31
NOËL CARROLL
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Noël Carroll (1947–) is one of the most influential philosophers of art of his generation. He has PhDs in both film studies and philosophy and has written about many topics in aesthetics in addition to film, including other arts, such as literature and dance, as well as more general topics, such as the definition of art. Although his work is influential and frequently discussed in the realm of analytic aesthetics, it has been harshly criticized or ignored in much of the mainstream film studies community, due to Carroll's rejection of theories commonly utilized in that field. His early work focuses on critiques of previous film theorists, including continental theorists who dominated film studies in the 1970s and 1980s. By Carroll's own admission, his goal is to sweep the table clean of these theories and encourage new film scholars to take a wholly different approach. In *Post-Theory* (coedited with David Bordwell), Carroll criticizes film scholars for their use of large-scale or "Grand" theories, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althussarian Marxism. He argues that these theories are usually taken as axiomatic and their frameworks are used to generate film interpretations rather than to investigate the validity of the theories themselves. Carroll also argues that these "Grand" theories have several problems per se. First, they are not only essentialist but also have "every indication of being false" (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: 39). Second, they are used dogmatically to exclude broad areas of inquiry from film studies. Finally, they conflate film theorizing with film interpretation (albeit interpretation laden with "theoretically derived jargon"), whereas the two are distinctly different activities.

For Carroll, film theorizing is a practice in which we should ask "middle-level" questions and propose answers using limited theories that do not attempt to answer every question about every type of film. He advocates a dialectical approach in which smaller scale discussions of specific films are used to test larger theories and potentially refine them. Those larger theories would be then used to generate (hopefully) better answers to middle-level questions. Carroll argues that we should not start with a broad theoretical framework we assume to be true, especially because the answers to middle-level research questions will not necessarily all fit into one framework.

Due to his "piecemeal" approach, it is difficult to synthesize Carroll's writings into a general theory of film. Nonetheless, his discussions can be said to have certain themes running through them, as we shall see.

Film and antiessentialism

Carroll's view of film is distinctive in its critique of normative essentialism. His first book, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988a), offers detailed critiques of classical film theorists on the basis of their commitments to an essentialist concept of film. Specifically, he criticizes the influential theorists Rudolph Arnheim and André Bazin for basing their advocacy of certain film techniques on an erroneous view that film's nature legitimates the use of these techniques over others.

Arnheim's position was developed in a historical context in which it was commonly argued that film could not be art. After all, the argument goes, art is an expression of an artist's thoughts and feelings. When an artist creates a painting, everything on the canvas is there because the artist intended it to be there. In contrast, photography – and by extension, film – records reality automatically. Photographed images are a record of what was before the camera, not a view of the world as interpreted and expressed by an artist.

Arnheim's response to this position is to note that photography and film are not perfect recordings of reality. On the contrary, they necessarily transform reality (Arnheim 1957). An actual scene is three-dimensional, whereas a photographic image is two-dimensional. In real life, we experience time as smooth and uninterrupted, but a film can speed up, slow down, or skip over periods of time. These types of transformations of reality are based on choices made by the filmmaker, such as editing and framing. For this reason, Arnheim claims, film can be art. Further, since it is the essence of film to transform reality, Arnheim claims that the best films are those that transform reality in a meaningful and expressive way.

Although Bazin's position on praiseworthy filmmaking techniques almost directly opposes Arnheim's, Carroll argues that the structure of his position is similar. Bazin claims that one of the central functions of art is to immortalize the past (Bazin 1967). By this standard, film actually exceeds the capabilities of the traditional arts. Because it is an automatic recording device, it can more accurately capture the past than the other arts. Further, since the camera records without human intervention, film does not impose the preconceptions of the human mind on aspects of the world; it thus allows us to see the world in a new way. For Bazin, since film's essence is to capture and illuminate reality, the best films are those that exploit this capability through techniques such as the long take.

Carroll suggests that Arnheim's and Bazin's positions about the essence of film are the result of prior normative judgments about what types of films are to be preferred. For example, Bazin feels that long-take naturalistic films are praiseworthy in that they allow us to see the world in a new way. Thus, he identifies the essence of film as its recording capability, which justifies his advocacy of long-take films. But this preference for certain types of films is the result of the undefended assumption that there is value in seeing the world in the way that film allows. Carroll notes that film can be employed in many roles in our culture; it does not have one essential role that is more appropriate than others. Thus, it is unlikely that any theory based on a notion of film's essence will allow us to understand the many types and uses of film. A theory

that answers questions about documentary film may be inappropriate for helping us understand why sight gags are funny, and vice versa. This argument forms the basis of Carroll's antiessentialism.

