



## A Rejoinder to Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*

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Let me begin by noting that *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, one of the latest in the Blackwell series on the Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts, is an intriguing monograph, which contains Professor Carroll's latest pronouncements on the major issues in the philosophy of film which have concerned him for over two decades. While I found little to disagree with in the first five chapters, the following critical review will take extensive issue both with Carroll's account of emotional affect in cinema, and with his views on film evaluation.

As he rightly points out, 'The philosophy of the motion picture was born over the issue of whether or not film can be art'.<sup>1</sup> Carroll refights the battle in chapter one, refuting all the old arguments against photography in general and motion pictures in particular. Happily, this is one battle that philosophers and film theorists have won...there is little doubt that at least some cinematic productions qualify as fine art, with works like *Citizen Kane* being widely recognized as paradigmatic examples of 20th-century art.

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<sup>1</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 7. Further references will be followed by the page numbers from which they are taken.

Chapter two rehearses one of Carroll's signal triumphs, his refutation of the medium specificity thesis as applied to cinema. Following in the footsteps of Gotthold Lessing, many early film theorists (including Bazin, Eisenstein, Kracauer and Arnheim) argued that the cinematic medium could do certain things better than any other artistic medium, and that movies that did those things were, *ceteris paribus*, better movies. Unfortunately, as the list of theorists above suggests, there was no consensus forthcoming about what the singular artistic virtue(s) of cinema were. Even if there was such a consensus, Carroll convincingly argues that '...artists and artworks (are) validly assessed in terms of the excellence of the effects they achieve and not in terms of whether their means of securing those effects are pure. The requirement of purity here seems to fetishize the medium' (47).

Despite his skepticism about the medium specificity thesis, Carroll finds the traditional question 'what is cinema?' to be a compelling one. He offers a careful descriptive definition in chapter three, and proceeds to respond to a raft of counter-examples. Cinema is the practice of making moving images, and '...something is a moving image if and only if 1) it is a detached display...2)... the impression of movement is technically possible; 3) performance tokens of them are generated by templates which are tokens; 4) performance tokens of them are not artworks in their own right; and 5) it is a two-dimensional array' (78). I applaud Carroll's talk about the moving image, which allows us to discuss film, video and digital media without privileging one over the other.

But his resultant definition seems to illustrate a point first made by Morris Weitz in his landmark essay 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'<sup>2</sup>: definitions of 'Art' and its subconcepts are essentially evaluative, or, if they aren't, purely descriptive definitions aren't of much use anyway. While conditions 3) and 4) usefully serve to distinguish films from theatrical or dance performances (although I must admit I have never had trouble telling them apart), 1) and 5) seem to state the obvious, while 2) seems a trifle obscure.

Furthermore, couched as his proposal is in terms of traditional 'if and only if' conditionals, Carroll still seems to be operating under the assumption that artistic media like the cinema can be given 'real' definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper application of the term. Like 'Art', the term 'moving image'

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<sup>2</sup> Morris Weitz 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Sept. 1956, pp. 27-35.

seems more likely to be a family resemblance concept (to use Wittgenstein's apt phrase). The diversity of art forms covered by the concept 'moving image' makes it highly unlikely that any proposed set of necessary and/or sufficient conditions will stand up to all possible counterexamples. Indeed, given the speed at which the various forms of visual media are evolving, the term 'moving image' is particularly wide open.

Chapters 4 and 5 enter into debates about the nature of the shot, the cinematic sequence and the functioning of various forms of cinematic narrative. In the first of these, Carroll rejects the widely held notions that the shot provides us with an illusion of reality, or a transparent representation of the physical world, or a set of codes for us to decode. I agree with his naturalistic recognition thesis, that we do not 'read' a film like a text but rather respond to its perceptual prompts in ways strictly analogous to our responses to the external world.

Carroll continues in this naturalistic vein in arguing against attempts to talk about film as a language, with its own rules of syntax and semantics. Instead, he analyzes how such techniques as variable framing naturally manage our attention by directing it to what is important to the filmmakers: 'Cinematic sequences are built through variable framing, which exploits our natural perceptual predispositions in order to guide our attention to where the motion picture maker wants it to be...' (124). Take the close-up as a simple example: the scale of the image is so great that we cannot help but attend to it in some detail. It's not that we come to recognize, after much experience, that in the language of film, the close-up means that something is important. Rather, we follow our natural perceptual predisposition to take something that big seriously. This is neither a purely arbitrary conclusion nor is it something we need to learn as we acquire fluency in the language of film. The rest of chapter 5 restates Carroll's insightful observation that cinematic narrative is basically erotetic, i.e., that what holds our attention are compelling questions, which are pointedly raised and which closure demands must be answered before the story runs its course (e.g. will Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) and Rick (Humphrey Bogart) end up together at the conclusion of *Casablanca*)

