

PICTURES, BYTES AND VALUES:
AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIC McIVER LOPES

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PALOMA ATENCIA-LINARES: You have worked extensively on pictorial representation and issues concerning the evaluation of pictures. It is striking that this topic (pictorial representation) has almost exclusively been studied by aestheticians and not by philosophers working in other disciplines. Especially when we realise that probably the majority of pictures are not artistic and that they are an important means of information transmission. Why do you think this is so?

DOMINIC LOPES: This is something I was thinking about quite a bit when I started to write my book *Understanding Pictures*.¹ But let me begin to answer the question by challenging an assumption that is built into the question. When you say that only aestheticians work on pictures, the question arises: who counts as an aesthician? Just working on pictures maybe makes you an aesthician; we tend to think of that topic as one that happens to be addressed in a particular field. Take my own example: my doctoral training was almost entirely on philosophy of language and philosophy of mind; I didn't have a clear idea what aesthetics was. I had done some undergraduate aesthetics but it was more oriented towards issues related to mind, language and metaphysics; the textbook we had was Goodman's *Languages of Art*² and I had never read Kant's third critique, for instance. So what you think of traditional aesthetics was

¹ Lopes, D. (1996).

² Goodman, N. (1968)

not part of my training in aesthetics. I then wrote this book – *Understanding Pictures* – and I moved to the US and people said, “Oh, you do aesthetics,” and I said, “Oh, I do? OK!” and I started to go to the American Society for Aesthetics meetings. But it’s kind of arbitrary that we say that anybody who works on pictures is working on aesthetics or, for that matter, that anybody who works on fiction is working on aesthetics. Well, if you want to claim that, say, David Lewis is an aesthetician because he wrote a paper on fiction, I’m happy to say that’s true.

It doesn’t really matter how we draw these boundaries, except that there is a more fundamental issue. Once you put the topic of pictures within a certain context it shapes the way the topic is treated, it shapes certain approaches. You’re right that pictorial representation ought to be more interesting to people who work on representation generally, pictorial communication and knowledge transfer ought to be more interesting to people working on epistemology, and so on. If you’re looking for an explanation it might be that philosophy of language is closely tied to logic and formalisation, and philosophy of language never thought of itself as treating artifactual representation in a general way. I’m sure that is changing.

There is a group of philosophers outside of aesthetics who are reading the depiction literature and who are working on depiction; these are philosophers of science and this has been happening especially in the last ten years. For several decades historians of science have been interested in the use of images in scientific contexts and philosophers of science are now beginning to take seriously scientists’ own reports that their images are not just illustrations meant to supplement their theories, but that in many cases their illustrations are the main conveyors of scientific reasoning, evidence and hypothesis in their publications and presentations.

PAL: It is frequently claimed that pictures are similar in relevant respects to perception; but are they not also importantly similar to memory?

DL: From a non-philosophical, art-studies perspective, that is the first thing a historian of art would say. “Pictures are like memories,” that’s what they would say. In a way, philosophers implicitly also think of pictures as related to memory. In *Understanding Pictures* I explored the relation between pictures and recognition – recognition is a form of memory. I had a bit of a discussion of episodic memory and

recall and I also tried to associate depiction to episodic memory.³ Also there is an awareness in, say, Rob Hopkins' comparison of pictures to mental images.⁴ It could be that you think of mental images in a pretty broad way as memory images; that's memory in a sense of cognitive information storage, the broad psychological science conception of memory. Of course, you might be thinking about memory in a more specific sense, as when you remember the picnic you had last Sunday. You remember what you saw in that picnic and imagine your drawing a picture of that episode. There's some way in which pictures capture those specific episodic memories. But I don't think philosophy has yet developed enough theory about that kind of memory for it to be useful for thinking about pictures.

PAL: The transparency thesis has been the closest comparison of pictures – photographs, in particular – with perception. You have claimed that being transparent is not something that distinguishes photographs from paintings. Does this mean that both are always transparent or can they also be opaque?

