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Representation & its limit

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REPRESENTATION & ITS LIMIT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
The Department of Philosophy

By
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation into traditional accounts of aesthetic representation. Using the work of Noel Carroll as an exemplar of the definition put forward in canonical philosophical accounts of aesthetic representation, I look at how Carroll's account must work. By examining both the definition in abstract and how this definition is instantiated into existent and hypothetical works of art, it becomes apparent that Carroll's definition is overly stringent and relies upon a counterintuitive distinction between aesthetic representation and aesthetic expression.

This distinction is problematic insofar as the distinction seems to be a largely semantic distinction: the mechanism by which a work of art expresses something seems identical to the mechanism by which a work of art represents something, and the method by which one determines whether a work expresses a concept or represents it is wholly dependent on the content communicated. Moreover, if one retains a traditional definition of representation it becomes evident that either our understanding of representation is insufficiently complex to account for meta-representation—representations that represent representation—or non-representation—representations that represent nothing.

I propose a new definition for representation that combines aspects of Carroll's accounts of both expression and representation, and investigate ways in which such a representation can represent both meta-representational content and non-representational content. Graham Priest's work provides a mechanic by which the limits of that which can be expressed may be appropriated into aesthetics, and Jacques Derrida's account of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty gives us a limit case of nonrepresentational art for

which I contend a definition of representation must account. This representation at the limits requires a representation substantially more expansive than that proposed by Carroll—and thus demonstrates the need for widening the scope of that which can be represented.

I conclude by demonstrating how an expanded definition of representation such as that which I put forward can be explanatory of contemporary works of art deemed non-representational in philosophy of art. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate why such an account is preferable to the alternatives.

“A fuller understanding of philosophies, like that of people, can often be obtained in the light of what has been repressed.”

-Graham Priest

“When proposed answers to a question turn out so wrong, the time has come to re-examine the terms of our discourse, the commonplace as well as the technical notions we are working with, and perhaps even the question we are trying to answer.”

-Nelson Goodman

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Architecture of the Argument

The marriage between art and representation—a union which seemingly owes its origin to both Plato and Aristotle—was seen to be the primary and operative characteristic of the vast majority of exemplary works of art pulled from a variety of Western artistic traditions.¹ This attention from the ancients ensured that aesthetic representation would remain central to any historical analysis of European art, and that the concept would remain relevant at the very least as the principle by which early Western art was initially believed to work. This can be seen from the centuries of silence in philosophy of art after the ancients—though to be fair this may have less to do with the validity of the theories espoused by our forebears and more to do with the deterioration of the scholastic community during the Dark Ages.

Regardless, any careful examination of both Plato and Aristotle reveals that the earliest aestheticians took quality and presence of representation to be essentially constitutive of all good art. With the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, came the advent of non-representational art and, perhaps more damningly, increased Western awareness of non-Western art; the paintings of Picasso, Mondrian, Pollock, the films of Maya Daren, along with the music of Cage and Phillip Glass all suggested that art did not need to be representational at all.

¹ Both Plato and Aristotle conceive of art as being primarily *mimetic*; Plato does so in Books II, III and X of *The Republic*, while Aristotle explained this in *The Poetics*. A fuller treatment of mimesis will be given in Chapter 2 of my thesis.

This sea change lent renewed credibility to other modes of artistic evaluation that had developed along the way: certainly proponents of expressionism and formalism argue against the primacy of representational characteristics in a work of art, as do the neo-Hegelians and the institutional theorists.² Indeed, the explosion of aestheticians and comprehensive accounts of the nature of art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seemingly reduced the representation theory to little more than a concern for the antiquarian; and, despite multiple attempts to redefine representation,³ the idea that representation is the primary characteristic by which all art functions seems to have passed its time.

It is the purpose of this work to re-examine the definition of representation in art: What representation is properly considered to be, what should be excluded from the concept, and what this means to those who propose a philosophy of art. Through this analysis, I contend that the traditional architecture of the representational theory of art is unnecessarily restrictive—counter-intuitively so, in fact—but restrictive in ways that substantively diverge from contemporary critiques of the aesthetic theory; To wit, that critiques of representation’s centrality in art are rarely actually critiques of representation *qua* representation, but are critiques of either various instances of representation in a given work of art or our own attempts to properly define representation’s scope.

Thus, I propose a slight redefinition of representation as a whole: A definition that coheres with folk-intuitions on the subject while avoiding the pitfalls that plague

² Leo Tolstoy’s work is an excellent exemplar for the expressionists, and Clive Bell probably the most definitive source for the formalists. The philosopher Noel Carroll is an excellent example of the neo-Hegelians, while Arthur Danto and George Dickie are the most famous of the institutional theorists.

³ Obviously, Noel Carroll’s take on this will be the focus of my thesis. But Carroll is far from the only culprit: Nelson Goodman tinkers with the definition in *Language of Art*, Joseph Margolis appropriates it to lend credence to his conception of art as the exemplar of “cultural entities,” as do many philosophers working in the neo-Hegelian tradition.

contemporary canonical understandings of the concept. The advantages of this approach are manifold: the result is a more reasonable refinement of representation's definition that dovetails nicely with more modern intuitions about the nature of the work of art as provided by the formalists, expressionists, and aesthetic Hegelians. This and this alone should provide one with sufficient reason to retool the way we approach representation and ascribe representational status to representation in a work of art. Moreover, my redefinition will broaden the scope of that which can be represented, thus broadening the scope of representation as such.

I hope that, rather than viewing representation in a work of art as merely a first step on the path towards understanding art more completely, one will be able to see exactly what early philosophers of art saw in the concept—a concept that seemed so appealing and so explanative of art as a whole. I contend that if we broaden our understanding of what can be represented, we will be able to see why the early thinkers were able to claim early Western art was representational. Such an understanding provides us the tools with which we can clarify this early intuition in a way both palatable to the modern audience and explanatory of art itself.

1.2 Noel Carroll and Contemporary Formulations of Aesthetic Representation

Finding a contemporary exemplar of the representation theory of art was fairly easy: In *Philosophy of Art* Noel Carroll proposes a form of representation that seems to be intuitively correct upon casual reading. Possessed with a Hegelian sense of historical progress, Carroll frequently argues that the representational theory of art—while

important insofar as it identified representation as a crucial issue in many types of art and, perhaps, in art as a whole—is little more than the most primitive of attempts to understand and analyse the multiform ways in which art functions.⁴

Carroll's formulation of representation as a whole, however, twists representation into something that bears little resemblance to the term in its full sense: Thus making it the perfect exemplar of the problem I seek to redress. Although Carroll does note that *mimesis*—the notion put forward by Plato and Aristotle—is quite different than the representation identified by more contemporary proponents of the theory, Carroll's restated definition poses significant philosophical problems.

Thus, when Carroll notes in his discussion of various styles of representational theories of art that “[n]either the imitation theory, the representational theory nor the neo-representational theory succeed in discovering a general property that all works, in order to count as artworks, must possess,”⁵ the question I ask is simple: Is the blame to be laid upon the philosophers and critics who, during the past two and a half millennia, have raised the mimetic or representational aspects of a work of art above its proper place or, instead, to the contemporary notion of representation? Perhaps more pressing: Is there enough blame to be spread around?

I contend there is more than enough blame to spread around. In my view, it is our understanding of representation that is insufficient to the task at hand: Carroll's attempts to debunk the notion that representation in art is not essentially constitutive of works of art result in a proposition that, upon careful analysis, goes too far in asserting representation's relative inconsequentiality. By presenting an account of representation

⁴ This will be examined more completely in Chapter 2 of this thesis, which deals with Chapter 1 of Carroll's *Philosophy of Art*.

⁵ Noel Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 33.

that coheres with the central argument of his book and establishing a defined historical growth towards the ways humanity's understanding of art has evolved, Carroll—far from proving his own point—instead reveals that canonical definitions of representation have reduced the concept to something that fails to adequately account for all of the things in a work of art that can be representational.

Indeed, an analysis of Carroll's definition reveals the entire distinction between 'expression' and 'representation' may be unnecessary given that the concepts seem to work identically: The only difference between them is the scope each of the words is defined to cover, rather than the way by which the content is transmitted to an audience. A careful reading of Carroll reveals that his attempts to reduce the efficacy of representation cause one to re-evaluate its importance in the work of art.

1.3 From Representation to Its Limits

Carroll's definition of representation presents us with an opportunity to examine the mistake and redefine representation properly. This redefinition yields surprising results; Carroll's formulation seems like an ideal starting point for a reanalysis of what can properly be called representational in a work of art and what cannot. Carroll's enterprise, when coupled with a careful examination of the work of Antonin Artaud through Jacques Derrida's essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" provides one with a new understanding of representation's possibility and gives us some clue as to how it can function in the presence of its own limit: non-representation.⁶

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 232-50.

This thesis demonstrates that this new formulation of representation is a representation that can be properly seen to be *necessary* to art though clearly not sufficient for art given the aesthetic relevance of formal properties in a given work of art. Where the current definition forces representational art to be overly simplistic and explicitly limited in scope, my redefinition creates a representation that can function in the presence of non-representation and more easily interrelate to other aspects of the work of art. My contention, to steal the lapidary sentence structure of Kant, is that, even in the presence of its own limit, representation without formal elements dictating its manifestation is blind, while formal elements without representational content are empty.⁷

I explain how this can work in the final two chapters of this thesis. The point of departure was already alluded to in my acknowledgement of the debt this work owes to Derrida's study of Antonin Artaud. A much larger debt can be found in the works of Graham Priest: Priest's examination of Derrida's methodology shows us exactly how a reader can best put the Derridean pieces together. Moreover, Priest's conceptualisation of the limits of expression and thought gives us a map of exactly how representation can function in the presence of its own limit and in relation to those aspects of the work of art which are explicitly non-representational.

This distinction is critical: Without accounting for formal elements in the work of art, one is forced to reach the troubling conclusion that two different representations of the same thing would result in the same work of art if representational content alone is sufficient to individuate artworks. Thus formal elements in my account of the work of art will serve to clarify representation into something intelligible and individuated. To look

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 193-4.

at this relationship metaphorically: representation is essentially the semantic content of the work of art, while formal restraints are relevant to the medium within which the meaning of the semantic content is made apparent.

It is Priest's idea of the limit of thought that explains the interrelation between formal elements and representation in a work of art in an intellectually satisfying way. The idea that the work of art can be the location of such a tension is given powerful voice by Jacques Derrida in his own analysis of what Antonin Artaud must have meant by the concept of cruel representation and its relationship with and to art as a whole.

1.4 Where We Go from Here

The representation we are left with—a concept that is a great deal more conservative than that advocated by Artaud, but that nonetheless accounts for the space Artaud demands be created—is fundamentally a representation that survives many of the critiques levelled at the representation theory of the past. This is a sharp contrast to more traditional accounts of the concept, and in my view an advantage. This representation solves several of the historical problems levelled at any representation theory of art, yet presents the theory with new challenges to overcome: These new challenges—while formidable—are, at least in principle, far less devastating to the theory than those to which the theory in its crudest form falls prey.

And, indeed, the Derridean conception of cruel representation will be held up as a limit case of exactly how representation can function at the very edge of contemporary understanding of the concept. Moreover, cruel representation will provide a schema for

exactly how representation relates to those works of art which are correctly identified as non-representational in the first place.

In short, the aim of this project is not to compile a laundry list of all that is and is not art. Rather, by focusing on the concept of representation and that which is both included and excluded by some contemporary colloquial and technical definitions of the term, I hope to better understand the way in which art works. With that, I begin the body of this argument.

CHAPTER 2. NOEL CARROLL'S CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATION

2.1 Carroll's Account of Representational Art

In *Philosophy of Art*, Noel Carroll concludes his analysis of the representational theory of art by noting that

the development of non-representational art in the nineteenth and twentieth century rendered the representational theory of art obsolete, while also alerting theorists to the fact that it had never really been fully comprehensive.⁸

Although his reasons for reaching this conclusion are varied, Carroll is hardly alone in asserting this point: the advancement of non-representational art seems to be the proverbial nail in the coffin for the most venerable attempt to formulate a comprehensive account of the nature of art.⁹ With the existence of non-representational art purportedly disproving the representational account of art, Carroll draws a strict divide between the way that non-representational art and representational art work throughout his analysis. At the crux of it all lies the question of representation itself: Both what it is and what it is not.

Carroll provides several formulations of representational theories of art, and rebuts them with varying degrees of success. While his formulation of rebuttals to various sub-genres of the representational theory of art is intriguing, it is important to focus on his account of the representational theory of art alone: The various permutations of the representational theory of art generally do not contend that representation is the primary quality that must be possessed by a work of art but instead focus on other qualities

⁸ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 56.

⁹ Clive Bell asserts much the same point in *Art*, and it's a theme taken as given by many of the thinkers featured in Richard Roth and Susan King Roth's *beauty is nowhere: ethical issues in art and design*.

possessed by artworks in an attempt to avoid the problems of representation. They are, as such, of little interest to us at this juncture. The representational theory of art proper, however, is of a great deal of interest, and Carroll maintains that it functions as follows:

x represents y (where y ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events, and actions) if and only if (1) a sender intends x (e.g., a picture) to stand for y (e.g., a haystack) and (2) the audience realizes that x is intended to stand for y.¹⁰

Thus, for Carroll, representation is said to be operative when a given object represents something out of a domain consisting of objects, persons, events, and actions (all of which tend to be existent things but do not, in principle at least, necessarily have to be) if and only if the artist intends for this specific representation to be present in the work and the audience realizes that this representation is operative in the work.

