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# Noël Carroll, "Philosophy and the Moving Image"

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**Noël Carroll.** *Philosophy and the Moving Image*. Oxford University Press 2021. 416 pp. \$74.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190683306).

Anyone with either a passing interest or a deep commitment to the philosophy of film (or philosophy of the moving image) will have encountered Noël Carroll's work at some point. This volume is extremely helpful in localizing a number of his previously published essays (ranging from 1995 to 2020), but also includes three new pieces.

The volume appears to have two aims: first, to bring new light to Carroll's contribution to the field, by organising some of his writings on the subject; and second, to show that the philosophy of film can be viewed through the lens of other philosophical fields. Regarding the first aim, this volume offers the first systematic overview of Carroll's thinking on the matter, although some of Carroll's writings on the subject, such as *Mystifying Movies* (Columbia University Press), and *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton University Press), both from 1988, are not included. And regarding the second aim, the volume is organized into seven parts, each tackling a different philosophical field touched by the philosophy of the moving image: metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, ethics, politics, and philosophy of the arts – the final chapter being dedicated to the history of the philosophy of the moving image itself. But, as Carroll notes in the introduction, the reach of the philosophy of the moving image likely extends beyond these fields. Overall, I believe that this volume succeeds in its first aim, but less so in the second, even though I agree that the philosophy of film can indeed contribute to many other philosophical fields and should be considered more central.

Title-wise, it is important to clarify a central distinction from Carroll: why the 'moving image' as opposed to 'motion pictures,' 'cinema,' or 'film'? First, Carroll favours 'moving image,' as opposed to 'film' or 'cinema' because he is concerned with the evolving nature of this broad medium and wishes to include 'film, television, video, computer-generated imagery, virtual reality, and whatever moving imagery comes next' (xi). Second, he also distinguishes between 'motion pictures' and 'moving image,' (already forwarded in *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, Blackwell 2008), to 'include under the concept abstract as well as realistic, moving, visual arrays' (xi). In the first part of the volume, Carroll offers some clarifications when discussing the ontology of the moving image: "'picture" seems to imply the sort of intentional visual artifacts in which one recognizes the depiction of objects, persons, situations, and events' (12), while 'images' may be non-representational. Pictures are always *of something*, but not necessarily images.

With that distinction in mind, in Part I, 'Metaphysics,' we find one of Carroll's most important contributions to the field, namely his 1995 'Toward an Ontology of the Moving Image.' But, perhaps most exciting is a new essay on 'The Return of Medium Specificity Claims and the Evaluation of the Moving Image.' Famously, Carroll argued against the notion of medium specificity, namely the view that, as interpreted by Carroll, the *material* medium of film (i.e. its physical components, as well as its instrumental components such as editing, or the camera itself) differentiates film from all other art forms, *and* determines specific aesthetic goals for filmmakers to attain on the grounds of its uniqueness. Carroll even issued a call to 'Forget the Medium' (in



*Engaging the Moving Image*, Yale University Press 2003). Here, he addresses Berys Gaut's (2010) and Dominic McIver Lopes' (2014) arguments in favour of medium specificity claims, which in turn should revive the debate in interesting ways. For instance, Carroll is right that, by proposing a new conception of the medium (one based on practices rather than the material), Gaut offers a conception of medium specificity which ends up being importantly different than the original version that film theorists like Arnheim proposed. However, charging Gaut 'with changing the topic rather than offering a defensible version of something suitably called medium specificity' (28) is not entirely fair. Gaut's goal is not to defend early film theorists, but to theorize a version of medium specificity that is interesting and helpful given the way we engage with and value movies, and accordingly is not changing the topic, but changing the stakes. Still, more needs to be said, which, if anything, illustrates how productive Carroll's thoughts continue to be for this debate.

Part II is dedicated to 'Epistemology,' although 'Metaphilosophy' might be more appropriate, as it is mostly concerned with the topic of 'Philosophy Through Film,' although Carroll refers to it as 'movie-made philosophy' or 'philosophy *in* the moving image' – a topic that resurfaces in other sections of the volume. This debate is centered around the following question: 'can movies produce philosophy?', which is not to be confused with: 'can movies illustrate philosophical ideas and themes?'. In 'Movie-Made Philosophy,' Carroll summarizes the debate and provides general arguments in favour of movies producing original philosophy, if we understand philosophy in a broader sense – for instance, by accepting that our philosophical practice can rest on interpretation. This paper serves to frame two other pieces, which operate as case-studies of Carroll's argument, the first focusing on *Serene Velocity* by Ernie Gehr, and the second on Warhol's *Empire*.

