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The Practice of Filmic Interpretation

Noel Carroll

Interpreting the Moving Image

Foreword by Tom Gunning

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'[I]f you assume that the analyst has the necessary training (knowledge, method), the whole value of his work depends on his personal qualities, since he is at the same time the scholar, and (together with the film), the very terrain of the research.' Christian Metz [1]

For a few readers at least, this review may seem like deja vu all over again. In 1989 I wrote a review of Noel Carroll's book Mystifying Movies, [2] which prompted a response from Carroll: 'Cognitivism, Contemporary Film Theory, and Method: A Response to Warren Buckland'. [3] Before moving on to review Carroll's Interpreting the Moving Image, I shall offer a short and rather belated reply to Carroll's response.

Firstly, Carroll misunderstood my review of his book as an attack on cognitivism. My primary aim was to investigate the reasoning behind his extreme interpretation of contemporary film theory, to examine the logic of his claims, and the conditions that make such an extreme interpretation possible. I find *_Mystifying Movies_* a fascinating read because the extremities of its arguments are innovative (a breath of fresh air) and seductive (due to their appeal to common sense and to philosophical modes of reasoning such as the *reductio ad absurdum*). However, the results are at times misleading (the breath of fresh air becomes a cold, biting wind), as my review attempted to demonstrate.

Secondly, I criticised the alternative cognitive theory Carroll presented in *_Mystifying Movies_* because it was insufficiently developed and out of place. It seems that the cognitive sections were hurriedly added as an afterthought. Furthermore, my review did not try to defend the aims of contemporary film theory in the face of Carroll's critique. After all, I stated near the beginning of my review that: 'Contemporary film theory needs to be critically analysed at its foundations. However, I differ with Carroll in stipulating the manner in which this critique should be carried out'. [4] Carroll fails to acknowledge this aspect of my review. The tone of my review simply implies that Carroll's critique of contemporary film theory is exaggerated. When a new player enters the intellectual marketplace, he establishes his identity by overstating his case (just think of the slogans propounded by the Russian Formalists in their formative period). This is exactly what Carroll aimed for (and achieved) in his review of Stephen Heath's *_Questions of Cinema_* in 1982 (the review upon which *_Mystifying Movies_* is based). Carroll wanted to throw the baby out with the bath water without getting wet. My review argued that we need not go quite so far, but agreed that the bath water needed to be changed. [5]

From the mountainous peaks of film theory, we move down to the hinterlands of filmic interpretation. I will be using David Bordwell's *_Making Meaning_* to guide us through these murky lands. In particular, I shall make reference to Bordwell's appeal to three of the five operations of the *techne rhetorike* to analyse the rhetorical structure of filmic interpretations: *inventio* (invention of arguments), *dispositio* (their arrangement), and *elocutio* (style). The two he leaves out are *actio* -- the performance of the discourse, and *memoria* -- committing the discourse to memory. Bordwell presumably leaves out these two operations because they are irrelevant to written interpretations, although they might come in useful in analysing the way papers are presented at conferences.

The Introduction to *_Interpreting the Moving Image_* consists of Carroll's post hoc rationalisation of his interpretive activity over almost 20 years (1971-1990). Much of the Introduction consists of a clear and detailed definition of the term 'interpretation', which for Carroll means 'explanation -- a matter of answering the question of why a work has the parts it has and/or . . . why the parts it has are related in the ways they are' (5). 'Explanation' is taken in the broadest sense of the term, covering thematic, functional, or causal explanations (6). Carroll's primary aim is to explain the presence of parts/features in a film, and he draws upon these various types of explanation to

achieve this end. He distinguishes his approach from formalism, reception studies, symptomatic interpretation, and explicatory criticism (as defined by Bordwell -- the study of underlying meanings). Carroll tells us he is not a formalist because, in explaining the formal features of a film, he relies on contextual factors. (Nonetheless, this is the type of criticism his analyses largely conform to.) He does not subscribe to reception studies because his aim is not to create an archive of film viewers' actual responses to the films under analysis. And he does not regard his interpretations to be explicatory criticism, as Bordwell understands this practice, because he does not subscribe to a hierarchical model of meaning, in which the 'essential' meaning is to be 'found' below the film's surface. This hierarchical model, of course, is developed further in symptomatic interpretations, which I shall discuss below.