This plays out elegantly. Were I a painter, I would create representational art by a very simple process. Suppose that I, upon having an item of great worth stolen from my home by a vagrant who frequents the area around my home, wish to graphically illustrate the severity of this vagrant's crimes against me. When I finally lift my brush from the canvas, I could tell straight away that my hypothetical painting is representational. For instance, the fact that I painted a man clad all in black and white—wearing a black mask to cover his heinous features—running away from my apartment building holding what seems to be a Playstation 3 seems to be fairly representational. Despite the fact that the real-life vagrant in question—let's call him Y—was not wearing black and white (most likely he dresses quite distinctly from the Hamburgler in reality), my painting of the Hamburgler—for simplicity's sake, X—surely could represent him; After all, X can represent Y provided that I as an artist intend for X to represent Y, and provided that an audience can perceive that intention.

¹⁰ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26.

As with the Hamburger, so too with other art. With little trouble, one can easily account for what is commonly thought of as the representational content of any work of art.

2.2 Initial Problems with Carroll's Definition

There is a problem, however: While an existent or potentially existent thing is representable, an idea, in this formulation, is not. Furthermore, this formulation also fails to account for non-ideal audiences or non-ideal artists.¹¹ Because a given work of art can only be said to represent a thing if the representation is both intended by the artist and understood by the audience, it precludes and diminishes the role of both artist and audience: there are no accidental representations in Carroll's account of representation because there cannot be any by definition. Successful artists—in this instance, artists who create representations—can never represent anything unintentionally given restriction (1); astute audiences, more distressingly, are astute only insofar as they fulfil the requirement set in section (2). For Carroll, it seems, audiences that see representations where the artist intended none are not seeing representations at all.

Carroll, I suspect, does have a defence against this last charge. If the audience in question is picking up empirically verifiable representations not explicitly intended by the artist, Carroll could suggest that the representations in question were subconsciously intended by the artist—and, perhaps, that an audience astute enough to see more than the

¹¹ Umberto Eco: Porta Ludovica, "The Author and his Interpreters," Porta Ludovica, http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_author.html. Here I retain the distinction between ideal and non-ideal audiences employed by Eco.

artist believed she created is simply capable of interpreting subconscious representations. Such an analysis seems intuitively plausible.

But such an analysis would not inure Carroll from the suggestion that there are occasions in art where events an artist definitively did not intend to include—and explicitly denies including—are perceived by astute audiences and that are in fact present in the work. The most obvious example to fans of epic fantasy novels would be J.R.R. Tolkien's account of the Battle of the Shire, which does invoke newsreel footage of the bombing of London during World War II.¹² Tolkien, a British writer alive and writing during World War II, undeniably saw the result of these bombing raids. To suggest the work is in some way a reaction to what the author saw seems utterly reasonable.

But Tolkien himself denies just that.¹³ Tolkien's conception of his own work is found in the interplay of escapism and consolation. Though the mechanism by which this plays out is ultimately beyond the scope of this example, the long and short of it is that the work exists because it is a fantasy and an utter escape from the real world and its influences. The upshot of all this is a work that is non-allegorical, and readings of the work as allegory act specifically counter to the author's intentions in writing the work.¹⁴

Such readings, of course, exist. Indeed, such readings could still be said to be subconscious intentions in a work of art—and I suspect Carroll would claim that to be the case and call it quits. Such an answer seems insufficient to the task at hand, however; When dealing with an author across a gulf of time, such pat denials are unavailable and

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, *Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company), 303.

¹³ Socialist Review, "Fantasy and Revolution: An Interview with China Mieville," Socialist Review, <http://pubs.socialistreview.org.uk/isj88/newsinger.htm>.

¹⁴ Revolution: Science Fiction, "Michael Moorcock's 'Epic Pooh,'" "Revolution Science Fiction, <http://www.revolutionsf.com/article.php?id=953>.

much latitude can be given to audience or critical responses to a work of art.¹⁵ But when an author spends a great deal of thought eliminating audience responses to his work as unsupported by the text—going so far as to write treatises explaining why this must be the case—suggesting that he does not know his own mind seems to be less than fair to the artist in question.

If such an example is possible regarding allegory and image in literature, it seems not unreasonable to suggest such problems could arise in strictly representational terms as well. Photography could provide us with a hypothetical analogue. Suppose an unassuming and apolitical wildlife photographer dedicated his life to taking pictures of elephant herds, and suppose a collection of these pictures was selected in June of 1994 to be published in America in the November issue of a magazine. The magazine hits newsstands, by pure happenstance, the day after the midterm elections of that year. By a singular accident of timing, photos of stampeding elephants by an apolitical photographer take on a political meaning unintended by the artist and denied by the artist because of the Republican Revolution. Regardless, it is what the public will remember the pictures for through a series of non-political decisions made by publishers.

In such a case, it would be inevitable for audiences to assume the pictures were published to coincide with the election and serve as an illustration of the election of many new Republicans. It would also be reasonable for the artist to deny this as that which he was trying to represent in his pictures, just as it would be reasonable for the magazine publishers to cite that they had never considered the outcome of the election when

¹⁵ David Ball's *Backwards and Forwards* is an excellent example of this. An intensive and close reading of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* starting at the end and moving backwards to the beginning may not have been intended by Shakespeare; but the results of such a reading seem reveal new things about the play Shakespeare left us with. At any rate, Shakespeare has yet to complain about it.

publishing the pictures. But regardless of the author's intent, it seems churlish to deny that the pictures in question do not represent the election in question in a manner of speaking.

2.3 Further Problems with Carroll's Definition

A close examination of Carroll's definition suggests the definition is set up in such a way that—contrary to intuitions about the fact that some works of art *are* clearly and distinctly representational in function—representation can never be the defining trait of a complex work of art. Indeed, the qualifications put in place by Carroll upon the function of representation suggest to this reader that Carroll's conception of representation is always limited to that which can be anticipated by both the artist and the audience. While this is explanatory of a wide array of representational art, the utility of representation is limited to that which can be easily and obviously understood since intention and understanding are set by Carroll as representation's limits.

Others have reached similar conclusions. Nelson Goodman, in an analysis of the limitations of the critic's often-needless appeal to the authority of author's intent detects this stress as well. "Obviously," Goodman notes, "drastic adjustments in this are needed to accommodate works that fail to realize the artist's intentions or that exceed or diverge from them[.]"¹⁶

This, of course, encapsulates my concern completely while opening up the dialogue even farther: while I am also concerned with the applicability of Carroll's formulation to art that is considered good, Goodman notes this has direct effect on the

¹⁶ Goodman, AJ II.4.

ways in which one assigns blame—or, to be more charitable, *responsibility*—for bad art as well. Certainly, representational content is still present in a portrait of one person that, through sheer artist’s error, perfectly mimics the visage of another person, a person who is decidedly not the subject of portrait; While this occurrence seems largely implausible given the fact that portraiture is a craft at least presumably grounded in verisimilitude, it certainly remains possible and—as a limit case—is something for which we must account. After all, “not only the road to hell is paved with unfulfilled intentions, and great works are often full of unintended realizations.”¹⁷

Certainly, by the formula espoused by Carroll, I would be incorrect in my assignation of representational art status to the works in question above given the fact that there is a decided lack of intentionality present. And, while I certainly think Carroll to be justified in so doing in regard to subconscious intentions, I suspect he sorely misses the mark when confronted with works wherein the audience seems to have discovered something explicitly denounced by the artist in question. It also bears mentioning that, regardless of his astuteness regarding the first condition required for the assignation of representation-status, the presence of the second condition seems to be largely spurious on an intuitive level: After all, would Emily Dickinson’s poetry have still been good had no one found the musty box it was stored in? Does the audience’s understanding—or even awareness of—the work in question really affect the work itself?

I contend that the confusion and counterintuitive nature of Carroll’s insistence upon audience recognition is not a result of the way that representation works on an essential level but, rather, follows ineluctably from the way that the word is defined: In all fairness to Carroll, his definition of representation notes that “by representation, here,

¹⁷ Goodman, AJ II.4.

is meant something that is intended to stand for something else and that is recognized by audiences as such.”¹⁸

2.4. Carroll’s Representation in Action

Despite these quibbles, however, perhaps it would be best to illustrate how the creative process of art would work in Carroll’s account of the representational theory of art. In accordance with Carroll’s formulation of representation, the process by which I could paint a picture of two dogs fighting as allegory would be fairly straightforward. Without much difficulty, my hypothetical painting would represent both animals in question while communicating my own simplistic and jingoist analysis of World War II. The dog that represents America would be a Golden Retriever or a Collie (evoking memories of the iconic American dog Lassie, a dog possessed of rare nobility and virtue); The dog representing the Axis Powers could be a Pug or a mutt of the filthiest variety (perhaps infected with mange to show its baseness and deprivation). If I intend these representations to represent that which I stipulate above, and if my audience understands this picture is a representation of World War II, then my painting would have at least met the most basic necessary condition that denotes art status.

My painting of two dogs fighting would be art according to Carroll’s representation because the two dogs represent World War II (which belongs to the domain of events) if and only if I, as the artist, intend for my painting to stand for World War Two and the audience realizes that my picture of two dogs fighting represents World War Two. Indeed, perhaps employing collars on my images of the dogs that respectively

¹⁸ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 25.

read “Axis” and “Allies” would be most efficacious in this regard, but that is neither here nor there.

Carroll’s rebuttal to this conception of art is twofold: first, he notes that “there are many works of art that are not representations in this sense [for] the cathedral of St. Peter in Rome does not stand for a house of God; it *is* a house of God.”¹⁹ This first objection—while substantive—is merely setting the stage for his second, more crucial, objection:

the problem with the representational theory of art is not simply that it excludes too much architecture from the category of art. It also excludes important and obvious examples of art from every other artistic genre as well.²⁰

Carroll notes that much orchestral music, movies, photographs, poetry, and dance are actually merely “presented as occasions for concentrated perceptual experiences.”²¹ Decorative art, too, seems to disprove the representational theory of art for Carroll, as he notes that these works of art are “works based in the pleasing play of forms, representing nothing.”²² Thus, Carroll contends that, although representation seems to be necessary in some way for traditional visual art, the existence and popularity of other forms of art seems to be a strong argument against the universality of representation as a necessary condition for art *qua* art.

Before answering these rebuttals directly, let us look again—albeit briefly—at Carroll’s formulation of the representational theory of art, in particular at what exactly constitutes representation itself:

x represents y (**where y ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events, and actions**) if and only if (1) a sender intends x (e.g., a picture) to stand for y (e.g., a haystack) and (2) the audience realizes that x is intended to stand for y.²³

¹⁹ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 25.

²⁰ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 25-6.

²¹ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26.

²² Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26.

²³ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26. **Emphasis** mine.

Perhaps the reason Carroll is allowed to raise the previous objections is not because of an inherent flaw in representation but, rather, because of the stringent definition he has provided governing what can and cannot be represented. One could certainly circumvent Carroll's first objection concerning architecture by making a slight addendum to Carroll's definition of representation: This new definition of representation would read, instead, "where y ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events, actions, **ideas, states of being, and abstract concepts.**"

Carroll would certainly object to including ideas, states of being, and abstract concepts into the representational model: he notes later in *Philosophy of Art* that there must be a clear distinction between representation, which functions exclusively as outlined above, and expression, which is the proper medium by which ideas, states of being, and concepts are transmitted in the sphere of art. Carroll asserts that this division between expression and representation is evident in the whole of philosophy of art, and the apparent synonymy between expression and representation is merely attributable to a looseness of speech. Indeed, although a critic can assert "AC/DC's *You Shook Me All Night Long* represents one man's passion for an erstwhile love that ended too soon" and mean the same thing as when she says "AC/DC's *You Shook Me All Night Long* expresses one man's passion for an erstwhile love that ended too soon," Carroll contends that

this sense of expression is broader than the one that concerns philosophers or art, since typically when they talk of expression they intend it to contrast with representation. Thus, the sense of "expression" that concerns us is more narrow than the view of expression as representation.²⁴

²⁴ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 79.

Let us assume—for the sake of charity—that Carroll is attempting to remain firmly within the auspices of convention and determine whether his rationale for this distinction retains intuitive plausibility.

Staying in line with the rationale behind the above observation, Carroll continues by noting that the aforementioned

sense of expression contrasts with the notion of representation explored [earlier]. There the notion of representation applied to certain kinds of things, but not others; its domain comprised objects, persons, places, events and actions.²⁵

Carroll is here merely reiterating his formulation of representation. He continues by noting that

in contrast, the domain of expression comprises human qualities or anthropomorphic properties—i.e., the kinds of qualities and properties that can be applied only to human persons. These are the sorts of things that can be expressed by artworks.²⁶

Thus, for Carroll, an artwork that concerns anthropomorphic qualities can only be said to express them, and cannot represent them.

