

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: PHI2013-0845

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**PHI2013-0845**

**Paraesthetics: Irvine School of Aesthetic  
Theory and Criticism**

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URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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**ISSN 2241-2891**

23/1/2014

## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Bobrowska, E. (2013) "Paraesthetics: Irvine School of Aesthetic Theory and Criticism" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: PHI2013-0845.**

**Paraesthetics:  
Irvine School of Aesthetic Theory and Criticism**

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**Abstract**

The concept of paraesthetics was developed in the 1980s by David Carroll, the first director of the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California at Irvine. It describes the collaborative research of such distinguished philosophers as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Murray Krieger. It is a new concept of aesthetic theory that favors interdisciplinary strategies and dynamic relations between the aesthetic and the theoretical. This paper discusses the history of its formation and possible meanings of this concept in the context of the postmodern turn towards theory in the United States. The argument concerns the writings of Carroll, Derrida, and Lyotard, in particular: *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse; Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida; Discourse, Figure; The Truth in Painting.*

**Keywords:**

**Corresponding Author:**

This paper focuses on David Carroll's concept of paraesthetics. This term should be regarded in the light of the philosophical investigations of the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California at Irvine. The term 'paraesthetics' was coined in the 1980s as a result of the collaborative research of the Institute, involving such distinguished philosophers as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Luc Nancy, David Carroll, and Murray Krieger. The Institute as "an interdisciplinary, collaborative research group from various departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences" (cti home) was established in the 1980s, and it is still operating today. The origins of the Institute should be associated with the so-called Yale school of literary criticism - the first centre of deconstruction in the US - and with names such as Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, and Hillis Miller, who later became affiliated with Irvine. In my paper, I would like to point to two terms developed at the time of the Irvine group formation, that is, the notions of paraesthetics and "theory."

In response to the poststructuralist "crisis" of theory, the Irvine research group attempted to shift strictly outlined discipline boundaries in order to analyze the relationship between a work of art and aesthetics, literature and its criticism, or philosophical and linguistic systems. As one of the areas of their investigations, the group identified art analysis in the light of postmodern theory that could reveal new philosophical contexts of artistic activities.

Aesthetics, or rather a specific concept of paraesthetics, constituted an important part of their research. The above-mentioned critics called for the reconsideration of some traditional values, such as aesthetic experience, and for broadening the field of aesthetics so that it could include various disciplines. Moreover, they emphasized a growing interest in anti-art, fringe-art, and the non-aesthetic or extra-esthetic aspects of art. As defined by Carroll in *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* and in his introduction to *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, the term 'paraesthetics' describes a new concept of aesthetic theory that promotes the dynamic relation between the aesthetic and the theoretical. It also undermines the traditional Kantian model of aesthetic autonomy. In other words, it is a strategy of exceeding the boundaries between art and its theory. Thus, paraesthetics begins with the recognition of an aporiatic, self-reflexive nature of both discourses: the visual and the philosophical.<sup>1</sup>

Carroll, one of the theorists of the Irvine School, notes that, in response to the latest revisions in art theory, critics should remain open to criticism coming from art itself. Paraesthetics, a term that he proposes, defines a new type of aesthetic theory, for which "art is a question (and in question) rather than a given" (Carroll 1994, 14), as he states. Paraesthetics is an analysis that remains, on the one hand, aware of its limitations, while on the other hand, it draws inspiration and critical models from the territory of art. It is based on an

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<sup>1</sup>The term *paracriticism* has also been used by another American critic of postmodernism - Ihab Hassan (*Paracriticism: Seven Speculations of the Times*, Urbana, 1975). Hassan defined this type of criticism as a play with inconsistencies and metaphors and an attempt to reactivate the art of versatility.

attempt to bridge the boundaries between the language of criticism and the language of art.

In other words, the term 'paraesthetics' refers to various post-deconstructive strategies raised by the contemporary critical theory group originally formed at Yale University and later at the Critical Theory Institute, Irvine. The main assumption characteristic of these schools concerns the postulate of exceeding the existing critical modes in order to designate a territory open to an unconstrained interdisciplinary dialogue between the theorists and the practitioners of art. This solution was expected to offer a way out of certain impasses in contemporary aesthetics. Indeed, research collaboration has led to the formation of a new model of theory in the humanities, in its broadest sense, with particular emphasis on the aesthetic, philosophical, literary, semiotic, and sociological strategies of analysis. Their primary objective was to develop a new position which would offer an adequate response to current challenges faced by the humanities and to the need to confront the achievements of individual fields.