DL: Here is my view: transparency is a matter of degree or, maybe better, images are transparent with respect to some determinate or determinable property. That's probably a much more useful way to think about transparency than the way it's usually discussed, which seems to suggest that it's an all or nothing matter. That can't be right. Let's say that you do believe that a photograph is transparent and you take a photograph of your beloved's face. You want to make her more pretty so you put a mole on her face with a little magic marker. Has the image now gone from transparent to opaque? I don't think so. What you probably want to say is that it's transparent, and if you think the drawing of the mole is not transparent, you would say that it's transparent with respect to most of its properties. The representation of those properties is the product of counterfactual dependence not mediated by beliefs. The presence of the mole may be counterfactually dependent but mediated by your belief that the mole is there or your wish to show that the mole is there. That is, I think, a much more powerful way to think about transparency.

It makes a lot of sense to say that there is a spectrum. At one end there is a kind

³ Lopes, D. (1996), p. 136-140

⁴ Hopkins, R. (1998).

of pure type of photography – I’m not sure what you get from calling it ‘pure’ but, in any case, there is a kind of photography where you can say there is a mechanism designed to ensure transparency and to minimize opacity. And then you have some transparent hand-made pictures where, as I explained in *Understanding Pictures*, the artist allows to muscle memory, lets eye-hand coordination to take over and does not allow any beliefs about what she’s doing to interfere. That is again, one end of the spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum are uses of photography where you have opacity and we have pictures where the artist is saying “I want to make this square” and she makes a square.

Notice that this view is relevant for the literature on the epistemology of photography, where there is this worry about digital photography. I think the idea of a spectrum makes the worry go away entirely. Also, this view pushes you to take seriously the fact that there has always been doctoring in traditional photography. It is not true that in a courtroom photographs are just treated as evidence. It has to be established that the photograph is not doctored. Now we know the respects in which you have reliable information transmission.

PAL: You also have claimed that the fact that transparency does not distinguish photographs from paintings does not mean there is no difference between them. What is the difference, then? Is this a difference in kind?

DL: Here is how I approach metaphysics, at least as it is relevant to aesthetics in the broad sense. I think kinds are a dime a dozen. There are properties with respect to which photographs and hand-made pictures differ. I think that the best way to understand that difference is the way Patrick Maynard does:⁵ in terms of different kinds of technologies, the histories of those technologies and the purposes to which those technologies are put. I think this three-part account works really well to describe the difference between what he calls the ‘family of technologies’ that constitutes photography and the ‘family of technologies’ that we think of as paintings, drawings and hand-made depiction more generally. So there is a difference; is it a difference in kind? Do we want to define two kinds? Well, there is the property with respect to which they differ, so it may seem we have two kinds. But I would ask what

⁵ Maynard, P (1997).

explanatory work is done by the hypothesis of these two kinds? Maybe you think that the explanatory work is connected to the issue of transparency, but since I think transparency is a matter of degree, then maybe there aren't two kinds of things. If I am right and there is not a deep difference in how we appreciate photographs vs. non-photographic images, then it doesn't make much sense to say these are two different kinds. Now if there is indeed a deep difference – and maybe there is – then I think we need the concept of a kind here. I don't think our intuitions about sharp differences in phenomena necessarily match how reality is differentiated; I think that we need to think about the kinds that do explanatory work for us.

PAL: In *Understanding Pictures*, you claim that “a picture represents an object only if it conveys information from it on the basis on which it can be identified” and that “to understand pictures, viewers must employ a specifically pictorial mode (or modes) of identification which single out, on the basis of their contents, the picture's sources.”⁶ Does this mean that pictures are always of particulars or can there be general pictorial content?

DL: I can see two ways to accommodate general pictorial content: one is to say that an image depicts a singular item which can then be used to represent a kind, for instance. Another is to say that it has a singular pictorial content but it has a general representational content. So there might be facts about the picture in virtue of which it represents, say, cats by depicting a cat; it's not just used to represent a cat but actually represents cats.

