

Evaluating Film

- Cynthia Freeland

In his recent collection of essays, *Engaging the Moving Image*, Noël Carroll addresses film evaluation in an intriguing chapter titled 'Introducing Film Evaluation'.¹ This is an important topic he is right to direct our attention to. Here I will consider his suggestions about how to put film evaluation onto a rational, firm foundation.

One thrust of cognitivist film studies has been to turn away from those questions of film interpretation that were so central in film studies, towards new topics. Theorists like David Bordwell suggest that we ask other questions about film, analyzing film style and history, reception studies, medium, genre studies, and so forth.² Bordwell writes,

Most broadly and basically, I suggest that the questions of composition, function, and effect that interpretive criticism sets out to answer are most effectively addressed and best answered by a self-conscious historical poetics of cinema. I conceive this as the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects.³

Carroll's writing elsewhere, as here, may not aim explicitly at giving interpretations, but his comments on individual films and directors are often quite instructive for getting at the 'sense' of a film. I am thinking, for example, of his essays on specific films or types, like the ones discussed in his fine Chapter 16 of *Engaging the Moving Image* on the professional western.

I think Carroll is right to acknowledge the significance of film evaluation. He notes that for both ordinary filmgoers and for all of 'us' who make an academic specialty of filmwatching, evaluation is not only common but almost inevitable. As he says, 'evaluating films is something that we all do all of the time,

'something we avidly pursue', and typically, we do this in a social setting that 'is at the heart of the practice [of film-going] for most of us' (p. 148).

Carroll's key starting-point is that ordinary discussions about film evaluation go beyond preferences into 'the realm of objective evaluation' (p. 149). This remark sounds Kantian. Preferences are subjective, but evaluations aspire to objectivity. And so, 'the central problem of film evaluation (and, indeed, of all aesthetic evaluation)' arises: *disagreement*. Carroll does not accept that such disagreements are irresolvable. The task of a theory of film evaluation is to describe and account for the possibility of rational approaches to resolving evaluative disputes.

As Carroll notes, discussions of evaluation have gone on in aesthetics for years (centuries!), ever since Kant wrote the *Critique of Judgment*. Accounts of evaluation in the recent aesthetics literature include Alan H. Goldman's *Aesthetic Value* (1995), George Dickie's *Evaluating Art* (1988), and Malcolm Budd's *Values of Art* (1995).⁴ Below I shall return to Budd's theory, in particular, to highlight a difference in approach that represents an important challenge to Carroll. As a preview: although Budd agrees that evaluation is a rational process, he still thinks that evaluative disputes are ultimately irresolvable. Such a conclusion about value incommensurability would probably disturb Carroll, but I am inclined to think Budd is probably correct.

Let's look more closely at Carroll's sketch of how rational film evaluation could proceed. He describes a friendly argument about whether the movie *Speed* (1994) is any good. A critic who says no might compare it with *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). But another person who likes the movie might compare it to *Die Hard* (1988), employing a different comparison category. To

resolve the matter at this point or to suppose that it can be rationally resolved requires the possibility of determining the correct *category* (or categories) to which the film belongs. Carroll proposes to resolve evaluative disputes about film by identifying the correct *category* to which a given film belongs. Categories are psychological tools we use to situate a film in terms of its more general purposes and relevant standards. He writes, 'This is a psychological fact about us. To evaluate, one categorizes.' (p. 150) Carroll makes several important moves in his proposal. Let's consider three of them.

I

First is the claim that the use of categories is our natural psychological way of making evaluations. Is this right as a claim about our psychology? It does seem that we ordinarily evaluate, say, chocolate desserts as such, in contrast to cheesecakes, pies, and sorbets. When I swoon over a juicy South Haven peach in the summertime, I do not compare it to a luscious fig in summer or tart bite of rhubarb in spring. Each has its own particular virtue. Horses and tennis players are evaluated by their respective categories of athletic performance and victory. Baseball players are judged according to their specific roles as pitchers, base stealers, fielders, and so on. In all of these cases, judgments represent more than preferences. I prefer peaches to figs, and Astros pitchers to other teams' pitchers, but I recognize the specific virtues of figs and even of Mets pitchers.