Carroll's antiessentialism also underlies his arguments against medium specificity, a view which holds that the arts each have certain unique capabilities, based on differences in their media (1996b). For example, sculpture is created with media that allow for certain three-dimensional effects not available to other arts, such as painting or dance. This view also holds that the best artworks are those that most fully exploit their unique capabilities, that is, capacities not shared with any other medium. Thus, one might think that the best sculptures are ones which most effectively use the three-dimensional capabilities of the medium. Carroll challenges media specificity, saying that it is not the case that the arts have distinctive media (Carroll, "Forget the Medium!" 2003b). It is difficult even to describe what counts as a medium. Is a medium the physical material used to create an artwork? Most arts are made with many types of materials; painting, e.g., requires paint, a tool to apply the paint, and something on which to apply the paint. It also seems wrong to say that the arts have unique media. A painting can be created using one's fingers as a primary tool, but a sculpture can as well. Thus, Carroll argues, there is no essential tie between an art form and any particular medium. Further, an art form's media can change. What we call "film" now comprises video and computer-generated images, in addition to images projected from film strips. For this reason, Carroll often uses the term "the moving image" rather than film (and all subsequent mentions of film in this essay should be read as meaning the moving image). But we would hesitate to say that film is now a different art simply because it includes different media than those present in its early years.

Based on these concerns about medium specificity, Carroll attempts to define film without recourse to the media that might be said to compose it ("Defining the Moving Image" 1996). He provides several necessary conditions for a representation or artwork to count as a film. The first is that the artwork must be a detached display. By "detached" Carroll means that an image is detached from the object it represents in a way that prevents a viewer from reliably orienting his or her body to the represented object. If I see an image of a horse on a movie screen, for example, I cannot orient my body toward the actual photographed horse. The image is detached from the object. Some might respond that, upon seeing an image of the Eiffel Tower, they can reliably orient themselves to the referent of the image, but this is true only if they already know where Paris is in relation to their current position. The orienting information is not provided by the image or the viewer's understanding of how the image is generated; it is solely based on the viewer's extrinsic knowledge of geography.

Another necessary condition for something to be a film is that it must have the potential to present moving images. A film might only present static images, and it might present only text rather than pictures, but we would still consider such works films if they had the potential to present images that appeared to move.

A third condition is that something can only be said to be a film if its token performances are generated by templates. What does this mean? Carroll defends an ontology

of art that holds that some artworks, like the *Mona Lisa*, are particular objects, while other artworks, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, exist in thousands of copies. Two different editions of *A Tale of Two Cities* both count as instances of the artwork itself, because the artwork is not a physical book. There is not one physical copy of the novel which is the "real" artwork while others are merely duplicates of the original. Rather, every copy of the novel can be said to be a token of the artwork created from the same type (i.e., the same text). Similarly, every screening of *Goodfellas* can be considered a token performance of that film. A key feature of film is that its token performances are generated by the same type of template (typically a film print or a DVD) and are essentially similar. This is in contrast to theater, where the token performances differ substantially based on each theater company's interpretation of the script. A script and a film print are not templates in the same way, because to perform the play described in the script requires an artistic interpretation. Consequently, we can say that a theatrical performance is both a token performance of a play and an artwork in its own right. The play *Hamlet* can be an artistic success or failure, and a performance of that play can also be an artistic success or failure. In contrast, when a film is presented using a template, such as a film print, to generate a token performance, no similar artistic interpretation is required (excluding avant-garde films in which projection choices are part of the filmic performance). A film can only be said to be screened well or badly in a technical sense, not in an artistic sense. For this reason, an artwork can count as a film only if its performance tokens are not artworks in their own right.

Finally, a film must be two-dimensional. This apparently mundane requirement serves to exclude artworks such as music boxes from the domain of film. A music box with a spinning dancer is a detached display, presenting a moving image, where the performance is generated from a template but is not an artwork in its own right. But the music box is not two-dimensional, and thus cannot be considered a film.