Part III, on 'Philosophical Psychology,' illustrates Carroll's engagement with empirical approaches and his commitment to the tradition of Cognitive Film Theory. What is particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of a recent paper, 'Movies, Narrative and Emotions,' which connects seemingly distinct areas of interest for Carroll: 1) cognitivist theorizing about movies, particularly attentional mechanisms, 2) theories of narration, particularly erotetic narration (i.e. narrative structures that create questions to be answered), and 3) emotions, understood by Carroll as both cognitive and affective modes of appraisal. Connecting these areas is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it pushes against a thought some might have regarding cognitivist theorizing, namely that it dismisses the affective dimension of movies. And second, it allows Carroll to make a substantial claim about our engagement with movies, and ultimately about their value. He identifies a mechanism he calls *criteria prefocusing*, which 'involves foregrounding or making salient those features of onscreen events and states of affairs that satisfy the ... conditions relevant to the activation of the intended emotional response in the audience' (145-146). Carroll claims that this mechanism is the 'leading way in which movies engage our emotions' (146). This claim deserves further empirical investigation – but, if correct, could have important upshots for theories in the philosophy of the moving image, in particular theories concerned with the aesthetic value of movies.

Part IV, 'Ethics,' ties in Carroll's work on the moralism and immoralism debate, moral psychology, and emotions, along with his skills as an essayist and film critic. An excellent example

of this is ‘Talk to Her,’ where Carroll offers both an analysis of Almadovar’s *Talk to Her*, which furthers his challenge to immoralism, i.e. roughly the view that moral defects in a work can constitute aesthetic merit (Carroll’s response to Eaton’s robust immoralism, ‘Rough Heroes’ is also found in this section), and some of his arguments in favour of philosophy through film. The section then concludes with an analysis of *Vertigo* which draws on the philosophy of love (in particular Plato’s).

In Part V on ‘Politics,’ Carroll once again suggests that movies can help us philosophize, specifically in matters of political theory and practice. As he argues in ‘Science Fiction, Philosophy, and Politics,’ some science fiction movies (e.g. *Planet of the Apes*) can be construed as political thought experiments and, insofar as thought experiments are an essential part of the philosophical toolkit, can engage in philosophical discourse.

Part VI, ‘Philosophies of the Arts,’ features the second new essay by Carroll (with Margaret Moore), ‘Three Problems in the Philosophy of Movie Music.’ This chapter spotlights a topic largely ignored by analytic aestheticians and should fuel further discussion among them. Those interested in the ontology of art might want to focus on the first problem, namely: what is ‘movie music,’ and importantly is it something more than just music *in* movies? Those interested in theories of narration might want to explore the second problem, namely: who is the fictional presenter of the music (given that movie music usually has a narrative function)? And, the final problem, perhaps more geared towards philosophers and historians of film, and those interested in medium specificity, asks whether movie music has a *cinema-specific* function.

Finally, part VII addresses another of Carroll’s strengths: his historical understanding of the medium of film, *and* of the philosophy of film. This is amply demonstrated in his writings on Béla Balázs, Sergei Eisenstein, Stanley Cavell, and – the last new essay in this volume – on Arthur Danto’s philosophy of the moving image.

What this volume makes particularly clear is that Carroll, throughout his career, has developed certain theoretical commitments, such as the view that our engagement with moving images should be investigated on a cognitive *and* affective level (this sounds perhaps trivial, but given the history of film theory, it is actually far from it), and that moving images, through various strategies, can produce original and insightful philosophical material, but that our philosophical engagement with moving images should not detract from our aesthetic engagement with them. Carroll reminds us of this by offering generous analyses of individual works and some artists’ entire oeuvre (as in ‘Yvonne Rainer and the Recuperation of Everyday Life’), which reflect his own aesthetic experience in the context of broader philosophical arguments. But, again, this volume does not fully illustrate the idea that the philosophy of the moving image fully connects to other philosophical subfields. Carroll demonstrates its wide reach, but I am not sure, for instance, that movie-made philosophy illustrates the kind of contributions that philosophers of the moving image can make to epistemology, or that viewing individual films as political or ethical thought experiments is all that the field has to bring to political philosophy or ethics.

Overall, this volume illustrates a constant characteristic of Carroll’s philosophical and critical practice, namely its pluralistic and inclusive approach to aesthetics. As Hans Maes notes in his

*Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press 2017), Carroll is more akin to Isaiah Berlin's fox than he is to the hedgehog.

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