PAL: Our experience of seeing things in pictures is similar in many respects to our experience of seeing things face-to-face. However, our evaluation of our experience of pictures depicting scenes and events is different from our evaluation of our experience of things seen face-to-face.⁷ Why is that?

DL: When you look at a representational picture, you have an experience as of the depicted object, but you normally don't just have that experience; that experience is

⁶ Lopes, D. (1996), p.107.

⁷ Lopes calls this ‘The puzzle of mimesis’ and traces it back to Flint Schier (1993).

paired up with, twinned with, interpenetrated by other components of experience. There is a range of options⁸ and that range of options explains why seeing things in pictures is different from seeing things face-to-face. The second part is the evaluation – this part is not a fully defended theory, I call it a conjecture, and it is just meant to apply to pictures. When you evaluate a picture aesthetically what you’re doing is attributing a merit to it and part of what makes that feature a merit is that a suitable observer finds the picture to have that feature; they experience the picture as having that feature. Now, part of that experience consists in that complex formed by seeing-in paired with the other component of experience that explains the role the picture itself is playing. You can’t have that experience when you see objects face-to-face in normal circumstances unless you are making a mistake. To make this a bit concrete: if you look at a sunset and you say it’s charming, you’re attributing charmingness to the sunset; and part of what makes the charmingness a merit of the sunset is that a suitable observer finds it to be charming. In the case of a picture of a sunset things are a bit different. When you attribute charmingness to the image, you’re attributing a merit to it – it can be a demerit, but let’s say it’s a merit – and part of what makes the charmingness of the picture a merit in the picture is that a suitable observer experiences the picture as charming; but their experiencing the picture as charming takes into account not only their seeing the sunset in the picture but also the other component of their experience that is provided only by the picture.

PAL: Your solution to the ‘Puzzle of Mimesis’ explains why we value seeing objects in pictures even though we would not value seeing such objects face-to-face. But does it also shed light on why we sometimes value positively a picture depicting a scene that experienced face-to-face would be valued negatively; for example, as repulsive, cruel or violent?

DL: I’m not sure whether the problem even arises in my account. The problem arises

⁸ In *Sight and Sensibility* (2005) Lopes claims that there are different ways of seeing-in. Seeing an object in a picture is (just) to have an experience ‘as of’ seeing the object the picture depicts. But there are other experiences we can have of the picture. We can also have “a visual experience as a configuration, on a two-dimensional surface, of marks, colours, and textures in virtue of which the surface depicts a scene.” (p. 28) This is what Lopes calls design seeing. Another possible experience is surface seeing, which allows us to see the marked surface of the picture without seeing some object within it. These experiences can or cannot be paired up with ‘simple’ seeing-in giving rise to a variety of ways of seeing in pictures. For details, see pp. 25-45.

if you think about it hedonically. So you say, seeing a person being executed in the street would be shocking and painful and you would avert the gaze, but seeing a photograph of a Vietcong prisoner being executed in the street⁹ is disturbing but it is gripping – we don't avert the gaze. We look intensely and then we confess it: in some way it is pleasurable. So then the question is how it is possible that what is unpleasurable in one context can be pleasurable in another context. But I am not thinking of values as necessarily hedonically coloured. I guess it's bad for people to be shot in the street and our experience of seeing people executed in the streets represents that badness and we act accordingly. But it might be good in all sorts of ways – cognitively, morally, aesthetically – to see pictures of it. So the question doesn't arise in the same biting form, I think. Maybe it is helpful to think about something that is disgusting when seen face-to-face – say, the carcass of a cow – and then you see Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef* (1657) and it's actually quite interesting to look at. There you have the disgustingness being a demerit face-to-face and being a merit – is it a merit? Yes, I guess it is a merit – in the pictorial case. But my account doesn't require that the demerits and merits track across the two contexts.

PAL: You defend the view that moral and cognitive evaluations are relevant for aesthetic evaluation, a view that has also been defended by other philosophers. What is distinctive about your position?