However, the difficulties double once the critical discourse embarks on the subject of the postmodern visual arts, due to the ontological distance which separates art from its theory. As a result, one observes the tendency to discard the representational practices in favor of the polyphony of little narratives in the field of visual arts. The tendency to extend linguistic maneuvers into the visual arts accompanies the dispersion of traditional concepts of beauty to some degree analogous to the postmodern dispersion of meaning. Contemporary audiences are entrapped within self-invading codes that inevitably subvert any straightforward or sincere comment upon the world or themselves. Consequently, the prevailing tendency of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde to negate any presuppositions in its persistent quest for ever newer forms of expression, often self-destructive, antiaesthetic, and irrational, calls for adequate categories of analysis.

As a result, critics and philosophers may reach for literary or artistic forms, as was the case with Lyotard, the author of *Pacific Wall*, a novel which takes place in California and is an extensive commentary on the poetic works of Sam Francis, a painter from Santa Monica, whom the French philosopher met during his stay at the University of California.

In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard claims that painting poses a certain potential for formulating critical statements; at the same time, in the theoretical discourse, there are some traces of the visual. Therefore, paraesthetics should take the place of a frame parallel to a work of art, an inner *parergon*, to refer to Derrida's terminology. This modern strategy is based on a "constant play between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic" (Carroll 1994, 16).

Furthermore, the term 'paraesthetics', introduced by Carroll, could be substituted by or compared to another similar term also mentioned by Carroll, namely, paratheory, which points to the main focus of research of the Irvine group. Paratheory or "theory" (in quotation marks), as it has been used, are broader terms that embrace paraesthetic issues within their scope. However, these terms are mutually dependent; therefore, in an attempt to define

paraesthetics, one needs also to consider the Institute's central concept of "theory" and its focus on the recognition of the contemporary state of theory. Thus, the Institute's most important collection of essays, which could be considered their aesthetic manifesto, is entitled *The States of "Theory"*. It was published in 1990 by Stanford University Press, California, and it is composed of two parts entitled *Question of History* and *The Question of Aesthetics*. The collection comprises twelve essays by various authors, such as Derrida, Hunt, Leforta, Jameson, Nancy, Krauss, Iser, Krieger, Miller, and Lyotard, and it is prefaced by Carroll's introduction.

Derrida, in his paper included in this anthology, points to the emergence in the United States in the '70s of a very specific, new American use of the term "theory." Like Jonathan Culler, he locates the development of theory in the context of American departments of literature. This theoretical discourse is - according to Derrida - "a purely North American *artifact*, which only takes on sense from its place of emergence in certain departments of literature in this country. (...) literature and not simply Humanities, if sometimes the Humanities includes historical disciplines" (Derrida 1994, 71). "I would add that this actually happens neither in other departments of this country nor in the literature departments of other countries in any statistically noticeable way", he concludes (Derrida, 1994, 71). Moreover, Derrida refers to Jonathan Culler's article entitled *Criticism and Institutions: The American University*. The following quotation from this paper will throw some light on the formation process of the terms 'paratheory' and 'paraesthetics':

The major critical development of the past twenty years in America has been the impact of various theoretical perspectives and discourses: linguistics, psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, deconstruction. A corollary of this has been the expansion of the domain of literary studies to include many concerns previously remote from it. In most American universities today a course on Freud is more likely to be offered in the English or French Departments than in the Psychology Department; Nietzsche, Sartre, Gadamer, Heidegger, and Derrida are more often discussed by teachers of literature than teachers of philosophy; Saussure is neglected by linguists and appreciated by students and teachers of literature. The writings of authors such as these fall into a miscellaneous genre whose most convenient designation is simply "theory," which today has come to refer to works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they ostensibly belong, because their analyzes of language, or mind, or history, or culture offer novel and persuasive accounts of signification. (Culler, 1987 p. 87.)

Let me stress again that the research on "theory" and the related concept of paraesthetics began in California at the time of the publication of Culler's paper in 1987 and should be associated with the Critical Theory Institute at the UCI.



These are among the most important concepts developed by this group. The terms "theory" or "paratheory" were first used in *The States of "Theory"* - an important collection of essays, edited by Carroll, by leading figures cooperating with the Institute. On the other hand, the neologism "paraesthetics" is a key term in Carroll's monograph entitled *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*.