However, in a cognitivist context inviting contributions from psychologists, we might seek stronger empirical evidence than our informal observations. Let's say that this is a challenge Carroll is posing for others. I would hope that it is both a good and a do-able task for future scholars: to provide empirical accounts of the derivation, application, and revision of our categorical schemes used in film-watching and assessment. (Perhaps this is already being done, and we philosophers need to be told more about it.)

Just as a remark that might be cautionary,

consider evaluations of beauty. There is now a good deal of psychological literature (especially in evolutionary psychology) alleging that our standards of beauty are universal, inborn, and unconscious – not in the Freudian sense, but in the sense of being unavailable to conscious minds. Such claims are supported, for example, by observing infants' preferences for faces.⁵ Extrapolations are also made about how the origin of human aesthetic categories, like those used for mating selections in the animal and insect worlds, reflect inbuilt and genetically supported choices for symmetry, health, and fitness for reproduction.⁶ Some defenders of evolutionary accounts argue that there could even be inborn color preferences relative to gender or race, because scientific evidence shows that men and women or members of different races actually *perceive colors differently*.⁷ My point here is to raise the possibility that perhaps our evaluative categories may not be accessible to reasons. Of course, it is a long way from color or mate preferences to film categories, but a truly scientific account of category development may explain it in ways surprising to philosophers.

II

A second move in Carroll's proposed sketch for film evaluation is to presume that categories are relevant for evaluation because they provide a matrix of purposes and standards (p. 151). Evaluation proceeds, in effect, by measuring a given item against specific purposes and standards.

In pondering Carroll's proposal for film evaluation, I collected random samples of assessments of various recent films. Many of these fit his view to a 'T', in that a category placement was part of the argument. Here are some illustrations.

Daniel Mendelsohn reviewing *Troy* (2004) in the *New York Review of Books*:

The real problem with Petersen and Benioff's reductive ideological updating of the epic story they tell is organic, not pedantic: the "realism" they've opted for goes against the grain of the genre they're

working in.⁸

Roger Ebert reviewing *Spider-Man 2* (2004) in the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

Now this is what a superhero movie should be. "Spider-Man 2" believes in its story in the same way serious comic readers believe, when the adventures on the page express their own dreams and wishes.⁹

Ty Burr reviewing *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) in the *Boston Globe*:

One last thought: "Fahrenheit 9/11" is many things, but for pity's sake let's not call it a documentary. To do so abuses the word and shames the good and balanced work done by filmmakers as storied as D.A. Pennebaker and Barbara Kopple, as current as Jehane Noujaim of "Control Room", and as hard-working and unheralded as Carma Hinton of Brookline's Long Bow Group.¹⁰

Wesley Morris reviewing *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) in the *Boston Globe*:

Please don't think the hand-held camera at the start of the third Harry Potter movie means that the franchise is off to a shaky start. It's just the opposite. You're in comfortable hands. They belong to the Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, who made the luscious hormonal road flick "Y Tu Mama Tambien" and an overlooked version of "Great Expectations". Appropriately, this "Potter" is the first to allow the books' Dickensian nature to flourish. Right away, Cuarón makes it clear that he plans to bring a whiff of cinema to the Warner Bros. franchise, an act of mercy that should make him a candidate for sainthood.¹¹

Note in these brief excerpts from actual reviews that we do indeed find categorizations. Mendelsohn faults *Troy* for failing (or refusing) to meet the criteria of its proper genre, epic. Ebert praises *Spider-Man 2* as a superior instance of the superhero movie – indeed of the superhero genre in general (including comic books). Burr rejects the categorization of Michael Moore's film as a documentary; presumably, assessment must then proceed on some other basis. And Morris lauds the new Harry Potter movie for its sensitivity to what he calls the Dickensian nature of the original stories. All of these various claims do represent classifications.

