
Definitions of “Art” and Their Intended Import

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I.

I shall begin *in medias res* by reflecting on an individual definition of “art”. I have chosen one version of Monroe Beardsley’s aesthetic definition of “art” as my opening example.

In an article from 1983, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art”, Beardsley defines a work of art as “*something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest*”.¹ By “aesthetic interest” Beardsley means the attitude we adopt when we approach an object in order to derive an aesthetic experience from the encounter. As regards aesthetic experience, Beardsley characterizes it by saying that sometimes, when we interact with objects or artifacts,

we find that our experience (including all that we are aware of: perceptions, feelings, emotions, impulses, desires, beliefs, thoughts) is lifted in a certain way that is hard to describe and especially to summarize: it takes on a sense of freedom from concern about matters outside the thing received, an intense affect that is nevertheless detached from practical ends, the exhilarating sense of exercising powers of discovery, integration of the self and its experiences. When experience has some or all of these properties, I say it has an *aesthetic character*, or is, for short, aesthetic experience.²

This is clearly a rather wide definition of “aesthetic experience”, especially since Beardsley is prepared to call an object a work of art even if the desire to make it aesthetically attractive was not the *dominant* ambition when it was produced.³

1. Monroe C. Beardsley, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art”, in Hugh Curtler, ed., *What Is Art?* (New York: Haven Publications, 1983), 21.

2. *Ibid.*, 20.

3. To quote Beardsley: “the aesthetic intention need not be the only one, or even the dominant one; it must have been present and at least to some degree effective—that is, it played a causal or explanatory role with respect to some features of the work [...] even if we know that a Chi-

Beardsley's definition should be understood as stating the necessary and sufficient properties required for something to be recognized as art. The most frequent way of discussing the merits of such a definition is no doubt to ask whether the definition is in fact applicable to all, and only, those entities that fall within the scope of the concept. As one might expect, Beardsley's definition has been criticized because it does not "succeed in covering all and only things we now call 'art'".⁴

To my mind, there is something elliptic and unsatisfactory about such criticism. Why should a definition of "art" succeed in covering all and only things we now call "art"? How can we be sure that common usage represents the ultimate wisdom when it comes to the delimitation of the boundaries of art? Reflecting along such lines, one is soon confronted with the quite fundamental question "What good grounds can be given for or against a given definition of 'art'?"

The answer to that question is not obvious. In part, it must depend on what I shall call the "intended import" behind the definition, on how the definition is meant to be taken in a number of respects.

First and foremost, there is more than one way of perceiving concepts and the conceptualization of reality. A basic and classic difference has recently been described by Ian Hacking as the one between "nominalism" and "*inherent-structurism*".⁵ Inherent-structurists do not necessarily deny that concepts are human-made, but remain convinced that there are divisions and structures inherent in reality itself and that it is possible for our conceptualizations to orient themselves according to these and be determined by them. Nominalists do not necessarily deny that there is an independent reality with a definite constitution including, if you wish, divisions and structuring, but they maintain that all conceptualization must nevertheless find its ultimate justification in its productiveness for practical or theoretical human purposes.⁶ It makes a palpable difference whether we are to

nookan story, such as 'Seal and Her Younger Brother Lived There,' is told mainly to children to teach them a lesson (and so has primar[i]ly a pedagogical intention), the presence of aesthetically satisfying formal features and its success in satisfying the aesthetic interest is enough to stamp it as a work of literary art". *Ibid.*, 23.

4. Richard Kamber, "Weitz Reconsidered: A Clearer View of Why Theories of Art Fail", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998), 45. In fact, Beardsley has no such ambition. In his article, he himself voices essentially the same objections to criticism of Kamber's kind as I do in the next paragraph. (Beardsley, "An Aesthetic Definition of Art", esp. p. 15.)

5. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 83.

6. This is, essentially, the description Hacking gives of what he calls inherent-structurism and nominalism (see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 33, 60, and 83), though I emphasize much more strongly than Hack-

understand a person defining “art” as attempting to delineate structures inherent in reality itself or simply as proposing a useful way of construing the concept. The definitions will have very different intended imports in the two cases, and arguments about the definition will have to take quite different forms.

Moreover, a mere indication of the general spirit in which the definition is meant to be taken will still not suffice if we are to be able to discuss the proposal in a productive fashion. If the definition is intended to capture a structure in reality, we need to know, in particular, in what sense the structure in question is thought to be independent of our minds and our linguistic usage, and how we are supposed to have knowledge of the structure. On the other hand, if usefulness, not correspondence to reality, is at stake, we need to know, above all, what use of the concept of art the theorist has in mind, and what is thought to motivate the fruitfulness of the concept shaped by the definition.

