

# Author Meets Critics: Noël Carroll's *Engaging the Moving Image*

---

Fourth conference of the Center for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image (CCSMI), Saturday 24 July, 2004

## Introduction

The dossier section of this special issue focuses on one of the highlights of the fourth CCSMI conference – an 'Author Meets Critics' panel held on the concluding afternoon. The author in question is Noël Carroll, a highly respected philosopher of art who has written extensively on all aspects of the 'moving image' – his preferred term for a category comprising film, television, video, CGI, and any related form of mass-produced moving image technology. Although Carroll has written about numerous topics during his prolific career, in film studies he is perhaps best known for his pointed critiques of contemporary film theory in his book *Mystifying Movies* (1988) and the anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), co-edited with David Bordwell. In particular, Carroll has attacked 'Big' or 'Grand Theory' – the view that every conceivable question about the moving image can be answered by appealing to a single, unified, all-encompassing theory. Instead, he has advocated the practice of 'piecemeal theorizing': different questions about the moving image require different approaches and different theories, a notable example being the type of cognitivism espoused throughout this volume. Above all, Carroll has continually placed a (post-positivist) emphasis on dialectical debate, logical argument, and (where appropriate) empirically grounded research.

Carroll's rigorous, piecemeal approach to the moving image has given rise to both a large number of ideas and a large number of books. In addition to his studies of specific topics in aesthetic theory, such as genre (*The Philosophy*

*of Horror*, 1990) and mass art (*A Philosophy of Mass Art*, 1998), Carroll has written dozens of articles that have been reprinted in several collections: *Theorizing the Moving Image* (1996), *Interpreting the Moving Image* (1998), and *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (2001).

The subject of the aforementioned panel picks up from where Carroll's 1996 book *Theorizing the Moving Image* left off. Carroll's 2003 book *Engaging the Moving Image* is a collection of eighteen articles originally published in the second half of the 1990s. Each chapter can be seen as presenting a piecemeal theory which addresses a different aspect of the moving image. The aspects in question are numerous and diverse: examples include the role of the medium itself (celluloid, videotape, pixels, etc.); film's capacity to engage our attention and emotion; the moral status of horror films, comedy films, and television; the function of film style; the objective status of film evaluation; the nature of the documentary; and the film theory of Siegfried Kracauer. Carroll also discusses specific film genres and filmmakers such as the professional western, the dance film, the art films of Sergei Eisenstein, and the avant-garde films of Yvonne Rainer.

The 'Author Meets Critics' panel tackles three of the more fundamental chapters in the collection. Murray Smith addresses Carroll's plea to 'forget the medium!' (Chapter 1), arguing that every art-form must be realised through a particular type of medium and that the audiovisual qualities of film play a significant role. Jinhee Choi assesses Carroll's naturalistic account of filmic communication (Chapter 2), arguing that such an account overlooks the role

of socio-economic explanations. Cynthia Freeland considers Carroll's account of film evaluation (Chapter 7), offering a number of interesting examples from aesthetics, film reviews, and psychological research. Carroll addresses all three criticisms in his response, thereby strengthening and clarifying various aspects of his arguments.

Unlike the previous contributions to this special issue, the papers from the 'Author Meets

Critics' panel have not been revised and expanded for publication. Instead, the papers have been treated as 'recordings' of an academic exchange – albeit, recordings based on words rather than images and sounds – with only minor changes for copy editing, and original notes and references included.