This raises the question concerning how the different approaches justify their analyses. Formalism is object-centred; its descriptions and hypotheses can be tested against the film. Reception studies justifies its research by postulating that it documents the activity of actual viewers. The explicatory critics, in the form of auteur and mise-en-scene criticism, searched for underlying meanings, a search which is premised, as Bordwell points out, 'on Sartre's maxim that every technique reveals a metaphysics'. [6] Carroll justifies his interpretations by appealing to one aspect of *inventio*, namely pathos, an appeal to the reader's emotions. Bordwell writes that critics 'create identificatory roles around which the reader's emotions can crystallize. One such role is that of the constructed reader, a kind of parallel to the rhetor's own persona. The other role is that of the 'mock viewer', the hypothetical spectator who responds in the fashion best suited to the critic's interpretation'. [7] Carroll's hypothetical spectator is someone who values film appreciation: 'Film interpretation is a form of film appreciation, in the first instance, and then a guide to others about the ways in which they too can come to appreciate the value (and, in some cases, the disvalue) of the films in question' (8). Moreover, Carroll doesn't distinguish the hypothetical spectator from the constructed reader of his essays. Instead, he combines them into one figure -- himself:

'If these essays document anything, it is my own considered assessment -- upon reflection and viewing -- of how these films work . . . The interpretations are my own hypotheses. They are not meant to stand in as reports of the surmises of the average audience member (whoever that might be) . . . I hope that readers will test my interpretations in their encounters with the films I discuss, where this testing involves not only ascertaining whether my conjectures are objectively plausible attributions -- given the work and its historical context -- but also seeing whether it enhances their appreciative activity (their contemplation, comprehension, and understanding of the film and its features)' (9-10).

This subject-focused type of justification, when acknowledged, is no bad thing, for it recognises that no analysis can be conducted from a neutral, objective standpoint. Also, acknowledged subject-focused justifications of one's work is not new in film studies, as the quotation from Metz opening this review attests, in which he argues that the validity of research into the cinema is strongly influenced by the personal qualities of the individual researcher.

A fundamental -- and very traditional -- assumption upon which Carroll's interpretations are based is that most films are organic or unified -- that is, he interprets films 'in light of their relation to hypotheses about the *unity* of the works in question' (10). In this respect he differs most fundamentally from symptomatic interpreters, for whom films are fundamentally disunified (riven with contradictions). The assumption that films are organic informs the dispositio of Carroll's essays (the second process of *techne rhetorike*). Bordwell writes that: 'The explicatory critic frequently structures the argument around an intuitively apprehended experience of the film'. [8] This is one aspect of Bordwell's definition of explicatory criticism that Carroll adheres to. The dispositio of Carroll's essays are largely determined by his own intuitively apprehended experience of the film, together with the film's plot structure.

The book contains analyses of an eclectic mix of classic films -- including *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *The Gold Rush*, *The General*, *October*, *M*, *Vampyr*, *King Kong*, *Citizen Kane*, *Magnificent Obsession*, plus a selection of avant-garde films, including *Entr'acte*, *Heaven and Earth Magic*, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *Text of Light*, *Journeys From Berlin/1971*, and *In the Bag*. There are also four essays with a general focus -- the now classic 'The Future of an Allusion', which identifies and investigates a canon of filmmakers in the seventies who employ a series of allusive practices in their films; 'Back to Basics', a weak, inferior essay that attempts to complement and enrich the history of seventies film presented in 'Future of an Allusion'; an essay focusing on the 'primacy of experience' in Herzog's films (ineffable, immediate experiences that fall outside conceptual frameworks), and one on cinema in the postmodern age, which is restricted to surveying filmic practices that emerged after the modernist structural film movement. In the interest of completeness, I shall mention in passing that the reader will also find discussions of *Kameradschaft*, *Becky Sharp*, *The Trial*, *Nothing But a Man*, and *The Cool World*.

As I pointed out above, 'organic unity' is the dominant concept with which Carroll approaches these films. He argues that in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* there is not, as Kracauer suggests, a conflict between the main story, written by Mayer and Janowitz, and the framing story that was added on afterwards (in which the framing story is seen to transform a social allegory of the consequences of unchecked authority into a mere fantasy of a madman). For Carroll the film is still 'stylistically and thematically an organic whole' (19) because the framing story does not negate the social message of the main story by reducing it to a madman's fantasy, but interacts with it: 'In terms of the whole film, the framing story doesn't subvert social criticism so much as resituate it in a psychoanalytic context where the core of the film, the fantasy, dialectically supplies enough evidence for us to charge that Francis has been maddened by his environment' (19).