How are we to understand Beardsley’s definition in these respects? What is the nature of its intended import? The contribution I quoted does not address the question explicitly, nor can it be said to give a clear implicit answer to it. Beardsley does in fact discuss the point of defining “art” and the requirements that can be made of a definition of the term.⁷ He does not, however, touch on the issues that I brought up and his remarks do not unequivocally point in either the inherent-structuralist or the nominalist direction. At the beginning of his article, for example, he expresses himself as follows when discussing what problems the question “What is art?” actually concerns:

Taken philosophically, the question calls for decisions and proposals: What are the noteworthy features of the phenomena to which the word in question seems, however loosely, to call our attention? What are the significant distinctions that need to be marked for the purposes of theoretical understanding, and that the word “art” or one of its cognates (“artwork”, “artistic”, “artistry”, etc.) is most apt and suitable for marking? How does art, defined in a comparatively clear, if somewhat unorthodox, way, differ from closely related things?⁸

ing that the nominalist does not need to deny the existence of differences, and thus of “structuring”, within reality itself.

It is worth noting that one can be an inherent-structuralist about some concepts and not others. Both stances could of course also be differentiated considerably and a large number of varieties discerned, but that seems unnecessary in the present context.

7. See esp. Beardsley, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art”, 15–17.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

Here, Beardsley's focus is on the things themselves, on their features, on actually existing significant distinctions that we need to register in our definition. On the other hand, he is also speaking of decisions and proposals and of the purposes of theoretical understanding that seemingly ought to guide the process of constructing a definition. As I read his article, there is a thoroughgoing duality of this kind, and it is not possible to ascribe a definite intended import, in my sense, to his proposal.

If this is a correct assessment, we cannot say whether Beardsley's definition is a nominalist one or of the inherent-structure variety; probably the question about intended import simply does not have an answer since there is no corresponding intention. Anyway, if Beardsley endeavours to describe a structure inherent in reality, we do not know how he conceives of such an enterprise, and if his definition is a nominalist one it is not very clear, despite his elaborations, what more precise purposes it is intended for and wherein its practical superiority for that employment is thought to consist. Thus the intended function of the concept created through the definition remains partly obscure. This makes the concept into something of an abstract model whose possible applications it is to some extent up to oneself to detect or devise, a key for which one has, oneself, to find a corresponding lock.

It is my main contention in this article that obscurity of what I have called intended import is a significant problem in connection with definitions of "art"—and probably in connection with many other definitions as well, but I shall leave that aside. Those who define "art" typically do not make it clear whether the definition is to be understood in the inherent-structurist or the nominalist manner, and if in some cases they do attempt to do so, their statements are so imprecise that the definition's intended import still remains vague. It is of course always possible to ask for more precision in a definition, so my criticism may sound a little facile. Let me emphasize, therefore, that I see obscurity of intended import as a cardinal problem with the definitions, something which seriously diminishes their value.

Having thus stated and explained my thesis, I shall devote the rest of my article chiefly to the defense and substantiation of it. There are two objections in particular that I foresee and would like to discuss in some detail. Firstly, it might be argued that my talk of obscure intended import is, on the whole, unfounded. There exists, undeniably, one may maintain, a concept of art in our culture, and it would be quixotic to doubt the validity of that concept. The intended import of definitions or analyses of "art" is, characteristically, to capture the content of

the concept, or to describe the logic behind its application, and the contours of that task are sufficiently clear-cut. Secondly, choosing another tack, one can cast doubt on my claim that the shortcomings of which I accuse Beardsley are really representative. Is it really true that these problems, if problems they are, also haunt entirely contemporary state-of-the-art definitions and analyses?

In the third section of my article, I shall take up the latter question and comment on the intended import of a few, mostly well-known, definitions or analyses of "art" from the 1990s. Before that, however, I shall, in the next section, reflect on the validity of the concept of art. My aim will not be to decide whether or not the concept is valid, but to demonstrate that the question of the concept's validity is indeed sensible and in no way far-fetched. If that is correct, we should produce good arguments, whether inherent-structuralist or nominalist, for the concept's validity if we wish to base our understanding on it. For in that case, simply taking its credentials for granted is not warranted.

My discussion of the concept of art will start with a detour. I shall first speak of the concept of literature at some length, pointing to different ways of utilizing it, and then apply my findings to the concept of art. My reasons for choosing this strategy are partly that I am myself a student of literature and prefer to use a subject with which I am well acquainted as my point of departure. However the concept of literature is also placed further down on the ladder of abstraction than the concept of art. If the complications to which I want to draw attention are to be made fully visible, it appears well-advised to go from the more concrete to the more abstract category.

II.

