

**Review of**  
***Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory***  
**by Noël Carroll**  
**(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), x + 268 pages**

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Professor Noël Carroll is a distinguished young philosopher specializing in aesthetics, art theory and media studies who has made numerous respected contributions in the past decade to the journals of record in these subjects. He has now issued the first of what promises to be a series of book-length studies on the foundations of film theory, and a welcome contribution it is.

The book is a study of three classical theorists of film: Rudolph Arnheim, Andre Bazin, and Victor Perkins. The choice of subjects is felicitous for diverse reasons. First, we encounter a German, a Frenchman, and an Englishman through the eyes of an American, each writing as their cultural proclivities would demand. The result is a remarkable mix of methods for those of us (Canadians) with a taste for the blind incongruities of cultural presupposition: Arnheim following the logic of his argument to its proper conclusion, despite counterexamples at every hand; Bazin keeping his eye on the prey as he circles round-and-round his conclusion in arcs of decreasing scope, however inconsistent the argument; Perkins muddling through with a bit of this and a bit of that, oblivious to the elitism of his critical stance; and all focused through the careful and cautious, neo-analytic, Anglo-American eye of the Mr. Carroll himself.

Second, it is about time that scholars recognized the important work of Victor Perkins. I, like Carroll, was uncommonly provoked when I first encountered his bracing book in the early 1970s, and I share Carroll's dismay at its neglect.

Third, if one is to understand the centrality of philosophical juggling among film scholars, one must focus, as Carroll insists, on the key debate of the last seventy-five years; namely, what sort of things are we encountering when we encounter them by means of film? (If encountering trees and flowers is sufficient to generate philosophical perplexity, how much more ought we to be perplexed by images of them.) This ontological-epistemological quagmire, replete with essentialist twists and turns leading either to expressionism or realism, remains the central contentious issue of film theory (even among those who fail to note their entrapment in it). And Carroll is surely correct: no authors have more thoroughly mired themselves at opposite ends of the swamp than Arnheim and Bazin, and few have tried harder to avoid it than Perkins. For all of these reasons, Carroll could hardly have improved upon his choices; and few indeed could hope to do better than he has done with the material in hand.

Carroll organizes his presentation transparently: an introductory essay on "the Structure of Film Theory" is followed by three chapters of seventy-five pages each devoted in order to Arnheim, Bazin, and Perkins. Each of the three chapters, in turn, is structured identically: Carroll first unpacks the arguments of the author "in strongest form" (page 6) taking care to relate them to prior or posterior views, to place them within the critical context in which they were historically introduced, and to establish the range of influence they enjoyed. Only then does he test them critically for cogency and lasting value.

With respect to Arnheim and Bazin, Carroll's goal is unequivocal: "to dismantle these influential positions as effectively as possible" (page 5). And, although Perkins proves cleverer than his predecessors, Carroll finds him guilty of "closet essentialism" as well (page 253). The book, therefore, could more accurately have been entitled "A critique of essentialism in three classical theories. "

Does the author's anti-essentialism bias his discussions of the individual authors? Oh, a little – especially when speaking of Bazin. Carroll buys without argument, for example, Goodman's contention that it is logically inconceivable that representation could be a symmetrical relation (page 124). And those fond of reading widely and carefully will remain unimpressed with his pervasive assumption that Bazin wished to identify the image with the profilmic event, rather than identifying what one sees by means of the image with the event; or with his methodological presupposition that "I shall set forth the outline of Bazin's theory as it is usually conceived in film circles rather than attempting to discover a more compelling version that might be developed by working through all his writing with the purpose of making it consistent" (page 103). However sound this counsel may be when praising an author, it is surely unwise when seeking to bury him in self-contradiction; for if a consistent rendering of his argument is otherwise achievable, what has one achieved?

Clearly, for example, Bazin did not believe "the cinema to be committed artistically to realism" (page 169). Rather, as his frequently expressed admiration for the "classical art" of Ford and others shows, he was seeking to explain the newly-reconsidered possibilities of cinematic realism – a construal of Bazin that Carroll emphasizes is consistent with the texts, but which he summarily disregards, even though he recognizes that, by so doing, he is perhaps forcing Bazin into caricature (page 101).