But let's look at the nature of the classifications more closely. It's interesting to see that in three of these four cases, the categories that come into play are broader than *film* categories. This might be an accident of my selections, but I'm not so sure. It is common to compare film versions of books or plays to their original sources. (Note I could have used another recent and controversial example of this type, Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. But that might lead us off topic!) Thus Mendelsohn thinks of Homer; Ebert mentions a comic-book genre, and Morris alludes to the realist novel of social conditions.

These examples suggest one problem for Carroll's proposed account of rational adjudication; namely, that he seems to suppose that the relevant classification is a film classification. While it's true that many assessments of *Troy* have compared it to other films of its ilk, or to other 'sword-and-sandal' films like *Gladiator* (2000), it seems to me useful to assess it within the broader literary tradition as Mendelsohn does.¹² And even though I actually liked the movie, I found his scathing critique of its shortcomings very persuasive.

It is also intriguing that Ebert continues his review of *Spider-Man 2* by recommending it even to people who generally do *not* like comic-book genres. He says:

"Spider-Man 2" is in another category: It's a real movie, full-blooded and smart, with qualities even for those who have no idea who Stan Lee is. It's a superhero movie for people who don't go to superhero movies, and for those who do, it's the one they've been yearning for.¹³



• Achilles (Brad Pitt) prepares to lead his army in attacking Troy in *Troy* (2004).

What might Carroll's theory do with this?

And Morris's review of the new Harry Potter film not only compares it to a novelistic category but also emphasizes how its director brings a specific virtue to the film of addressing the emerging adolescence of its young hero (which he can do, presumably, as director of the 'hormonal' film *Y Tu Mama Tambien*).

I doubt that these are very serious challenges to Carroll, since he allows for the application of multiple categories to any given film. He also notes that new categories are always emerging, that categories may be 'hybridized', and that our assessments may need to be very complex in order to reflect the diverse categories applicable to an individual film (pp. 161–162).

But consider another issue. In the fierce current disputes about *Fahrenheit 9/11*, evaluations often reflect previously adopted political views. There are disagreements not just about its categorization as a documentary (denied by Burr above), but about whether it *aimed at* such a classification in the first place – whether it *ought* to have tried to be one or not. Is it a documentary or a piece of political activism/propaganda?

Suppose we wish to laud the movie and its director. Let's recall another point from Kant's aesthetics: his theory of genius. Grant for the sake of argument that Michael Moore is a genius. How would Kant describe this? A genius is someone who breaks all the rules. Kant wrote, 'Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art.'¹⁴ Kant thinks geniuses do this, even though art itself has no rules. Geniuses 'set the rules' for later artists to emulate. New geniuses emerge by breaking the current rules and setting up some new pattern.

To continue with the 'genius' construal of Moore, maybe he is not creating anything that belongs to an existing film category like documentary, but instead breaking all the rules by creating a completely new thing. *Time* magazine struggled with categorizing *Fahrenheit 9/11* and wound up dubbing it a 'tragicomidocumentary'. I don't really think Moore is a genius, but I am tempted to say perhaps something like this is true of other cases,

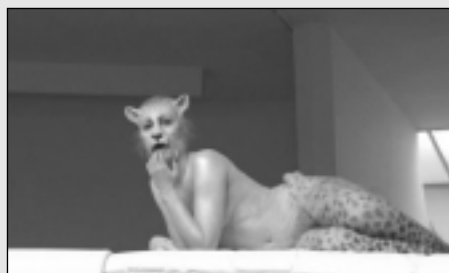
maybe of Matthew Barney in some of the *Cremaster* movies. When I saw *Cremaster 3* (2002), I felt I was witnessing something altogether unique and unparalleled. I just could find no category to put it into. Even 'art film' didn't seem to do the trick. But I nevertheless found it quite wonderful, a work of genius, if you will.

Maybe Carroll would say we just haven't developed an appropriate category yet so we can't do an evaluation. But he acknowledges that a more developed theory of film evaluation will need to address broader issues of 'axiology' concerning how to compare film categories against one another, 'such as whether the philosophizing of the New Talkie is more valuable than the emotional engagement of the suspense film' (p. 162). Clearly this is another broad topic for future film theorists to tackle. Issues of axiology lead me to my next and final point about key moves in Carroll's proposal for film evaluation.