Carroll's attempt to define film by positing necessary conditions may seem to contradict his antiessentialist positions. In response to this concern, Carroll notes that there are several different ways something might be considered essentialist. He argues that his definition of film is not essentialist in the sense used by medium-specificity theories because the definition does not define film in terms of any specific medium. Both the medium of a photographic film strip and the medium of videotape can count as a film. Another way something might be essentialist is by attempting to capture the essence of some kind of thing. Carroll argues that his definition of film cannot be said to describe film's essence because the conditions he proposes are not central to understanding how films function. This point seems questionable. For example, say we are trying to understand how people respond to films in ways that differ from their responses to actual objects. Whether films are two-dimensional or three-dimensional surely makes an important difference to our experience of them. Or, consider someone analyzing how films function in the world of aesthetic criticism. The differences between film and theater in terms of token-type relations would be an important part of that discussion.

In "Defining the Moving Image," Carroll (1996a) also argues that his definition is not essentialist, because he posits the conditions as necessary but not sufficient

for classifying an artwork as a film, noting that a flipbook meets all of the conditions but is not what we normally mean when talking about films. In the more recent *The Philosophy of Moving Pictures* (2008), however, he proposes that these conditions are both necessary and sufficient. Carroll's definition invites a number of gray-area counterexamples – not only flipbooks but also historical antecedents to film, such as Mutoscope presentations, and possible future media, such as moving holograms. Carroll suggests that since he is defining "the moving image," rather than film proper, it is reasonable to include flipbooks and the like, although he thinks that moving holograms should be considered "moving sculptures," rather than moving images. Whether it is advantageous to include or exclude any particular example from the category of moving images presumably depends on the context of the discussion. However, Carroll does open himself to charges of essentialism in positing the conditions he presents as jointly sufficient for identifying what artworks count as films.

Comprehension and emotion

Another major dimension of Carroll's work is his attempt to understand how viewers comprehend and respond to films. In *Mystifying Movies* (1998b), Carroll criticizes the way that several strands of continental film theory dealt with the relationship between viewers and films. These theories, which dominated film studies in the 1970s and '80s, include semiology, which holds that filmic representation is a socially constructed symbolic system; Althusserian ideological criticism, which holds that film and many other institutions produce subjects to perform certain types of social roles; and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which holds that film's effect on the viewer is based on its ability to create or fulfill certain desires in his or her psyche. A common thread in the theories Carroll criticizes is the thesis that we can understand film as a language. Film scholars have combined these ideas to make various claims about how film affects viewers, such as the notion that film positions the viewer (often called the subject) through formal features such as shot/reverse-shot editing, and the claim that film's use of smooth-continuity editing allows it to surreptitiously present constructed aspects of society as natural.

In *Mystifying Movies*, Carroll harshly critiques these positions. He rejects Lacanian psychoanalysis in favor of models of the mind developed by cognitive psychology. In a number of his later works, he proposes alternate accounts of the viewer's relationship to film which rely on what he considers to be natural features of human beings (i.e., evolved or biological features), rather than on notions of social construction.

For example, in "Film, Attention, and Communication" (2003a), Carroll argues that although film is a major form of communication, it is not like a language. One reason is that there are no elements of film analogous to words, sentences, or rules of grammar. A shot is not like a sentence because it is not a compilation of discrete units. A shot does not have elements that function as a subject, predicate, or direct object does in a sentence. Further, the rules of grammar determine whether a sentence is well-formed. A sentence with subject/verb disagreement, for example, is not

grammatical. The concept of grammaticality, however, does not apply to films or film sequences. Although there are sometimes said to be rules of film editing, such as the 180° rule, we cannot hold that a shot which violates this rule is "incorrect."

Finally, the words of a language have arbitrary connections to the objects to which they refer. The connection between the word "dog" and an actual dog is arbitrary. It could have been the case that we called dogs "elephants." Semiologists of film hold that the relationship between pictures and their referents are similarly arbitrary and also that pictorial conventions are culturally specific and must be learned. It is on this basis that semiologists say that we must learn to "read" a film. Carroll argues against this model by noting that film is a medium of *pictorial* representation, and, unlike words, film images do not have arbitrary connections to their referents. He cites an experiment by Julian Hochberg and Virginia Brooks, who raised their child in a picture-free environment for his first two years and thus formed no connections between pictures and words (Hochberg and Brooks 1962). When the child had developed a sufficient vocabulary, he was shown pictures without any labels and could identify what they were pictures of. He could identify the pictures based solely on a visual resemblance between the pictures and their referents. This and other pieces of evidence show that we primarily understand pictures by recognizing the objects in them based on our knowledge of what the actual objects look like, not by learning a system of codes.