On balance, however, I think Carroll has served his theorists well. Specialists may quibble with his conclusions, but he writes with such unexceptional clarity and fairness that even his critics will be indebted to him. Besides, he manages to discuss along the way, in context and with a total absence of jargon, a breath-taking range of topics central to contemporary discussions among aestheticians (including the analogy theory

of expression, the medium-specificity thesis, the illusion and resemblance theories of representation, Weitz's "open concept" argument, the genetic fallacy, etc.).

Were the book restricted to an exposition and critique of the essentialism implicit in three classical theories, it would have my wholehearted admiration. I admire the three central chapters of the work and shall reread them often when thinking about either of the three theorists discussed therein.

Unfortunately, the book is entitled "Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory," and by it, one quickly notes, Carroll means *the* philosophical problems of classical film theory. For, in his view, he has not simply chosen three interesting theorists to critique, but rather three prime exemplars of three encompassing types of film theory, each of which exercised primary influence in sequence over a historical period of film theorizing after having "refuted" its predecessor (page 259).

Thus, Arnheim represents the "silent-film" theorists (among whom Carroll lumps Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Belazs, Eisenstein, etc.) who were interested largely in the "expressive manipulation" of reality (page 58), but whose paradigm was succeeded, after Bazin's refutation, by the "sound-film" theorists (including latterly Kracauer and Cavell) who were interested in the "mere recording of reality" (page 258), which was succeeded in turn, after Perkins's refutation, by various "metacritical" or postmodern paradigms, which will, in turn, be succeeded by – but here we are given only Carroll's promissory note, in the last two pages, for a non-encompassing "piece-meal theorizing" (page 255) that will focus on the "use rather than medium" of cinema, will be integrated into our broader cultural investigations into "representation," "fiction," etc., will be non-Marxist and non-semiotic and non-psychoanalytic and all sorts of other good things as well.

Carroll thus appears to be committed to a progressive and not just evolutionary historical theory of theorizing. My problem with this is twofold. First, I find the notion of a non-encompassing theory self-contradictory, for non-encompassing theories seem, by definition, irrefutable and thus incapable of severe tests. (Purported counterexamples may always be construed as falling outside the range of the theory; ergo no refutation.)

Second, I fear that such a view leads all too often to serious distortions of historical record and influence. Pudovkin, for example, did not believe (as did Arnheim) in the "expressive manipulation of reality." Rather, he urged that the profilmic event be exactly represented in a "temporally concentrated" form matching the shifts of attention of an imaginary observer. The screened segments ought to preserve the exact temporal order of the original event but with all superfluous temporal aspects of it having been removed. As Pudovkin put it: "This method of temporal concentration, the

concentration of action by the elimination of unnecessary points of interval, occurs also, in a more simplified form, in the Theatre. In the film this method is not only pursued to a maximum, it forms the actual basis of filmic representation. " (Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* [London: Vision Press, 1968], page 84.)

Pudovkin, then, was hardly repudiating reproduction in favor of manipulation; indeed, he insists upon realistic reproduction (temporally condensed) as the precondition for eliciting natural responses by means of film to the profilmic event. Or, as Eisenstein put it late in life (after becoming a "closet Pudovkinian"), "in the actual method of creating images, a work of art must reproduce that process whereby *in life itself* new images are built up in the human consciousness and feelings." (Eisenstein, "Word & Image" in *Film Sense*, translated by Jay Leyda [Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963], page 18. [italics EWC])

Pudovkin and Eisenstein thus fail to meet Carroll's criterion of "silent-film" theorists; and Carroll, in turn, fails to notice that Pudovkin's theory passed without a hitch into the sound era, and is indeed the theory according to which 98% of the popular cinema (including prime-time television) is shot and edited today. I fear, therefore, that I cannot share Carroll's theoretical stance.

Thankfully, however, the stance impinges little on the bulk of the book. The 225 pages that Carroll devotes to examining the arguments of the three theorists encompass the finest concentrated writing on each of them that I have encountered. I therefore recommend the book unequivocally. As a sourcebook on their arguments, it has no peers.