Carroll, further, states that “saying an artwork expresses x means that it manifests a property typically applied to humans—such as sadness, courageousness, and the like.”²⁷

He summarizes by noting that

to say that an artwork expresses x means that it manifests, exhibits, projects, embodies, or shows forth some x where x is a human quality (some anthropomorphic property) such as an emotive property or a quality of character.²⁸

Thus, the primary distinction between expression and representation developed here by Carroll seems to be simply a matter of conventional definition: If an artwork deals with a certain kind of property, then it either represents it or expresses it, with the method in

²⁵ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 81.

²⁶ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 81.

²⁷ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 81.

²⁸ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 81.

which it transmits or embodies that characteristic owing its derivation to the type of quality in question.

Take, for example, my earlier hypothetical painting featuring two dogs fighting. So long as the painting is intended to represent the struggle between the Axis and Allied powers, and so long as it is recognized by an audience in this manner, it is necessarily a representation of this conflict. Note, however, that arbitrarily changing the artists' intent of the painting results in the painting functioning in a different way: had I, as the artist, wished the painting to serve as an example of the moral superiority of American soldiers to those they fought during World War II, Carroll—by virtue of his formulation of the two theories—would be committed to stating that the painting now “expresses” its semantic content rather than “represents” it provided that audiences understand the content in question. This seems problematic.

An attentive reader will notice that I seem to be asserting something that Carroll has not explicitly stated: That representation and expression are mutually exclusive. This is not my goal, nor is it a charitable interpretation of Carroll. Some representations are also expressions and vice versa; the content communicated stipulates which is operative at the moment, not that one form of communication precludes the other. Rather than the two methods of communication with the audience being mutually exclusive, it is my strong suspicion (or, at least, hope) that good works of art not only can but actually do succeed in communicating with the audience in both of these ways, and I suspect that Carroll would agree with this statement. My contention, in contrast, is not that expression and representation are mutually exclusive but that Carroll's formulation of the two

different methods of content transmission fails to cohere with reasonable definitions of expression and representation.

2.5 Conclusions from Carroll's Definition and Problems with Redefinition

With these considerations in mind, it seems that the definitions presented by Carroll are overly stringent in their application, and result in a subtle degree of mutual exclusivity that is dependant not upon the method by which something is transmitted but, rather, on the content of the transmission. Despite the fact that this *can* be applicable in certain specific instances—a radio advertisement *is* determined solely by the method of its intended transmission rather than its content, as opposed to an advertisement *qua* advertisement which can exist in any medium—philosophy of art does not seem to be one of these instances.

To be more precise, despite the fact that the philosophical tradition purportedly stipulates that the above must be the case, it hardly seems to be necessary to make the delineation found in Carroll. I doubt seriously that anyone could intelligently deny the distinction between expression and representation, but this doubt hardly leads me to accept on faith the distinction made between them by Carroll: The fact that the model employed by Carroll results in a work of art that transmits or embodies its content is in models that are structurally identical to each other (if not identical in every respect save name) leads one to the troubling conclusion that Carroll's distinction is between them misses the mark sorely.

After all, taking the model presented by Carroll forces several troubling questions: first, does an artwork that expresses an idea function substantially differently than an artwork that represents a location; second, does this communication's appeal in some way function differently upon the audience in question? One would think that the answer to both of these questions must be a definitive "Yes!" in order to warrant the two disparate theories whose distinction is argued quite vigorously by Carroll over the course of a hundred pages; However, it is important to reiterate that—according to Carroll at least—the main distinction between representation and expression is decidedly not the mode of "communication" within the artwork whereby it functions but, rather, the type of object that is being communicated in some way. Whether this distinction is indicative of a true separation of representation and expression or, alternatively and perhaps more compellingly, whether it is perhaps indicative of a more complex symbiosis between the two remains to be addressed.

Perhaps, then, rather than representation and expression existing in some poorly defined opposition to each other, their relationship is parasitic; While I can hardly imagine a painting expressing an object, person, event or action, I certainly can imagine a painting representing an anthropomorphic quality just as readily as it would represent the non-anthropomorphic qualities previously delineated by Carroll. Let us abandon our painting of dogs and, instead, suppose the following: I have, after months of diligent labour and numerous nude models, created a painting of the Lady Justice governing the proceedings of the Geneva War Crimes trial after World War II. She wears a blindfold, holds a scale, and is strikingly beautiful and stern. Perhaps she is even austere in her loftiness. Does my painting represent the enduring justice of the human causes who

fought totalitarianism and genocide or does it express the enduring justice of this cause? Alternatively, could my painting function in principle as a combination of the two previous statements? Does the content, mode of content transmission or way the work functions substantially differ if it either represents or expresses? Most tellingly, if the answer to the last question is “no,” is the distinction Carroll makes worth keeping?

Certainly, if one had never encountered Carroll’s distinction, I would imagine that one would be inclined toward either maintaining that the painting functions by virtue of representation or towards the claim that it functions in some way through a combination of both representation and expression: After all, I have constructed a painting of a famous symbol of justice set in a famous location depicting an undeniably anthropomorphic quality, and this painting is created firmly in the representational style. Folk intuition would surely require that the painting of a representation of justice would be, in turn, a representation of justice, and that this representation of justice could also express to others the idea of justice. Or, perhaps, it would not matter to you in the least whether this is a representation of justice or an expression of justice because the distinction between the two seems to be decidedly spurious.

I suspect Carroll would be hard-pressed to declare my painting of Lady Justice an example of expression rather than representation; He certainly runs the risk of question-begging by merely applying his definition to my picture willy-nilly. Even more distressing is that my hypothetical painting fulfils the representation paradigm in all respects save one: Carroll’s criteria for what can and cannot be representation. Furthermore—and most interesting of all—is that folk intuition, in light of my hypothetical, seems to suggest that representation and expression are operating in tandem

if there is a distinction to be made between them at all, and this symbiotic relationship does not regard content but, rather, involves method by which the content is being disseminated to the audience. Could expression in the sense outlined by Carroll above simply be, in fact, a subcategory of representation proper?

While the above are certainly not definitive rebuttals that prove—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that the exclusion of ideas from representation is justified, I believe these questions are sufficient to convince an attentive reader to lend at least conditional support to the contention that a reformation of Carroll’s definition of representation is warranted. Further, the questions arising from this distinction should indicate to a reader that the scope of what is currently deemed representation can potentially be much, much wider than Carroll allows.

With that in mind, and with at least conditional support for my reformulation achieved, it is now possible for Gothic Cathedrals to be representational art insofar as they represent the magnificence of God in architectural form: Something for which representational theories of art—as codified by Carroll—could not account. If the above is not a particularly attractive reading, then perhaps these cathedrals could effectively represent man’s feeling of awe and powerlessness when faced with the idea of an all-powerful God. Or, instead, they could be representative of God’s constancy and immutability. The possibilities of exactly what a Gothic cathedral could represent are endless insofar as the anthropomorphic qualities represented are reasonable.²⁹

²⁹ Note that by “reasonable” I merely intend to limit the scope of what exactly an artwork could be said to represent to that which is appropriate for the artwork to a certain extent: while a cathedral could be said to represent a variety of things, this proviso prevents one from making the contention that Notre Dame cathedral is in any way representative of the enduring power of Mork from Ork, or something else equally inane. An excellent example of a test for reasonability can be found in Umberto Eco’s *The Limits Of Interpretation*, in which he proposes a Popper-like theory of falsification. It, or anything like it, suffices for the purposes of the discussion at hand.

The second objection raised by Carroll, however, proves to be a bit more difficult: what could events “presented as occasions for concentrated perceptual experiences”³⁰ be said to represent? The idea of pleasure? Perhaps, but this answer seems unsatisfying insofar as it seems more likely that these artworks are—rather than representing pleasure—meant to instead engender pleasure to the audience. Perception itself? This seems to be just as problematic as the above, since these artworks could be just as easily said to use the medium of perception as to represent it. Could they merely represent nothing at all? Certainly Carroll could contend that they represent nothing save themselves as non-representational experiments in art, but this formulation raises an important question: Can a work of art that represents nothing be said to represent something in some way by virtue of the fact that non-representational art is essentially the representation of nothing? Can a work be said to be representational when the only thing that it represents is itself? Or is this merely word-play?

³⁰ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26.

CHAPTER 3: GRAHAM PRIEST AND THE LIMITS OF THOUGHT

3.1 Overview of Graham Priest

In this chapter, I hope to begin sketching an outline of how we can characterize the representation of nonrepresentational and meta-representational content in an artwork. The work of Graham Priest provides a framework to discuss the interrelations between formal elements in a work of art and its representations. This will provide the groundwork upon which the questions posed in the previous chapter shall, eventually, be answered. A close reading of Priest's method should reveal that the limits of thought are a model for meta-relationships in art; while I focus on meta-representation, the analogy should hold when extended to other aspects of the work in question.

But first, a few words on Priest and his attempt to find the outmost edge of philosophy.

When Graham Priest notes that "[f]initude is a fact of human existence" at the beginning of *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, one hardly expects to find a text that provides much relevance—if any relevance at all—to the field of aesthetic criticism; Thus, the onus is indisputably on me to establish the links between the two endeavours and then to fill in the blanks. Priest's work is, to say the least, controversial, as any work which minimally purports to circumvent the law of non-contradiction would have to be; Indeed, a more stringent interpretation—and the interpretation advocated by Priest himself—suggests that Priest's *schema* is to short-circuit the law of non-contradiction right out of the gate, radically altering the face of logic as a whole. This dialetheism, here, is the very

thing that provides a sympathetic reader with a gateway into finding an intellectually-rich analogue for how representation functions at its own limit; As should be unsurprising to my reader by now, I contend that the reason this is the case is because of the rubric I set up in Chapter 2 that governs how representation must work, contra Carroll.

In an attempt to avoid lengthy discussion of the conception of dialetheism presented in *Beyond the Limits of Thought*—a discussion that would be of minimal direct relevance to the matter at hand—Priest’s rationale for dialetheism can be summarized as follows, in his own words:

orthodox logic, however well entrenched, is just a *theory* of how logical particles, like negation, work; and there is no a priori guarantee that it is correct.³¹

It seems to me to be uneconomical to merely repeat Priest’s argument here: its correctness or incorrectness, soundness or unsoundness is beside the point. My use of Priest relies less upon Priest’s own views on logic and more upon the ways in which Priest maps conceptual limits and the expression of these limits in an attempt to see how representing the non-representational could work in a given work of art while still fitting within the definition set forward.³²

The point, of course, is that there are certain characteristics about ideas that have been throughout history considered by many philosophers to be inexpressible. Priest characterizes this neglect as a neglect predicated on Aristotle’s authority and little else.

Until Aristotle, the idea that a contradiction might be true was a highly contested one. Aristotle went to great lengths to argue against the idea in book 4 of the *Metaphysics*. Because of Aristotle’s magisterial authority in the Middle Ages, the subject became

³¹ Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 4.

³² I ask for forbearance in advance when I *do* talk about a given amount of dialetheic properties of the inexpressible. I encourage readers interested in Priest’s account of Dialetheism to refer to the Introduction of *Beyond the Limits of Thought* as well, Chapter 7 (concerning Hegel), and the conclusion of the book. A brief account of Priest’s argument can be found on pages 4-6.

closed; and, unlike most other subjects on which Aristotle pronounced, was not substantially reopened subsequently—and least until recently.³³

Despite this, Priest contends that ideas which seem to be unthinkable are thought nonetheless. Priest explicitly states that his “interest throughout is in the substantial thesis concerning the dialetheic nature of limits of thought”³⁴. By using the mechanic and approach advocated by Priest, it is possible to see how meta-representation—or representation of non-representation—can be considered to be a prime *locus* of the inexpressible or a material or expressible instantiation of the limit of thought itself.

This localization of the inexpressible and the potentiality of the limit of thought give readers the key with which to analyse those works of art which are maximally problematic to my enterprise—works that either represent the absence of representation or works that function at the limit of representation. Or to put it bluntly: the very works which are the focus of the final chapter of this thesis, and which present the difficult questions previously posed at the end of Chapter 2.

While Priest’s dialetheism is, no doubt, a source of controversy³⁵, his assumption that the limits of thought itself are decidedly dialetheic is seemingly less so: indeed, Priest himself notes that the

relationship between the limits of thought and contradiction might be described as a vein that runs prominently through the history of Western philosophy—except that it is more like a major artery.³⁶

It seems quite sensible, upon reflection, to state that ideas which violate the law of non-contradiction represent at the very least the outlier of that which humans can think: After

³³ Priest, 5.

³⁴ Priest, 6.

³⁵ Aristotle *Complete Works*, Jonathan Barnes, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1619-23.

³⁶ Priest, 6

all, the very idea that something existent could meaningfully violate the law of non-contradiction is largely a fringe view in contemporary philosophy.