III

Third and last, Carroll's sketch for evaluation proceeds with the conviction (or at least the hope) that it is possible to make categorical classifications rational. He allows that this is very challenging: 'But how does one determine a correct category? That is the million dollar question.' (p. 151)

Carroll is well aware of the potential limits of his approach. His essay as a whole is, as he reminds us, a sketch. In an important footnote, he notes that his approach will not resolve *all*



• Aimee Mullins as the Catwoman from 'The Order' section of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 3* (2002).

problems of film evaluation (note 5, p. 163). Other issues remain, such as whether certain standards are appropriate to a category, and whether some categories as a whole are superior to others. It is to Carroll's credit that he has thus 'thrown down the gauntlet', as it were, for future scholars to pursue in order to advance this particular line of inquiry. I would find it very daunting to try to argue that documentary films are superior as a category to horror films, or anime films to melodramas. It would be like asking whether Sophoclean tragedy is superior to Shakespearian, or Goya to Picasso. How would one even begin? This leads me to the remarks I have promised about Malcolm Budd's views on evaluating art.

Budd, like Carroll, wants to put evaluative assessments of art onto a rational foundation, but he concludes that some kinds of evaluative disputes simply are not open to rational resolution. He writes,

'[T]here is more than one evaluation of the work that is not incorrect. In such a case we must clip the wings of the aspiration to intersubjective validity of a judgement of artistic value and confine the demand for unanimous assent by relativizing the judgement of the work as experienced as possessing one of the qualities.'¹⁵

Let me phrase my challenge here to Carroll as a broader challenge to the Kantian framework that I think forms the background of his proposal. Kant's view of rationality emphasizes rules and rule-governedness. We can see this in his account of how the basic categories of experience work to ground our mental lives, how concepts are employed, and how ethical questions ought to be addressed. Many critics of Kant's ethics complain that his account of the categorical imperative is so vague or abstract as to be useless for solving real problems in ethics. Even in aesthetics, where Kant admits that no rules are at work, he still wants rule-like behavior to operate, as evidenced in his paradoxical-sounding claims about geniuses 'giving the rule' to art, which actually *has* no rules. An alternative approach to ethical and aesthetic evaluation would be an Aristotelian approach that relies

instead on a theory of highly developed rational and emotional capacities in observers. People make moral and aesthetic judgments through habituation and training that foster growth of fine-tuned, almost automatic, perception, not through any conscious application of rules.

You will notice that I've introduced the topic of ethical assessment here; this is no accident. Questions of axiology in aesthetics often do, I believe, blend into questions of ethics. Consider the struggles by reviewers and average filmgoers alike to assess *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Passion of the Christ*, and *Troy*. Apart from disputes that reflect political and religious convictions, some debates revolve around questions of *moral* taste. Many people feel that Moore's satirical humor is too blunt and that his use of the grieving mother Lila Lipscomb, or the wailing older Iraqi woman, is too exploitative of their private human misery. Evaluations of Mel Gibson's movie reflected concerns about how much gore and suffering is appropriate to subject film-watchers to, even in order to render a torture scene believable and moving. Concerning *Troy*, some complaints registered the incongruity of interpreting Agamemnon's motives in contemporary terms of geo-political empire building.

My concern then is twofold. First, aesthetic evaluation cannot always be clearly distinguished from moral evaluation. Whether these two things ought to be kept distinct is another long-standing and still-disputed issue of aesthetics.¹⁶ But this blurring of ethics and aesthetics muddies the waters of film classification.

