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Conversation with Noël Carroll. A little look into the aesthetics of cinema (of live-action and animation)

*Introduction*¹

Nowadays, the philosophical branch of aesthetics represents a central theme in film analysis. Several distinguished 'classic' authors (Candou, Arnheim, Warburg, Gombrich, to name the most influential ones) talked about it for a long time. Today, Noël Carroll distinguished himself among the contemporary scholars on the world scene. In fact, he has long and profitably reflected on issues of fundamental importance for *cinematic aesthetics*, such as (as outlined in the questions) the conception of the actor's body in the filmic space (this is the case, for example, of his studies on Buster Keaton). In his essays Carroll highlighted several important concepts, making popular this specific philosophical field, even maintaining its proper academic slant. We believe that aesthetics, meant both as, Philosophy of Art and Philosophy of emotions or perception,² would be the right way to analyze cinematographic theories, using their paradigms to develop new approaches.

The questions posed would like to introduce a very little part of Noël Carroll's thought on different fields: from 'classic' silent cinema to animated films, with also several considerations on digital.



Massimo Bonura: What are your five favorite films and why?

Noël Carroll: Well, the first isn't just my favorite. I think it's the greatest film that has been made so far. It is Renoir's *Rules of the game*.³ One of the many reasons why I praise this film regards Renoir's mastery of multiplanar composition. Another film that would be in my top five list is Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.⁴ I admire it for its philosophical insight into the nature of love. It's a counterexample to the Platonic idea that we love our beloveds because of their properties. Hitchcock illustrates this idea by showing what's wrong with Jimmy Stewart's attempt to transfer Madeleine's properties to Judy. My next choice is Buster Keaton's *The General*,⁵ which I think is the greatest film in history in terms of giving the audience an understanding of the physical environment and its causal relation to human action. Keaton was a great director as well as a great comedian. My candidate for the greatest horror film ever made, and that's James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*⁶ for its masterful capability to move back and forth between comedy and horror, thereby underscoring the thin line between the two. The last film on the list is my childhood favorite: *King Kong*.⁷ I've seen it at least sixty times. I love the oneiric quality of the stop action animation and the way the film works out visually the parallel narratives of the island and the city.

M. B.: The concept of 'art' is extremely varied and complex. I think for example at George Dickie's theories,⁸ Arthur Danto's ideas⁹ or Ricciotto Canudo's concept of cinema and art.¹⁰ But is cinema an art for you? If yes, can you describe your personal perspective?

N. C.: Not all cinema is art. Surveillance footage isn't. Of course, it is a matter of contention as to how you establish a claim like this. Initially some, like Canudo and many of his contemporaries, analogized cinema to existing art forms like theater. But I think this has a problem, because it was based just on the notion of resemblance, which is problematic since, as a matter of logic, everything resembles everything else in some respect.

So, I prefer a different approach. I think about establishing that something is a work of art as a matter of descent – that is, in terms of its belonging to a certain tradition –. This is a historical question which can be established by showing, for example, lines of influence. So, I identify films as art in virtue of their lineage and the problems that they inherit from forebears in the relevant tradition. Think about the scenes in many of Visconti's films, like *Senso*:¹¹ the directorial style is often derived from the art of Opera. And we can establish that historically by pointing out the fact that, among other things, Visconti was a great Opera director. And by

establishing that the film belongs to that tradition, a tradition antecedently recognized as art tradition, we can begin to make our case that the film is an artwork.

M. B.: I enjoyed very much *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008), which I truly consider a milestone in film aesthetics. I have a question for you: about the analysis of the aesthetic philosophy of a film, how much do studies in the theory of perception or, in general, in cognitive sciences count?

N. C.: Well, I think we should always be informed by the best science of the day, at the very least. We shouldn't claim that film spectators are able to do something that contemporary psychology doesn't agree that we are capable of doing.

But I also think that we can learn about how films operate by looking at what the cognitive and perceptual psychologists have taught us. For example, I developed my own theory of point of view editing by consulting psychology. An important reason to become informed about the psychology of human perception and the psychology of human emotions, is that psychology, by explaining how these structures operate, can help us to explain how cinematic techniques and mechanisms engage us communicatively by activating our perceptual and affective apparatuses.

Moreover, I like to think that filmmakers are sort of non-credentialed psychologists trying to intuitively feel their way to what works on the basis of audience feedback. They try out techniques, experimenting with which ones and how they will engender targeted audience responses. I think that the level to which filmmakers are intuitive psychologist is underappreciated.

M. B.: You have also studied the concept of corporeality in Buster Keaton (in the book *Comedy Incarnate*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). Generically, what is the link between the concept of corporeality and cinematic aesthetics?