But the fact that Priest's ideas are considered fringe ideas need not disqualify the results of his investigation as being trivial; One need only consider the *oeuvre* of the philosopher Foucault to realize that sometimes it is of great interest to seek out the hidden histories and the secret names of streets.³⁷ Or, perhaps more convincingly, consider the titular quote of this thesis, which notes that "a fuller understanding of philosophies, like that of people, can often be obtained in the light of what has been repressed."³⁸

Thus, regardless of the validity of dialetheism as a viable model of judging the world around us, it seems to be certainly reasonable to use thoughts that are *seen to be* dialetheic as a starting point to find the location of the limits of thought itself—and from this, Priest supposes, also the limits of language, iteration, cognition, and conception.³⁹ That these thoughts are so contentious suggests they may well inhabit that space. Of the four limits that concern Priest throughout *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, only one of those limits—the limit of expression—needs concern us here. The domain of that which can be expressed is, as was noted in Chapter 2, not altogether different from that which can be represented.⁴⁰

Priest's attempt to locate a limit of thought involves analysing seemingly contradictory or impossible thoughts and applying to them his Inclosure Schema. This provides us with the structure by which boundaries are identified and subsequently transgressed for a number of disciplines, giving us, minimally,

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 3-37.

³⁸ Priest, 7.

³⁹ Priest, 3.

⁴⁰ Refer to the introduction to Chapter 1 of *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, p. 11 for a more detailed account of this divide and why Priest believes that these four limits follow.

the limit of what can be expressed; the limit of what can be described or conceived; the limit of what can be known; the limit of iteration of some operation or other, the infinite in its mathematical sense.⁴¹

This conception of limitations provides us with the framework to determine whether work that is non-representational inter-relates with the concept of representation; *vis a vis*, is it non-representation or the representation of nothing, and is there a difference? Most importantly, this schema gives us the language to judge the limits of representation and how non-representation goes beyond these limits while still engaging in a relationship with that from which it has deviated.

It is my contention that the limit of representation—be it non-representation itself or the representation of nothing—functions isomorphically to the limits provided by Priest. And, at least insofar as aestheticians should be concerned:

[l]imits of this kind provide boundaries beyond which certain conceptual processes (describing, knowing, iterating, etc.) cannot go; a sort of conceptual *ne plus ultra*. The thesis of the book is that such limits are dialetheic; that is, that they are the subject, or locus, of true contradictions.⁴²

If the limit of representation—which must, in some way, involve the line between representation and everything else—functions in this way, we will have a schema which allows for the interaction between representational and non-representational content in a work of art, regardless of how this interaction is iterated.

3.2 Closure and Transcendence

It should be common sense to contend that representational and nonrepresentational aspects of a work do not function in isolation from each other, but, rather, that the

⁴¹ Priest, 3.

⁴² Priest, 3.

elements work together in a complex work of art to create a *gestalt* greater than the sum of the parts. If this working together yields a certain degree of commingling of functions, then we are left with a distinction between representation and non-representation that is not dissimilar from Priest's postulates regarding the limits of thought: to wit, the area between representation and non-representation is yet another limit of thought, and "the limits of thought are boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed."⁴³

The Inclosure Schema is the method by which we negotiate the space between representation and non-representation, irrespective of how one characterizes this space. It is important to note that not just anything meets Priest's requirements for a given idea to be the genuine locus of contradiction. For Priest's Schema to be applicable, he notes that

In each of the cases, there is a totality (of all things expressible, describable, etc.) and an appropriate operation that generates an object that is both within and without the totality. I will call these situations *Closure* and *Transcendence*, respectively.⁴⁴

Thus, there is present in a given *locus* of contradiction a statement stipulating or naming a completely enumerated set of things—Priest's totality—and a procedure which, when followed, results in an object that exists both within the set yet also, definitionally, outside of the set.

This process executes itself in two distinct steps: Inclosure and Transcendence. Indeed, Priest notes that "Closure is usually established by reflecting on the conceptual practise in question."⁴⁵ In other words, one can determine whether the system in question is the closed system stipulated by Priest earlier; When one reflects on the conceptual practise, one can determine the ability of the concept itself to have limits.

⁴³ Priest, 3.

⁴⁴ Priest, 3-4.

⁴⁵ Priest, 4.

Transcendence, of course, is more problematic, largely because it involves more than simply looking at a concept and determining if it possesses boundaries. Priest himself, in attempting to describe Transcendence succinctly, claims

Arguments for Transcendence are of more varied kinds; often they involve applying a theory to itself.⁴⁶

Transcendence is determined only when one takes a theory and sees how it functions in light of self-referentiality. While the concept is not set in stone, the elegance of the way it works can best be in action.

Priest first shows that the limit of expression can be found as far back as the work of Plato. In a discussion of Heraclitean flux, Priest notes that Plato—in the *Thaetetus* in part, and the *Cratylus* throughout—takes exception to Cratylus’ formulation of the doctrine of flux; Cratylus famously claimed that everything changes, that everything is in a state of flux. Through a series of twists and turns, it becomes apparent that Cratylus’ argument amounts to the claim that nothing can be expressed because its essence is constantly in flux; The words themselves have no consistent meaning, and thus expression is pointless.⁴⁷

The above fits into Priest’s Inclosure Schema nicely. Given Cratylus’ claims that nothing can be expressed, and given that Cratylus, rather than simply endure Socrates’ questions in silence—an event that would have made for a terribly boring dialogue, incidentally—expresses his theory about the inexpressibility of concepts, we have reached a boundary of thought quite nicely. Priest summarizes the dilemma quite nicely:

⁴⁶ Priest, 4.

⁴⁷ Refer to Plato’s *Cratylus* for the specifics of the argumentation. What matters here, in my view, is how Priest takes Cratylus’ contention and applies the Inclosure Schema to it.

even to come to the conclusion that one cannot speak, it is necessary to express this thought to oneself, and how can one do this if there is no language (not even a language of thought!) in which this can be expressed.⁴⁸

Priest positions this exchange as what he believes to be philosophy's first encounter with the limit of expression and the contradiction to which this limit leads, and positions this contradiction within the language of his Inclosure schema:

By applying Cratylus' theory to itself it follows that it is not in the domain of the expressible (Transcendence); but he does succeed in expressing it, at least to himself (Closure).⁴⁹

The mechanics of Transcendence are fairly elegant, here: Cratylus' theory posits that nothing can be expressed, and analysis of this theory reveals quite easily that this theory as an expression—even an expression to one's self—places it neatly outside the realm of the expressible. Given the correctness or truth of the theory, the fact that it has been expressed causes it to exist both within and without the limits imposed upon reality in the theory.

That is not to say that Closure and Transcendence occur easily, however.

"In a polemical context," Priest notes while addressing the determination of Closure, "this can appear as an *ad hominem* argument."⁵⁰ And this is very true. It is not true in all instances, of course, but it is certainly a valid contention when both Transcendence and Closure are found to be present. When the Inclosure Schema is operative, the presence of Closure necessarily results in a contention that the statement presented as a premise—vis a vis, the truth of the premise in question—is, to a certain extent, false. After all, the presence of a Transcendent object necessitates the falsity of

⁴⁸ Priest, 16.

⁴⁹ Priest, 16.

⁵⁰ Priest, 4.

the closed set: The Transcendent object exists both within and without the system in question, thus invalidating the proposed boundary of the set as a whole.

Priest seems to believe that the generation of a totality results in the concept in question being something akin to a closed set: If there is a properly generated totality—be it conceptual, mathematical, and so on—then its limit points will be clearly delineated within the system in question. Priest demonstrates this generative process multiple times throughout the course of *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. In all cases, the central claim amounts to a proposition about the closed status of the concept in question. Its finitude must be determinable, its boundaries clear.

However, the presence of Transcendence necessitates the presence of a given object that can exist both within the boundaries of the closed system as provided yet simultaneously transgress the limits of this boundary. More specifically, Priest's take on the problem with Transcendence seems to be that these transgressions of boundaries are only problematic because philosophers are predisposed to believe that the law of non-contradiction is a law: Thus, Priest notes

[t]hat a contradiction might be true, or that dialetheism (the view that there are true contradictions) makes sense, may still be abhorrent, and even threatening, to many contemporary English-speaking philosophers.⁵¹

Dialetheism, with Priest, seems always to be the devil in the details.

Again, while Priest may well be correct about dialetheism, it is not the purpose of this work to defend his claims about the true nature of logic. What is important, here, is the fact that Priest has managed to formalize the language by which one can meaningfully discuss the limits of concepts and the problems that arise from the paradoxes of self-reference. Just as Closure can fail due to demonstration of a lack of boundaries on the

⁵¹ Priest, 4.

given object, Transcendence can fail provided demonstration that a given theory does not survive its own self-scrutiny. Indeed, the Cratylus example above is ultimately deemed a failure by Priest given the fact that the flux of expressions is not definitively determined to be instantaneous.⁵² Given the stringency of the requirements for Transcendence, it is fairly easy for one to determine the largely narrow scope of *Beyond the Limits of Thought*: With reasoned analysis, relatively few concepts can be seen to be constitutive of an irruptive force capable of violating the law of non-contradiction.

Thus, it is important to note that the number of systems which Priest is willing to advocate can reasonably present a reader with both Transcendence and Closure is fairly small throughout *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Although the four different types of limits designated by Priest are certainly not the only limits which can contain the essence of contradiction, this demesne of contradictions will seem to be far more expansive than it actually is to a reader of my work given that I introduce these issues under the guise of a discussion about the problematic nature of representation and its relationship to its own limits.

3.3 Derrida and the Limits of Thought

Representation and its limit—which, given the questions posed at the end of Chapter 2, seems to at least include non-representation and meta-representation—fall under the limit of that which can be expressed, given that all problems associated with exactly what can be represented occur as a result of what representation can be said to convey to an audience; To be colloquial, the issue is what representation can express.

⁵² Priest, 15-6 has more details.

Representation, as a concept that describes certain aspects of works of art and not others, is an optimal candidate for this irruptive force as a Priestean limit of expression given its relationship with non-representational aspects of a work of art and its potential to represent both itself and non-representation. Thus, while this thesis works within the framework set up by Priest, it is important to note that this is not indicative of Priest's commitment to all concepts being similarly problematic.

Of course, assertions of the problems associated with representation bear little weight without substantiation. Representation, at this point, only seems to matter if it can be demonstrated that it, too, is a transgressive concept properly seen to fall under the rubric of a limit of thought itself, at least in the sense used by Priest—or, barring that, that some sorts of representations can function in such a way. While folk intuitions about the possibility of representing non-representation are in some ways compelling, there has to be some reason to accept representation as a limit case. In Chapter 4, I address Derrida's essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," which presents us with a representation that exists and functions in the presence of its own limit.

What remains to be demonstrated is the utility of using Jacques Derrida at all in a discussion of the nature of representation; The onus of relevance to the rest of this work remains to be met. This relevance will be demonstrated throughout the remainder of this chapter: The Inclosure Schema presented by Priest pertains to Derrida because Derrida's methodology—indeed, his entire enterprise—is a successful instantiation of the effect transgression has upon a supposed totality. When this approach is used upon a concept folk-intuition suggests is similarly complex, the self-referential nature of representation

as a whole becomes something with which a reasoned understanding of representation can cope.

The structure of the remainder of this chapter is atypical; it is common for one to present the work of a philosopher in his own words, and then use other authors to guide the reader through the work. Indeed, I have done just that in the previous two chapters. But the problem here is that Jacques Derrida is not like other philosophers. On the one hand, Derrida's writing embraces language's nuance and allusion as frequently as he does its ability to communicate; And on the other, Derrida questions the ability of language to communicate at all. A full-throated explication of Derrida's philosophy is beyond the scope of this work—but an appropriation of a cross-section of Derrida's work remains possible and is necessary.

Thus, rather than drag this process out unnecessarily, I hope to provide a secondary analysis of Derrida's methodology by Graham Priest before tackling Derrida's own work. What concerns me is not Derrida's *oeuvre*; It is his ability to use deconstruction to explode the concept of representation such that we arrive at a representation that is explicitly non-representational. To accomplish this, I suspect it is more helpful to include Priest's interpretation of Derrida first, then use Derrida's work as an instantiation of these overarching themes elucidated by Priest: Priest's success or failure will be borne out by the work of Derrida that follows this chapter.

With that, I begin.

Priest begins his analysis of Derrida with a somewhat revealing and broad characterization of Derrida's work.

Derrida is a literary philosopher.... His work falls across the traditional divide between philosophy and literary criticism.⁵³

This seems mildly controversial as an overarching analysis; Much—perhaps even most—of Derrida’s work is explicitly phenomenological.⁵⁴ But dwelling on this objection overlong is probably making a philosophical mountain out of an anecdotal molehill; Priest’s characterization seems to be more a comment upon Derrida’s style than it is on his philosophical enterprise as a whole.

If this defense seems weak sauce, then so be it. Perhaps Priest does mischaracterize Derrida and his *oeuvre*. But for all that Priest’s generalities may be lacking, his analysis of Derrida’s methodology is quite helpful. Priest connects the idea of a transcendental signified with that of a *presence*: which, as Priest notes, includes familiar philosophical terms such as “essence, Being and, particularly, consciousness.”⁵⁵ Moreover, Priest notes that meaning, in the Derridean sense, adheres to Saussure’s structuralism insofar as

each of the words in [a] family has meaning in virtue of its network of relations of opposition with the other members of the family, that is, its differences from them.⁵⁶

But for all of Derrida’s heterodoxy towards Saussure on the subject of the indeterminacy of meaning, Priest captures Derrida’s critique of the Saussurian linguistics exceptionally clearly. Although Derrida retains the distinction between signifier and signified, Priest formalizes Derrida’s critique thus:

[t]hough the sign may be dependent for its identity on its place in a network of meaning-relations, the signifier is still conceptualized as corresponding to a unique concept, the signified: and this is a presence.⁵⁷

⁵³ Priest, 214.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Margins Of Philosophy*, Alan Bass, trans., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-25.