In *The Gold Rush* there is a unity of style and theme: 'The themes of being alone, alienated and outside are dramatized by compositions where the character is visually isolated and outside, thus literalizing social relationships through visual ones' (37). 'The result is an organic unity where

narrative content and cinematic style (composition and editing) reinforce each other in articulating a compelling theme of alienation' (43). In *The General* Carroll identifies a correlation between the 'formal articulations of the image' and 'the key causal relations of the depicted event' (75), while in *October* Eisenstein's montage sequences follow standard argument structures -- such as the *reductio ad absurdum* -- to convey abstract concepts. Carroll analyses the 'God and Country' sequence to see how it conveys the theme that God does not exist.

We also learn that '*M*' is an exemplary case of an organic film' because the 'narrative structure, the framing, the use of sound to present off-screen traces, the overhead angulation, and the order of editing, all seem coordinated to induce an investigatory attitude on the part of the audience' (96). *Vampyr* is made coherent only by the lengthy intertitles, and the second half of *King Kong*, set in New York, is marked by the repetition of visual and narrative motifs that appear in the jungle setting of the first half. Such repetition not only creates formal unity but also conveys an evolutionary theme -- 'Kong can be seen as a popular illustration of Social Darwinist metaphors . . . In this light, the equation of the city with the jungle is perfectly fitting -- almost 'natural' (119).

Even though, Carroll points out, the theme of *Citizen Kane* has been subjected to two different and incompatible interpretations -- the enigma interpretation (a person has multiple selves and therefore remains a mystery) and the Rosebud interpretation (a person's life can be understood in terms of a single meaning such as 'lost childhood') -- Carroll argues that the film is still unified: 'although the film has two interpretations of *Kane's life*, the *film* can be characterized in terms of one interpretation which attributes to it a unified purpose' (162) -- namely, to create a more aesthetically engaging film. Meanwhile, Carroll perceives no Brechtian subversion of theme by style in *Magnificent Obsession*, but a unity between them: '*Magnificent Obsession* is conformist in terms of form and content, and form as content' (170).

Harry Smith's *Heaven and Earth Magic* visually represents several cultural metaphors of the mind, a fusion of style and theme that reveals that the film is coherent: 'Smith presents one with an exemplary instance of aesthetic organicity, the parade of diverse objects reconciled and subsumed through a consistent view of the film as a mind' (189-90). In a perceptive analysis of spatial articulation in Welles's *The Trial*, Carroll argues that the film's editing, which creates spatial incoherence, is not a matter of clumsy mismatches, but is due to the consistent use of disjunctive cutting: 'the disjunctive editing of *The Trial* results in a uniform experience of the film object . . . One's experience of the space in Welles's *The Trial* is uniformly disjunctive and fragmented to such an extent that it is most plausible to assume spatial disjunction as the norm rather than as anomaly' (199). And the film's uniform experience of disjunction is organically related to the film's theme: 'Insofar as the system or code of editing is associated with the legal system of code, the breakdown of the one stylistically implies or connotes the breakdown of the other' (202). Finally, one stylistic technique Herzog uses in an attempt to express ineffable and immediate experiences is 'to hold a long shot of a landscape or a cityscape for a duration that is greater than that required to recognize what the image represents' (295).

Carroll's adherence to a wholesome 'organic interpretation' is a far cry from the meaning and aim of filmic interpretation as currently practised -- that is, symptomatic interpretation that employs Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis to identify the hidden ideological and psychical contradictions in a film. The reader accustomed to Carroll's work may be surprised in not finding in this book an attack on symptomatic interpretation. Instead, Carroll simply attempts to justify his adherence to organic interpretation, at a time when symptomatic interpretation is still the dominant practice, by arguing that his work is a precondition for symptomatic interpretation, since it identifies the unity against which disunity can be identified.

Furthermore, in the Introduction Carroll almost apologises for using psychoanalytic concepts in a few of the essays: 'the explanation for what psychoanalysis there is in this volume is that I was once a fellow traveller, and, through having to talk the talk, I had to listen to myself long enough to know when I had to be faking it' (14). The Introduction also contains a rather tedious explanation for including these psychoanalytical essays in the book.

