

Review of WHAT GOOD ARE THE ARTS?

by JOHN CAREY

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What Good Are the Arts? is an attack on historic claims that art has any purpose. Such attacks on the theories of art are not new, but Carey trumps previous iconoclasts by attacking not only specific theorists, but art itself, arguing that viewing art is a waste of time, and that those who say they love art are socially-divisive individuals who value human life less than the existence of artworks. As evidence Carey offers the evacuation of the National Gallery collection from London during the Second World War as proof that art lovers believe 'people are replaceable whereas artworks are not', and he suggest that this contempt for people is 'embedded in Hitler's art-worship' where it helps to explain the Holocaust.

The book is divided into seven chapters, the first five of which question claims that art improves people or society, while the remaining two are devoted to protecting Carey's pet subject, literature, from any collateral damage. Each of the first five chapters is headed by a question, the answers to which are almost unremittingly negative, from the shoulder-shrugging 'whatever' when asked 'What is a work of art?', to repeated noes for the questions 'Is "high" art superior?', 'Can science help?', 'Do the arts make us better?' and 'Can art be a religion?'. It is notable how the question marks disappear from the last two chapter titles, in which Carey defends literature in a more proselytising mode, allowing us to question the image, but not the written word.

The first five chapters also betray the origin of the book on the lecture circuit as Carey's method is to use a limited number of critical figures to act as emblems for what he sees as common attitudes. In chapter one Immanuel Kant and Arthur C. Danto dominate, the first as indicative of a neo-platonist view that beauty is universal and eternal, and the second for his claims that art is anything an artist intends as art is art. Both Kant and Danto hold fallacious positions, we are told, by believing objects hold fixed meanings within themselves, a conclusion that may be reasonable. The problem lies in Carey's reliance on unsubstantiated claims to prove such points. For example, the subtleties of Kant's claim there is an objective criteria for beauty is dismissed merely by an appeal to common sense, with Carey writing 'To a modern reader this seems patently untrue'. Common sense may indeed tell us that beauty is subjective, but this level of argument could also justify claims that the sun goes round the earth. Such shorthand is excusable in a public lecture, but it makes one wary of using this book with students in case they take it as an exemplar of good critical writing.

Unfortunately such flaws permeate the book, and become more serious in Carey's attempt to discount scientific claims for æsthetic responses, the so-called neuroæsthetics. Here he appears uncertain of engaging sensibly with matters on which he lacks subject-specific knowledge, with the result that the gentle dismissals of Kant and Danto are replaced with outright abuse. No real explanation given as to why we should consider Professors V.S. Ramachandran and William Herstein to be the 'Laurel and Hardy of neuroæsthetics' beyond the fact that Carey does not like

their seemingly unremarkable claim that artists manipulate reality to make it visually more interesting. That Ramachandran and Herstein call this process 'caricature' seems to result in a confusion in Carey between a common conception of comic caricature, and the processes of manipulation artists employ, all of which is hardly justification to call them 'inept'.

Despite the media attention given to Carey's attack on the art world, it is his defence of literature that is in many ways more interesting. Carey suggests that literature is superior to other arts because it allows for the juxtaposition of attitudes, not only within a single work, but between texts, authors, genres, times and places. Set Jane Austen's aversion to the 'unsightly' grief of the Musgroves in *Persuasion* against Wordsworth's sympathy for the grief of the shepherd in the poem 'Michael' and you have two moral schemes that can be compared and contrasted within the readers' minds. This is a dialectical process that Carey clearly understands from first hand experience of teaching students, and is of interest for the way in which it does not allow for definite ethical conclusions to be reached. As Carey states, each new text we read 'constantly modifies, adapts, questions or abrogates whatever we have read before', so that although we cannot make statements that one moral position is superior to another, at least moral questions are kept in focus. The problem with this is simply Carey's denial of the ability of other art forms to perform the same function. If literature thrives on comparisons, one might legitimately ask is it not infinitely easier to compare two paintings on a gallery wall, situated next to each other, or two artworks projected side-by-side in a classroom, than two novels or poems? Indeed, it is curious that Carey chooses to deride Ruskin so fervently in the book given Ruskin's development of a very similar theory for visual art in which the 'poesis' of artists like Rossetti is contrasted against the 'mimesis' of an artist like J.W. Inchbold. For Ruskin this dialectical contrasting is also a moral question that allows individuals and society to function and develop. However Carey is desperate to distinguish his literary theory from similar art theories, even when the comparisons lie within his own book. In his 'theory of indistinctness' Carey argues that literature allows the reader creative freedom because the meaning of words is open enough not to force a specific vision onto the reader. It is the reader who can decide what Mr Darcy looks like, or how terrible is Milton's Hell, or how Othello's jealousy feels. Yet only a few pages earlier Carey has dismissed Semir Zeki for making a similar claim for art, with Zeki suggesting that Michelangelo's unfinished works are superior to his finished sculptures because they do not 'tie the visual system down to a definite form'. Zeki's suggestion is, Carey states, a 'questionable conclusion'.

Such prejudice is a pity as one of Carey's most important statements on art gets lost in it. According to Carey, arts policy in Britain is skewed in favour of big centralised art venues in which one can be no more than a passive spectator. Marginalised from this is the only place in which art really does have a function, namely as a participatory event that can save people from alienation, self-loathing and a life of crime. Such views are by no means new, and echo those made over fifty years ago by Herbert Read. Read is a figure curiously absent from Carey's text, and one cannot help suspecting Carey would not welcome a comparison with the author of *Education Through Art*, a book that helped ensure art's place in the school curriculum after the war, where it did exactly what Carey wants it to do. With its duplicitous tone, in which an individual's freedom to choose to

like art is married to a mockery for all those who do, it is difficult to imagine *What Good Are the Arts?* having the same effect.

Michael Paraskos