DL: This issue comes up in *Sight and Sensibility*.¹⁰ I thought what I was doing there was quite different from what everybody else was doing, and I now deeply regret that I didn't better explain that. What other people are doing is thinking about whether moral and epistemic values are relevant to artistic evaluation. So the question for them is “what are the artistic values?” There is aesthetic value, that's one of them, but what about moral values and epistemic values? They might be artistic values. But, what about other values such as social status? It seems that they are going to say those are not artistic values. Given that way of setting things up you have the possibility of what Carroll calls radical autonomism.¹¹ The radical autonomist is someone who

⁹ Lopes refers here to Eddie Adams's 1968 photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner. He discusses this case in Lopes (2011a).

¹⁰ Lopes, D. (2005).

¹¹ Carroll, N. (1996).

identifies artistic value with aesthetic value. The radical autonomist says that moral value and epistemic value are not artistic values, none of them are; the only one that is, is aesthetic value. I'm arguing in a different way against radical autonomism by saying: actually some values such as moral values and epistemic values are connected to aesthetic values. Or, if you want to be a moralist or moderate moralist or moderate autonomist in the contemporary sense: they are artistic values because they can be aesthetic values. So it's not that they are values alongside aesthetic values; it's rather that they can be part of aesthetic value. I thought I was arguing for something that was quite distinct from what is in the literature, but it doesn't come across because people use artistic and aesthetic interchangeably and they haven't tracked the structure of the dialectic using those terms to differentiate different presuppositions.

PAL: Why do you think some authors prefer to talk about artistic value instead of aesthetic value? Why do you think is their motivation for that?

DL: A little bit of armchair history here. I think there are two things and the two things are related. Firstly, there is Danto's Indiscernibles Argument – I think Danto says this but even if he doesn't, people see this in the scenario – : “Boy! You have works that are indiscernible aesthetically but that differ in values that are relevant to the way we're thinking about art from a philosophical perspective. Boy! Let's have a name for that, let's call it artistic value.” It's not just that Brillo boxes and Brillo Boxes by Warhol have different value even if they have the same aesthetic value; it is that they differ in a philosophical interesting value – not just economic value, for instance. And then people call this value 'artistic value'. At the same time, there is the general contextualist current in aesthetics going back to the 1970s and 1980s, lead by people like Jerrold Levinson and also inspired by Noël Carroll's idea of 'conversationally and cooperatively realised values.'¹² People want to say that there are values that works have that are not based on their appearances.

Now, the problem is that, at bottom, all this discussion assumes a narrow sense of the aesthetic. A narrow conception of the aesthetic, moreover, based on a narrow sense of the perceptual – because you can have broad notions of perceptual content and narrow notions of perceptual content, and this is perceptual in the narrow sense. I

¹² Carroll, N. (1986)

suspect that a narrow conception of the aesthetic is flawed and we should not get stuck with it. James Shelley has talked about a much broader experiential conception of the aesthetic in *Early Modern Philosophy*,¹³ for instance, and I am persuaded about the things he says about Hutcheson, for example...

PAL: So do you think we need to broaden the notion of artistic value or are we better off without it?

DL: In *Sight and Sensibility* I argued that there is a relationship between aesthetic value on the one hand, and cognitive and – specifically – moral value on the other. But one of the things I tried to do by mounting this argument was to try to understand what aesthetic value is. I think that our intuitions are all over the place; they are a mess. Also, our understanding of appreciative practices is pretty limited, there is theory-ladenness all over the place and the phenomenon is probably not only one phenomenon. At the end of the day, my hunch is that there are a bunch of different phenomena that we are lumping under ‘the aesthetic’ and we need some way of theorising that provides some tidiness, some distinctions. So one of the things I was doing in that book was trying to understand the aesthetic in relation to the moral and the epistemic to get at a better conception of one thing that aesthetic value can be.

PAL: ...but you have recently claimed¹⁴ that there is no such thing as artistic value. What are your main reasons for holding this view?