While the individual essays are object-focused, when collected together they are also subject-focused -- that is, they represent 'the collected film analyses of Noel Carroll'. With *Theorizing the Moving Image* and now with *Interpreting the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press has endeavoured to reinforce Carroll's status as an authority in film studies by publishing his collected works on film. Yet the essays in *Interpreting the Moving Image* have nothing to do with how Carroll became an authority -- through his critique of contemporary film theory, and his tentative development of a cognitive theory. Instead, this book represents an 'opportunity' for Carroll and Cambridge University Press to republish a collection of traditionally focused essays, on the strength of Carroll's authorship.

In the interest of contextualising Carroll's practice of filmic interpretation, I shall compare and contrast it to symptomatic interpretation. The practice of symptomatic interpretation emerged in the early seventies as a reaction against auteur and mise-en-scene criticism, which by that time had reified into a routine activity searching for unity in a director's films. One of the strengths of symptomatic interpretation is its oppositional readings of mainstream narrative films. The premise of this reading strategy is to debunk the mysticism surrounding mainstream cinema by denouncing it as a site of dominant cultural production. Symptomatic interpretation is based on a language of 'depth', of hidden meanings, of attempts to covertly perpetuate ideology through unknowing subjects (that is, split subjects, since the ideology is perpetuated unconsciously). Within this perspective, films are seen as necessarily bearing the traces of their socio-historical context. These traces are symptoms rather than signs -- that is, they are hidden, and therefore require a hermeneutic process to bring them to the surface. This process involves rewriting a text in terms of a particular master code (Marxism, psychoanalysis, etc.). In this sense, symptomatic interpretation is an allegorical act which, at its extremes, becomes a conspiracy theory and at the same time a form of therapy that alleviates and confirms the conspiracy.

Bordwell points out that appeals to authority constitute one of the symptomatic interpreters' preferred aspects of elocutio in presenting arguments. He uses an example from Dana Polan's book *Power and Paranoia* to illustrate the point. [9] But an even better example can be found in Polan's symptomatic interpretation of *Mr and Mrs Smith*. [10] In the first ten pages of his essay Polan moves from one authority to another -- everyone from Ted Sennett, Rohmer and Chabrol, Gerald Mast, Henri Bergson, Stanley Cavell, Wes Gehring, Tania Modleski, Robin Wood, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Bakhtin, finally resting on Sartre's 2,800 page study of Flaubert. These gestures to a broad array of authorities aim to impress the reader by conferring gravity onto the essay.

Towards the end of his essay Polan writes:

'Screwball comedy bears the traces of confusions and contradictions in a later moment of capital when this commodification of desire reaches new extremes . . . Far from representing an alternative to the system of capital, an escape from it, the film [*Mr and Mrs Smith*] represents the very triumph of late capital, the dream of a state in which the endless saving of a nineteenth-century Protestant ethic can give way to the endless spending (in both the sexual and economic senses of the terms) of a twentieth century newly devoted to pragmatic expenditure'. [11]

Polan begins his essay with a question, thereby clearly identifying the problematic state of affairs he wishes to address: 'What would it mean to treat the screwball comedy *Mr and Mrs Smith* (1941) as an Alfred Hitchcock film?' [12] Yet, I wonder to what extent the long quote above contributes, if at all, to the answer (or indeed, I wonder to what extent the first ten pages contribute to an answer). Is the above quote an hypothesis that aims to support the question? And if so, what textual evidence is offered? Polan mentions the opening of the film, in which the couple of the title have just spent three days in the bedroom to solve a marital dispute. Their privacy is interrupted by an office worker who brings Mr Smith a document to sign. What processes of inference connect the opening of the film to Polan's statement that 'the film represents the very triumph of late capital'. There is a huge unmediated jump here from the specific (the events that open the film) to the general (the interpretation identifying in this scene the triumph of late capitalism).

This huge jump can only be covered over by a leap of faith. And how does Polan attempt to persuade the reader to take the jump? Firstly, the off-hand gestures to authorities in the first ten pages not only confer gravity on the essay, but attempt to hide the fact that Polan is trying hard to find something to say about Hitchcock's film. And when Polan does eventually manage to find something to say, it is so general that it can apply to almost any film. Polan's interpretation is dominated by a self-confirming tedium that reduces films down to the same predictable political-historical and psychoanalytical subtexts. The outcome of a predictable interpretation such as Polan's is that the results are known in advance. Such predictability produces redundancy -- which,

in information theory, means a message with low information content.