Carroll similarly relies on folk psychology in understanding how other aspects of film function. For example, he argues that for films to communicate, they must direct the audience's attention to specific things on the screen. Several factors facilitate this process. The context of presentation (a darkened theater) encourages us to focus on the film. Movement also draws our attention because human beings have an adaptive sensitivity to movement in our environments. Many film techniques, such as shot scale, lighting, and framing can concentrate our attention on specific objects on screen, and drawing our attention allows the film to communicate information essential for us to understand the film.

Carroll discusses in detail a common technique in which we see a shot of a character looking off screen and then a shot of an object. This editing pattern communicates that the character is looking at that object (sometimes the pattern continues through several shots). This particular technique draws Carroll's attention because the notion that point-of-view editing has ideological implications has been influential in film studies. Some ideological theorists have claimed that this structure, which they call a "suture," simultaneously positions the subject in an ideological structure and masks its doing so (1982). Carroll argues to the contrary that point-of-view editing is not an unnatural construction with potentially pernicious effects; rather, it is popular because it effectively communicates information in a way that mirrors our natural perceptual and cognitive inclinations. When we see someone looking at something, the next thing we see is often what that person is looking at, because we have a natural tendency to follow someone's gaze. Point-of-view editing reflects this pattern by reproducing it on screen.

Our psychological tendencies also inform Carroll's account of how films tell their stories. Following George Wilson's (1986) discussion of narrative structure, Carroll

proposes that most popular films have stories which proceed in a question/answer format. A movie's story proceeds when a movie scene poses or raises questions to be answered (or partially answered) in subsequent scenes. Carroll gives the example of a shot of an open door, which raises the question, "Why is the door open?" If a movie presents a scenario in which an asteroid threatens to destroy the Earth, it raises the question, "Will this disaster be averted?" We expect the film to answer this question, presumably at its climax. The process is driven by our natural thought processes, which encourage us to ask ourselves how events will proceed. Carroll calls this question/answer process *erotetic narration*.

Some movie scenes raise questions, others answer them, and some do both. As Carroll notes, the question whether King Kong can be stopped is answered when he is gassed into unconsciousness, but that scene also raises the question of what will happen once he is sent to New York. Further, we can understand questions as fitting into macro- or micronarrative structures. The microquestion, "will the 'launch missile' button be pushed in time?" organizes one scene in a film, but its answer also helps answer the macroquestion that organizes the movie as a whole: "will the asteroid destroy the Earth?" A movie has closure when all of the questions that have been posed by the narrative get answered. Most popular films aim for closure, while films of other types, such as art cinema, may intentionally avoid closure for aesthetic purposes.

Carroll also has written substantially on film and emotion. In his most recent work, he uses the term "affect" to refer to any bodily states associated with feelings. This includes reflexive states such as the state we are in when startled, sensory states such as pain, prototypical emotions like anger or joy, and general states of feeling such as moods. There are many ways film can create affect. At the most basic level, filmic stimuli such as loud noises or distasteful creatures such as spiders can generate feelings in the audience. Emotions, for Carroll, are a specific type of affective state that rely on appraisals of stimuli relative to our interests, and which incline us to act in certain ways. If you see a large creature and appraise it as threatening, you might feel a chill down your spine, and you might freeze in place. These elements constitute the emotion of fear.

A long-standing question in the philosophy of art is how fictional media, such as fiction films, can generate emotion. The so-called "paradox of fiction" is based on an apparent conflict between our emotions about fictions, such as a fear of a movie monster, and our knowledge that the monster, being fictional, poses no danger. The paradox extends beyond the emotion of fear. Why do we cry at a character's death, when we know that no one has actually died? Why do we want the good guy to beat the bad guy, when we know perfectly well that the good guy and bad guy do not really exist?