The concept of literature, in its present shape, has a relatively short history. Before the eighteenth century, "literature" was, roughly, synonymous with "erudition" or a designation of what we would now call the study of the humanities, especially philology.⁹ During the course of the eighteenth century, the term also began to be applied to texts. Then in the nineteenth century the latter usage be-

9. I am referring, on this point, to the situation in Western Europe in general. See, e.g., *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, ed. under the direction of Alain Rey... (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1992), vol. 1, 1137; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press), vol. 8 (1989), 1029; Carlo Battisti and Giovanni Alessio, *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (Firenze: G. Barbèra editore, 1968), vol. 3, 2212; *Deutsches Fremdwörterbuch*, started by Hans Schulz, continued by Otto Basler (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.), vol. 2 (1942), 34.

came dominant, and more and more restricted senses of "literature" came into being.¹⁰

According to *Oxford English Dictionary* "literature", as referring to texts, has three different meanings. It may stand for "[t]he body of books and writings that treat of a particular subject", as in "the literature of the subject", but also, colloquially, for "[p]rinted matter of any kind", as in "literature from the Travel Bureau". The main meaning in this group, however, and the one I have in mind when speaking of the concept of literature, is described by the dictionary as referring to "[l]iterary productions as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general", with the addition that the word is now also encountered "in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect".¹¹

As the OED suggests, the extension of the concept has tended to narrow over the, approximately, two centuries that have elapsed since its introduction. Originally, most texts fell within the scope of the concept, while nowadays we think about literature in the relevant third sense as being more or less synonymous with imaginative literature. One might have expected that the earlier, wider use of the term would have become obsolete in the process, but it cannot be said without reservation that this has in fact happened. Many older texts of kinds that would not now be seen as literary are still called "literature", mainly, I think, because they were literature according to early nineteenth century usage and have retained that historically acquired classification. As a consequence, histories of literature include almost all and any texts from early periods, while only imaginative literature qualifies when we come to the twentieth century sections. In 1975, for instance, Miriam Lichtheim wrote in the preface to her much used three-volume anthology *Ancient Egyptian Literature*:

In dealing with ancient literatures it is both customary and appropriate to define literature broadly, so as to include more than belles-lettres. For the most part,

10. There are several descriptions of these developments to consult. See esp. Robert Escarpit, "La Définition du terme 'littérature'", in Robert Escarpit et al., eds., *Le Littéraire et le social: Éléments pour une sociologie de la littérature* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970); Henryk Markiewicz, "The Limits of Literature", in Ralph Cohen, ed., *New Directions of Literary History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); René Wellek, "What Is Literature?", in Paul Hernadi, ed., *What Is Literature?* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978); Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), ch. 2.

11. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1029.

ancient literatures are purposeful: they commemorate, instruct, exhort, celebrate, and lament. To define literature narrowly as non-functional works of the imagination would eliminate the bulk of ancient works and would introduce a criterion quite alien to the ancient writers. In fact, the reduction of the term literature to the concept of *belles-lettres* did not occur before the nineteenth century. Egyptian literature, then, means all compositions other than the merely practical (such as lists, contracts, lawsuits, and letters)... The medical texts, written on papyrus, which may well deserve a place within the definition of Egyptian literature, have been omitted out of practical considerations, having to do with their bulk and their very specialized character.¹²

One could give examples of similar classifications—perhaps a little less extreme—in the field of older Western literature, or classical Chinese literature, or medieval Arabic literature, etc.¹³ The usage is well established; the somewhat surprising breadth of the concept when employed about early periods is, in fact, just another feature of the concept of literature as it is actually understood and employed in our present culture.

Thus far, I have been characterizing our communal concept of literature as it exists today. The concept has certainly been made to appear broad and vague, but that, I believe, is entirely realistic. I would now like to ask whether it is a valid concept.

The question about the concept's validity can naturally be tackled in more than one way. If we take the inherent-structuralist view that the division of texts into literature and non-literature is, in some sense, inherent in the nature of social reality, we face the question of whether the communal concept of literature that I just described is true to that division. The idea of literature as a structure inherent in reality can be developed in several ways, and the assessment of the communal concept's validity will depend, in part, on which precise version we advocate. I

12. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, 3 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1975–1980), vol. 1 (1975), v–vi.

13. Concerning the concept of literature as used about Chinese and Western literature before the modern period see, e.g., the interesting discussion in Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), 3–11, esp. p. 9. In the introduction to their *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), xi, Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey say: “For the medieval period, the scope of ‘literature’ has not been restricted to *belles-lettres* but has been extended to other types of writing—history, biography, geography, philosophy and so on—as medieval writers and readers did not make the same distinctions between various types of ‘literature’ as do modern ones.”

believe it is obvious, however, that it is at least not self-evident that the communal concept of literature faithfully delineates a structure inherent in reality. If that is so, the concept's validity, if understood along inherent-structuralist lines, is not beyond question. It makes sense to ask whether or not the concept is valid.

