On Essentialism:

Thoughts Between Nöel Carroll and Stanley Cavell

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Nöel Carroll has been one of the most eloquent proponents of an anti-essentialist view of art, in general, and of cinema, in particular. He seems to think that Stanley Cavell holds an essentialist view of film put forward in his foundational work on film, *The World Viewed*,¹ and developed in later essays and books. While Carroll admires Cavell’s philosophical readings of particular films, he also criticises his conception of film as essentially connected with photography (understood as photographing and projecting the world). The aim of this paper is to provide some thoughts on this exchange between Carroll and Cavell. Or more precisely, to compose a kind of conversation between them based on their positions and what they entail. Perhaps their views are ultimately reconcilable.

Carroll rejects the photographic basis of film and instead proposes a definition of the works of the moving image, an over-arching category that includes films. For him, \( x \) is a work of the moving image if and only if

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(1) \text{ } x \text{ is detached or a series thereof; (2) } x \text{ belongs to the class of things from which the promotion of the impression of movement is technically possible; (3) performance tokens of } x \text{ are generated by templates that are themselves tokens; (4) performance tokens of } x \text{ are not artworks in their own right; and (5) } x \text{ is two-dimensional.²}
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Carroll claims that this characterisation is not essentialist. Essentialism can be described as the belief that certain things, the things under scrutiny, have a set of essential attributes that make it what it is. When applied to art, essentialism implies the description of some essential and specific characteristics of art forms that are thought to

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be immutable. These characteristics range from the medium or media of an art form to its proper use. For Carroll, this definition avoids essentialism in three ways, which are also different ways of defining essentialism.

First, it does not consist of jointly sufficient conditions, but instead of necessary conditions. That is, the conditions are broad and open, instead of narrow and closed. Films have other features like colour that may be key yet are not necessary for their classification as films.

Second, it is not connected to a medium and does not indicate the stylistic directions that works should take. It is not built on the assumption that the media that the art form uses and is embodied in have unique characteristics. This principle of medium-specificity usually leads to the belief that these unique characteristics determine the manner in which media should be used. This way of understanding the essentialist approach has been Carroll’s major target. Yet in this sense, Cavell’s broad description of film as a succession of automatic world projections is not essentialist. As D. N. Rodowick rightly points out, this ontology of film does not assume an essentialism or teleology insofar as it also claims that the possibilities of the medium (the medium, in a broad sense) cannot be determined in advance, but they are created by the art form. The artistic possibilities of a medium are not deduced or given; they are discovered. Cavell is then anti-essentialist in a Wittgensteinian sense, one that does not reject categories so much as defines them from similarities and family resemblances. Therefore, this categorisation of film does not obscure salient differences between works. It instead invites us to notice them.

Finally, third, it is not comprised of a necessary condition useful for the understanding of film. This is what Carroll calls Grecian essentialism. The philosopher gives the following example:

When Plato speaks of drama as essentially mimetic, he does not suppose that this is a unique feature of drama, but only that it is a necessary feature of drama [...] to which is useful to draw our attention, if we want to understand how drama works.\textsuperscript{6}

Carroll adds that contemplating the conditions that he lists for moving images does not lead to deep insights about them. Cavell appears to be a Grecian essentialist because he states that film is photographic and its subject is reality, and furthermore, because he argues that acknowledging and reflecting on these attributes yields a deeper understanding of film. But it is crucial to comprehend that Cavell's position is built on the idea that film (or cinema) only exists because films exist. In other words, he thinks that only specific cases can guide our thinking about an art form.

Rodowick describes Carroll's definition as a merely logical one. Even though he suggests that "these statements encourage us to discern the relative distinctiveness of various moving-image media by qualifying the nature of their adherence to these conditions,"\textsuperscript{7} he maintains that Carroll's definition is "technically consistent and aesthetically uninteresting".\textsuperscript{8} Rodowick formulates it as a criticism that denounces the definition as too general since it does not help us, for example, distinguish between film and video. Yet logical and technical consistency are clearly Carroll's objective and therefore Rodowick's correct evaluation can be taken as an appraisal. Carroll tackles a larger question that does not interest Cavell because it is too abstract. Cavell's writings on art are driven and sustained by an encounter with concrete works: musical compositions, operas, plays, television programmes, and movies. In this sense, The World Viewed may be seen not as a basis for his later work on the comedies of remarriage\textsuperscript{9} and the melodrama of the un-