DL: I believe two things. On the one hand, I think there is aesthetic value in a narrow sense and aesthetic value in a broader sense. On the other, I think that items have value as members of kinds. Specifically artworks have value in so far as they are members of art-kinds – art forms or genres, maybe styles and traditions. Now, having aesthetic value and being good as a member of a kind are two things that should be treated separately. In her book *Normativity*¹⁵ Judith Jarvis Thomson says there is no such thing as being good simpliciter. Either something is good as a member of a kind – being good as a tomato, being good as a chess-player, etc. – or something is good in

¹³ Shelley, J. (2003)

¹⁴ Lopes, D. (2011b)

¹⁵ Thomson, J. J. (2008)

certain respect – being morally good, being epistemically good, etc. – she calls this ‘good-modified.’ These are different kinds of goodness. Aesthetic value is good-modified, good as a picture is good as a member of a kind, and they ought to be treated in different ways. Now when people think about artistic value they basically lump the two together. But there is no such thing as being a member of the kind art because there is no non-aesthetic essential feature of art. The only non-institutional definitions of art that there are, I think, are all aesthetic ones – even in the case of Berys Gaut’s cluster theory,¹⁶ the things in those clusters scream of the aesthetic to me; and so I would say it’s a cluster theory of the aesthetic. There is nothing that makes an item a work of art that doesn’t just make it a painting or a work of music or a work of literature. So artistic value isn’t value as a member of the kind, art. Could it be good-modified? What would it be for something to be artistically good-modified? Nobody has said. What I think people are doing in the literature is treating artistic value as a kind of good-modified, and when you ask them what do they mean by that, they try to scale up from value as a painting, value as a work of music, to value as a member of the category ‘art’. Doing that’s a deep confusion.

PAL: In your most recent book *A Philosophy of Computer Art*¹⁷ you introduce a criterion for individuation of art forms that goes something along these lines: an art form or kind of art is such, if and only if it is an appreciative kind. This view contrasts with the more traditional view that individuates artworks in virtue of the distinctive artistic possibilities of a medium. What are the advantages of your view over the traditional one?

DL: I actually think that the views are consistent. That’s because it’s not that a kind is an art form “if and only if it is an appreciative kind,” it is “only if it is an appreciative kind.” So all art forms are appreciative kinds, but there are many other kinds of appreciative kinds; genres, for example. Now, what kind of appreciative kind is an art form? In my book in progress I say it is one that is individuated in terms of medium plus practice. So, the full story brings the medium in, but it’s true that’s not in *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. Now, at the end of that book I say that digital art is not

¹⁶ Gaut, B. (2000)

¹⁷ Lopes, D. (2010)

an art form because it is not an appreciative kind whereas computer art is indeed an appreciative kind and it is OK to call it an art form because it's not a genre or a style or anything like that. But I also hint in the book that there's a medium and that it is interactivity, so if you use work in progress you can plug it back into *A Philosophy of Computer Art* and you'll get the full idea.

PAL: As you said, genres are also appreciative kinds. What makes a certain appreciative kind a new art form rather than a new genre?

DL: I think it is really difficult to have a theory of genre. Here are just a few platitudes and observations: genres cut across art forms, they typically have to do with the effects produced rather than with the means for producing the effects, they typically have to do with emotional effects produced, and any number of means can be used to produce those emotional effects depending on the art form or depending on the medium. Where to go from there it's very hard to say. It's a topic that really needs to be treated.¹⁸

PAL: In *A Philosophy of Computer Art* you state that “an item is a computer art work just in case (1) it's art, (2) it's run on a computer, (3) it's interactive, and (4) it's interactive because it's run on a computer.” Now, elsewhere¹⁹ you have maintained that “we do not need a theory of art except to address cases where an answer to the art form question leaves open the answer to the art question.” Does clause (1) in your definition of computer art makes it necessary to have a theory of art after all?

DL: There is a question that philosophers have asked since the 1950s which is “what makes an item a work of art?” But there are two other questions that you can ask; one of them is, “what makes a practice or an activity an art form?” That is, what makes painting an art whereas tattooing is not? What makes ballet an art while gymnastics is not? That is a separate question. The other question is “what makes an item a work of painting or what makes an item a work of ballet?” Philosophers have focused only on the first question. Moreover, I think there's an assumption that the three questions

¹⁸ Lopes has co-authored an article on 'genre'. See Laetz, B. and Lopes, D. (2008). Also on this topic Lopes recommends Schaeffer, J-M. (1989).