If, instead, we look at the concept of literature through nominalist glasses, the question about its validity will be seen to require further specification. For the question will concern the concept's usefulness, and there is an unavoidable counter-question: "Usefulness for what?"; "Validity in what capacity?"

Naturally the concept of literature of which I am speaking must be supposed to be useful in humble everyday contexts as a term referring to a special sector of reality, to a special grouping—with relatively fuzzy boundaries—of written or oral texts. The term would hardly have retained its place in the language if it had not been able to fulfil that function in a relatively satisfactory manner. I maintain, though, that it is at least an open question whether the communal concept is useful in contexts where the concept of literature carries a heavier theoretical or practical burden. We may certainly build on the communal concept of literature when we put together a history of world literature, or delimit the province of the academic subject of Comparative Literature, or determine what kinds of texts are eligible for the Nobel Prize in Literature. It will however be sensible to ask, in all such cases, whether the communal concept really fills the bill.

Take literary history for example. I have already indirectly admitted that histories of literature normally make use of the communal concept of literature. One of the consequences is that the criteria for belonging to the subject of the history vary with the country and period described. Broadly speaking, practically all and any texts qualify where ancient times and non-Western cultures are concerned, while the parts dealing with contemporary Western literature treat of imaginative literature only. This comes out particularly clearly in histories of world literature such as the large German *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* (1972–1997).¹⁴ Though this practice may be generally accepted, raising the question of its reasonableness remains justified. We would not wish the designer of a terrestrial globe to operate with different principles of representation for different continents, so should we really condone such seemingly erratic practices where literary history is concerned? I do not contend that the answer is no, nor that it should

14. Klaus von See, ed., *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, 25 vols. (Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, later AULA-Verlag, 1972–1997).

be yes, merely that it is not obvious, without further argument, that the communal concept is adequate in this context. (In the case of *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, the concept of literature employed has in fact already been explicitly or implicitly called in question by some of the contributors.¹⁵)

Comparative Literature and its boundaries is perhaps an even clearer case. Here, the authority of the communal concept has been energetically challenged by prominent representatives of the subject. René Wellek, for example, once wrote, in his and Austin Warren's classic *Theory of Literature* (1949):

The term "literature" seems best if we limit it to the art of literature, that is, to imaginative literature... The centre of literary art is obviously to be found in the traditional genres of the lyric, the epic, the drama. In all of them, the reference is to a world of fiction, of imagination [...] If we recognize "fictionality", "invention", or "imagination" as the distinguishing trait of literature, we think thus of literature in terms of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Balzac, Keats rather than of Cicero or Montaigne, Bossuet, or Emerson.¹⁶

Wellek contends that the term "seems best" when limited in the fashion he prefers. In the context where the discussion occurs, it is natural to understand him as presenting his version of the concept as the one best suited for literary study or literary scholarship.¹⁷ In reality, Wellek formulates what had already become the orthodox view within the subject, an outlook which would later be criticized as too narrow by many theorists, Terry Eagleton and Peter Widdowson among others.¹⁸ Thus one has to ask oneself whether the question of how "literature" is to be understood in connection with the subject Comparative Literature can really be settled by a simple reference to the communal concept of literature. In appearance, at least, the demarcation of the domain of that subject seems to be a question in its own right and with many aspects, practical as well as theoretical.

15. See, e.g., Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Einführung", in von See, vol. 5: *Orientalisches Mittelalter*, ed. Wolfhart Heinrichs et al. (Wiesbaden: AULA-Verlag, 1990), 17–18, and Joachim Krecher, "Sumerische Literatur", in von See, vol. 1: *Altorientalische Literaturen*, ed. Wolfgang Röllig et al. (Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1978), 104.

16. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd revised ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966); quotations from pp. 22, 25, and 26 respectively.

17. The interpretation appears more or less inevitable if one reads Wellek's discussion of the term against the background of the rest of the chapter and of *ibid.*, ch. 1.

18. I am thinking of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), ch. 1, and of Widdowson, *Literature*, esp. chs. 2–3.

