiment, with the variation from the original scenario being that here *both* have an explicit *instrumental motivation*, but in the case of Jerome such instrumental motivation (i.e. identifying instances of the ironic use of the word ‘love’) does not impede his valuing the experience for its own sake.

40 Following the customary practice in much contemporary literature, I take it that we can replace Kant’s ‘judgement of taste’ with our contemporary notion of ‘aesthetic judgement’ without doing too much violence to Kant’s conception; and, by the same token, we can construe Kant’s ‘pleasure’ (or ‘displeasure’) as ‘aesthetic satisfaction’ (or ‘dissatisfaction’) in the contemporary sense, that is, the type of aesthetic satisfaction that would allow us to assess favourably bleak, unforgiving and distressing works of art, such as Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* or Franju’s *Head Against the Wall*. Moreover, I will write only ‘aesthetic satisfaction’ when it is obvious from the context that the reference is also implicitly made to ‘aesthetic dissatisfaction’.

Kant's notion of disinterestedness, the upshot being that Stecker has no problem with aesthetic judgements stemming from aesthetic experiences that would not be disinterested in Kant's view because they would be simultaneously valued instrumentally and for their own sake. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 3, both Carroll and Stecker reject a normative (and in this sense potentially revisionary) account of aesthetic experience: ascriptions of aesthetic experiences related to aesthetic judgements are not to be legislated upon, but understood and conceptually clarified. Putting to one side Kantian disinterestedness, the idea that our aesthetic satisfaction should determine our aesthetic judgement is one that seems perfectly sound, current and popular.

Now, let us go back to Case 3 and develop it in a way that shows the tension between Stecker's and Carroll's notions of aesthetic experience. According to Carroll, it would be possible for the critic to undergo an aesthetic experience in the process of aesthetically evaluating the performance without any trace of valuing such experience for its own sake. Whether or not Carroll really needs to commit himself to this view will be discussed shortly, but in principle this is an option available to the follower of the content-oriented approach.

Stecker would argue that, in Carroll's stipulated scenario, an aesthetic experience would not take place and presumably no actual aesthetic judgement either. Anyone ascribing an aesthetic experience to our critic, himself included, would be confused or misguided. Given his own views about the extensional adequacy of his proposal, Stecker surely thinks that few people would be inclined to make such an attribution and that those who did would break with widespread usage and tradition.

I propose that Carroll's scenario, while conceivable, is *psychologically impossible*. If the critic were to experience the performance as prescribed by Carroll's content-oriented approach, he would inevitably value the performance for its own sake despite having no desire or expectation to do so: as developed in Section 4, the background or dormant disposition to undergoing an aesthetic experience *fully* according to the minimal view would kick in. In short, experiencing the performance with the comprehension and understanding required by Carroll's approach to aesthetic experience would make it inescapable that the critic values the experience of the performance for its own sake.

Let me establish the full connection between the present claim and the arguments developed in previous sections. Analogously to the case of unexpected aesthetic experiences, the critic would undergo the full aesthetic experience unintentionally (as discussed in Section 4).<sup>41</sup> In contrast to those experiences, what would impose or force the aesthetic experience upon the critic would be the requisite discriminating engagement with the performance, rather than some aesthetic salience as in the case of unexpected aesthetic experiences.

For the purposes of this article, I do not need to explain any further the psychological mechanisms that underpin my thesis, just as Carroll does not need to regarding the psychological plausibility of the scenarios described for Charles. As presumably Carroll does regarding his own proposal, I trust that my position will be vindicated as the readers

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41 The aesthetic experience could also be unexpected, although this might be more likely for the novice critic, since for the more experienced ones, however unintentional the aesthetic experience might be, force of habit would make the experience, at the very least, unsurprising.

react to and reflect on the thought experiments in the light of my explanations and against the background of their own experiences and understanding (both through self-reflection and the testimony of others) of what an aesthetic experience entails. In sum, it is on the strength of the proposed thought experiments that I hope to persuade the reader that undergoing the full aesthetic experience would mean undergoing it as the minimal view would have it, namely, including the valuing of the experience for its own sake.<sup>42</sup>

Three brief clarifications are in order at this point. One, it might be that Stecker grants the empirical plausibility of Carroll's scenarios merely for strategic purposes, with the intention of being as charitable as possible to Carroll's proposal, while still showing it to be wrong on conceptual grounds. At any rate, the important point is that, while my approach differs from Stecker's, it does support the same understanding of aesthetic experience in relation to the valuing of it for its own sake.