While I find much to agree with in these chapters, these seem to be debates in film theory and not particularly philosophical in their nature and scope. Chapters 6 and 7, however, are the most intriguing in the book, as the former explores crucial issues in the

philosophy (and cognitive psychology) of the emotions, while the latter analyzes the nature of (and justification for) aesthetic evaluations

Having long rejected traditional attempts to put identification with fictional characters at the forefront of the account of how films affect us emotionally, Carroll condemns simulation theorists in chapter 6, as well as those who put empathy at the center of our emotional experience of cinema. His reasons for doing so are complex, but his most convincing argument is how frequently an asymmetry exists between what we feel and what the characters with whom we are supposedly identifying feel at any point in time during the narrative.

One example that he cites is when an unsuspecting politician who has just secured a major nomination is about to be assassinated. *We* feel suspense, but *he* doesn't, since he has no idea of the impending attempt. The (unsuspecting) protagonist, then, is simply feeling elated at his success. This example is somewhat puzzling, because if the hero knew what we knew, he would feel fear and suspense as well, and part of what we feel (our helplessness, as we suppress the urge to call out a warning) is precisely because of his ignorance.

As I read him, it is primarily because of asymmetries like this one that Carroll privileges sympathy over empathetic identification. The sympathetic soul is not expected to feel the selfsame feelings as those with whom he sympathizes. Since at least the time of his last major book on film, *Engaging the Moving Image* (2003), Carroll has urged what he calls 'criterial prefocusing' as an alternative to traditional accounts of identification as the major source of our emotional response to cinema. As he put it then, '...emotions in response to fictions (must) be governed by criteria of appropriateness. Thus a film text can be emotively prefocused by being *criterially prefocused* - that is, by being so structured that the descriptions and depictions of the object of our attention...will activate our subsumption of the relevant characters and events under the categories that are criterially apposite to the emotional state in question...as a result of entertaining the appropriate cognitions, we go through some physical changes<sup>3</sup> (e.g., we laugh, our skin crawls, we tense up, or may even shed a tear).

This cognitive approach to emotional states leads Carroll to foreground our evaluative judgments (especially moral ones) in accounting for our pro or con attitudes

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<sup>3</sup> Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 69-70.

towards fictional characters, which in turn (he contends) are the primary determinants of our emotional involvement with such characters. Our emotional response is hence the result of a highly complex and conceptually mediated process. When things go the way we want them to for the characters about whom we have developed pro attitudes, we are euphoric; when they don't, we are dysphoric.

Classical Hollywood films do indeed tell us precisely how to respond to emotional scenes, using every technique in the book, from shot composition, camera angle and point of view to the score and soundtrack. In so doing, they achieved a remarkable uniformity of emotional response in audiences worldwide. But, fortunately, films have gotten a good deal more ambiguous in the last thirty years or so. Part of what makes recent Oscar winner *No Country for Old Men* so interesting is that it virtually eschews a musical soundtrack.

Those aestheticians who privilege empathy over sympathy, or champion some version of the simulation theory, have found great solace in a recent development in neurophysiology. Scientists at UCLA and elsewhere in the mid-1990's discovered and localized what they call mirror neurons in the brains of primates. They were so named because these particular neurons fired identically whether the primate in question was engaging in an action (say, picking up a peanut) or simply observing another primate (in this case, the experimenter) doing the same action.

While the existence and function of mirror neurons have only recently been confirmed in human testing, many neuroscientists have heralded their discovery as a momentous breakthrough in understanding both cognitive and affective processes in the human brain. In the 2006 New York Times article that brought the story to the nation's attention, Dr. Marco Iacoboni, a neuroscientist at UCLA who studies mirror neurons, observed: 'When you see me pull my arm back, as if to throw the ball, you also have in your brain a copy of what I am doing and it helps you understand my goal. Because of mirror neurons, you can read my intentions. You know what I am going to do next.'<sup>4</sup>

He continued: 'And if you see me choke up, in emotional distress from striking out at home plate, mirror neurons in your brain simulate my distress. You automatically have empathy for me. You know how I feel because you literally feel what I am feeling.' (Ibid)

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Blakeslee 'Cells That Read Minds' in *The New York Times*, January 10, 2006, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/10/science/10mirr.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/10/science/10mirr.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin) Accessed May 16, 2008.

This is precisely the identity of feeling that Carroll contends does not (and cannot) exist between movie goers and fictional cinematic characters. The ability to share the emotions of others appears to be intimately linked to the functioning of these mirror neurons, according to Dr. Christian Keysers (who studies the neural basis of empathy at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and who has published several recent articles on the topic in *Neuron*). When you see someone touched in a painful way, your own pain areas are activated as well. When you see a spider crawl up someone's leg, you feel a creepy sensation because your mirror neurons are firing. People who rank high on a scale measuring empathy have particularly active mirror neuron systems, Dr. Keysers said (Ibid).