⁵⁵ Priest, 215.

⁵⁶ Priest, 216.

⁵⁷ Priest, 216.

Given Derrida's analyses about the relational aspects of words and texts, and given Derrida's renunciation of presence, meaning is something in short supply. We cannot square the circle and "we do not, therefore, find meanings; just more words."⁵⁸

Where Saussure found difference, Derrida finds deferral; thus the infinite regress is a feature for Derrida rather than a problem to be surmounted. As Priest notes,

Any word is referred to further words indefinitely, and this relationship of referral, or perhaps better, deferral, is just as constitutive of meaning as Saussure's differences.⁵⁹

Where Saussure saw difference, Derrida found *différance*; the total network of differences and deferrals.⁶⁰ Moreover, it is in this totality that Priest later notes we find opposing presences. As Priest later notes,

The totality of all linguistic entities, that is, textuality itself, is structured by a certain binary opposition. What *all* such entities have in common is their presupposition of (the) metaphysics (of presence); crucially, the sign itself, of which all linguistic expressions are composed, is the metaphysical notion *par excellence*.⁶¹

Because of this, "presence" in this schema remains utterly inseparable from linguistic expressions;

"[H]ence it is the pair presence/absence that structures textuality itself, that is, the totality of all texts."⁶²

But perhaps we get ahead of ourselves.

The deferral of presence does not happen willy-nilly; Deconstruction, the lynchpin of Derrida's philosophy, is the method by which presence is continually denied. And, while Derrida has written about this process extensively throughout his corpus, Priest's brief analysis serves well to characterize how Derrida works.

⁵⁸ Priest, 216.

⁵⁹ Priest, 216.

⁶⁰ Priest, 217.

⁶¹ Priest, 220.

⁶² Priest, 221.

[W]hat [Derrida] does do is take examples of texts which endorse some notion of presence, either overtly or covertly, and show that they are self-undercutting in some sense. This is called 'deconstruction'.⁶³

This construction seems uncontroversial, if atypical to readers familiar with Derrida given the directness with which Priest attacks the text. Since every word is a text, the possibilities for deconstruction seem boundless: Every text is fertile ground for deconstruction.

While there are exhaustive analyses of exactly how this can and does work, Priest's formula for Derrida's schema is helpful given its universal applicability in Derrida's work.

Take a text that endorses some form of presence, π . By the Saussurian semiotics, this draws its sense from its opposite, non- π . And this means that the pair (π , non- π) provides, in some sense, an underpinning structure for the text... But the members of the pair are not on equal terms; since it is π that is supposed to be doing all the metaphysical work, π is the dominant member of the pair.⁶⁴

After determining the binary opposition of presences lurking at the heart of the text, deconstruction follows apace in two broadly-construed stages which do not necessarily have to occur sequentially.

Obviously, we begin with the first stage.

The first stage is to reverse the privileging, to make non- π the dominant member of the pair. This is done by showing how, in contrast to the claims of the text, it implicitly shows that non- π is the more important and fundamental of the pair. This stage is called, for obvious reasons, 'reversal'.⁶⁵

This stage demonstrates the presence of contradictions within the text—indeed, that contradiction is implicit and fundamental to the way the text works. As for the second,

[t]he next stage, now that both members of the pair are on an equal footing, is to examine the very ground of the distinction between π and non- π and show that it is a false antithesis. There is a space between them in which some new concept lies, which

⁶³ Priest, 217.

⁶⁴ Priest, 217.

⁶⁵ Priest, 217.

both unites and differentiates the pair, but is not reducible to either. This stage is called 'displacement'.⁶⁶

While the first stage demonstrates the shaky ground separating the two concepts from each other, the second questions the necessity of the distinction between π and non- π : if the ground between π and non- π is unstable, the distinction between the two becomes difficult to maintain.

Priest can now begin to question whether there is truly any distinction between the two concepts. Though this analysis come perilously close to reducing Derrida to Hegel, from thesis and antithesis we achieve synthesis—and the analysis seems fair in this context.

the undecidable concept that emerges undercuts the distinction between, and hence the sense of, the original contrasting pair of concepts, and *a fortiori* any attempt to use the contrast to ground an account of meaning (presence).⁶⁷

The groundlessness of meaning allows Derrida to retain the sense of meaning as context-determined.

This characterization of deconstruction as an explicit process is crucial. As Priest notes,

Deconstruction is an operation that, when applied to a text that is structured by some binary opposition, produces, in the phase of displacement, a notion that is not expressible in terms of that opposition, and so in the text that this opposition structures.⁶⁸

Each text is married to the notion of presence, and thus metaphysics is written into every linguistic expression:

hence it is the pair presence/absence that structures textuality itself, that is, the totality of all texts.... What notion is obtained when the pair presence/absence is deconstructed? The answer, of course, is *différance*.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Priest, 217.

⁶⁷ Priest, 218.

⁶⁸ Priest, 220.

⁶⁹ Priest, 221.

3.4 Applying Derrida to the Work of Art

How this could apply to a work of art is fairly simple.

I return to the hypothetical painting of Chapter 2 of this work as an example. With my painting of a Golden Retriever and a mangy mutt representing a fairly jingoist analysis of World War II to serve as a text, it is reasonable to conclude that I am endorsing the idea (presence) of conflict. To understand conflict per Derrida, one must recall that the word does not communicate meaning in isolation; Meaning is drawn from a given word's relation to other words. For conflict to be understood in this sense, it is understood as the negation of its opposite: Harmony. Thus, according to Derrida, the interplay between conflict and harmony define my painting.

Pursuant to the first step, however, my painting about conflict is not actually about conflict. Though the two dogs are as dissimilar as two canines can be, it seems hasty to reduce what they do to mere conflict. Dogs mark their territory and compete for territory, it is true, but they are adversaries by mere circumstance. The dogs' conflict is only temporary, one brief moment immortalized and frozen in a picture. What is interesting about the work is not what the fight will look like, but how harmony will be restored; Will the street smarts of the mangy cur give our mutt an advantage over a Golden Retriever surely bound by the Marquis of Queensbury rules, or will good breeding and civility win out? What informs the moment is what happens once the moment is over; Thus conflict is the most visible member of the pair, but hardly that which informs the work.

The second step is where things get hairy. If both conflict and harmony can be said to work within my painting in equal measure, perhaps there is no conflict between them at all. Perhaps what defines the painting is not the fight or what comes after, but the space between the two: Neither conflict nor harmony, but something more than encapsulates both concepts. Perhaps the moment immortalized in the painting is not a fight or peace, but a truce—something not fully either but that partakes of both. That this could seem unsatisfying should come as no surprise—I grasp at straws just to find a word to fit this irruptive, new concept.

What if there is no word to describe this new concept?

Thus we begin to see how Derrida fits into Priest's limits of thought. Like Cratylus, Derrida attempts to express the inexpressible; But unlike Cratylus, says Priest, Derrida succeeds where Cratylus failed.

As Priest sees the situation, deconstruction brings Derrida to the very limit of the expressible. Indeed, Derrida's entire philosophy straddles the locus of contradiction.

If Derrida is right, there is no presence, no ultimate ground of meaning. In particular, no text can show immediately and transparently what it means. Thus, all texts must be interpreted—or read, to use a different jargon. Moreover, because of its iterability, a text can be read in many ways; that is, it may be interpreted to mean different things in different contexts (which is not to say it can be interpreted to mean anything). There is no question of any one interpretation being correct (though this is not to say that all interpretations are equally good). Finally, and in any case, the interpretation of a text is just another text, and so needs to be interpreted, but itself has no privileged interpretation.⁷⁰

Thus we neatly arrive at Cratylus' problem. Derrida claims texts have no fixed meaning, but in so doing he creates a text. Moreover, Derrida expresses this problem, and thus creates a text with a fixed meaning insofar as it addresses the problems it raises.

⁷⁰ Priest, 218-9.

This fits into Priest's Inclosure Schema nicely; As Priest notes, "given that [Derrida] does express certain views, he is expressing something (Closure) that, if he is right, cannot be expressed (Transcendence)."⁷¹ This, of course, is not a slam dunk; Derrida can escape from this trap by noting that the texts in question have a function within the discourse, and can serve this function without having a fixed meaning. Irrespective of whether this passes one's personal smell test, there is enough wriggle room to claim that utility is not and does not automatically denote a fixed meaning.

Where Derrida's conception of meaning allows Derrida an out lies in *différance*. *Différance* is a concept where Priest contends his Inclosure Schema is necessarily operative. Because *différance* is an irruptive force that explodes and transcends binary oppositions, it cannot be expressed—a fact illustrated in my admittedly ham-handed painting example. But, though *différance* cannot be expressed, it precisely is expressed.

According to Derrida, [*différance*] is the structure that gives rise to meaning; it is the precondition of any meaning at all. It itself is beyond expression: it cannot be described in any way.⁷²

The problem, as Priest notes, is that we do clearly express the concept of *différance*—or, to be more precise, we have named the space it must occupy and identified its function.

We do this by way of deconstruction. As Priest notes by way of two observations,

The first is that, if a text is deconstructed we arrive at a notion, facts about which cannot be expressed in the text in question. The second is that the notion of *différance* is obtained by deconstructing the totality of *all* linguistic expressions. It follows from these that facts about *différance* cannot be expressed by linguistic utterances at all.⁷³

Thus, as in Cratylus, deconstruction cannot be expressed (Transcendence); but Derrida does clearly express this, as the corpus of his work demonstrates (Closure).⁷⁴

⁷¹ Priest, 219.

⁷² Priest, 220.

⁷³ Priest, 221.

⁷⁴ Here I use the formalization of Cratylus' problem as presented by Priest, 16.

Unlike Cratylus, Derrida has no escape. As Priest notes, Derrida would be forced to concede that his own writing had no meaning—but this would be an empty concession.

For Derrida *is* making himself understood, and so is not saying meaningless things. Indeed, his statements about *différance* enter into the play of differences constituted by discussions of texts (his own and others), and so are meaningful by his own account, in exactly the same way that all other statements are.⁷⁵

And this is crucial to Priest. The above, in his estimation, requires us to understand Derrida's work as a working instantiation of the limits of thought Priest spent an entire book searching for.

Hence, any honest appraisal of the situation must admit that statements about *différance* *are* expressible. We therefore have a contradiction typical of a limit of thought. Claims about difference are not expressible (Transcendence); yet they are expressed (Closure).⁷⁶

This reading of Derrida seems plausible; And it is this positioning of Derrida's methodology and goals that will serve as the framework within which we will analyze his reading of Antonin Artaud's concept of cruel representation to arrive at a maximal limit case for what can be charitably deemed representation. My hope is that positioning Derrida's work in this way will afford us a clearer idea of how we can arrive at answers to my earlier questions. What we will see is that Derrida's method of deconstruction, when combined with Antonin Artaud's concept of Cruel Representation, presents us with an opportunity to understand exactly how we can have a representation that exists in relation with—and, perhaps, in opposition to—itself.

⁷⁵ Priest, p. 222.

⁷⁶ Priest, p. 222.

CHAPTER 4: DERRIDA, ARTAUD AND THE THEATRE OF CRUELTY

4.1 Operating at the Limit

Jacques Derrida's essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" certainly seems to support a new notion of representation through an analysis of its limits. Indeed, it is in this work that Derrida uses deconstruction as a tactic by which the entirety of the theatre can be interrogated. This interrogation which, at its heart, is a negotiation between presence and absence, leads us to an understanding of representation that is explicitly unrepresentable. Indeed, it may even be impossible to achieve.

I contend that the process by which Derrida arrives at what Antonin Artaud characterized as "cruel representation" is far and away the most extreme exemplar I have found of a representation (both representation *qua* representation and *a single* representation) that is beyond the traditional limit of the concept. Cruel representation's relationship to Derridean deconstruction—as we shall see, its very existence is as a trace of *différance*—suggests that its status as a limit of that which can be expressed is unimpeachable. My hope is that a careful analysis of the concept from its germination to conception will demonstrate both how this form of representation is sufficiently non- or meta-representational to fulfil the questions asked at the end of chapter 2; and then, moreover, to illustrate why my proposed redefinition accounts for this more satisfactorily than that provided by Carroll.

