

Naturalizing Hollywood?: Against the Naturalistic Account of Filmic Communication

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Noël Carroll's *Engaging the Moving Image* is exemplary of the piecemeal approach that Carroll has proposed and advocated for more than two decades. In this book, Carroll's research interests range from definitions of genres – such as documentary and moving-picture dance – through a discussion of film emotions to individual film analyses. Carroll's contribution to the establishment of cognitive film theory as a viable methodology cannot be overstated in any way. In this essay, I will focus on Carroll's naturalistic approach to filmic communication.¹ Carroll explains the international popularity of cinema through recourse to the fact that film is a visual medium, the comprehension of which relies on the viewer's natural perceptual capacity to recognize objects and events, in conjunction with the fact that the film techniques of indexing, bracketing, and scaling are better equipped to direct and hold the viewer's attention than the techniques employed by other types of media. I will first attempt to tease out an evolutionary account embedded in Carroll's naturalistic approach, together with its possible implications and its relationship to a socio-economic approach. Next, I will question whether an evolutionary account is capable of explaining the stylistic changes in film history.

Carroll distinguishes his naturalist approach from both a linguistic approach, which claims that film is parallel to language, and a conventional approach, which foregrounds the viewer's ability to decode photographic images according to their knowledge of filmic conventions. Against both of these approaches, Carroll claims that the relationship between a

photographic image and its referent is not arbitrary, since it relies on the human capacity to recognize the referent of the photographic image. For example, one cannot show a photograph of an elephant to someone and tell them that it depicts a cat. Furthermore, Carroll argues that the comprehension of a photographic image or film is not a learned process, as conventionalists would argue, but relies on the viewer's recognitional capacity. Such a capacity is more or less innate and is not acquired through education or training. However, Carroll does not deny the fact that film comprehension sometimes involves the viewer's knowledge of film conventions such as genres. For example, one should be informed about the generic norms of the horror genre in order to identify a character with a certain kind of make-up as a vampire.

Carroll develops his naturalistic approach to filmic communication, underscoring film's engagement with the viewer's naturally endowed perceptual and cognitive capacities. That is, in delivering information necessary to advance the narrative, film and most film techniques recourse to the biological make-up of the viewer, a notable example being attention. Attention, claims Carroll, is an innate biological capacity, which focalizes the consciousness of the viewer onto a salient element in the sensory field. The film medium holds the viewer's attention better than other media, such as theater, through its viewing conditions (a darkened room), figure and camera movement, and its capacity to shift settings more frequently. The film medium is also far better equipped to guide the viewer's attention than, again, theater, with film techniques such as framing, staging,

lighting, sound cues, and editing, that serve the functions of indexing, bracketing, and scaling. If so, the popularity and/or accessibility of the film medium across various cultures, nations, and ethnicities can be found in the fact that it alerts the viewer's attention and sustains the viewer's interest more efficiently than other media.

A common criticism addressed against this type of cognitive approach is that it merely naturalizes the status of Hollywood as it is now, neglecting other socio-economic conditions that generated such a status. Instead of attributing the popularity of Hollywood film or the prevalence of certain stylistic conventions to the resources of the Hollywood film industry – i.e., its capital and global distribution system – a naturalistic approach locates its cause in 'universal' or 'innate' human capacities. Carroll entertains such a criticism when he states, 'where the film theorist is politically minded, the spread of these codes and conventions – their global diffusion – is explained as part and parcel of some larger process, such as Western imperialism or the expansion of capitalism' (p. 17). Instead of dealing with this kind of criticism, however, Carroll focuses on whether or not a naturalistic approach has a theoretical advantage in explaining the phenomenon in question. In the following, I will discuss some of the possible relationships between a naturalistic-evolutionary approach and a socio-economic approach.

In my view, a naturalistic approach per se is not susceptible to such a criticism, but it is so when it is combined with an evolutionary account of film style or mode. In response to the socio-economic criticism mentioned earlier, a naturalist may just say that regardless of whether a film in question is a Hollywood film or a film from the Third World, film as a medium engages the viewer's biological capacities at the level of shot/scene comprehension. Thus, film is more accessible, or has the potential to reach a larger audience, than another medium such as poetry, because the acquisition of language skill takes place at a more advanced developmental stage and/or verbal communication requires more complicated computational processes than visual recognition.