¹⁹ Lopes, D. (2008).

relate to each other in such a way that if you can get an answer to some of them you'll get an answer to the rest of them. So people think that if you answer the question "what makes something a work of art?" you get answers to everything else. I argue that you can't. Actually, it's a bad idea to try to answer the question "what makes something a work of art?"

Now, that leaves us with the following question: which of the other two questions should we focus on? I think the answer is the third one: "what makes something a work of ballet or what makes something a work of painting?" As for the question "what are the arts?" I don't have an argument for this but my hunch is that there is no principled answer; there's only sociological and historical explanation. I don't think there's a deep difference between ballet and gymnastics. People can argue for there being a difference in terms of one of them having an aesthetic function and the other lacking it or something along these lines. But I think those are non-starters. Then you have a kind of persuasive definition happening in social contexts, where people are saying "Hey! Here's something, and it's art, here's why" and I do a little bit of that myself, just for fun. I say, "look, we have these works made by recognised artists, and they are considered to be art. That's fine. And there's this other practice that is just like it, videogames, and there's no reason not to count it as art."

PAL: You claim that digital art – unlike computer art – is not really a distinctive art form partly because certain digital works – say, digital images or digital songs – are better appreciated when compared to other images (digital or not) or other songs (digital or not). Computer artworks, by contrast, are better appreciated when compared to other computer artworks. Now, I wonder whether certain works that fall into your category of computer art would not be also better appreciated in comparison to other works which do not fall under that category. For example, is Lozano Hemmer's *Standards and Double Standards* not better appreciated when compared to other installations such as Warhol's *Silver Clouds* than to Jeffrey Shaw's *Golden Calf*? Does it not make more sense to compare Lozano Hemmer's *Entanglement* with, say, Bruce Neuman's light spirals than with Goldberg's *Telegarden*?

DL: Let me step through this, because it's actually quite complicated. The first thing to say is that the claim isn't about what category is the best one to appreciate works

in; the claim is about what category is one that we appreciate the works in at all. An art form is an appreciative kind; it's a kind within which we appreciate the works. By their nature, computer artworks necessarily belong to the appreciative kind of interactive works, but interactivity is not something that you can touch or see or hear, so they have to use some other form of traditional media; they are going to have another visual aspect, sonic aspect or narrative aspect. In this sense, they also belong to music, painting, installation art... They're always going to be hybrids or crossover works. It's not that a computer artwork is only a computer artwork; a computer artwork is also in the visual arts, movies, and what have you.

So what about digital art? Why isn't that an appreciative kind, then? After all, digital artworks share with computer artworks this feature of *remediation*.²⁰ The answer is that for something to be an appreciative kind, when you appreciate a work in that category the other members of the kind play an implicit role in the appreciation. So one way to think about this is to ask "how do you decide what the boundaries of the kind are?" Say that you're trying to figure out what the boundaries of the blues are, and it turns out that you're thinking of the blues in a certain way that completely excludes anything with electric guitars. Then you're leaving out the Chicago blues, you're only thinking of the Delta blues. But that category you have in mind is not the blues, because you are systematically excluding a subcategory. So the category of the blues is a category within which we appreciate works and that appreciation is sensitive to features of the Delta blues and the Chicago Blues; the Chicago Blues is not left out. That's what makes the blues an appreciative kind. But what would it be for digital art to be an appreciative kind? What is digital art? Well it's any work that is digitally encoded. What works are digitally encoded? Well, almost any work! James Joyce's *Ulysses* on Kindle, digitally made movies that you download off iTunes, animated digital movies... They are all digital. Now when you're watching a digital movie, are you appreciating it in a category that includes digital songs? No! You systematically exclude digital songs. So digital art not an appreciative kind. It is a kind but it is not an appreciative kind, it is not a kind where the full membership of a kind plays a role in appreciation in any member.