As regards the Nobel Prize in Literature, the term "literature" is, at least in principle, still used in a wide sense—not quite in the old nineteenth century manner, but not in the modern, Wellek-like fashion either—although that fact seldom affects the Swedish Academy's actual decisions. The Nobel Prize regulations say that "under the term 'literature' shall be comprised, not only belles-lettres, but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and method of presentation, possess literary value",¹⁹ which helps to explain the literature awards to the professional historian Theodor Mommsen in 1902 and to the amateur historian Winston Churchill in 1953.²⁰ It makes sense to ask, I would say, whether history writing should really be awarded the literature prize, or whether it is really sound to exclude literature for children and young adults, as the Academy effectively does—and again it is far from clear that the invocation of the communal concept provides an irrefutable argument one way or the other. The two questions just raised are concerned with policies on various planes, and thus it may seem, once again, that responsible answers will have to take into account all kinds of theoretical and practical considerations.

I would like to conclude my discussion of the communal concept of literature by suggesting that it is useful to distinguish between two ways of employing it. There are all kinds of occasional occurrences of its employment with individual, sometimes idiosyncratic features. There are however also several more or less institutionalized special uses for the communal concept—for example those associated with the writing of literary history, or the study of comparative literature, or the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature. It is in these special, more or less institutionalized usages, that the concept carries substantial theoretical or practical weight, and its content in these contexts is almost invariably controversial.²¹ The question is whether these institutionalized uses may not require more specific, more precise and specialized, concepts of literature than merely the communal concept in its general form.

My contention has not been that they do—just that the question is sensible and calls for close consideration. I do not deny the existence of a communal concept

19. Quoted from Lars Gyllensten, *The Nobel Prize in Literature*, translated by Alan Blair (Stockholm: The Swedish Academy, 1987), 15.

20. Cf., e.g., Tyler Wasson, ed., *Nobel Prize Winners: An H. W. Wilson Biographical Dictionary* (New York: H.H. Wilson Company, 1987), 203–206 and 719–721.

21. Cf., on this point, Richard Shusterman's description of "literature" as an essentially contested concept in *The Object of Literary Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi; Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1984), 42–44.

of literature, but I regard it as an open question whether that concept possesses any considerable theoretical or practical validity. I find it conceivable that the theoretically and practically important uses of the term, those which lend the term "literature" its significance and prestige, require substantially adjusted concepts of literature.

"Art", in the sense relevant in this article, stands for the arts collectively: literature, visual art, music, etcetera. The communal concept of art—whose existence I can see no reason to doubt—consequently relies in part on the communal concept of literature. If, for instance, the theoretical usefulness of the communal concept of literature can be called into question, this inevitably means that the theoretical usefulness of the communal concept of art will also be questionable, at least in part.

Another way of demonstrating this is to point out that the usual, general definitions of "art" also, in an indirect fashion, offer definitions of "literature" (and of "visual art", of "music", and so on). Thus, for instance, Beardsley's aesthetic definition of "art" as "*something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest*" can easily be reformulated as a definition of "literature" ("*a literary work is an oral or written text produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest*"), and all definitions or analyses of "art" allow themselves to be applied to "literature" (and, *mutatis mutandis*, to "visual art", to "music", etcetera) with the aid of kindred strategies. If the communal concept of literature were to prove invalid, definitions or analyses of the communal concept of "art" would consequently, in part, be definitions or analyses of an invalid concept.

For these reasons, my argument about "literature" also has a bearing on "art". My aim was to demonstrate that the validity of the communal concept of literature could not simply be taken for granted. If my argument was successful in that respect, it also shows that the same is true of the communal concept of art, at least where part of its denotation is concerned.

It would have been more satisfying to construe an argument directly concerning the relevant concept of art, an argument structured like the one about "literature" but substituting "art" for "literature". I also believe that this would be feasible, though I do not, myself, feel qualified to carry out the task.

It might moreover prove to be more difficult, since "art"—in the wide sense in which the term is a general designation of the arts—is more of a specialist notion than "literature" and is probably less rich in institutionalized uses, in associations with special practices. Approaching the concept of art from below, via

the concept of literature, also opens interesting perspectives which would otherwise have remained hidden. The concept of art builds on, and probably derives much of its credibility from, the concepts of the individual arts. It is important to see that the validity of such concepts, like the concept of literature, may be brought into question.

III.

I have explained why I believe that the validity of the communal concept of art cannot just be taken for granted but is in need of demonstration, why I believe that there is a complex justificatory context to which the theorist defining "art" should be sensitive. I shall now take up the second objection broached at the beginning of my article, that concerning the representativity of the problems with intended import associated with Beardsley's definition.