If Carroll wants to keep aesthetic or filmic categories 'pure' in the sense of being separate from moral ones, then I'm not sure his plan is a good one. To specify the proper or distinctive function of a given genre of art, literature, or film often requires reference to relevant moral aims of that genre. Consider 'epic' as an example, especially in light of Mendelsohn's insightful and historically informed evaluation of *Troy*. Even for the super-hero genre, Roger Ebert hits the peculiar virtue of *Spider-Man 2* on the nose when he comments,

It succeeds by being true to the insight that allowed Marvel Comics to upturn decades of comic-book tradition: Readers could identify more completely with heroes like themselves than with remote godlike paragons.¹⁷

Besides my first concern about the nature of the categories to be used for film evaluation, I also wonder about the psychological processes that come into play in learning, modifying, and applying such categories. Carroll firmly believes that cognitivists in philosophy and film theory must pay attention to the best available current theories of human psychology. I agree with him on this. What do such theories tell us about the development of our categories for either aesthetic or moral evaluation? We need to listen to what the empirical evidence shows us about the extent to which employment of such categories is rational – and even more importantly, to the empirical accounts of what the nature of such rationality *amounts to*. I believe it will amount to something far more like the Aristotelian account of almost automatic, yet still rational, engagement of trained perceptual and emotional abilities, rather than to an idealized Kantian notion of rationality as the application of rules to instances.¹⁸

I hope that my questions for Carroll here show respect for his work. The chapter that I have addressed from *Engaging the Moving Image* is explicitly presented as the *sketch* of a theory—an open invitation for others to join the discussion. Film evaluation is a fun, important, and challenging topic, and we should all thank Carroll for putting it into play in the field of cognitive film studies.

Notes

- 1 Noël Carroll, 'Introducing Film Evaluation'. Chapter 7 of *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp.147–64. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers follow quotations in brackets.
- 2 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); see especially Chapter 11, 'Why Not to Read a Film', pp. 249–74.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 266–67.

- 4 See Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); George Dickie, *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); and Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry, and Music* (London, Penguin, 1995).
- 5 For summaries of this research, see Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).
- 6 See Donald M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).
- 7 Ned Block, 'Sexism, Racism, Ageism and the Nature of Consciousness', in Richard Moran, Jennifer Whiting, and Alan Sidelle (eds.), *The Philosophy of Sydney Shoemaker, Philosophical Topics*, 26, 1 and 2, 1999.
- 8 Daniel Mendelsohn, 'A Little Iliad', Review of *Troy*, *New York Review of Books*, 51:11 (24 June, 2004). Available online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/17220>.
- 9 Roger Ebert, 'Review of Spider-Man 2', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 30 June, 2004. Available online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040629/REVIEWS/406300301/1023>.
- 10 Ty Burr, 'Moore's anti-Bush outrage fuels his riveting 'Fahrenheit 9/11'', *Boston Globe*, 23 June, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.boston.com/movies/display?display=movie&id=7054>.
- 11 Wesley Morris, "'Harry Potter' comes of age in a more dangerous, enchanting world", Review of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Boston Globe*, 4 June, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.boston.com/movies/display?display=movie&id=2566>.
- 12 Mendelsohn writes, 'The Greeks knew enough to realize that if you're making an epic, the potency and grandeur of the epic action, the magnificence and scope of the genre itself, would undercut any attempts to subvert it from within.' (unpaginated)
- 13 Ebert, 'Review of Spider-Man 2'.
- 14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1781]), p. 186.
- 15 Budd, *Values of Art*, p. 42 (italics in original).
- 16 See Matthew Kieran, 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41:1 (2001): 26–38; and Cynthia Freeland, 'Art and Moral Knowledge', *Philosophical Topics* 25:1 (1997): 11–36. See also Budd: 'My account of artistic value therefore has built into it a normative dimension, and this normative dimension houses reasons, not mere causes.' (*Values of Art*, p. 40)
- 17 Ebert, 'Review of Spider-Man 2'.

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18 Hubert Dreyfus, 'Intelligence Without Representation: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation', *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, 1:4, (2002), 367–83; Paul M. Churchland, 'Flanagan on Moral Knowledge', in Robert McCauley (ed.), *The Churchlands and Their Critics*

(Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 302–306; and 'Toward a Cognitive Neurobiology of the Moral Virtues', *Topoi*, 17 (1998), 83–96, reprinted in Joao Branquinho (ed.), *The Foundations of Cognitive Science* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).