PAL: It seems that your notion of 'appreciative kinds' is similar to Walton's idea of

²⁰ See Lopes, D. (2010), p.16 and p.27.

‘categories of art’.²¹

DL: Yes, it is based on Ken’s idea. Now, how similar or different both notions really are depends on the interpretation one has of Walton’s notion. He has this explicit theory of categories that individuates them perceptually, but he also comes pretty close to saying that there may be categories that are not individuated perceptually; maybe there are categories that are individuated by provenance, history, context and things like that. So it really depends on how you read Ken’s view. I don’t think appreciative kinds are necessarily perceptually individuated. They can be individuated by any other appreciative relevant feature.

PAL: Many different artworks fall into the category of computer art. Some of them are the kind of works we expect to see in a museum, at a biennale or at an art fair. Others, such as videogames, can be found in video arcades and bought in superstores. Do the categories of high art and mass art cut across computer art or is there a sense in which they all should be considered mass art?

DL: I think they cut across the category computer art. But maybe thinking of computer art also suggests that those categories might not be all that useful. Low art or popular art is generally thought of as art that has widespread appeal and so tends to appeal to the lowest common denominator; everybody likes it, it is going to work for almost anybody. But popular art it is not necessarily mass art; it could be folk. Mass art is thought of as works that are distributed in pretty much the same form – it is broadcast art. According to Noël Carroll’s view,²² given that mass art is distributed in pretty much the same form, it works best when it appeals to the largest possible amount of people; so it tends to be popular art. The thing about computer art is that it takes advantage of algorithms in a way that allows input from the user, so there’s a possibility – which is not always taken advantage of – for the work to be scalable to the user’s capacity. As a result, the same work can address the lowest common denominator but also very niche audiences – so it can be mass distributed but not popular. In a way video games do this with the idea of levels. Think of capacity as

²¹ Walton, K. (1970).

²² Carroll, N. (1998).

eye-hand coordination, quick thinking and these sorts of skills that are required for many video games; you start off easy and then it can be harder and harder and harder. Well that very same idea can be carried over into an intellectual or aesthetic capacities.

PAL: You have done research on many topics within aesthetics and I imagine you have an informed perspective on the state of the field; what issues, problems or questions do you think are yet to be developed, need attention or would be interesting to see more work on?

DL: I think aesthetics is a very young field. In the preface to *Reasons and Persons*²³ Derek Parfit says something like “ethics is no more than a decade or two old” and I think that is now true of aesthetics. The foundations of contemporary aesthetics are in the 1960s and the field as we know it really began to grow in the 1980s. So there is a huge amount of work that needs to be done. I don’t think it should be hard to find topics, but the question is really how do you choose a good topic. My advice is: do something fresh and original; avoid topics that people have had tons and tons of things to say about. You don’t want to pick a topic where almost nothing is being said, but there are some areas of the field that have been chewed over far too much. Pick a topic that is really hard philosophically and offers opportunities for philosophical depth, because aesthetics when done well, when it is done at its best, is the very best philosophy. I’m not too worried about covering all the various arts or taking expression from music and applying it to literature just for the sake of having a nice coverage across the board. I don’t think people should worry about that. What are the topics that are going to pose the deep puzzles, the puzzles that will enable us to think in a deep way? Those are the topics to look for.

²³ Parfit, D. (1984)

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Dominic McIver Lopes is Distinguished University Scholar and Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of three books: *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford, 1996), *Sight and Sensibility* (Oxford, 2005) and *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (Routledge, 2010). Lopes has also edited various books and published widely in issues such as pictorial representation and perception, the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures and scientific images, theories of art and its value, the ontology of art, and computer art and new art forms. Lopes has been a fellow of the National Humanities Center and a Distinguished Scholar at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, in addition to holding visiting positions at Ritsumeikan University, the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and the EHESS. He has won two Indiana University Teaching Excellence Awards, a Philosophical Quarterly Essay Prize, and the American Society for Aesthetics Outstanding Monograph Prize.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER:

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