A problem arises, though, when Carroll makes, from time to time, evolutionary comments about film history to back up his naturalistic account of filmic communication. At the beginning of his article, Carroll briefly sketches out the shift of dominant genre/mode in film history – for instance, the transition from documentary to fiction film – through recourse to the fact that documentaries such as the Lumières' actuality films were unable to sustain the viewer's interest after they lost their novelty and thus gave rise to the need to incorporate fictional narratives (p. 11). At another point, Carroll argues that abstract avant-garde films such as Viking Egging's *Symphony Diagonale* (1924), and Stan Brakhage's abstract expressionist films are less popular than representational (pictorial) films, since avant-garde does not engage the viewer's recognitional capacity as much as representational (pictorial) films do (p. 24). Carroll also refers to changing average shot length and scale over time – that is, editing pace becomes faster and faster and close-up shots are employed more and more – as evidence of the importance of guiding and holding the viewer's attention (p. 32).

From these examples, it is not hard to guess what the most biologically adaptive film style or genre would be. It would be a genre or type of film that captivates the viewer's perceptual and cognitive mechanisms via constant visual/auditory stimuli. All things being equal, a fiction film will appeal to a larger audience than a non-narrative documentary, since the former can prolong the viewer's interest better than the latter; a representational (pictorial) film will appeal to a larger audience than an abstract one, because the former engages more with the viewer's recognitional capacity; and a fast-paced film with more close-up shots will appeal to a larger audience than a slow-paced film with more distant shots, because the former holds the viewer's attention better than the latter. The most biologically adaptive film style or genre would therefore be something like action films or blockbusters. Engagement with action films or blockbusters is more prone to rely on human biological make-up and is thus more easily

exportable across cultures than other types of films.

For a naturalist, then, there is an evolutionary reason that Hollywood action films have become popular; that is, because they have an adaptive value. Action-packed Hollywood films provide opportunities for the viewer to exercise and hone his or her receptivity to movement, activity, and change in environment (p. 28). If visual or auditory alertness is quintessential for the human organism's adaptability to a changing environment, then viewing action-packed, fast-paced films may enhance such a capacity in the viewer.

However, this kind of answer does not refute the socio-economic criticism addressed earlier, unless one can prove that the human biological tendency to be drawn to novel perceptual stimuli with a certain pace and frequency undermines the popularity of films propagated for socio-economic reasons. For example, early Soviet films, despite governmental promotion and support, did not survive because they did not appeal to the general public due to their dull narrative pace. It appears to me, then, that the popularity of certain types of films – the comprehension of which depends more on human biological make-up and less on specific cinematic conventions – is a product of both a biological force (since it is adaptive, according to Carroll) and a socio-economic force (since it is more profitable than other kinds). If the biological make-up of the human organism makes the viewer endorse visual spectacles and movies that feature similar spectacles, the film industry would produce films with such spectacles, since they would appeal to a larger audience. The biological force and the socio-economic force can reinforce each other in the cycle of the consumption and production of a certain type of film. If so, a naturalistic account and a socio-economic account are not necessarily incompatible.

However, a naturalistic account has not proven its advantage over a socio-economic approach in explaining the phenomena in question. All the examples that Carroll lists to prove his point – namely, the transition from documentary to

fiction film, a general preference for pictorial films to abstract ones, and contemporary editing pace – can be equally or better explained by referring to industrial demands and economic reasons. Changes in exhibition venues – the increased number of nickelodeon theaters around 1905 – demanded more content on regular basis and fiction films were better fit for that purpose, since they were easier to plan and shoot than actuality films. As Carroll mentions, nowadays films are shot with home viewing conditions (television or DVD) in mind, and thus employ more close-ups for the legibility of shots. The development of non-linear editing technology enabled filmmakers to cut faster than ever before. What is the advantage of endorsing the naturalistic account, then? Burden of proof seems to be on the naturalist.

Another question still remains. How do we explain the existence of filmmakers who employ less effective stylistic options in controlling the viewer's attention? For example, from a naturalist point of view, the stylistic evolution from deep staging to decoupage appears to be a natural step, since the former is less efficient than the latter in terms of guiding and holding the viewer's attention. Throughout the history of cinema, however, filmmakers have not necessarily relied on the most efficient techniques in this respect. Such a case can be found in art cinema, with particular directors adopting certain techniques of staging even though more efficient means of guiding and holding the viewer's attention are readily available to them.