No doubt because the study of mirror neurons is in its infancy, Carroll questions whether they explain the existence of what he calls 'mirror reflexes' (our tendency to instinctively mimic those around us), which he contends are involuntary and of primarily cognitive importance. Carroll places all of his emphasis on this cognitive component, playing down its affective counterpart in explicit terms: 'By calling them 'reflexes', I mean to signal that they are not full-fledged emotional states. Hence, the existence of mirror reflexes does not corroborate the model of infectious identification, though it is understandable that some might think it does.' (185)

I take him to mean that, if I grimace in response to seeing the hero grimace when he sees the bug monsters in *Starship Troopers*, I am primarily learning *what* it is that this trooper feels in the situation. Mirroring his facial expression helps me to more accurately identify *what* he is feeling. As Carroll describes the process, 'The activity on screen primes mimicry of a partial or limited variety which can deliver information about the internal states of characters which we sample in terms of similar sensations in ourselves. Though not full scale emotions—but only feelings sans objects, and, thus, without appraisals thereof—these sensations may nevertheless be a serviceable source of the affective grip that such motion pictures have on us...' (186).

Carroll's ultimate pronouncement on the meaning and significance of mirror reflexes is indeed strikingly cognitive in its focus: 'In sum, the human capacity for mirror reflexes is, in all likelihood, a stunning asset from the perspective of natural selection, since it is a means for gathering affective information about conspecifics (members of the same species) and for synchronizing joint ventures...' (186). While researchers have identified both cognitive and affective functions of mirror neurons, Carroll has virtually

effaced the latter, despite the fact that (or perhaps because) this function is seen by many of them to be the basis of empathy.

From the tone of his remarks, I can only speculate on which general theory of cognitive psychology Carroll is operating. It sounds a lot like Schachter and Singer's cognitive labeling theory, which contends that physical arousal is emotively neutral and that it is the cognitive processing of the context that determines the resultant emotive state. For example, when my daughter was six, and fell off her bicycle, she would immediately look to me to tell how bad the fall was, and would then react accordingly. I have no doubt that she actually felt less pain and fear if I downplayed the occurrence.

But the cognitive labeling theory underestimates the importance of mimicry in generating immediate empathetic responses in human observers. If there are mirror neurons that operate at the emotional level (thusfar only motor mirror neurons have been identified in humans), then someone observing an emotion-charged action would feel as if he were engaging in the action himself (e.g., grieving for the death of a beloved).

Furthermore, Carroll's account overlooks the distinct possibility that assuming the requisite facial expression (in this case, grief) also tends to produce feelings strikingly similar to the character one is mimicking. Evidence for the claim that adopting a facial grimace tends to produce a feeling of emotional distaste can be found in what Carroll himself recommends as 'an up-to-date philosophical discussion of the emotions' (191), Jesse Prinz's *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of the Emotions*.<sup>5</sup>

Prinz attacks two of the three major assumptions on which Carroll's account seems to be based: that emotions are conceptualized and that they are basically disembodied: 'The disembodiment hypothesis is threatened by the fact that emotions can be caused by direct physical induction, such as facial feedback. The concept-ladenness hypothesis is threatened by the fact that the emotions are ordinarily under exogenous control and by the fact that emotions seem to involve primitive brain structures that do not harbor complex propositional attitudes' (50). While he agrees that emotions involve appraisals (albeit embodied ones), Prinz still contends that 'subcortical structures can trigger bodily responses which are felt as emotions, without the intervention of concept-laden appraisals.' He even recognizes the promise of the mirror neuron hypothesis in a footnote

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<sup>5</sup> Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of the Emotions* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004). References to be followed by the page numbers from which they are taken.

towards the end of his book: 'We may discover neurons that behave like that in areas associated with emotion, such as the anterior cingulate' (229, n 1).

As Craig Delancey observed in his review of the book for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*,<sup>6</sup> Prinz resurrects a position that has long been out of favor with both psychologists and philosophers, but is recently enjoying something of a critical renaissance: the 'James-Lange view' that emotions are perceptions of bodily states. On such a view, when we adopt a facial gesture like a grimace while mirroring the expressions of fictional characters, we have a strong tendency to feel emotional distaste as well. It is this natural ability to feel empathy that explains how diverse societies like the United States of America can function effectively.

More intensely social than monkeys, we are built to be together. We feel each other's predicaments and triumphs at the neurophysiological level. When one looks at a series of happy faces, neurons fire in the area of the brain that registers personal happiness as well. Empathy happens so easily, some scientists now hypothesize, because of the existence of these mirror neurons.