4.2. From “Cruel Theatre” to “Originary Representation”

Throughout “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” Derrida deconstructs the theoretical tracts of the French theoretician Antonin Artaud. Artaud, a French playwright, theoretician actor and director was one of the pioneers of the *avant-garde* theatre scene from the 1920s until his death in 1948. Originally associated with the surrealist school, Artaud’s experiences with non-Western art—particularly a 1932 performance of a Balinese dance troupe—effectively caused Artaud’s break with the surrealists, and he began to formulate his own theory of how the lively arts should and must work.⁷⁷

For Artaud, the problems with both theatre and Western art as a whole was its focus on the individual: thus, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is not that it is a play about oppression, Artaud might posit, but that it gets bogged down in the oppression of Nora that it is insufficiently general.⁷⁸

According to Artaud, the theatre in the Western world has been devoted to a very narrow range of human experience, primarily the psychological problems of individuals of the social problems of groups. But to Artaud, the more important aspects of existence are those submerged in the unconscious, those things that cause divisions within people and between people and lead to hatred, violence, and disaster.⁷⁹

Artaud’s theatre is a theatre that embraces its role as a collective experience and seeks to communicate the truths buried within the spectator watching. The goal is an art that is not something that is necessarily watched but a transformative event that frees the spectator from mankind’s baser urges. Given Artaud’s work occurred after the mass-deaths of World War I, this is certainly understandable as a goal for an artist.

⁷⁷ Oscar Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 8th ed., (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 472.

⁷⁸ As in Carl Klaus, Miriam Gilbert and Bradford S. Field, Jr., eds., *Stages of Drama: Classical To Contemporary Theater*, 4th ed., (Boston: Bedford, 1999), 536-65.

⁷⁹ Brockett, 472.

With Artaud's goal understood, his historical methodology makes more sense. Given the nature of the truths which he hoped to represent onstage and given his belief that these truths were necessarily un- or subconscious, Artaud's approach to *mise-en-scene* and art as a whole shapes up to be a tactic for communication and representation of ideas working in the early part of the twentieth century.

Artaud was certain that his goals could not be reached through appeals to the rational mind. Rather, it would be necessary to operate directly upon the senses and break down the audiences defences. Artaud sometimes referred to his as a "theatre of cruelty", since in order to achieve its ends it sought to force the audience to confront itself.⁸⁰

Art, rather than being merely something to be looked at, becomes an assault on the senses of the spectator. It is a violence perpetrated on the audience, a cruelty "that is not primarily physical but moral or psychological."⁸¹

Where Artaud saw "cruel theatre" and "cruel representation," Derrida saw *différance* and what he calls "originary representation."⁸² This originary representation divorces mimicry and mimesis from representation, leaving us with a representation that is non-mimetic but still representational. Rather than being a reiteration of an object, person, event, action or anything of the sort, this originary representation is singular because it is happening the moment the audience sees it: The content being represented is the event the audience experiences in the moment.

A representation of this sort would necessarily short-circuit Carroll's understanding of the term; Given Carroll's definition, it is hard to see exactly how such a representation could be a representation at all. But as we shall see in the course of this chapter, Derrida's attempts to demonstrate what fails to be representation in this originary

⁸⁰ Brockett, 472.

⁸¹ Brockett, 472.

⁸² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

sense lead us to exactly what this representation actually is: the location of *différance* and, thus, a Priestean limit of thought. If this is the case, my expanded definition of representation will be able to account for such a representation where Carroll's does not. I contend such an account is necessary for us to have an understanding of representation—a representation that can represent the things that transgress these Priestean limits of thought is a representation that can represent the unrepresentable and thus remain relevant to the art of the present.

4.3. Derrida's Prohibitions: Groundwork

Derrida arrives at this originary representation after listing which kinds of theatre cannot be faithful to Artaud's vision, noting that Artaud's position requires him to contend that the theatre as it has been conceived in the past is not simply bad art, but a fundamental missing of the mark.

A certain stage has maintained with the "forgotten," but in truth, violently erased, stage a secret communication, a certain relationship of *betrayal*, if to betray is at once to denature through infidelity, but also to let oneself be evinced despite oneself, and to manifest the foundation of force.⁸³

The idea of betrayal of the theatre's true purpose undergirds this listing of the various ways in which theatre is unfaithful to Artaud's vision. Thus, it is not sufficient to note that earlier works of art were merely bad and unfaithful; Instead, they are "not simply the absence, negation or forgetting of theatre, is not a nontheatre: it is a mark of cancellation that lets what it covers be read. . . a perversion."⁸⁴ By listing the numerous ways theatre has missed the mark Derrida shows us the ground from which these failures become

⁸³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 236.

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 236.

obvious, seeing the “aberration whose meaning and measure are visible only beyond birth, at the eve of theatrical representation, at the origin of tragedy.”⁸⁵

The first of these prohibitions is simple: “[a]ll non-sacred theatre”⁸⁶ is deemed unacceptable. The “sacred” discussed here is not the traditional Western conception of sacrament but sacred in its Bacchanal⁸⁷ sense: since Artaud’s enterprise is in many ways—if not in most ways—decidedly Nietzschean, so too must his conception of the sacred be.⁸⁸ Though Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysiac is implicit in this prohibition, the distinction itself is more complex than Derrida reveals.

This Nietzschean distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysiac should be familiar to us given Priest’s analysis of Derrida’s work. The Apolline refers to the Greek god of light Apollo who, for Nietzsche, “holds sway over the beautiful illusion of the inner fantasy world,”⁸⁹ and represents the forces of harmony and ideality; in Derridean terms, Apollo is the instantiation of presence. Nietzsche contrasts this with the Dionysiac—derived from the Greek god of wine Dionysus, Nietzsche notes this term is

Most immediately understandable to us in the analogy of *intoxication*. Under the influence of the narcotic potion hymned by all primitive men and peoples, or in the powerful approach of spring, joyfully penetrating the whole of nature, those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self.⁹⁰

The Dionysiac here is tied to the human impulse to hold and participate in festivals; and, at least where the Greeks were concerned, “the centre of those festivals was an

⁸⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 236.

⁸⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 243

⁸⁷ As in Klaus, 76-96.

⁸⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Shaun Whiteside, trans., (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 16.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, 16.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, 17.

extravagant lack of sexual discipline, whose waves engulfed all the venerable rules of family life.”⁹¹

Note that Derrida’s move to forbid non-sacred theatre is not in and of itself a blanket endorsement of the Dionysiac impulse in art. Though there is no doubt that Nietzsche—and, as we will see later in this chapter—Artaud privilege the Dionysiac in art, a prohibition on nonsacred theatre is not an endorsement of purely Dionysiac art. As should be clear from the divine appellations given to both Apolline and Dionysiac art, both of these conceptions of art are, broadly speaking, sacred.⁹²

Derrida’s second prohibition builds upon this Nietzschean distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysiac; where the first prohibition demanded a theatre that was either Apolline or Dionysiac, this second prohibition forbids any theatre that is subordinate to the spoken word. Derrida underscores this point when he notes that

All theatre that privileges speech or rather the verb, all theatre of words, even if this privilege becomes that of a speech which is self-destructive, which once more becomes gesture of hopeless reoccurrence, a *negative* relation of speech to itself, theatrical nihilism, what is still called the theatre of the absurd [...] would not be, in the sense understood by Artaud (and doubtless by Nietzsche), an affirmation.⁹³

Speech, or even the reference of the negative aspects of speech, cannot be the principle by which theatre functions in part because speech is married to the concept of negation, at least in a Nietzschean sense. Derrida’s invocation of Nietzsche at this point is no accident; for Nietzsche, a speech that subordinates the intoxication of the Dionysiac festival to a script would result in art that is decidedly unsacred.⁹⁴ The argument here suggests that

⁹¹ Nietzsche, 19.

⁹² This can best be seen in Nietzsche, 104. Though these ideas in art are in conflict, Nietzsche is careful to characterize this conflict as a conflict between equals. Though Nietzsche’s sympathy lies clearly with the Dionysiac camp, some care is taken to show that this allegiance is dependent on the efficacy of the Dionysiac in the staged performance rather than all art in general.

⁹³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 243-4.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, 21-22.

theatre must be an affirmation of life, and any theatre that is subordinate to speech is and cannot be an affirmation of life; Rather, that type of theatre would be an affirmation of speech alone.

And it is here we begin to see exactly how the deconstructive process outlined by Priest works. The pair that is here being deconstructed is speech/action, which is why Derrida can speak of a theatre that “privileges speech or rather the verb”⁹⁵ in this way. According to the methodology of deconstruction, to privilege one of these pairs in a given text or event is to privilege the other through a process of decentering. Thus, a theatrical representation that privileges speech can be said to, per deconstruction, actually privilege the verb—and vice versa. Thus, to again borrow Priest’s Hegelian interpretation: We have determined both thesis and antithesis, and what Derrida is recognizing through negation is the resulting synthesis.

How this synthesis will work is further narrowed when Derrida notes it is appropriate to exclude “[a]ll *abstract* theatre which excludes something from the totality of art, and thus, from the totality of life and its resources of signification[.]”⁹⁶ This qualification is a bit tricky, however: What constitutes abstract theatre? Is it a theatre that explores idea rather than action? Theatre that explores life rather than represents it? Derrida answers these questions by noting that “[a]n abstract theatre is a theatre in which the totality of sense and the senses is not consumed.”⁹⁷ Thus, for theatre to possess the proper amount of fidelity required by Derrida in order to qualify as sufficiently “cruel,” it must engage all of the senses of the observer rather than appealing to only some of the

⁹⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 243-4.

⁹⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

⁹⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

senses. A theatre of ideas is removed from the equation because in many cases the theatre of ideas does not appeal to any senses whatsoever: It occurs in the mind of the audience.

One could quite easily assume that—given the totality requirement—it would be possible to simply create a theatrical work which assembles all of the arts into one artwork because it would properly engage all of the senses. But Derrida notes that such an artwork would necessarily fail. Indeed, “[n]othing could be further from addressing total man than an assembled totality, an artificial and exterior mimicry.”⁹⁸ With this exclusion, it becomes apparent that simply appealing to all of the senses is not a sufficient condition for art: rather, it is necessary for the work of art to be art that assaults the senses and the very body of the audience. This underscores an important point: In determining what is not acceptable, Derrida is providing one with the tools to see why his schema provides a theatre that is properly originary while also providing one with a clear idea of why the traditional Western conception of theatre misses the mark so completely.

Derrida next turns his sights onto Brechtian theatre by noting that we should eliminate

All theatre of alienation. Alienation only consecrates, with didactic insistence and systematic heaviness, the nonparticipation of spectators (and even of directors and actors) in the creative act, in the irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage.⁹⁹

This is significant insofar as Derrida has expanded his critique to eliminate the art of post-Nietzschean thinkers. While Bertold Brecht’s “epic theatre” is something with which theatre practitioners such as Artaud are undoubtedly familiar, the relevance and meaning of this attack are not immediately clear to a non-practitioner.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

¹⁰⁰ John Willett trans. and ed., *Brecht On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill And Wang, 1964), 33-42 has an excellent overview of Brechtian theatre.

Brecht's epic theatre is a theatre of alienation, first and foremost; To use the Nietzschean terminology employed earlier in this chapter, the epic theatre is anti-Dionysian insofar as the goal is to remove the audience from the spectacle.¹⁰¹ This alienation is achieved, according to Brecht, by distancing the audience from the narrative of the play, the setting of the play, the scenic design, the technical aspects of the production and the production as a whole.¹⁰² The resulting work is a theatre that incorporates the elements of other types of art into its production by estranging the audience from what it sees, feels and thinks—inscribing a call for political action into the work itself by forcing the audience to ask questions about the artistic event before them.¹⁰³

In "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht characterized the theatre to which his epic theatre was reacting and why alienation was its goal:

If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions [of its representations] but by changing them in such a way that if the audience took its representations as a practical guide to insights and impulses it would go astray in real life.¹⁰⁴

Thus, Brecht's attempt to inscribe alienation into theatre was an appeal to moving the audience to take political action. Far from the Apolline instinct toward beauty or from the total Dionysiac festival, Brecht's epic theatre is ultimately a didactic affair. Though the epic theatre could theoretically be beautiful, its beauty would be alienating; And any festival it creates would be one that is intoxicating in the same way a teamster's rally is intoxicating.

¹⁰¹ Willett, 33.

¹⁰² Willett, 33.

¹⁰³ Willett, 204.

¹⁰⁴ Willett, 204.

4.4. Derrida's Prohibitions: Creating the Festival

Such a theatre is problematic for Derrida and Artaud. This Brechtian theatre—like all traditional Western theatre—reinforces the very idea that the theatre of cruelty attempts to destroy: That there must be a separation of powers in the creative act. For cruel theatre, like Dionysiac art, “[t]here is no longer spectator or spectacle, but *festival*.”¹⁰⁵ This idea, while consistent with that which has already been enumerated, also clearly ties the theatre of cruelty to the Dionysiac through imagery. This is expanded upon and complicated when Derrida notes that

“Within the space of the festival opened by transgression, the distance of representation should no longer be extendable. The festival of cruelty lifts all footlights and protective barriers before the “absolute danger” which is “without foundation”: “I must have actors who are first of all beings, that is to say, who on stage are not afraid of the true sensation of the touch of a knife and the conclusions—absolutely real for them—of a supposed birth.” (letter to Roger Blin, September 1945)¹⁰⁶

Brecht's epic theatre works in stark contrast to this festival of cruelty. Instead of creating “*verfremdung*,”¹⁰⁷ or estrangement in the audience, Derrida contends that Artaud wants to rather subsume the audience within the festival: There can be no distance from the representation because the representation permeates the audience completely.