By contrast, Carroll does not make such general interpretations; instead, his analyses are specific, measured, and constrained (by the evidence). In other words, Carroll has something to say about the films he discusses; he does not write the analysis simply to reinforce the tenets of a pre-existing master code, as Polan does. (In the interest of completeness, I need to point out that Polan does return to his question at the end of his essay -- but only to rephrase it: 'what might it mean to treat Mr and Mrs Smith as a Hitchcock film *while treating it as a screwball comedy and as part of the Hollywood system?*. [13] The reader is none the wiser for reading Polan's essay.)

This contrast between Polan and Carroll can lead us to redefine the relationship between explicatory interpretation and symptomatic interpretation. I would argue that the difference between them is not so much a matter of the level of meaning at which they operate, but the degree of abstractness that informs them. We can place interpretations along a continuum, with 'abstractness' at one end and 'concreteness' at the other. Different values can be used to name the ends of this continuum -- for example:

abstract interpretation -- concrete interpretation

theoretical -- empirical

deductive -- inductive

detachable -- non-detachable

Whereas Polan develops an abstract, theoretical and deductive interpretation based on detachable inferences (that is, inferences that have no determinate relation to the film under discussion), Carroll develops a concrete, empirical, and inductive interpretation based on non-detachable inferences (non-detachable in the sense that the inferences relate closely to the film). When carried out well, a concrete interpretation can be informative by yielding the maximum information on the film and by teaching the reader something new about the film.

One thing that hasn't been carried out well in Interpreting the Moving Image is the proofing. Cambridge University Press has let the book and its author down through sloppy mistakes. Without even looking for typos, I spotted 15 bad errors on the first read through -- everything from missing diacritical marks (marks I cannot reproduce in this web review) to misspellings and missing text. For example, the title of Carroll's own essay on Lang is rendered 'Land, Pabst, and Sound' (7); the title of the journal Persistence of Vision is misspelt twice -- once as Presistence of Vision (105) and again as Persistance of Vision (341); the prefix 'un' is rendered as 'uu' on at least two

occasions ('uudeniably' on page 256 and 'uudoubtedly' on page 300); and in the footer on page 234, which is meant to supply information of the essay's first publication, the title of the journal is missing. In fact, many of the other mistakes occur in these footers -- that is, text added onto the essays by Cambridge University Press. It seems that, even for such a scholarly publisher as Cambridge, commercial pressure has compromised quality and rigour.

Interpreting the Moving Image is an uneven book. It consists of a mix of brilliant analyses (e.g. of The General, King Kong, and The Trial) and interminably dull pieces (the essay on Becky Sharp comes immediately to mind). The essays are arranged to correspond to the chronology of film history. Yet, when added together, they are not systematic and thorough in their representation of film history. But they are not meant to be. This book does not represent a broad, systematic film history in the style of Thompson and Bordwell's Film History, for example, nor does it refute or advance beyond the practice of symptomatic interpretation. Instead, it returns to the uncomplicated days of organic criticism unfettered by cognitive theory or polemical disputes.

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Footnotes

1. Christian Metz, 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film', in Warren Buckland, ed., The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), p. 157.
2. Warren Buckland, 'Critique of Poor Reason', Screen, vol. 30 no. 4, 1989, pp. 80-103.
3. Noel Carroll, 'Cognitivism, Contemporary Film Theory, and Method: A Response to Warren Buckland', Theorizing the Moving Image (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 321-335.
4. Warren Buckland, 'Critique of Poor Reason', p. 83.
5. As an aside, I shall simply note that Edward Small calls my review 'reactionary' ('Introduction:

Cognitivism and Film Theory', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. 6 no. 2, 1992, p. 171 -- this article can also be found on the *Film-Philosophy* website at <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/film-philosophy/files/paper.small.html>). Such dismissive talk simply closes off any attempt to develop a debate between different schools of film theory, suggesting that the reader should either accept Carroll's arguments or keep quiet.

6. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 47.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

10. Dana Polan, 'The Light Side of Genius: Hitchcock's *Mr and Mrs Smith* in the Screwball Tradition', in Andrew Horton, ed., *Cinema/Comedy/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 131-152.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 151

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