N. C.: During the era of the silent cinema, the film theorist Béla Balázs wondered if the movie has something that the novel doesn't have; he pointed out that a movie will hold our eager attention where a novel with the very same simple plot would bore us to the point that we would give up reading it. Balázs wanted to know why. He proposed that in virtue of the movie camera's capacity to move in on the character, his/her body and its gestures, including most importantly the face, movies give us more information about the characters, and thus the story than, for instance, we can derive when we view the theatrical stage from a distance because the the-

ater actor has to make his gestures larger and therefore less personal for all to see. For example, the way how Charlie Chaplin walks gives us insight into his personality. The movie actor has a certain physical advantage in contrast with the theater actor, because in the normal-sized theater the actor must speak louder, also using wider gestures. Thus, we don't have the same kind of access to their natural physical disposition of the actor, because they're creating a larger figure that will reach the mezzanine and the back row of the theater.

Movie acting is different, because of the camera. In virtue of the close-up, it can move in on his or her face or other parts of their bodies in order to capture their intimate gestures. In fact, the way they move, their way of standing still, their way of lighting a cigarette and so forth gives us this rich access to the character, which then will be relevant to the story. It enriches the otherwise simple story – fills it out in the way many novelists can't –. That was the answer that Balász¹² proposed a nearly a decade before the sound film, and I still think is the best answer that we have. That is, the densely articulated corporeality of the film actor is an expressive bonus beyond the reach of the novelist and of the theater actor on the standard proscenium stage.

M. B.: How would you describe the concept of film reality? Is cinema real for you? Or sometimes this depends on specific conditions?

N. C.: There are various kinds of realism, and almost all are in contrast with some earlier kind of filmmaking. In other words, when we call a motion picture realist, we are actually drawing a contrast between it and some earlier film style. For example, Italian Neorealism is reacting to the earlier, so-called 'white telephone films', because it introduced a dimension of social reality that was completely absent in those films. It provided access to different mode of representation of everyday experience, specifically working class experience, that was absent in the white telephone films.

On the other hand, the kind of perceptual realism found in the films of Renoir, Welles, and Wyler is realistic in terms of the contrast between their deep-focus, long shot compositions in contrast to the more tightly framed, soft-focused films of the thirties inasmuch as the deep-focus compositions invites the audience to scan the frame for meaning in a way that was more analogous to the way we perceive affairs outside the movie theater than the earlier soft-focus films. That is, they were more realistic because they were more like ordinary perceptual experience than what was available in soft focus films. I stress 'more like' – not 'just like' – and only when contrasted to an antecedently existing style of filmmaking. Furthermore, let me just step backwards for a moment to take note of another contrast, an

ontological contrast, the contrast between film and digital cinema. By film here I mean to be referring to its material base which is celluloid. This notion of film has been used frequently to define the difference between painting, on the one hand, and photography and cinematography, on the other hand.

Film images are on the screen because of the nature of film. That is, in film-based cinema everything on the screen is there because of certain causal-physical processes have been activated whereas with painting, what is on the canvas is there because the artist intended it to be there. Because film is based in physio-causal processes – whereas painting is based on mental processes –, film is often said to be a realistic medium. Digital cinema, given this contrast, can be said to have achieved the condition of painting, at least in contrast to film-based cinema. And for that reason – its rootedness in a physical medium – some are tempted to regard film-based cinema as realistic when compared to digital cinema which is, in a certain way of speaking, primarily an information-based medium.

M. B.: Let I ask you a few words about your opinion of the philosophical implications that digital has in filmmaking in general and in animation.

N. C.: Well, let's make a distinction between *King Kong's* stop action animation versus drawn animation as seen in Disney's *Pinocchio*¹³ where, for example, Jiminy Cricket appears on the screen. He is there because someone put him there and not just because a cricket happened to wander in front of a camera. An illustrator has placed him there so we can see him (at least for this kind of animation which we might call drawn animation, in which photography doesn't play a constituent role). What's on the screen is there because it was intended by the artist who drew it. But in *King Kong*, if Kong has a piece of dinosaur flesh caught in his teeth, it is there because that was in front of the camera whether anyone intended it or not. Digital animation is like drawn animation in this respect in contrast to film-generated, stop action animation.

M. B.: If possible, tell us something about your book *Mystifying movies* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988) and the underlying ideas and philosophical implications on which it was based.

N. C.: My approach in *Mystifying Movies* was in opposition to the tendency to apply mechanically or reductively to every motion picture and every cinematic technique the explanation that they were invariably positioning subjects in order to give us a sense of psychological coherence and unity which would enable capitalism to keep workers in our class position, doing our jobs compliantly. This approach was based on a stew of ideas

derived from Althusser and Lacan. My book was an attack on this sort of poststructuralism. In contrast, I proposed a cognitive approach. So, this returns us to one of your earlier question. For by trying to develop alternative hypotheses to the questions of cinema theory, based on cognitive and perceptual psychology, I hoped to present a more attractive theoretical framework than the championed by the Althusserian-Lacanian.