Derrida's final attack on Brechtian theatre is also—strangely enough—a reconciliation of sorts with the overarching end of Brechtian theatre: Theatre should lead to political action. Derrida's take on Artaud differs significantly from Brecht in the mechanism of how this works, however. Thus, when Derrida states that “[t]he festival

¹⁰⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

¹⁰⁷ The German word used by Brecht commonly translated as estrangement. Willett's translation of “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” explains the process of estrangement more completely than I.

must be a political *act*. And the *act* of political revolution is *theatrical*[,]”¹⁰⁸ Derrida is truly responding to Brecht with a wink and a nod. Where Brecht’s theatre attempts to motivate the audience into political action—and is, thus, a means to an end—for Artaud the theatrical festival is the end in and of itself. It is not necessary to motivate the audience to political action because, first, there is no audience and, second and more importantly, participation in the theatrical event is already constituted as a political action in and of itself. Cruel representation does not motivate the audience to political action, but involves the participants in an ongoing political act.¹⁰⁹

It is unsurprising that Derrida next stipulates that the theatre of cruelty must be political; indeed, his next forbidden quality is

All nonpolitical theatre. We have indeed said that the festival must be a political *act* and not the more or less eloquent, pedagogical, and superintended transmission of a concept or a politico-moral vision of the world.¹¹⁰

The festival cannot disseminate knowledge from above, cannot merely be an instantiation of the classical tree of knowledge in which there is unity, truth, and cohesion above all else; Rather, the festival must be that which would have been transmitted in the traditional, didactic Western formulation.¹¹¹

Derrida further expands the concept of the festival by noting that

...the ideal of a public festival substituted for representation, and a certain model of society perfectly present to itself in small communities which render both useless and nefarious all recourse to *representation* at the decisive moments of social life. That is, all recourse to political as well as to theatrical representation, replacement, or delegation.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

¹⁰⁹ Willet, 33-42 provides a more thorough account.

¹¹⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

¹¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi trans., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 3-25 employ similar terminology in their formulation of the arboreal- or root-book (which represents the classical conception of knowledge) as opposed to the radicle-system or fascicular-root. Refer to *A Thousand Plateaus* for a more thorough exploration of this distinction.

¹¹² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

This festival replaces classical representation because it completely divorces mimicry from the representational act: This originary representation—a representation which is certainly not what is traditionally thought of as representation—creates a distinct moment in time and space that is imminently political and from which there can be no distance, a moment that is totalising and immersive. This act, while seemingly unprecedented, is simply a reiteration of his earlier analogy. Derrida again notes that Artaud proposed “the replacement of theatrical representations with public festivals lacking all exhibition and spectacle, festivals without ‘anything to see’ in which the spectators themselves would become actors.”¹¹³

This leads us to the final move made by Derrida on Artaud’s behalf: The condemnation of

“[a]ll ideological theatre, all cultural theatre, all communicative, *interpretive* (in the popular and not the Nietzschean sense, of course) theatre seeking to transmit a content, or to deliver a message (of whatever nature: political, religious, psychological, metaphysical, etc.) that would make a discourse’s meaning intelligible for its listeners; a message that would not be totally exhausted in the *act* and *present tense* of the stage, that would not coincide with the stage, that could be repeated without it.”¹¹⁴

By removing the final trappings of Western conceptions of theatre, what Derrida and Artaud leave us with is something altogether different: Singular art. This art, this cruel representation, is originary in that it is not merely the repetition of an earlier event: Furthermore, its singularity in time prevents other art from being derivative or parasitic upon it. Because this art does not deliver a message, it does not deliver a message that would be self-refuting as in Priest. This art is not a mirror of life: It is life itself. The theatre, if it is sufficiently faithful to Artaud’s vision as delineated by Derrida, would

¹¹³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

¹¹⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

produce representations that nothing else can produce and that no other medium is capable of producing. The distinction Carroll made between expression and representation would be necessarily groundless because there would be no other aspect of art that could produce that content being represented.

Derrida notes that it is with this move that one can finally see the thrust of Artaud's project: As he states,

Here we touch upon what seems to be the profound essence of Artaud's project, his historico-metaphysical decision. *Artaud wanted to erase repetition in general.*¹¹⁵

In the removal of repetition, one can finally create a representation that is properly foundational insofar as it is originary. A representation built upon repetition is a representation that rests upon something else: A repetition of a previous event. Thus when dealing with mimetic representations, one is always dealing with a repetition of another discrete event, thing or place—and, while such a representation could theoretically be the foundation of something further, it could never be the originary representation which Derrida hopes to find. The move here is required by Derrida's list of prohibitions: Non-mimetic representation is the only form of representation that can be cruel, because it is the only representation which can actually represent what lies at the heart of cruelty.

Furthermore, the traditional conception of representation—*mimesis*—was preventing art from ever achieving the Dionysian status lauded by Nietzsche as the pinnacle of art. As Derrida noted, “[f]or [Artaud], repetition was evil[.] Repetition separates force, presence, and life from themselves.”¹¹⁶ And it is in this separation of life from itself that art misses the mark and ceases to represent that which it must represent:

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

¹¹⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 245.

Thus, if *mimesis* is that which prevents representation from representing the very thing it should represent, it is not life that is found wanting but our own understanding of representation itself.

4.5 The Limit of Representation

It is this separation of life from itself that motivates the search for cruel representation. By Derrida's conception, "Being is the form in which the infinite diversity of the forms and forces of life and death can indefinitely merge and be repeated in the word."¹¹⁷ Being, here, is a principle of unity, and merely another instantiation of the traditional patterns of thought that have been inseparable from philosophy seemingly since its inception: The redefinition of representation becomes the well-reasoned gambit of a strident anti-idealist attempting to refocus the work of art around that which is imminent and already given.

This move, of course, is not without its repercussions: Derrida notes that this paradoxical transformation of representation into something devoid of Being may be in some ways impossible. After all,

...there is no word, nor in general a sign, which is not constituted by the possibility of repeating itself. A sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its "first time," is not a sign.¹¹⁸

If there can be no sign without repetition, what does this say for the artistic event? Can this paradox be surmounted? Can there be art which is not a sign?

It seems clear that Derrida contends that it is certainly possible: This new representation opens up the door for this. Derrida himself notes that

¹¹⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 246.

¹¹⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 246.

Non-repetition, expenditure that is resolute and without return in the unique time consuming the present, must put an end to fearful discursiveness, to unskirtable ontology, to dialectics[.]¹¹⁹

The break from mimesis provides Derrida with two victories: The microcosmic victory of creating a space within which theatrical representation can function in the manner that Artaud hoped that it would, as well as a macrocosmic victory that furthers Derrida's own intellectual endeavors. Indeed, Derrida's conciliation of this point reads more like a triumph than a coda:

This is indeed how things appear: theatrical representation is finite, and leaves behind it, behind its actual presence, no trace, no object to carry off. It is neither a book nor a work, but an energy, and in this sense it is the only art of life.¹²⁰

Representation, then, is re-imagined, but not so radically as first seemed apparent. First, "[b]ecause it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure of that which is without end."¹²¹ Representation is originary in this sense; Because it has always already begun, it is seemingly the condition whereby things actually occur. Furthermore, representation cannot be said to be infinite: Although it has no end, such an end can be readily conceived. Such an end—the closure of representation—is hardly without precedent; Indeed, "[c]losure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its *playing* space."¹²² The end of repetition is more properly conceived as the limit of representation: An originary ongoing act whose only limit is the space within which it continuously and assiduously avoids *mimetic* resurgence by continually representing difference. Derrida leaves us with a caveat that is decidedly in line with the rest of the *corpus* of his work:

¹¹⁹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 246.

¹²⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 247.

¹²¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 250.

¹²² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 250.

To think the closure of representation is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in its deferral. To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity.¹²³

Although the type of representation described by Artaud is possible, its possibility says more about the nature of representation itself than the works of art which exhibit fidelity to it: In attempting to give us the tools to represent life, Artaud gave us, instead, the tools to understand the life of representation.

4.6 Cruel Representation and Traditional Representation

Whether this stratification or permutation of representation is actually achieved, in the end, is beside the point. What Derrida—and, according to Derrida, Artaud—are ultimately talking about is a cruel theatre that presents cruel representations. These cruel representations are non-mimetic representations, and are either non-representational in the sense that we understand the term—generally speaking, a representation is commonly understood to be a representation of something else—or, alternatively, meta-representational insofar as the scope of cruel representation seems to occupy the space of one of Priest's limits of thought. This cruel representation is a presence that denies presence, a difference that is *différance*. And thus we arrive back to Priest.

For this sort of representation is representation as transgression, a representation that must be both representation and difference. It is a representation that ultimately is more process driven than content defined; It is not a representation of anything in the traditional sense, it is the ground on which the struggle between presences plays out. If it

¹²³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 250.

has content at all, its content seems to be *différance*. Its importance lies in its struggle for existence, not whether it is actually existent.

Let us revisit the definition that began my work in chapter 2. According to Carroll a work, *x*, can be said to be represent something else, *y*, when the following criteria are met:

x represents *y* (**where *y* ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events, and actions**) if and only if (1) a sender intends *x* (e.g., a picture) to stand for *y* (e.g., a haystack) and (2) the audience realizes that *x* is intended to stand for *y*.¹²⁴

The domain of references intended in cruel representation can be seen here to fail on at least one count; *différance* and deferral do not seem to clearly fit in the domain of objects, persons, events and actions given that neither are an object or a person, nor are they correctly an event or an action in the general meanings of the terms.

Insofar as the play of differences Derrida isolates can be represented, my definition can do that. Remember, my modification allows the following:

x represents *y* (where *y* ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events, and actions, **ideas, states of being, and abstract concepts**. if and only if (1) a sender intends *x* (e.g., a picture) to stand for *y* (e.g., a haystack) and (2) the audience realizes that *x* is intended to stand for *y*.

The play of differences and deferrals is decidedly an idea, Derrida claims it is a state of being¹²⁵, and it certainly seems to be an abstract concept on top of all of the above. My definition would, in principle, be able to communicate this process because its scope is wider than Carroll's, though identical in process. Moreover, Carroll's representation is more mimetic than my definition given that the domain of things that can be represented in his account is ultimately concrete: My proposed definition allows for abstraction in ways his does not.

¹²⁴ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 26.

¹²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Alan Bass trans., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 11 notes that, much like in Heidegger, we must create a space for *différance* can "unfold."

In the conclusion of this work, I will turn to several concrete examples of how this limit concept of representation could work in art. Through a brief account of some of the more problematic works of art in the twentieth century, the benefits of my expanded definition should become obvious. Moreover, the play of differences and deferrals which is the avowed domain of cruel representation can be seen as a possible explanation for some of the more pernicious and strange aspects characterizing twentieth century art. Though I stop short of claiming to have proven the presence of cruel representation, I trust the evidence I find demonstrates the utility of cruel representation for an explanation of how representation can and will function when in the presence of its own limits.

CHAPTER 5: HOW TO REPRESENT THE UNREPRESENTABLE

5.1. Representation's Limit in Contemporary Art: *Black Square*

Arthur Danto's "Art and Meaning" revisits his analysis of several of the more problematic twentieth century works of art: Malevich's monochrome *Black Square* painting, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, and the appropriationist artist Mike Bidlo's exhibition *Not Andy Warhol*. Malevich's *Black Square* is simply an all-black square around which a picture frame is hung; Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* is a collection of 85 Brillo boxes stacked in a museum just as they are found in supermarkets around the world; and Bidlo's *Not Andy Warhol* consists of 85 Brillo boxes stacked identically to those in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Danto's argumentation for each of these individual works strikes me as neither here nor there; For the purposes of this discussion I ask that we give provisional art status to these works. My goal is to show how or whether these works could be said to be representational if they are works. My suspicion is that these works are famous enough that their art status can be taken as a given for the sake of argument, and familiar enough that we could from these exemplars see how an expanded conception of representation could account for some of the content of these works of art.

Danto suggests two broad rubrics upon which one can determine whether a given thing is a work of art:

I argued, first, that works of art are always about something, and hence have a content or meaning; and second that to be a work of art something had to embody its meaning. This cannot be the entire story, but if I could not get these conditions to hold, I am unclear what a definition of art without them would look like.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Noel Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 132.

These two criteria seem largely non-controversial; This theme that artworks are ultimately about something underpins both Carroll's work and my own.¹²⁷ Indeed, Danto's assessment of what makes an artwork an artwork is largely helpful at this state of the game: in the course of this thesis I have focused on how representation works in the context of a work of art. The short shrift I have paid to what makes an artwork an artwork was of necessity.

Moreover, Danto's overarching theory is helpful insofar as it is a more generalized schema of the kind of definitions Carroll and I put forward. Much like works of art as a whole, representations are always representations of something (in limit cases such as Derrida, that something is itself or *différance*). How that work is represented embodies its meaning in the work. Danto's position on the three above works is that each meets the qualifications set up in his rubric.

Malevich's *Black Square* is deemed a success because the work seems to Danto to be about something—thus possessing either content or meaning—and the artwork itself embodies that meaning in some way.¹²⁸ As Danto notes, "Malevich perhaps invented monochrome painting, but would have been astonished to be told that his *Black Square* was not about anything."¹²⁹ And this is true; The work at the very least is about something, though it may not have content as such, and that seems evident from the fact that it exists and presumably communicates something to an audience.