Carroll, who is currently lecturing at the University of California, has been involved in the research of the Institute from the beginning of its activities. As a specialist on literature, theory and aesthetics, Professor of Romance Languages at UCI and coordinator of the contemporary critical theory research program, he held the position of director of the Institute. He also participated in the first research project initiated by the group, entitled *The Aims of Representation: Subject / Text / History*. Notably, the international character of this cooperation has been due to the cooperation of not only American and French but also German (Robert Weimann, Wolfgang Iser) and British (Anthony Giddens) scholars. Notably, Carroll is still an active researcher who continues the tradition of the Institute with his lectures and seminars as a part of the Critical Theory Emphasis, UCI's program, which is open to all doctoral students.

Interestingly, the current ongoing project of the Institute entitled *Poor Theory* seems to refer to the above-mentioned projects from the second half of the '80s. According to its manifesto, poor theory aims to be situated within the framework of interdependence to the concepts of "weak philosophy" of Gianni Vattimo, Grotowski's "poor theater", "architecture for the poor", "arte povera" by Germano Celant, and the "poor cinema" of Julio Garcia-Espinosa. This project in many ways performs and radicalizes assumptions of the '80s, having excluded to a greater extent than previously the burden of its academic character. It also reaffirms the attitude of openness to new forms of reflection and shows a turn towards new cross-disciplinary solutions located among science, art, and literature. A short quotation from its manifesto will demonstrate the current application of paraesthetic strategies.

Poor theory does not simply celebrate fragmentation and pluralism; rather, it seeks a complex interdisciplinary engagement across cultures, histories, and practices. It draws inspiration and rigor from all disciplines, but it does not seek to redefine theory as a singular disciplinary endeavor. It may be particularly suitable to mingling familiar sites of theory with sites still incompletely engaged by other forms of theory. It may turn its iterative methods and generative re-mixtures toward, for instance, the zones of affect and economy, capital and life, value and reproduction, production and culture, subjectivation and materiality, science fictions and technopolitics.

The expected outcome of those paraesthetic strategies is the unpredictable, the unknown in Lyotard's terms.

Similar arguments can be found in Carroll's introduction to the aforementioned collection *The States of "Theory"*, in which he states: "In its critical form at least, theory may be best described as the hybrid and open field, in which the possibilities of the various disciplines and fields, it crosses through and which cross through it, are pursued and experimented with" (Carroll 1994, 3). Each of these interpretations is both a stimulus for further experiments and a contribution to the creative transformations of critical theory itself, as Carroll argues.

Paraesthetic strategies in Carroll's reading of Derrida are accounted for by the term "theoretical jetty," which allows the critic to approach the depth of a work or a process, although it does not ensure control over it. In a conflictual process, jetties compete for a dominant interpretation. Carroll interprets Derrida's jetty figure as an equivalent of research proposals, statements, systems, ideologies, which are related to the term "theory." Each new or "post" theoretical construction struggles for domination, it aims to subjugate previous forms and occupy a privileged, permanent, and safe position. The significance of the concept of theory is further evidenced by Derrida's comment on a joke based on alternative readings of the phrase "the states of theory" circulating among the staff of the Institute. They would refer to the United States or even to California as the 'state' of theory (a state that differs from other states in the USA by an excess of theorizing).

To sum up, the problem of aesthetics emerged as a significant issue at the very beginning of the program. The aesthetic turn in Irvine took place at the time of the formal foundation of the Institute in 1987. Simultaneously with the establishment of the Institute, there also arose questions about the purpose of formalization of research, the object of which was a turn against all structures. Therefore, one of the assumptions of the Institute was a paradoxical struggle with the petrifying effects of the institutionalization of theory, which should be located in the context of Paul de Man's resistance to theory.

According to Carroll, in the postmodern times, art - as a paradigm that was radically destabilized in the 20th century - has become a discursive phenomenon or a rhetorical trope. On the other hand, writing on art has become an important (para)artistic strategy. Carroll's monograph *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*, published at the same time as the collection *The States of "Theory,"* in 1987, also concerns the issue of paraesthetics. With regard to this book, I would like to emphasize his reflection on Derrida and Lyotard.

According to Carroll, paraesthetics - mentioned in the title of the book - is the analysis of art that comes from the nonaesthetic positions. Moreover, to use J. Hillis Miller's metaphor, paraesthetics is a quasi-parasitic form which partially absorbed and consumed its host and consequently took its form, as happened in the paraliterary or parapoetic philosophy of Derrida and Lyotard. Notably, paraesthetics had an effect on transformations of critical theory and should be associated with the decline of the critical school at Yale. This process is often inscribed in the framework of the end of poststructuralism. Carroll notes that analogically to the rococo in art, the late poststructuralist

phase of theory is characterized by a variety of critical experimentation strategies and the diversification of attitudes.