Two, relevantly, neither Stecker nor I are endorsing a normative thesis with respect to aesthetic experiences. Neither of us maintains that, in order to aesthetically judge an object, one ought to undergo an aesthetic experience of the right kind, namely, one valued for its own sake. We both think that, in order to aesthetically judge an object, one ought to undergo an aesthetic experience *simpliciter*, it being well understood that a necessary condition of an aesthetic experience is that one values it for its own sake. Whereas Stecker seems to think that one could undergo the type of experiences described by Carroll, with the proviso that they would not be aesthetic experiences, I do not think that one could: such engagement with the object of aesthetic contemplation would force upon itself the element of valuing the experience for its own sake and would, therefore, qualify as an aesthetic experience according to the minimal view.

Three, as with many other aspects of human nature, in general, and aesthetics, in particular, of course there will be outliers who will not experience aesthetic objects in the way I have argued for. But this does not detract from my thesis any more than a five-legged cow would cast into doubt that cows are naturally four-legged.<sup>43</sup>

Carroll can respond in two ways to the analysis of Case 3 by someone, be it Stecker or I, who favours the minimal view. He can grant that aesthetic experiences that ground aesthetic judgements are valued for their own sake, yet maintain that his point applies to non-evaluative aesthetic experiences, thus still resisting the minimal view.<sup>44</sup> This would be consistent with thinking that the aesthetic judgement of an object requires that the aesthetic experience be valued for its own sake, because of the role that aesthetic satisfaction plays in our aesthetic judgements.

Alternatively, Carroll could refuse to accept that even evaluative aesthetic experiences need to be valued for their own sake. He seems to point, if only tentatively,

42 See the subsection 'Thought Experiments and the Impasse' in Section 3, for further remarks on this point in the context of the full methodological discussion concerning this article. Admittedly, readers with a wealth of experience in matters of art evaluation and analysis may have an advantage in that they will have more forthcoming and robust reactions to the scenarios being discussed here.

43 Here, I take my cue from James Shelley, 'Hume and the Joint Verdict of True Judges', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 145–153, at 150.

44 In a less committal fashion, Carroll could remain agnostic about the minimal theorist's take on evaluative aesthetic experiences, while still holding that his view applies to non-evaluative aesthetic experiences.

in this direction when he rejects Stecker's contention that 'an aesthetic evaluation is an assessment of an object's ability to deliver aesthetic experiences—experiences valued for their own sake in virtue of being directed at the form, qualities, and meaning properties of the object',<sup>45</sup> and conversely suggests that 'perhaps an evaluation is aesthetic if it assesses the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the formal, and/or expressive, and/or aesthetic, and/or related effects of the work to the aims of the artwork'.<sup>46</sup>

Carroll's precise formulation allows for a final refinement of my position. If the assessment of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of any of the object's properties or effects requires attending with *understanding* to the *full* object (as in Cases 3 and 2b, even if the latter only requires the evaluation of a particular aesthetic property), then one could not produce an aesthetic evaluation without undergoing an aesthetic experience for its own sake, for the reasons explained above.

However, if one could examine an evaluative salient aspect of the object under scrutiny without comprehending the full object, then it would be possible to obtain some form of evaluation without undergoing an aesthetic experience for its own sake, but this would not trouble the proponents of the minimal view, since nobody would argue that an aesthetic experience was involved in the evaluation in the first place. For instance, think of a musicologist examining dozens of recordings of Baroque composers with a view to establishing whether the performances are historically informed or not, where their being historically informed is taken to be aesthetically positive. Given the volume of recordings, she decides to simply focus on the vibrato as a marker of sensitivity towards historically informed technique. We could imagine that she does not even listen to the full recording, but only bits of it, merely enough to establish the type of vibrato used. In such a case, nobody would contend that she is undergoing an aesthetic experience, even if she is attending with understanding to a technical and expressive aspect of the performance.

