

CARROLL ON THE MOVING IMAGE

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The question “What is cinema?” has been one of the central concerns of film theorists and aestheticians of film since the beginnings of cinema. No one has done more to show us how this question has been used than Noël Carroll. In his essay, “Defining the Moving Image,”¹ Carroll attempts to go beyond a critique of classical film theory for its essentialism by developing an answer to this question that is non-essentialist in various senses of that term.

In this paper, I shall consider Carroll’s proposed definition of the moving image. After considering whether his five necessary conditions for an object’s being a moving image are an accurate characterization of the concept, I will turn to the broader question of whether Carroll has evaded the essentialism of classical film theory. My conclusion will be that he has not and that the project of film theory needs to be rethought in a manner that is more deeply anti-essentialist than that proposed by Carroll.

Carroll develops his account of the moving image² in a dialectical strategy in which he first looks at two problematic views that have dominated philosophical theories of the moving image. The first such view is medium essentialism, the assumption that there is a single medium that determines the nature of an art form. Against this assumption Carroll argues that art forms generally have more than one medium and that, even if this were not so, there is no reason to see an art’s medium as determining appropriate ways for that art form to develop. Carroll’s claim is that this entails that defining the nature of an art form cannot have normative consequences for the future development of that art. As a result, Carroll concludes, one important goal of medium essentialism has to be seen as a mistaken one.

The second view that Carroll attacks is photographic realism, the claim that photographs allow their viewers to be directly perceive the objects represented. On this view, films are to be thought of on analogy with glasses or telescopes, instruments that simply aid a viewer in directly seeing the things that are before her. Against this view, Carroll asserts that “all photographic and cinematic images are detached displays,” by which he means that there is a discontinuity between the space portrayed in the images and the physical space in which the viewer finds herself. As a result, Carroll claims “that it is vastly improbably and maybe effectively impossible that spectators, save in freak situations, be able to orient themselves to the real, profilmic spaces physically portrayed on the screen,”³ so that cinematic realism must be false.

As Carroll puts this point, it seems clearly false. When watching a film that includes a scene of Washington Square in New York City, I may very well know exactly what actions I would have to take in order to relate my body to the space portrayed on the screen. Nonetheless, Carroll is certainly right to claim that there is a discontinuity between my own spatial and temporal position in the real world and the spatial and temporal world that I see portrayed in a narrative film.⁴ Even if I can walk to Washington Square, I cannot arrive at the world that I saw projected there. Carroll’s talk of a detached display is meant to conceptualize this discontinuity between the film world and the real world.

The claim that a moving image is a detached display is the first of the five conditions that Carroll proposes as necessary for an object’s being a moving image, a term that he prefers to film because it allows videos, laser discs, and other similar forms to be thought of as all the same art form. His claim is as follows:

we can say that x is a moving image (1) only if x is a detached display, (2) only if x belongs to the class of things from which the impression of movement is technically

possible, (3) only if performance tokens of x are generated by a template that is a token, and (4) only if performance tokens of x are not artworks in their own right and (5) only if it is two-dimensional.⁵

In spelling out these five criteria, Carroll is concerned to distinguish films from various other types of artworks. Paintings, photographic slides, and plays are the primary types of artworks with which Carroll is concerned. His criteria are intended to mark out moving images as artworks that are of a different ontological type than paintings, plays, etc.

I have already discussed some problems with Carroll's first condition. It is meant to distinguish moving (and still) images from the images we get when we look through such devices as glasses, telescopes, and microscopes. Although cameras also depend on the existence of lenses, Carroll thinks it is important that we realize that there is a real difference between what we see when we look at a photograph and what we see when we look through a device with a lens. He characterizes this difference by saying that, when we look through a device with a lens, there is a continuity between the space of what we see and the space that we inhabit. He claims that this is not true when we look at a photograph, be it a moving or still one, for they are "detached displays."