As noted by Carroll, the period of increased interest in theory in the United States should be associated with the assimilation of structuralism and poststructuralism that originated in France.

Interestingly, Carroll argues that in America, these tendencies have proven to be more vital and influential than in Europe, at least in France. Despite the exhaustion of theory and the protests of some academic communities, questioning the point of further research that "has become too philosophical, rhetorical," (Carroll 1990, 2), Carroll confirms the importance of critical theory, stressing that a lack of interdisciplinary approaches may lead to a closure within the rigid fields of specialization. The classic model of division into autonomic disciplines may be attractive in its clarity; however, it is not a guarantee of scientific progress. Furthermore, the postmodern turn towards theory in the United States may be, in his opinion, due to the exhaustion of American empiricist and pragmatist traditions.

In this context, Carroll's paraesthetics means opening the critical potential of art and literature and the search for the aesthetic dimensions of theory, as well as the theoretical, conceptual aspects of art. In other words, it is an attempt to reformulate theory by making use of an extremely valuable cognitive distance offered by art. The parasitic relationship between art and theory, to use Miller's metaphor, points to one aspect of this relationship. Art, in response to its theoretical entanglement, can often resort to defense mechanisms. It defends itself against excessive analysis, and paradoxically, the very process of this resistance becomes for Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida a topic of meta-defensive reflection, as Carroll argues.

Derrida's concept of the *parergon* challenges traditional oppositions, such as inside / outside, meaning / form, art / theory, the content/the effect. Carroll cites a very significant passage from *The Truth in Painting*, devoted to the relationship between art and philosophy, in which Derrida states sharply, "[I]n reading of these two discourses (...) I notice the following: they both start out from a figure of the circle. And they stay there" (Derrida, 23). Philosophy, which enclosed and displaced the discourse on art, is at the same time enclosed in a circle by art.

Are the elements of art and philosophy not only contradictory but mutually exclusive?, one could ask, and therefore, is the figure of an artist-philosopher possible? In American art, it was exemplified by Joseph Kosuth<sup>2</sup> and Barnett Newman among others.

If Derrida attempts to define aesthetic experience, he does it in negative terms of absence and trace, because beauty or aesthetic experience is not and cannot be complete. As he argues in the chapter *The Sans of the Pure Cut: "Negativity is significant, working in the service of sense"* (Derrida, 1987, 95). Art, according to Derrida, involves the experience of incompleteness, lack, and

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<sup>2</sup>The analysis of J. Kosuth art in the context of Derrida's deconstruction was the topic of my paper presented at *Derrida Today 2 Conference*, Bloomsbury College, London 2010.

absence, which is partly compensated for by the critical discourse of aesthetics and art criticism.

Carroll proposes using the critical potential of art and literature as a counterweight or an alternative to more analytic philosophy, which could dynamically shape and verify its arguments. Although he rejects the notion of a dialogue or a consensus present in the philosophy of Rorty, his proposed strategy refers to a model, based on the always precarious balance of opposing factors of art and philosophy. As one of the arguments, he cites the famous Nietzschean motif of domination of philosophy over art, illustrated most clearly in *The Birth of Tragedy*, in the scene where Plato burns his poems to become a disciple of Socrates. The conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements is presented differently by de Man as Dionysian, Apollonian, and Socratic. The American critic notes that the conflict presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* is a simplification. In fact, a semi loser becomes the winner, who wins by the force of influence and intersubordination of both sides of the conflict, in this case, by the transformation of philosophy into a more aesthetically pleasing form and supplementing art with a conceptual element of analysis, as is the case of Kosuth's art. As a result of the confrontation with philosophy, art incorporates the Socratic strategy of the dialogue. While de Man recognizes the primacy of the literary over the philosophical, Lyotard, as Carroll points out, on the one hand, recognizes the ontological autonomy of art, but also points out that its role is not so much dominant as critical. He argues that "all art, to fulfill its critical function as art, has a critical and self-critical function. It unmask[s] all attempts to raise any force or entity above the conflict of forces and orders" (Carroll 1987, 27). In a sense, art, according to him, takes over the critical function of theory; all art "to fulfill its critical function as art, [should- E.B] be art and anti-art, at the same time", as Carroll interprets Lyotard's approach from his *Driftworks* (Carroll 1987, 27).