Carroll's solution to this quandary is what he calls the *thought theory*. Carroll argues that emotions are not necessarily responses to actual situations – they can be caused by thoughts as well. He gives the example of someone preparing to ask her boss for a raise. If she imagines her boss responding negatively, she may actually feel angry, even though the conversation has not yet taken place. Similarly, although we do not

believe in the reality of a movie monster, just the thought of the monster can make us feel scared. Carroll ties this account to natural aspects of the human mind, saying that our ability to be emotionally aroused by imagination is evolutionarily advantageous because it assists us in planning future actions. For example, if we tell children stories about how strangers might kidnap and harm them, the very thought of wandering off with a stranger may cause a child to become scared. The emotion generated by the thought of wandering off thus encourages the child to act safely.

The concept of identification is typically used to explain how we relate to characters in films. Carroll notes that the term can be used in many ways. It can imply a type of mental projection in which a viewer imagines what it would be like to be a character. This type of imagination may be facilitated if the viewer and the character are similar in the right sorts of ways. For example, I might identify with a character who is a forklift operator because I once operated a forklift and thus can easily imagine what the character is experiencing. Or, I might imagine what it would be like to be a character very different from me who embodies qualities I admire – say, Superman. Carroll, however, says these situations should not be described with the term "identification." He says the former case is better described as feeling "affiliated" with a character and the latter as "wishful fantasizing."

Often, people think of identification as a process where we care deeply about a character in a manner that leads us to feel the same emotions the character feels. On Carroll's view, this is an appropriate use of the term identification because there is an identity relationship between the viewer's and character's emotions. But Carroll argues that this account is a poor description of the relationship between the viewer and character. In many situations, he notes, we may care deeply about characters but feel very differently than they do. Perhaps they are calmly walking down the road, not realizing (as we do) that there is a killer right behind them. We are scared for them, but they are not scared at all. In this case, our emotions are not identical.

Carroll argues that a better explanation of our emotional responses to film can be understood through the concept of *criterial prefocusing* – the notion that a filmmaker can focus the viewer on aspects of the story that address certain emotion-generating moral criteria. Filmmakers will often, but not always, present the story in a way that suggests the viewer should feel similarly to the protagonist. A character investigating a haunted house may be apprehensive, and the film's spooky soundtrack may encourage us to feel the same way. The film is structured to both generate our apprehension and to suggest the character's apprehension. Carroll believes that there is no reason to invoke the notion of identity in such a case.

Carroll presents a valid argument against identification as he understands it, but it could be argued that the narrowness of his definition blunts the force of the argument. He notes many situations in which people would say that they identify with a character even when their emotions do not match the character's emotion. He argues that other terms, such as affiliation, better describe those situations and that the term "identification" really only makes sense when used to describe a process where the character's emotions cause identical emotions in the viewer – a process that he then argues never actually occurs. If the goal is to describe and explain the feelings that ordinary people

point to by using the term "identification," then it seems counterproductive to posit that many of those uses are not appropriate and that the word should be understood in only one sense.

Conclusion

Carroll's work is among the most cited in the field of aesthetics. In addition to the topics discussed above, he has made many substantial contributions to the philosophy of film which could not be discussed in this short entry. He has written genre analyses of horror, comedy, documentary, and the avant-garde; he has generated insightful critical essays on many individual films; and he has developed theories of narration, style, film evaluation, and the nature of art.

Carroll's keen skepticism and thorough critiques of theorists who aim to present comprehensive or overly broad accounts of how films work support his notion that the best approach to film theory is answering middle-level research questions. However, there is an irony here. Although Carroll argues against attempts at providing a comprehensive theory, the breadth of his writing and the consistency of his positions constitute a fairly comprehensive theoretical approach to film. His book *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* belies the notion that middle-level research questions are in some way opposed to the construction of comprehensive theories. What this situation reveals is that, in fact, it is the top-down nature of most film theory that is the real target of his critique.

See also Definition of "cinema" (Chapter 5), Emotion and affect (Chapter 8), Empathy and character engagement (Chapter 9), Consciousness (Chapter 4), Gender (Chapter 13), Horror (Chapter 46), Psychoanalysis (Chapter 41), Cognitive theory (Chapter 33), Narration (Chapter 18), Narrative closure (Chapter 19), and Style (Chapter 25).

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