For example, I argue that the theory point of view editing that I offer is more attractive than the Althusserian-Lacanianism account of the so-called subject positioning story they told. I tried to give a much more fine-grained account that really was more specific about the actual factors which go into the audience's engagement with the point-of-view structure. I didn't offer my theory point of view editing in that book, but I proposed counter theories about narration and cinematic perception that contested the poststructuralist theses. For example, I argued that we perceive the image on screen when we recognize it, because it taps into our natural perceptual capacities and not because we're reading a code. Moreover, it should be emphasized that my approach is not opposed to analyzing cinema politically; rather it recommends that the analysis of ideology in cinema employ the resources of contemporary research into cognition and emotion.

M. B.: What emotional responses and perception of reality do you think a viewer might have in front of a particularly emotional film? You've talked about this a lot in your books, but I'd like to ask you about the philosophical considerations behind it here as well.

N. C.: The poststructuralist account of the emotions was not really very rich, because their usage does not go much beyond the way those concepts are used in ordinary life. Our emotions are not deeply analyzed other than other than by reducing them to the same sorts of drives and desires that Freudians postulate. I wanted more fine-grained accounts of the emotions such as the view proposed by contemporary psychologists and philosophers that emotions are forms of appraisal or evaluation. Thus, emotions have to meet certain standards. So, we can start to talk again about filmmakers as intuitive psychologists, in the sense that they have to structure their images in ways that are appropriate to the evaluative criteria of the emotions that the movie makers intend to engender in their audiences.

For example, movie directors have to make sure that when the actor looks off screen and has a terrified visage on his face, the image of what he is looking at meets the criteria of being terrifying. That is, when the image track cuts to the object of the character's glance, the filmmaker must be sure that the object of the character's attention meets the criteria of being

dangerous. If the object in the character's glance were a newborn kitten, we would laugh at the absurd juxtaposition. What the filmmaker has to do is to make salient events comprehensible in the way she intends by providing appropriate objects, that is, the kind of things that match the emotion at hand. And discovering the right match here means discovering which emotions go with what things which, I like to say, is an exercise in intuitive psychology.

M. B.: Does the aesthetics of animated film differ significantly from those in live action? If so why and from what?

N. C.: The animated films maker can exaggerate the attributes of everything on screen. The most obvious case of this is the representation of women's bodies in comic books and in certain animated films. The enormous breasts are patently designed to meet the desires and wishes of young men. But they're not representations of most women we are likely to see on the street. This happens because animation is an abstraction, it simplifies or streamlines what it represents. So, it can make certain things more pronounced. Another obvious tendency in this regard is that the representation of physical violence for comic effect can perhaps be more vivid and extreme in animation than it can be in live photography. It has been said that slapstick comedy declined in importance in the nineteen thirties because cartoons began to take up that function and they could explore violence even more extravagantly. Wile E. Coyote surely suffers more than any live actor I can think of.

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- ¹ The tasks of this work were divided as follows: Noël Carroll answered the questions we asked and double-checked the whole conversation; Massimo Bonura was responsible for writing abstracts, keywords, the introduction and all the questions for this conversation; Marco Pirrone translated and transcribed the entire article and took care of the text notes and references.
- ² Cfr. P. D'ANGELO, *Tre modi (più uno) di intendere l'estetica*, in L. RUSSO (a cura di), *Dopo l'estetica, Aesthetica Preprint Supplementa*, Palermo, Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica, 2010.
- ³ *Rules of the game*, directed by Jean Renoir (1939, NEF).
- ⁴ *Vertigo*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1958, Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions-Paramount Pictures).
- ⁵ *The General*, directed by Buster Keaton and Clyde Bruckman (1926, Buster Keaton Productions-United Artists Productions).
- ⁶ *The Bride of Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale (1935, Universal Pictures).
- ⁷ *King Kong*, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1933, RKO).
- ⁸ G. DICKIE, *The Art Circle*, New York, Haven Publications, 1984.
- ⁹ A. DANTO, *What Art is*, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 2013.
- ¹⁰ See for example M. DANIELE, 'Le Drame Visuel: Riccioito Canudo e la settima arte', *Sinestesia online*, 21, Ed. Sinestesia, 2017.
- ¹¹ *Senso*, directed by Luchino Visconti (1954, Lux Film).
- ¹² For Baláz's theories see B. BALÁZS, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory. Visible Man and the Spirit of film*, edited by E. Carter, tr. R. Livingstone, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books in association with Screen, 2010.
- ¹³ *Pinocchio*, directed by Ben Sharpsteen, Hamilton Luske, Norman Ferguson, T. Hee, Wilfred Jackson, Jack Kinney (1940, Walt Disney Productions).