Most of the argumentation in the first part of the chapter of *Paraesthetics*, dedicated to Lyotard, concerns the possible socio-political entanglements of art (but these considerations, however, are not the subject of this paper). In the summary of this section, there is an interesting diagnosis of the critical function of art in relation to aesthetics. In this light, paraesthetics is not only aesthetic theory with a clearly marked critical and self-correcting nature, but also art is involved in a creative and critical dialogue with theory. Carroll comments in the following way on the new paraesthetic function of art, as revealed in the writings of Lyotard.

Depending on how it is approached, art has very different critical effects in his various works, which makes it possible to argue that the so-called ontological exteriority of art does not determine a space in which the essence of art can be located, but rather posits a distance in which critical alternatives - not just to the historical-political order, but also to the aesthetic realm itself - can be formulated. (Carroll 1987, 30)

In *Discourse, Figure*, two different orders of language and painting are juxtaposed as equal elements of a broader discourse, Carroll argues. Moreover, there is a clear emphasis on the second of these two elements. As Carroll notes, Lyotard considers linguistic forms to be exhausted, determined through the historical and philosophical tradition of self-restraint, with no future potential. He would like to substitute them with the dynamics of painting, which is independent from the philosophical, traditionally linguistic, or semantic grounds, and is open to the unpredictable. Lyotard's figure disrupts discourses and signification and replaces them with intensities. According to Carroll, "It is the realm of movement, difference, reversal, transgression, and affirmation" (Carroll 1987, 31). In *Discourse, Figure*, he claims that painting poses a certain potential for formulating critical statements; at the same time, in the theoretical discourse, there are some traces of the visual. In another passage, inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, the American critic emphasizes the transformation of both discourse and art into a formless libidinal energy. Libidinal paraesthetics is basically - as stated - a form of the impossible, or a limit, which aesthetic theory can only approach and indicate, but never phrase.

Carroll briefly discusses also Lyotard's late essay entitled *Adorno as the Devil*, in which the French thinker refers to another tradition, derived from the negative theology, describing attempts to approach the inexpressible or transcendent. Therefore, libidinal economics may be considered another form of negative theology. For Lyotard, the libidinal structures and art are the highest form of expression, which border on the "inexpressible," comparable to the mechanisms of negative theology. Theoretical and critical discourse, as Carroll admits, should be constantly transgressed and overcome, as is expressed through *via negativa* in apophatic theology.

Moreover, Carroll draws attention to the role of the faculty of narratives or the faculty of narrative imagination introduced by Lyotard. Carroll interprets it as a proposal to extend Kantian trichotomy. To the three cognitive faculties, namely, the intellect, power of judgment, and reason, Lyotard adds an extra faculty of narrative imagination, which "may be defined as the capacity to respond to any narrative with a counter-narrative, to occupy a different place than that assigned by any master-narrative, to improvise and deviate from the assigned plot" (Carroll 1987, 160). The decision to grant a special role to imagination, or rather to this faculty of the mind, which is manifested through storytelling, links Lyotard's philosophy to Rorty's thought. Both thinkers emphasize the ethical, cultural, and almost universal role of the narrative. This association is not accidental; it confirms the role of literature and its theory for contemporary philosophy, including the philosophical school at Irvine, and the thought of Derrida.

Furthermore, Carroll praises American critics for a return to Kant, in particular to the concept of aesthetic judgment and the sublime, before it became problematized by French philosophers (Derrida, Lyotard, and Nancy). These approaches differ in their emphasis on the autonomy and integrity of a work of art in American theory; in the case of French philosophy, the relationship of aesthetic and extra-aesthetic aspects are dominant. Carroll's

concept of paraesthetics belongs to the second category. It is oriented towards the future, with an emphasis on the unpredictability of possible solutions in art, philosophy, or theory. The intersection point of these discourses is their shared interest in art as a model of an indeterminate unknown. Carroll defines paraesthetics as not so much a strategy or method, but rather a set of questions which leads to the next set of questions.

The search for one prevailing structure or a universal dictum which could encompass all possible varieties of aesthetic and antiaesthetic realms encountered in contemporary art is doomed to failure, states Lyotard. In Lyotard and Carroll's rhetoric, conceding defeat marks the shift toward a new opening that validates certain strategies of crossing the established interdisciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, it is within the realm of paraesthetics that one can encounter similar endeavors to relocate the restrictive disciplinary demarcation lines.

Thus, the research undertaken within the Critical Theory Institute may be defined as a process of collaborative, maieutic para-theorizing, the process of questioning which is never satisfied with the received response, regardless of the (current or Californian) state of theory.

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