\textsuperscript{7} Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 39.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 39.
known woman, but simply as a book that contains reflections that themselves come from the experience of watching particular movies and responding to them. It is this experience and response that prompts Cavell to focus on photography and reality. Cavell is not trying to present an all-encompassing definition of film. This is made explicit when he replies to Alexander Sesonke in an added and fundamental chapter, “More of The World Viewed”. Sesonke proposes cartoons as counter-examples and as a challenge to Cavell’s view. As usually with Cavell, we follow his thinking and rethinking, which means following his indecision and reconsideration — William Desmond writes that his thinking is “always on the move, and it moves more by perplexity and questioning that by arriving at assertoric claims”, the opposite of Carroll’s manner of philosophising. His first response to Sensonke is to deny that cartoons are movies, but later he argues that some of the terms that he uses to talk about movies (a world projected, for example) can be illuminating when applied to cartoons. Although he is more interested in the ontology of live-action fiction films that screen the reality that includes performers, he is able to expand on his remarks in other directions.

Similarly, when Carroll explains that he is not a Grecian essentialist, adding that contemplating the conditions that he lists for moving images does not lead to deep insights about them, this can only seem true if we take the conditions of his definition as completely abstract. If we put them to use, if we try to grasp how they connect with concrete cases, these conditions raise questions that invariably result in insights — which is not surprising given that Carroll’s definition may not be essentialist, but it is ontological. For instance, the first condition — that moving images are detached (displays) or a series thereof — immediately brings up this question: Detached from what

in *this* film? How can we think about such connection and separateness regarding *this* film?

Maybe this is why the only overt and published disagreement between Carroll and Cavell is the way they think through photography. Carroll defends that photographs document but that they can be used for other ends besides documentation. He goes on to propose that the shots in a film portray in three different ways.¹⁵ They are *physical portrayals* — shots of Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* physically portray the actor. They are also *categorial portrayals* — Gary Cooper belongs to categories like human beings, men, and North American. They are also *nominal portrayals* — shots of Gary Cooper in Frank Capra’s film nominally portray Mr. Deeds. Cavell would gladly accept this proposition since he is not saying that there is an identity between what is on screen and what has been photograph but a *likeness* that in the context of a fiction film also has a nominal layer. Moving photographs are a phantom of what was in front of the camera and whose projection is now present. This is some kind of presence. They *make present*, which is not the same as saying that they are actually present.

Conjoining Carroll’s and Cavell’s contributions is valuable, but this is not to deny the differences between their ideas. They must be recognised, but their contributions can be thought of as complementary when all is said and done. Carroll’s restricted definition of medium mirrors Cavell’s restricted definition of film. They have different concepts of medium. Carroll has a circumscribed concept of medium that basically only covers *materials*. Cavell broadens what counts as media and encompasses *instruments, uses*, and *forms* like genres, for example. The opposite is true in the discussion of what counts as film. Carroll tackles film from a theoretical approach and considers *what we may call film*. Cavell opts for an ordinary perspective and looks at *what we usually call film* — hence his account of film as a traditional and not a modernist art, which

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does not mean that he thinks that modern and avant-garde cinema are not interesting, as his remarks on Eisenstein\textsuperscript{14} and a later essay on Godard’s \textit{Je vous salue, Marie} (\textit{Hail Mary}, 1985)\textsuperscript{15} make explicit. In similar fashion, Carroll is not uninterested or opposed to interpretation and appreciation. Volumes like \textit{Interpreting the Moving Image}\textsuperscript{16} and \textit{On Criticism}\textsuperscript{17} make clear that this is not the case. But his piecemeal approach leads him to treat them separately.

At the end of an essay called “The Specificity of Media in the Arts”, Carroll advocates stylistic over mediumistic considerations.\textsuperscript{18} Cavell is also more interested in the particular style of particular films, in their singularity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness. Of course, he would say that style and medium are inseparable. To talk about style is to talk about how a variety of media are worked on, how the work of art (re)creates these media. One of these media (for instance, a new set of conventions, what Cavell calls automatisms) may be more salient and persuade us of how central it is to a specific film. It is up to us to acknowledge this. And like a new member of the genres that Cavell investigated in American cinema, it is up to all films to discover new media and to contribute to the revision of what we think that film is. Would Carroll not agree?\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{14} Cavell, \textit{The World Viewed}, 217.
\textsuperscript{17} Carroll, \textit{On Criticism} (London: Routledge, 2008).
\textsuperscript{19} I am deeply thankful to Andrew Klevan (University of Oxford) for a fruitful conversation that touched upon some of these ideas.