Carroll himself considers a putative counter-example to his claim, one in which we are watching a video monitor that shows us the contents of the room next to us. Do we not know how to orient ourselves to the physical space presented on the screen? Carroll's reply is that, unlike the case of detached displays, we need to use information that is not provided by "the image itself"⁶ in order to orient ourselves to the physical space of the image. But is it so clear that we do not need information external to the image to orient ourselves to the space of a telescope or a microscope? In each case, I

think that there is information external to the image that a person needs to use in orienting themselves to the image. I just do not see that Carroll has been able to give an account of a detached display that is adequate to his purposes.

I think that this problem can be sharpened if we think about whether there is a difference between what a cameraperson sees when looking through a camera lens and what an audience member sees when she sees the same visual information projected on her television set. For Carroll, the former is an instance of direct seeing, for the cameraperson exists in a physical space that is continuous with the one that she sees through the camera. The viewer of this scene, however, does not see things directly, for her world is spatially discontinuous with the world she sees on the screen.

This way of putting things is misleading, however, for even though the cameraperson filming a fictional narrative is in the same physical space as the actors, she is not in the same physical space as the characters they play. So the issue is not the physical means by which one looks at an object but what one sees when one looks, how one interprets the images that one sees. Although Carroll is correct in rejecting the claim that film allows one to see the world in an unmediated way, his own explanation of film as involving a detached display is not an adequate characterization of the viewer's situation.

In explaining his second condition, Carroll vacillates between an epistemic and an ontological mode of exposition. Given his project, he needs to stick to the ontological mode, saying that for an object to be a moving image it must be possible that it convey the impression of motion. I do not have a lot to say about this condition. It does seem right to say that, if an object is a moving image, it must at least be possible for it to convey an image of motion. The condition has to be formulated as merely a possibility in order to take account of films, like Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1965), a 7-hour static shot of the Empire State Building or Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a film composed of shots

of still photographs alone. Although neither of these films includes a shot of things actually moving, Carroll claims that they *could*.⁷

The question about the validity of this condition comes down to whether Carroll can justify giving an ontological interpretation of the “could” in the last sentence. When I am watching a film, it might make sense for me to be aware that I might soon see something moving on the screen even when nothing I am currently seeing is in motion. But the “might” in that sentence is an epistemic one. *Might* the film have included a shot of things in motion even though, in point of actual fact, it does not? One’s position on whether this claim is true depends on prior metaphysical commitments. So it is not obvious that Carroll has provided a sound necessary condition for an object’s being a moving image in his second condition.

I shall discuss Carroll’s third and fourth clause of Carroll’s set of necessary conditions together. They are both proposed because the first two clauses are not adequate to distinguish moving images from plays or, although Carroll does not mention this, from pieces of music. Carroll attempts to distinguish between these distinct types of artworks by claiming that there are differences in their “performances.” Whereas performances of plays or musical works are themselves works of art that are generated by interpretations, Carroll claims that film performances are not artworks and are generated by templates. Although he does not explain what he means by a template, the point is fairly clear. Carroll is using the term “template” in order to conceptualize the relationship between, say, the reels of film stock of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Week End* (1967) and the “performances” of it that my class attends when I screen the film. The reels of stock act as a template in that, when I project it, there is a mechanical procedure that results in the film being performed for my class in a way that can be reproduced on other occasions.

I find it quite odd for Carroll to speak of performances of moving images. We generally say that they are screened or played. I think that it would be more informative to claim that moving images are screened rather than performed and then to explain the difference between art forms that are screened and those that are performed.

So let us investigate what the implications are of saying that moving images are *screened* rather than *performed*? First of all, it means that, as Carroll's fourth condition points out, the screening of a moving image is not a separate object of criticism. One may be interested in criticizing a film, but not its screening, although one might explain that there was a technical problem in the screening one attended. That is, one would not report that the latest screening of *Week End* involved an amazing interpretation of the significance of the film, so long as the film was simply projected onto a screen as it standardly is. With artworks that are performed, however, the individual performance is a candidate for criticism as well as the work of which it is a performance. So one might well debate whether Glenn Gould's 1955 or 1981 performance of the *Goldberg Variations* were superior, for the two performances involved very different interpretations of the work.