Beardsley's definition is formulated in terms of the function of art. In contemporary analyses it is often assumed that no shared properties or functions underlie arthood, but that webs of causal relationships or of similarities nevertheless unite the objects that are art. Jerrold Levinson's well-known historical definition of "art" is of this kind.²² In the latest version of it, the article "Extending Art Historically" (1993), Levinson should perhaps be said to analyse the concept of art rather than define it, for he does not claim to be giving a definition. Be that as it may, there is a certain concept of art which he takes as a given: "the most general concept of art that we have now", "the one we standardly work with and presuppose in enlightened and informed contemporary discourse about it".²³ Levinson's aim is to demonstrate what binds art (in this sense) together. According to him, "to be art is, roughly, to be an object connected in a particular manner, in the intention of a maker or profferer, with *preceding* art or art-regards: the agent in question intends the object for regard (treatment, assessment, reception, do-

22. In his comprehensive discussion of definitions of "art", Stephen Davies divides the field differently: he sees definitions of the "functional" and the "procedural" (especially institutional) types as the main current alternatives. Levinson's definition (in earlier versions) is characterized as belonging to another, "historical" kind. See Davies's *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), chs. 2 and 7.

23. Jerrold Levinson, "Extending Art Historically", in Levinson's *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 150 and 154 respectively. Levinson's article was originally published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993).

ing with) in some way or ways that what are acknowledged as already artworks, are or were correctly regarded or done with".²⁴

Levinson's successively proposed historical definitions or analyses have been criticized from several vantage-points. Not surprisingly however, the objections have been substantially designed to demonstrate that the relatedness he describes fails to unite all art and only that which is art. For my part, I shall not attempt to assess how successful Levinson's proposal actually is in that respect, but concentrate on the intended import of his definition or analysis.

There is certainly an anti-essentialism of a kind in Levinson's analysis of "art". In the first of the series of articles relevant here, he already emphatically maintained that "artworkhood is not an intrinsic exhibited property of a thing, but rather a matter of being related in the right way to human activity and thought".²⁵ Nevertheless, it does not seem clear whether Levinson should be characterized as an inherent-structuralist or as a nominalist with respect to the concept of the work of art. Perhaps Levinson would like to say that the relatedness central to his notion of art is to be understood as an inherent structure in reality which our definitions or analyses of "art" have to adjust to. (In that case, it would be interesting to know how he would develop the idea.) On the other hand, Levinson might equally well want his analysis to be taken in a nominalist manner, as just recommending a productive way of using the concept. (In that case, one would wish to be told what use or uses of the term the analysis is intended for, what makes these uses valuable from a theoretical or practical point of view, and why the analysis is a better tool than its rivals when it comes to solving the tasks in question.) As far as I can see, the intended import of his analysis is not accounted for.

It is true that Levinson not only presents an analysis of the concept of art but also points to the pragmatic context in which he wishes to place the analysis. To my mind, however, Levinson's indications, just like Beardsley's, fall short of providing a genuine explanation of what the intended import is. Basically, Levinson argues that we do in fact share a common concept of art and informs us that this is the concept he is referring to in his analysis.

It is natural to ask at this point *what* concept of art it is that I have taken myself to have plumbed, or to put the question in its usual, accusatory form, *whose?* Bearing in mind that it is the descriptive or classificatory idea of art that is in

24. *Ibid.*, 151.

25. Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979), 232.

question, and not any of its honorific or polemical relatives, my largely unapologetic answer to this is that it is, naturally enough, *our* concept—the Western, Renaissance-derived notion [...] whose current state of evolution I was trying to understand.²⁶

Evidently, the concept of art that Levinson is discussing is the communal concept of art. I agree that there is such a concept, but I would like to object to Levinson's implicit supposition that the concept's validity in significant theoretical or practical contexts cannot be questioned. What if the concept of art, in its communal form, lacks real theoretical interest? I have tried to demonstrate that the communal concept of literature, which undoubtedly forms an integral part of the communal concept of art, might in fact be relatively amorphous and serve most of all to indicate an area of interest and study, while the theoretical and practical importance of the concept of literature may hinge on uses of the term in more specialized senses for more specific purposes. In the same way, it is conceivable that the *communal* concept of art is of limited interest and value, so that analyses or definitions of the concept would not take us very far, even if they were, in themselves, entirely watertight. I do not claim to have shown that such a situation actually obtains. But I believe I have given us good reasons for saying that by rights one should not just presuppose that the concept of art is both unified and theoretically significant.

The questions I put to definitions of "art" in asking about their "intended import" should be familiar by now. Is this an inherent-structuralist account of art, and if so, what are the epistemological assumptions behind it? Or is this a nominalist account, and if so, what use or uses of the term is it meant to cover, why are the uses in question of genuine value to us, and why is the definition expected to provide especially serviceable ways of employing the term for the purpose in question?