I do not disagree with Danto's analysis of *Black Square*, though I think with my account of representation he can go much farther. Let us first turn to Carroll's account of

¹²⁷ Indeed, if you refer to both Carroll and my own accounts of representation in a work of art, our definitions seem to presuppose this very fact. Derrida's search for cruel theatre in the previous chapter delineates what cruel theatre would be about.

¹²⁸ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 132.

¹²⁹ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 132.

representation. Carroll, by necessity, would suggest the work in question is not representational because the domain of representation is insufficient to the task at hand. *Black Square* does not seem to represent objects, persons, events, and actions; And even if Malevich had intended to represent these things, the work is such that no audience to date has realized that the black square in the painting is intended to stand for any such thing.

I have more options with my definition. I can account for all of the things delineated in Carroll's definition without question; Moreover, I can also represent ideas, states of being and abstract concepts. Given Danto's conviction that *Black Square* is a painting about something and given the lack of discernible things depicted in the painting, it would seem obvious that the meaning of this painting is also, per Danto, its content. Based on what we know about the painting, it seems fair to say that both its meaning and its content are in some way abstract: Perhaps this lies in ideas, perhaps this lies in states of being or perhaps these are just abstract concepts.

Irrespective of which of those it is—if any—by my account any or none could be represented in the work itself. Facts about representation (such as its absence in the work) fall firmly within the rubric I have set up, unlike that put forward by Carroll. Though I fail to see how such an absence of representation would be cruel in the Derridean sense of the term, certainly such an absence could be said to be the representation of a Priestean limit: By representing non-representation we can see echoes of Closure and Transcendence. Moreover, Danto's account of the work above seems to concede both intentionality on the part of the artist and a certain amount of understanding of that intentionality on the part of the audience. Thus, the expansion of the definition of

representation allows us a chance to represent both meta-representation and non-representation—and in so doing we can arrive at a representation that may not be cruel but seems to be in some limited sense originary insofar as it can depict facts about *différance* if not *différance* itself.

Danto underscores this point by proposing a hypothetical painting that, unlike Malevich, is a painting of nothing: “We can of course imagine someone in the spirit of philosophical counterinstantiation painting a work about nothing.”¹³⁰ Such a painting, obviously, would not have the Malevich defense of artistic intention behind it; Rather, the artist could and would insist that the painting is a painting about nothing. Danto’s defense echoes my interpretation above: “But there is a problem of distinguishing between not being about anything and being about nothing, and I incline to the view that nothing is what the painting is about.”¹³¹ In my account of representation, nothing can be represented; Carroll cannot claim the same.

5.2 The Brillo Problem and Expanded Representation

Danto rules that Warhol’s *Brillo Box* succeeds for the same reasons as *Black Square*. The stacks of Brillo pads are clearly the content of the work in question—and unlike *Black Square*, the work does have existent constituent things that do, indeed, constitute the work. But the problem with *Brillo Box* is that little distinguishes Warhol’s boxes from ordinary boxes:

Ordinary boxes of Brillo in the stockrooms of supermarkets are about something—Brillo—and that they embody their meanings through the designs on their surfaces.

¹³⁰ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 133.

¹³¹ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 133.

Since I wanted a definition that would distinguish artworks from real things, however something looked, I cannot have succeeded, since the definition, while it fits Warhol's box, fits equally well the ordinary boxes from which I was anxious to distinguish it.¹³²

The problem here is that both *Brillo Box* and Brillo boxes seem to be art. Danto does not find this to be particularly problematic. While there can be a distinction between commercial art like Brillo boxes and fine art like *Brillo Box* without much controversy, to suggest they are art in the same way seems counterintuitive. Danto agreed with this sentiment, noting "the distinction between fine and commercial art was no more and no less pressing than the parallel distinction between fine art and craft."¹³³ And this problem is thrown into clear relief when one adds Bidlo's *Not Andy Warhol* to the mix as well.

In all three of these works—the commercial art that is the Brillo box, the fine art that characterizes Warhol and Bidlo's appropriation of this commercial art and resituating it into museums around the world—we have changes in both meaning and embodiment. The boxes of Brillo convey to the consumer exactly what a Brillo pad will do. Danto notes Steve Harvey, the designer of the Brillo boxes created a carton that

Is not simply a container for Brillo pads: it is a visual celebration of Brillo. The box is decorated with two wavy zones of red separated by one of white, with blue and red letters. Red, white, and blue are the colors of patriotism, as the wave is a property of water and of flags. This connects cleanliness and duty, and transforms the side of the box into a flag of patriotic sanitation.¹³⁴

Far from being just an object of utility, the Brillo box in its everyday form is explicitly a work of art.

Warhol's fine art appropriation of Brillo boxes into his *Brillo Box* depends upon such an understanding of the basic carton. Danto explains this by noting

Commercial art was in some way what Warhol's art was about. He had a view of the ordinary world as aesthetically beautiful, and admired greatly the things Harvey and his

¹³² Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 133.

¹³³ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 135.

¹³⁴ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 136.

heroes would have ignored or condemned. He loved the surfaces of daily life, the nutritiousness and predictability of canned goods, the poetics of the commonplace.¹³⁵

Danto's suggestion that Warhol's appropriation of Brillo boxes was predicated on a keen understanding of commercial art seems plausible. It establishes one way in which the art in question could mean what it does in a way that is different than that of the ordinary Brillo boxes, though not yet by which mechanism this meaning is transmitted to the audience.

Bidlo's appropriation of both the ordinary Brillo boxes and Warhol's *Brillo Box* depends on both of these senses of the works. Danto notes that Bidlo "installed, in the same configuration in which they were shown at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1968, eight-five Brillo boxes, which he had fabricated."¹³⁶ The objects comprising the three shows are, in and of themselves, relatively indiscernible. Though Bidlo's Brillo boxes were handcrafted, there's nothing to suggest that the boxes looked altogether different from those found in shopping centers around the world or in Warhol's exhibit in Pasadena. What sets Bidlo's exhibit apart from Warhol's—as well as from the Brillo boxes in commercial stores—is the way in which the work communicates its meaning.

It is central to Bidlo's project that the number and array of his boxes be connected with the number and array of Warhol's boxes in Pasadena. In Warhol's case, by contrast, the number may have been adventitious and the arrangement a matter of indifference. Bidlo's was in some way an installation, whereas Warhol's was just a number of artworks.¹³⁷

Thus, what sets the work apart is its meaning in comparison to other works that are variations on the theme of Brillo—be they the Brillo cartons themselves, Warhol's *Brillo Box* or something else.

¹³⁵ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 136.

¹³⁶ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 136.

¹³⁷ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 138.

Danto suggests that the indeterminacy of the Brillo boxes, here, is the crux of the problem.

It is important to the problem that in all relevant visual respects, they are entirely alike. That is what I have meant in saying so often that what makes something art is not something that meets the eye. And that makes clear as well why so much rests on meaning, which it is the task of art criticism to make explicit.¹³⁸

But as interesting as this problem is, Danto does not provide us with an explicit solution to it. If the defining problem with these works is that they somehow mean differently, then the task at hand is to find a way in which they could all mean. I propose the way in which all these works mean is representation.

How Carroll's account of representation could account for any of these works is unclear to me. With the commercial Brillo boxes, the meaning in question is not really an object, person, event or action; Carroll cannot represent the combination of patriotism or cleanliness. With Warhol's *Brillo Box* he fares better: If one decides Warhol's work is representing the existent Brillo boxes in supermarkets, it neatly fits within the scope of Carroll's account of representation. So, too, with Bidlo's *Not Andy Warhol*, if one accepts that Bidlo's boxes are meant to represent Warhol's as well as the original boxes.

The problem, of course, is that it is not clear that the events Carroll's definition represents have to be the only events represented. Given that all the boxes are identical in each of the works of art, and given that each conveys meaning, it is unclear why the content being exhibited in the first one is being transmitted to an audience differently than the content in the other works of art. The meaning expressed by Brillo boxes seems to me to be transmitted to audiences and understood by them in a remarkably similar way as that communicated in the Warhol and Bidlo exhibits.

¹³⁸ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 138.

If one employs my account of representation instead, the process by which meaning is transmitted is much simpler. The commercial boxes represent the American qualities of cleanliness and patriotism with aplomb given that both cleanliness and patriotism are ideas, states of being and abstract concepts. Moreover, Warhol's *Brillo Box* represents both the commercial boxes as well as his ideas about commercial art and aesthetics as a whole. Finally, Bidlo's *Not Andy Warhol* represents all of the above, as well as Bidlo's understanding of how aesthetic representation works *vis a vis* his appropriation of Warhol's work.

The Brillo problem clearly demonstrates the problems with Carroll's traditional account of representation. In visual works of art such as those presented by Warhol, Bidlo and Harvey, it seems strange to say that certain meanings are represented in the works, certain meanings are expressed in the works, and certain meanings are imparted to the audience in other ways. After all, the works do not transmit these meanings differently to an audience despite the different enumerations of the method of transmission; They are there for anyone to see.

Furthermore, none run afoul of the intentionality requirement given the availability of critical interpretation of the works that assert artistic intention as Danto, in these cases, does. And none seem to run afoul of audiences not understanding what is going on in the works—discussing the works and reading critical assessments of them seem to be *prima facie* evidence that audiences can understand the meanings operative in the works. At no point in the Brillo problem does Carroll's account work better than my own—and in all cases, it is insufficient to communicate the ways in which the artworks work.

5.3. But Can We Represent Différance?

The Brillo problem explains the efficacy of my redefinition in terms of more traditional content. But—aside from *Black Square*—we have yet to see exactly how différance could be credibly communicated to an audience. The best example I can find is a film that displays an intimacy with the subject matter: The 2002 film *Derrida*, a Derrida biographical movie.¹³⁹ What follows is a short examination of ways in which this film could, theoretically, be said to represent the unrepresentable in a uniquely Derridean way.

One could suggest that this film is representational insofar as it depicts Derrida the person. But if one considers the assembled whole of the movie—the combination of shots depicting Derrida being charitable, friendly and accessible in some scenes while mysteriously closed off and angry in others—the specialized audience inclined to watch a Derrida biographical film can and should understand that there is more than one kind of representation at work here. While the film certainly represents Derrida the person, what it also represents is a deconstruction of Derrida the person. It exposes contradictions, represents the play of differences that the philosopher cannot hide from a persistent cameraman.

While I must confess that such a representation might not be explicitly cruel insofar as it does not involve all the senses—certainly smell and touch would not enter the equation—it would be a representation that is also the locus of a deconstruction. While I do not suggest that all representations must be the locus of a deconstruction, as Derrida does, I do believe that they certainly can be represented definitionally if one

¹³⁹ *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Kaufman (Hollywood, USA: Jane Doe Films, 2002).

employs my definition. The Derrida film is one such example, and I leave it to other artists to present more.¹⁴⁰

5.4. Conclusions We Can Reach

In Denis Dutton's "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art," Dutton creates an analogy to explain differences in the ways people create art and understand it. Dutton notes

Suppose there existed a tribe whose only way of cooking food—any food, ever—was to boil it in water. Everything this people ever prepared and ate was either raw, unheated in any manner, or boiled. Would we say, "They have a different *concept* of cooking from us"? No; they cook food, though within a more limited repertoire of techniques than ours. But a greater range of techniques to carry out a practice does not in itself change the concept of that practice. The invention of the microwave oven did not change the concept of cooking; it provided a new way to do it.¹⁴¹

Dutton contrasts this with a second tribe with an altogether different understanding of food preparation.

Suppose, however, that we discovered a tribe that never heated food, had never heard of eating it, but always passed a spirit wand over it before eating it. Would we say they had "a different concept of cooking from ours"? Again, no; whatever else they are doing—blessing food, sanctifying it, warding off poisons, authorizing the occasion of its being eaten—they are not *cooking* it with a spirit wand (although the wand could act to "cook" symbolically if they already knew what cooking was; but the tribe would have to have the concept of cooking for that).¹⁴²

And here we have the crux of what this thesis has addressed.

I do not contend that Noel Carroll's definition of representation does not correctly identify representational content: it does. The problem is that his definition does not adequately describe all representational content. While his definition does determine

¹⁴⁰ And perhaps that artist is Derrida himself. According to several interviews with Derrida—including one featured in *Derrida*—Derrida himself wrote a play in his youth.

¹⁴¹ Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 228.

¹⁴² Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 228.

some of the things that can be represented, to call his conception of that which can be represented “adequate” strikes me as a misnomer.

As the examples I have provided demonstrate, there are ample reasons to suspect more can be represented than that for which Carroll accounts; Be they non-concrete things, meta-representations or nothing at all. Insofar as an artist intends to represent these things and insofar as an audience is able to understand them, there seems to be no reason to exclude them from our understanding of the term.

It would be uncharitable and incorrect to deem Carroll’s definition a “cooking stick,” given that he and I are clearly focused on the same qualities found in artworks. But I do suspect that my expansion of the definition of representation here is like giving a microwave to the first tribe Dutton describes: It will not change the concept of their cooking, only give them more tools by which to do so. As with microwaves, so too with definitions.

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