Part of the problem here is that the type-token distinction that Carroll invokes has to be used twice in articulating the ontology of a moving image. Moving images, like photographs, are not identical with a single physical object as is the case with paintings or sculptures. The original of a moving image, like the original of a book, is a type. All of the prints of *It Happened One Night* (1934) are on a par in this ontological respect despite their empirical differences: None of them alone *is* the artwork. This is different from the relationship between the *Mona Lisa* and its numerous reproductions around the world. As a result, a screening of a moving image is a token in *two* senses: First, the print that is screened is itself a token, one that is produced by a template when the print

is produced by being copied from a master. Second, the actual screening of the mechanically produced moving image is itself a token, something that is repeatable. It is this iterated use of mechanical means of production that I think is best captured by saying that moving images are screened.

The fifth condition that Carroll discusses is that a moving image must be two-dimensional. He includes this condition in order to distinguish moving images from music boxes with figures on them that move and other such devices. Carroll thinks that this condition helps limit the applicability of the concept of moving image in an important way.

Since I will discuss this condition in a moment, let me first address a putative sixth condition that would render the set of necessary conditions jointly sufficient. Carroll considers the additional condition that a moving image must be projected. This would distinguish moving images from such things as flip books. A flip book satisfies all of the five conditions that Carroll has proposed, but not this sixth one. Carroll rejects this proposal, too quickly in my view, because it would exclude certain devices such as Edison's Kinetoscope in which the viewer actually looked at a moving film rather than a projected image.

Although Carroll's reasons for rejecting this claim are more complex than his stated explanation, let us start by considering his explicit reasons, for I am not convinced that these are sufficient grounds for rejecting this sixth condition. As Carroll himself points out, we may have to make decisions in this area that do not quite accord with our pre-theoretical intuitions: "we should expect to find problematic border cases in exactly this vicinity."⁸ But this does not seem decisive to me. Why not simply accept the implication that certain pre-film technological devices like the Kinetoscope are not examples of moving images as we now know them, but that they are similar to them or precursors?

What reason is there for asserting that a Kinetoscope produces a moving image other than that it was an element in the historical process that led to the invention of the moving image proper. We even can admit that, if history were different, we would have a different conception of the moving image, but still maintain that *our* concept of the moving image requires that the image be a projected one. If he were to take this tack, Carroll would then have produced a set of six singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an object's being a moving image.

Carroll's reluctance to embrace this sixth condition, however, stems from a broader theoretical worry. He wants to develop an approach to theorizing about film that is free of the essentialism of earlier theorists. He seems to think that providing sufficient criteria for an object's being a moving image would result in an essentialist definition of film, a consequence that he believes he has avoided by specifying only a set of necessary conditions. As he says,

the characterization of moving pictures (or moving images) proposed in this essay is not essentialist in the philosophical sense that presupposes that an essential definition of cinema would be comprised of a list of necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient.⁹

It is this claim that I want to consider now, for I do not think that Carroll has fully understood the implications of his own anti-essentialist argument with the result that his own account of the nature of the moving image is too tied to the essentialist definitional project.

As we have seen, Carroll explicitly attempts to give a non-essentialist definition of the moving image. There are a number of reasons for this. Foremost among them is his desire

to avoid the objectionable types of essentialism that he sees operative in traditional philosophic theorizing about the moving image. For example, Carroll does not believe it is the place of a theorist of film to develop a concept of film that has implications for cinematic style. In this respect, he differs sharply from the classical film theorists, such as Rudolph Arnheim or André Bazin, whose own attempts to define film were clearly part of a broader strategy of legitimating certain film styles as constitutive of genuine works of art. (In this paper, Carroll does not consider the question of what makes a film a work of art in an evaluative sense, an important part of the classical theorists' program.) Carroll has no interest in developing this strategy for, as we have seen, he thinks that it is fatally flawed. Instead, however, he characterizes his own project as developing a definition of film that is non-essentialist in this objectionable sense.