To the best of my knowledge, such questions are left without clear answers by those currently producing definitions or analyses of "art". Several recent definitions or analyses would have furnished just as obvious examples of this as Beardley's and Levinson's. I am thinking, for example, of Robert Stecker's much-discussed functional definition of "art" and of Berys Gaut's analysis of "art" as a cluster concept.²⁷

26. Levinson, "Extending Art Historically", 153–154.

27. I am referring to Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park:

Stecker thinks of art as objects fulfilling certain functions, but he also wishes to accommodate the fact or possibility that the functions of artworks vary with time, and that objects not designed as art may become art by fulfilling functions of kinds that artworks typically have. In the simplest version presented by Stecker, his definition reads as follows: "An item is a work of art at time *t*, where *t* is a time not earlier than the time at which the item is made, if and only if (a) either it is in one of the central art forms at *t* and is made with the intention of fulfilling a function art has at *t* or (b) it is an artifact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function, whether or not it is in a central art form and whether or not it was intended to fulfill such a function."²⁸ As usual in this article, it is not my intention to discuss the descriptive accuracy of the definition, but to draw attention to how relatively shallow the intended import of the proposal is. Stecker straightforwardly admits that he has produced no real arguments for its validity and goes on to say: "Why should anyone accept it? My answer would be: If it works better, stands up to objections better, than its rivals and functions effectively as part of a plausible philosophy of art, it gains in plausibility."²⁹ Since Stecker does not make clear the spirit in which the definition is to be understood (inherent-structuralist or nominalist, etcetera), it is however not really possible to know what kinds of objections it should stand up to. My personal impression is that Stecker hopes his definition will prove to have pinpointed the communal concept of art more successfully than its contenders, and that it does not really occur to him to question the validity of the communal concept.

Gaut, for his part, maintains that "art" is a cluster concept. His idea is that it should be possible to "construct some set of properties, for instance, of being beautiful, being expressive, being original, and being complex and coherent", and demonstrate "that if various subsets of them obtain, then an object is art, that none of these properties has to be possessed by all artworks, but that all artworks must possess some of them."³⁰ With respect to its general approach, Gaut's analysis appears quite realistic to me; it is, however, not accompanied by any reflections on intended import. Gaut, too, seems to be occupied with correctly understand-

Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 48–65, and to Berys Gaut's "Art' as a Cluster Concept", in Noël Carroll, ed., *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

28. Stecker, *Artworks*, 50.

29. *Ibid.*, 65.

30. Gaut, "Art' as a Cluster Concept", 27.

ing the communal concept of art, while implicitly taking the concept's theoretical importance for granted.

Yet one also comes across theorists where the kind of criticism I have put forward may seem less apposite. In an article from 1991, for example, "Art and 'Art'", Julius M. Moravcsik must be taken to understand art as based on inherent structures in reality towards which our attempts at definition or analysis should be orientated, and his insistence on the viability of this view is not without further theoretical underpinnings.³¹ And in his introductory book on aesthetics from 1999, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*, Noël Carroll provides (his latest version of) an analysis of the concept of art geared to "identifying" art, as he calls it; in this context, Carroll relies on the communal concept of art but also presents arguments for its validity, for instance:

Classifying a candidate as an artwork—subsuming it under the category of art—is integral to determining how we should respond to it... Furthermore, the concept of art is an important one for the characterization of social reality. It supports many significant generalizations, such as: that every known culture has artistic practices; that there is more art today than there was in the fifteenth century; that the production of art is a major social activity in Bali; that art is an important factor in the creation of cultural identity; and so on.³²

Yet the differences between the two groups of writers may well be less than they appear. It could be said that Carroll belabours the (supposedly) obvious just because he is writing a textbook, and that Beardsley, Levinson, Stecker, and Gaut could easily have put forward the same kinds of reasons if they had found it at all necessary. Conversely, one should not exaggerate the sophistication of Moravcsik's and Carroll's positions when it comes to the intended import of their analyses or definitions of "art". They do not identify the question of intended import as a problem, much less comment on it, and their implicit attitudes to these matters are not particularly clear.

31. Julius M. Moravcsik, "'Art' and Art", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 16: *Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Peter A. French et al. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

32. Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 249–267; quotation from pp. 249–250. There are several earlier versions of Carroll's identificatory analysis; cf. the bibliographical note in *ibid.*, p. 267. Carroll's introduction to his earlier mentioned anthology *Theories of Art Today* provides a survey of the field and helps to clarify the rationale of his own analysis.

Moravcsik argues that the question: *What is art?* can be treated as distinct from the question: *What does the word "art" mean?* The gist of his article is that we can "identify in a reasonable way"³³ the objects from different cultures that are art objects, and that this makes it possible to investigate empirically art in different cultures in order to uncover the nature of art.³⁴ However, it seems evident that Moravcsik in reality relies on the communal concept of art—whose validity is, in the usual way, left unquestioned—when he regards the denotation of art, the problem of what objects we are justified in counting as art objects, as being basically unproblematical.

