
Book Review

CARROLL, NOËL. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Blackwell 2008, 241 pp., \$97.95 hardcover, \$26.00 paperback.

Reviewed by Landon Schurtz

Noël Carroll's work is so well known in aesthetics that a review of his 2008 book *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* hardly seems necessary. Nonetheless, there is some useful work a review can accomplish; specifically, to situate the book in the context of Carroll's other works on the subject. Before proceeding, however, the intellectual diversity of aesthetics and art criticism requires that I note that Carroll works in the analytic tradition, which sets him apart from many other film scholars. Thus, when I make reference to "philosophy" or "philosophers" in this review, I am thinking of that tradition.

Even within analytic philosophy of film, there is a diversity of works, many by Carroll. Unlike his *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988), this volume does not focus on the philosophical dimensions of film theory. It is not an appreciation of film studies generally, as in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996, co-edited with David Bordwell), nor does it provide a set of analyses of specific films, as in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (1998). If anything, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* seems an introductory text, covering a sweep of issues, from the ontological status of movies to how we ought to structure our critical norms. Whether or not this was indeed Carroll's aim, the book provides an admirable primer on the philosophy of film, so that a philosopher unfamiliar with the subject or with aesthetics generally would be able to execute a few informative undergraduate lectures after perusal.

Chapters are reasonably short, with an average length of thirty pages, and each includes a "Suggested Reading" section. The "Suggested Reading" lists are more than mere bibliographies; Carroll gives lengthy explanations of how certain other texts amplify or give alternatives to his accounts, so that the "reading lists" tend to run to a page or more each. Each chapter deals with a separate issue in a self-contained fashion, although many or even most of the topics addressed are matters of wider philosophical concern as applied to philosophy of film, rather than issues unique to film theorizing. The organization of the book, as does the selection of topics, suggests that it was intended to function as a kind of handbook, rather than to present any sort of sustained philosophical argument.

Most notable about the topics chosen is that Carroll seems more committed to hitting all the major discussions in the field than in focusing on current, live debates, as demonstrated at the very outset of the book. Chapter 1 addresses the question of whether film can be art, which I do not believe is a hotly contested matter just now; nonetheless, Carroll dutifully traces the history of the debate and skillfully lays out the philosophical points at stake. Likewise, Chapter 2 addresses the problem of setting critical norms by discussing the doctrine of *medium specificity*, which is not much embraced these days. Drawing closer to contemporary debates, Chapter 3 deals with the ontological question of what a film *is*, while Chapter 4 delves into epistemology as well in the course of asking what exactly audiences see when they watch a film. Chapter 5 grapples with questions more specifically in the domain of

aesthetics in treating the matter of how movies communicate information to audiences and construct narratives. Chapter 6 jumps to a consideration of how and why audiences have emotional reactions to fictional events and characters, a puzzle that is only partly philosophical and that is not entirely unique to the philosophy of film (but which is of special interest to Carroll), while Chapter 7 revisits the question of how we ought to fill out our film-critical norms.

I must count the diversity of the book as a strength, even though the shifts in theoretical focus from chapter to chapter can make reading it straight-through difficult. As noted, the broad range of topics treated makes this volume a good candidate for one's first exposure to philosophy of film, as does the fact that Carroll seems to mostly stick to theses that are already extant in the literature. There is diversity in more than just the organization, though – Carroll's examples are not restricted to obscure art films but rather range from avant-garde works like *Poetic Justice* to decidedly mainstream films like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. There is clearly a breadth to Carroll's knowledge of and appreciation for the film arts, especially since many aestheticians cite only the most outré works as examples.

If *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* has any weakness, however, it is that the book's intended audience is not entirely clear. I have underscored how the book's organization and presentation of issues support the mission of providing general familiarity of philosophy of film to the previously uninitiated. However, I cannot quite figure out what level of readership would benefit most from this book. There are several places where the book seems to be aimed at educated non-philosophers or undergraduates, most notably on p. 55, where Carroll spends two paragraphs explaining the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. However, most of the rest of the book is written in such a way as to suggest that one would need at least a solid undergraduate background in philosophy to truly appreciate the issues at stake, and the sections that draw upon larger concerns in other areas (such as metaphysics or epistemology) as applied to film seem to require at least professional competence in philosophy generally. Still, these concerns aside, I could without reservation recommend the book to anyone who wanted to get a "lay of the land" for philosophy of film from the graduate student level on up; a bright undergraduate, reasonably far along in his or her philosophical education, might benefit as well.

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