### *Art Analysis*

The relevant contrast to Case 3 is given by Case 2a, with Case 2b providing a middle stage between the two that will hopefully be useful in our analysis of the thought experiments. Case 2b is like Case 3 and unlike Case 2a in that it requires an aesthetic evaluation. Case 2b is like Case 2a and unlike Case 3 in that it requires the analysis of a particular property of the works of art under examination (Shakespeare's comedies), namely, irony in relation to the word 'love'. It seems uncontroversial that irony is an aesthetic property,<sup>47</sup> which can

45 Carroll, 'Ethics and Aesthetics', 94.

46 Ibid., 95.

47 Irony is not always an aesthetic property (for example, irony in a conversation or a political speech), but throughout this article the term 'irony' should be understood as 'literary irony', with the implication that it is the kind of irony that is aesthetically salient. I take it that irony in this respect is no different from other obvious aesthetic properties, such as wit or poignancy (Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 59–60).



be used for descriptive or evaluative purposes, and which can be aimed at a whole work of art, or can be analysed in relation to particular instances.<sup>48</sup>

Let us take Case 2b first. Can our student correctly assess the aesthetic quality of a given instance of irony without reading the text for its own sake? I would submit that she cannot, for reasons analogous to those discussed with respect to Case 3: upon reading the text of *As You Like It* with the requisite understanding, however uninterested our student might be regarding the experience of Shakespeare's text for its own sake, the latent disposition to experiencing the text for its own sake would impose itself; hence, an aesthetic experience of the text, as postulated by the minimal view, would obtain. Furthermore, the aesthetic satisfaction elicited by each detected case of irony will act as a compass for the aesthetic evaluation. Moreover, this would be the case irrespective of whether or not the evaluation of the aesthetic worth of a given instance of irony is merely intuitive or is supported by a subtle technical understanding and deep awareness of current theories of verbal irony and puts those theories to good use in relation to aesthetic merit.

Having explored Case 2b, one naturally wonders whether its analysis carries over to Case 2a, given that the only difference is that in the latter case the student has to discharge a descriptive analysis rather than an evaluative one. The connection between aesthetic judgement and aesthetic satisfaction, an aesthetic satisfaction which is readily understood as a satisfaction in an experience valued for its own sake, is no longer present. However, I contend that attending to the text of the comedy with the required understanding to make sense of it, as would be needed to locate instances of irony, will awaken the dormant disposition to experience the text for its own sake, even if there is no evaluative motivation associated with the experience.

One can design variations of Case 2a where our student is reading *As You Like It* in the most inauspicious circumstances: over-worked, under huge stress and with absolutely no inclination towards aesthetic enjoyment. Nonetheless, I submit that even in those cases there would be a relevant and irreducible aspect of the experience that would impose itself upon the student and that would qualify as valuing the experience for its own sake. Hence, my proposal works for non-evaluative analytical practices as well as evaluative ones, as long as they require attending with the appropriate understanding to the full object.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, I have primarily sought to show that beings such as ourselves cannot attend with understanding to objects suitable for aesthetic contemplation without experiencing

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48 At some point, Stecker seems to argue that aesthetic properties are evaluative properties (*Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 68–69). Consequently, Carroll has criticized Stecker's contention on the grounds that there are aesthetic properties that do not figure in aesthetic evaluation ('Ethics and Aesthetics', 94). For instance, and outside his debate with Stecker, Carroll has exemplified his point with the aesthetic property *sombre*, since it is evident that it can be used for evaluative or merely descriptive purposes ('Recent Approaches to Aesthetic Experience', 172). However, Stecker's considered view is that there are aesthetic properties that are simply descriptive properties (*Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 71–72 and 88–89).

them in such a way that we value the experience for its own sake. This will be true of cases of evaluation and analysis where one needs to attend to the object in question with the required discrimination or comprehension. Although perhaps not unexpected, such a result is nonetheless quite remarkable upon reflection: given our psychology and the nature of aesthetic experience, we cannot escape such a fate regarding our practices of art evaluation and analysis. There will be cases where one will not need to engage fully with the object in question, and then the evaluation and analysis might take place without producing anything other than instrumental gains; but in those cases there will be no contention by anyone (those favouring the content-oriented approach included) that an aesthetic experience has taken place.

Moreover, I have tried to make some progress in the controversy between Carroll and Stecker in the context of the debate about aesthetic experience by exploring methodological matters, and negative, indifferent and unexpected aesthetic experiences. Finally, the distinction between aesthetic experiences connected to evaluation and those focused on mere description should offer some further clarification regarding the potential extent of the disagreement between Stecker and Carroll.

I conclude that Stecker is fundamentally right in his defence of the minimal view. I would submit that, rather than denying that Carroll's fictional scenarios would be instances of aesthetic experiences, one should argue that they are conceivable but psychologically impossible.<sup>49</sup>

Víctor Durà-Vilà  
School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science  
University of Leeds  
[v.dura-vila@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:v.dura-vila@leeds.ac.uk)

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