Hence, I contend that Carroll's analysis of the meaning of 'mirror reflexes' and their role in triggering our emotional response to films is simply too cognitive to reflect the present state of neuroscience on the subject. Like his account of horror-pleasure in *The Philosophy of Horror*, it places too much emphasis on narrative and moral context and too little on our 'gut reactions' to fictional characters.

Furthermore, the philosopher of mind/psychology to whom Carroll refers several times in the course of his book takes issue with many of the cognitivist assumptions that shape his analysis. Carroll's privileging of what he calls 'criterial prefocusing' over more traditional notions of empathic identification is hence called into question as well. Not only is it likely that we are hardwired to have profoundly empathic responses to our fellow humans (in real life and in fictional situations), but much of the emotional asymmetry that Carroll remarks upon has to do with differences in knowledge between the character and viewer, or differences between being an active participant and a passive viewer (which would be minimized by mirror neurons). In most cases, were the character to share the same knowledge base as the viewer, their emotional reaction would be similar as well. If

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Delancey, review of *Gut Reactions* at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=4441> accessed May 16 2008.

mirror neurons are found to exist in brain areas associated with emotion, parsimony favors the empathic hypothesis.

Carroll's analysis of cinematic evaluation in chapter 7 doesn't go much beyond his earlier discussion of the issue in a section from *Engaging the Moving Image* entitled (appropriately enough) 'Introducing Film Evaluation'. He is still focused on what he calls 'the category problem', and his only addition to the previous account is to propose a 'cultural significance' standard when comparing excellent examples of different genres of film (e.g., that, *ceteris paribus*, biographical dramas have greater cultural significance than silly comedies).

Now, while situating a film in the proper category (or categories) is important to the process of evaluation, it is far from decisive. Most of the blatant misapplications of categories that Carroll considers are more likely to happen among neophytes (who, e.g., tend to judge abstract films harshly for their lack of narrative) than aficionados. In fact, in generating a hierarchy of the best instances of a genre, it is precisely the defining characteristics of the genre that are often in question.

Let me suggest a parallel in theory of tragedy. For Arthur Schopenhauer, tragedy is an object lesson in Buddhist resignation. When we see such noble protagonists as Macbeth and King Lear ground beneath the wheel of existence, we should learn that all striving is pointless, and seek the detachment of the Buddha. In this light, the most nihilistic of tragedies (like *Macbeth* and *Lear*) are the best of them, as Harold Bloom contends in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.<sup>7</sup>

In my dissertation, penned decades ago, I urged a Heideggerean theory of tragedy that highlights the authenticity and resoluteness of tragic protagonists. From this perspective, *Hamlet* and *Othello* are to be privileged, because Macbeth is torn apart by guilt at what he had done, while Lear abdicated his throne like a pouting child. Because there is no univocal paradigm for tragic criticism, evaluative debates often turn on such theoretical considerations.

The attempt to generate such hierarchies is not mere gamesmanship; if Plato is right (and I think he is in this instance), to understand an activity is to be able to generate a rank ordering in terms of excellence of things of that type. Debates about such hierarchies turn

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books 1998), pp. 476-545.

precisely on one's definition of the genre in question, for the hierarchies generated by opposing definitions are often very different.

Hence, there might well be widespread agreement as to which category or genre to place a certain work in without generating a consensus about *where* on the hierarchy of works of this type the particular film in question should appear (*Film Noir* is an example that comes to mind...there is much debate as to whether it is even a genre at all, or simply a style of filmmaking). This, in turn, is crucial to determining whether the work is a particularly good example of the genre or not, which is (to my mind) one of the ultimate goals of aesthetic evaluation.

My point here is that agreement on assigning a film to the appropriate critical category (or categories) can only take us so far in settling evaluative disputes. In the absence of agreement on the defining characteristics of the genre, for example, any two critics are likely to mean something very different by calling a particular film tragic. These differences make a great deal of difference to the ultimate value judgment passed on the work in question, which is the final end of aesthetic evaluation and the crux of most critical disputes that go on amongst the cognoscenti of any art form. I suspect Carroll has not addressed this issue because he denies 'the medium specificity thesis' discussed above.

The next step in justifying particular film evaluations is to propose standards for how to generate a hierarchy of competing theories of a particular genre or style, which is a notorious conundrum. For my own take on this issue, see 'A Kuhnian Metatheory for Aesthetics'<sup>8</sup>. Proposing and critically examining such metatheories will alone take us beyond an introductory discussion of film evaluation.

To summarize, then, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* is a useful compendium of Professor Carroll's preoccupations, although it should not be taken as a representative general introduction to the burgeoning field of the philosophy of film. His overly cognitive approach to issues of cinematic affect and evaluation is questionable, but he is convincing in his defense of film as art, and of a naturalistic analysis of the shot, of cinematic sequences and of narrative.

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Shaw, 'A Kuhnian Metatheory for Aesthetics' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 29-39.