Something similar can be said about Carroll. If we accept the validity of a certain practice and start to perform in accordance with its rules, the key concepts of the practice will naturally assume practical significance for us. Thus the concept of a witch is central to the practice of witch-hunting and will enable the believer in witches to make many significant generalizations—for instance, about the special characteristics and the relative frequency of witches in various times and cultures. What Carroll does in the passage that I quoted is, I think, essentially to remind us of some of the uses to which we put the communal concept of art. As I see it, that is to *presuppose*, rather than independently *demonstrate*, that the concept is valid. (It is also not clear on what basis Carroll would construct an independent argument for the concept's validity. The passage I quoted had, perhaps, a relatively nominalist ring, while some other loci in Carroll's book are naturally interpreted in a more inherent-structurist vein.³⁵)

In the present context, I lack the space to enter more deeply than this into the question of how well the problems surrounding the intended import of definitions or analyses of "art" are being understood and handled in today's aesthetics. Nor do I pretend to possess a secure overview over the field. My impression, however, is that the question about intended import is largely neglected—for all its importance, which I find it hard to ignore.

33. Moravcsik, "Art' and Art", 304. The formulation quoted concerns medicine; Moravcsik adds (*ibid.*): "Similar considerations apply to art".

34. See esp. *ibid.*, 312.

35. Consider, e.g., the following remark: "many people have false beliefs about what is art. In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority of people thought that in order for paintings to count as artworks, they had to be representations. But this was wrong" (Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, 12). Here, Carroll does not express himself as if the concept of art was restructured in the early twentieth century, but as if a new discovery was made about a timeless state of affairs.

IV.

In conclusion, I would like to comment on how my argument in this article is related to the view that "art" does not admit of a definition. That position has been familiar from the 1950s onwards and was famously defended in Morris Weitz's "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (1956) with its insistence that "art" is an open concept, that it cannot be given a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and that the really important thing for aesthetics is to be able to provide "a logical description of the actual functioning of the concept".³⁶ Richard Kamber presented a revised version of Weitz's stance in a 1998 article, "Weitz Reconsidered: A Clearer View of Why Theories of Art Fail".³⁷ Kamber criticizes, successfully to my mind, Weitz's unqualified characterization of "art" as an open concept.³⁸ However, Kamber also attempts to give plausibility to the idea that "all theories and definitions about the continuing unity of the concept of art must fail".³⁹ In the course of this argument Kamber, among other things, expresses his belief that the concept of art is, at least now, "an umbrella concept",⁴⁰ but also stresses the need for "empirical research of some kind" if we are to clarify "the way people talk and think about art".⁴¹

Personally, I share many of Weitz's and Kamber's ideas about the concept. It must, for example, long have been obvious to the reader that my convictions are nominalist rather than inherent-structuralist, and that I have no great belief in the theoretical importance of the communal concepts of literature and art. I have not however made it my business here to advocate any specific standpoint on those matters, but bracketed both the ontological problems and all substantive questions about art.

There are also other ways in which my argument differs from that of theorists such as Weitz and Kamber. Firstly, despite my interest in how the concepts of lit-

36. Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", in Joseph Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 125. Weitz's article was first published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956).

37. Kamber, "Weitz Reconsidered".

38. *Ibid.*, 36-40.

39. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 40-46. The quotation, however, comes from p. 34.

40. *Ibid.*, 44.

41. *Ibid.*, 35.

erature and art are actually employed in different contexts, I would not necessarily wish to confer any authority at all on everyday usage. The question of how "people talk and think about art" is a question about the content of the communal concept of art, and its importance or unimportance must consequently devolve on the validity or invalidity of the communal concept (which, I repeat, is here left undecided).

Secondly, I have argued that there are special, institutionalized uses of the concept of literature (and thus, indirectly, of the concept of art) for practical or theoretical purposes. They were exemplified by the use of the concept in connection with the writing of literary history, in connection with the delimitation of the domain of Comparative Literature, and in connection with the Nobel Prize in Literature. I believe that the importance of these and other such institutionalized uses has too often been overlooked. Arguably, these uses play a significant role for our picture of what literature—and thus also art—is. Their clarification is bound to take the form of (partial) analyses or (partial) definitions of terms such as "literature" and "art", and I do not object to that; quite the contrary. I merely propose that all such analyses or definitions should be accompanied by clear and reflected indications of their intended import.⁴²

42. The article reproduces, with some additions and changes, the text of a paper with the same title read at the joint conference of the Nordic and British Societies of Aesthetics in Umeå in June 2000.

Paisley Livingston drew my attention to the article by Moravcsik and to Gaut's then unpublished manuscript, for which I am grateful. I also wish to thank Pat Shrimpton for checking my English.