There appears to be two possible answers to this question: one, a naturalist can easily dismiss this objection by pointing out that such a style is less prominent, because it is biologically mal-adaptive; two, employing a less efficient style to attract the viewer's attention would still serve an adaptive function, an option that Carroll seems to take. The first option, though simple, does not satisfactorily explain current cultural practice. Art cinema has persisted for more than four decades – since the establishment of film festivals – and still is pursued and valued around the world. It is true that art cinema is less popular than

commercial or Hollywood cinema, but there should be some reasons why it persists and is still valued.

Regarding the second option, Carroll provides us with an alternative answer. He states, 'Frequently, a filmmaker, perhaps for expressive effect or emotional impact, may lead the audience's eye so that the most significant narrative detail is not evident immediately, but only after a second look.' (p. 40) Carroll calls such a device, 'standard deviation'. An example that Carroll draws on is the use of off-screen space to withhold information. We see a murder taking place but the murderer remains off-screen. Carroll states, 'this raises a certain *frisson* in the spectator and keeps us riveted to the screen in the expectation that sooner or later we will get to see the murderer' (p. 38).

Carroll does not fully develop this view and only mentions it in passing, but it appears that according to his view, 'standard deviation' still serves an adaptive function in that it engages the viewer's emotive capacities. In the article 'Art and Human Nature', for instance, Carroll proposes that human emotions, like an alerted perceptual mechanism, serve an adaptive function in that they promote social bonding and cohesion among groups of people.² This kind of answer seems to be still unsatisfactory, however. In the example of the unseen murderer, the anticipation or curiosity created by using off-screen space – or withholding the narratively crucial information – would seem to contribute to the overall level of horror, a general effect that the film probably aims to evoke. However, do all standard deviations contribute to the service of the overarching function of a film?

Suppose that showing an emotional state of a character in close-up (thanks to the power of facial expressions) is more effective than making the character turn away from the camera. Even if the latter might have psychological effects on the viewer – such as frustration – it may function against achieving the goal of the film as a whole, if its goal is to evoke sympathy in the viewer. If so, one needs to distinguish between non-standard stylistic devices that contribute to the

overall function of a work – emotive or otherwise – and those that work against achieving that goal.

Carroll might respond to this second objection by shifting the focus from the film's emotive effects to its cognitive effects on the viewer. In an attempt to figure out the psychological states of a character, the viewer's cognitive skills – such as imagination – will be exercised and thus improved. (Taking a course on European art cinema of the 1960s and 70s has an adaptive value after all, since one might be able to understand why all of his or her fellow graduate students suffer so much from existential angst for no obvious reasons.) Perhaps, then, art cinema, although it seems to engage the viewer less on the perceptual level, might engage the viewer at a higher cognitive level.

One problem with branching out to other adaptive values of film – such as emotive or cognitive adaptabilities – seems to lie in that it brings us back to Carroll's initial question as to why film is a major form of international communication. Film, or any other type of art for that matter, engages its audience at all three levels – perceptual, emotive, and cognitive – and if one wants to account for the overall adaptive value of film, one must look into all three levels of engagement. Therefore, there is no clear way to tell why film (or a certain type of film) is the 'most' adaptive, and thus 'most' accessible to the widest range of audiences.

In this essay, I have examined Carroll's naturalistic account for the reason that the film medium is one of the most popular and accessible of visual media. I agree with Carroll in that the viewer's natural, biological capacities are actively engaged during the process of viewing film, but at the same time, I am skeptical in terms of whether such an approach has more explanatory power than other kinds of approaches – such as a socio-economic approach – in explaining the specific changes within film history. I have also attempted to lay out some of the possible ways in which art cinema can be explained within the evolutionary account.

Notes

- 1 Noël Carroll, 'Film, Attention, and Communication: A Naturalistic Account'. Chapter 2 of *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 10–58. All subsequent quotations are
- 2 Carroll, 'Art and Human Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62:2 (Spring 2004): 101.

taken from this edition. Page numbers follow quotations in brackets.

Carroll, 'Art and Human Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62:2 (Spring 2004): 101.