For this reason, Carroll does not want to present a definition of the moving image in the traditional sense. He does, however, propose five necessary criteria for an object being a moving image, claiming that this makes his view non-essentialist: I want to ask whether Carroll's claim to provide a non-essential definition of the moving image because he has only provided necessary conditions makes sense. At issue is whether it makes sense to see the theorist as developing a set of conditions for calling an object a moving image when it is clear that the history of the art forms brought together under this term are rapidly developing and constantly changing. Indeed, Carroll is himself acutely aware of this fact and chooses to use the term "moving image" rather than "film" because he believes, as a matter of historical projection, that "in the future the history of what we now call cinema and the history of video, TV, CD-ROM, and whatever comes next will be thought of as a piece."¹⁰ Here, Carroll shows an awareness that the very terms in which we think about film and its related art forms are in a continuing process of change that depends upon both technological developments and

the art forms themselves. The theorist, he implies, has to see her own work as dependent on these historical developments rather than as dictating how they should go. The question that this raises is whether it then makes sense, if one is to be a thoroughgoing non-essentialist for the very reasons that Carroll has put forward, to develop a set of necessary conditions for an object's being a moving image. How do we know now that future developments in the moving image will not affect our willingness to call something a moving image in such a way that the necessary conditions Carroll has laid down will be violated?

The answer, I think, is that we cannot know. To choose one example, I want to take up the one necessary condition for something being a moving image Carroll has proposed a discussion of which I have postponed: its being two-dimensional. This is a peculiar condition since it is not clear to me that a contemporary film, soundtrack and all, can be thought of as a two-dimensional object, but leave that aside. Carroll proposes this condition in order that his own set of necessary conditions not allow in things like music boxes that have ballerinas on them that spin around once the box has been wound up. Is it clear that future developments in moving image technology will not make it possible for there to be three-dimensional projections that we watch in the way that we now watch films? What I have in mind is an extension of hologram technology in a way that makes it possible for films to present themselves to us in three dimensions. This certainly seems like a possibility to me, but it is one that Carroll's definition rules out as counting as a development of the moving image. Can we rule out on *a priori* grounds the existence of new cinemas in which people surround a moving holographic image projected from above?

My concern here is not so much with this particular necessary condition, but with the philosophic strategy that motivates Carroll. While he is aware that classical film theory has been burdened by essentialism, and while he tries to develop his own, non-

essentialist variant of film theory, I see his theory as still tied too rigidly to the idea that necessary and sufficient conditions are what theory is all about. He has not, I believe, assimilated fully enough the lessons about the nature of concepts in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,¹¹ for he still sees concepts as tied too rigidly to a logic of necessary, if not sufficient, conditions. My own example has attempted to show that the historical change in our concepts proceeds in ways that we cannot predict in advance, a fact that Carroll acknowledges but fails to integrate into his theoretical claims. The concept of the moving image is simply too variable for us to attempt to fix it for all time as Carroll seems to be doing.

There is, however, another possibility open to Carroll. He could say that he is simply articulating how we currently use the concept of the moving image, a project that he undertakes with a sense of certain historical tendencies that he thinks can be integrated into the account. This understanding of his project would make it non-essentialist in that the five conditions that he proposes would have to be seen as historically contingent in the sense that the future history of the moving image might cause us to reject any or all of them. This more historicist and pragmatic understanding of the concept of the moving image seems to me the right one, although it is one that I think Carroll has not fully accepted. Were Carroll to truly embrace anti-essentialism as a philosophic position, he would have to have a deeper sense of his own theoretical categories as themselves embedded in a historical process. This is, I believe, the right direction for film theory to develop, a direction that Carroll has done a great deal to help us find, but one that his own project is hesitant to follow.

1. Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49-74.

2. I follow Carroll's usage of the term "moving image" to refer to films, video, laser discs, etc., for purposes of exposition.

3. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 63.

4. In cases of documentary films, this condition seems less valid. For the purposes of this paper, I simply bypass this problem.

5. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 70.

6. *Ibid.*, 63.

7. Although Wahrol's film has been claimed to include a shot of some pigeons flying and Marker's does include one moving image, one can easily think of fictional counterpart films from which those short shots have been removed. Carroll's claim would then apply to these counterpart films.

8. *Ibid.*, 71.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 65.

11. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 50th Anniversary ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).